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## The BRIQ Working Paper Series

# China's Maritime Cooperation with Pakistan and Iran: Implications for the Region



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## The BRIQ Working Paper Series

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# China's Maritime Cooperation with Pakistan and Iran: Implications for the Region

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## ABSTRACT

In the realm of the maritime network of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) project, Iran and Pakistan play a significant role. China is already developing Pakistan's strategic Gwadar Port and linking it with the most western part of China, Xinjiang, through a complex road and railway network. Recently, China has signed a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with Iran that will have far-reaching implications not only for the region but also for global politics. It will impact Indian and US strategic interests. The border clashes between China and India, and the trade war between China and the US that has intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic, have compelled China to focus more on Pakistan and Iran. In this context, this article focuses on China's maritime cooperation with Pakistan and Iran alongside its impact on the US and India's strategic interests in the region, particularly in the Indian Ocean Region.

**Keywords:** Chabahar Port, China-Iran deal, CPEC, Pakistan, maritime cooperation

CHINA'S BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE (BRI) is considered to be one of the most influential economic development projects in recent history. It includes both land and maritime networks that connect China with more than 65 countries of the world. As part of the maritime networks of the BRI project, the Indian Ocean region and the Gwadar and Chabahar ports play a significant role. Robert D. Kaplan termed Indian Ocean region as the "Centre stage for the twenty-first century" (Kaplan, 2011). The rise of China and India as the major naval powers of this region and the presence of the US have completely altered regional power dynamics. The American and Indian naval presence at the Strait of Malacca has increased Chinese apprehensions as it is an important chokepoint for China's energy needs. To overcome these apprehensions, China started looking towards other sea routes where it can protect its Sea Lanes of Communications (SLOCs) from Indian and US influence. For this reason, China and Pakistan have built Gwadar Port in the Baluchistan province of Pakistan which borders Iran. To counter the rising influence of China in the Indian Ocean, India collaborated with Iran and invested heavily on Iran's Chabahar Port by linking it with Afghanistan via rail network. These power dynamics and the presence of the US in the region is detrimental to peace in the region.

As a result of the ongoing COVID-19 crisis, the frictions between China and the US and the border clashes between China and India have had a significant impact on the situation in the Indian Ocean. The increased presence of the US and Indian naval forces in the South China Sea has intensified China's reliance on Gwadar Port. Though the competition between China, India,

and the US is not new, it was not as direct as it appears to be now. To counter China's rise as a global power, the US has always supported India in the region and competition was generated between India and China for regional supremacy. Recently, border clashes at the Ladakh and Sikkim area between China and India are likely to have regional consequences. Moreover, a recent \$400 billion deal between China and Iran alongside Iran's expulsion of India from Chabahar Port and railway project has sent shockwaves to both India and the US. Though India and the US have created hurdles for China in the South China Sea by cooperating with other regional countries, China's strong strategic cooperation with Pakistan and Iran is a counterbalancing strategy to oppose the US and India's hegemonic designs in the region. Given the background, this study uses the process tracing method to analyze the emerging rivalries in the Indian Ocean Region in the face of the India-China standoff and the global hostile posturing between China and the US, along with its objectives and possible implications for the region. Process tracing is a qualitative method that aims to analyse and understand the causal dynamics and the possible outcomes of an issue under study. It proposes a case study-based approach that provides detailed knowledge about political phenomena conceived of as a complex series of events (Beach & Pedersen, 2013; Collier, 2011; Gürcan, 2019/2020). My process-tracing analysis will revolve around the following questions:

- How does the strategic importance of both Gwadar Port and Chabahar Port play a role in the emerging geopolitical competition?
- What are the prospects of maritime

cooperation between China, Pakistan, and Iran?

- What are the possible consequences of this cooperation for the region?

### **China's Ambitious Belt and Road Initiative**

China's heavy investment in the region to complete its Belt and Road project and its revitalization of ancient land-based routes that include the Silk Road Economic Belt and a maritime Silk Road speaks volumes of China's vision for the region. For this purpose, China's bilateral agreements have deepened its relations with littoral states of the Indian Ocean region such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka. These bilateral agreements now include Iran also. There were two prolonged motives behind the initiation of this Belt and Road Initiative. First, China wants to revive the Old Silk Road and connect the regional and extra-regional states for trade purposes. Secondly, China's heavy dependence on the Strait of Malacca, from where about 80% (Chen, 2019) of China's imported energy resources pass through, has become a security threat because of the presence of the US and Indian navy, and China needs alternative routes to fulfill its energy needs. In this context, China's development of Gwadar Port holds immense significance. Western countries and India term China's 'string of pearls' strategy as securing ports and other locations for its naval forces to set up bases. On the other hand, China refutes such allegations and hold that China is performing these actions for economic purposes. However, in the current global political dynamics, the US, as an outsider, is targeting China by using India, Australia, and other countries in the

South China Sea, which compels China to focus more on the Gwadar and Chabahar ports. China's development of Gwadar Port, the linking of road and railway networks inside Pakistan, and the signing of a deal with Iran on Chabahar Port are the beginning of a new era of cooperation between China, Pakistan, and Iran, and competition with India and the US.

### **Gwadar Port-CPEC**

The development of Gwadar Port is frequently in the international news media because of its link with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and its significance as the flagship project of China's larger Belt and Road Initiative. The location of Gwadar Port gives it a significant strategic importance in the region. It is situated at the mouth of the Strait of Hormuz as the meeting point of the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea. It is approximately 70km from Iran's Chabahar Port which has been heavily developed by India. It is also close to the Global Sea-Lanes of Communications (GLOCs) and is suitable for large shipment facilities. In 2013, the Chinese President Xi Jinping inaugurated the CPEC project worth \$46 billion, and since then the total investment has increased by more than \$65 billion (Xiangming Chen, S.K. Joseph, Hamna Tariq, 2018). Apart from the construction of Gwadar Port, the project includes the construction of modern transportation networks, various energy projects, and the creation of special economic zones. These modern overland roads and railway transportation networks will connect China's most western region of Xinjiang with the Gwadar port and would provide the shortest route for China to reach the Central Asian Region and Europe. The benefits of the CPEC project are enormous for both China and Pakistan.

**With the development of infrastructure and energy projects, Pakistan will be able to come out of the clutches of Western neocolonialism.**

With the development of infrastructure and energy projects, Pakistan will be able to come out of the clutches of Western neocolonialism. The economic situation will improve and could create further opportunities to attract foreign investment. Though the current COVID-19 pandemic has slowed down the global economy and caused lockdown all over the country, the development projects associated with CPEC are still underway. The overall project has been divided into short-term, medium-term, and long-term projects. In the first stage, substantial work on the construction of roads and energy projects have been completed. Progress on the ground suggests that out of 122 announced projects, 32 projects have been completed, and the other half are under construction. Gwadar Port is functional and started working in 2016, while the Gwadar Smart Port City Master Plan, which was inaugurated in 2019, is ready for implementation (Assadi, 2019). After successful completion of this project, Gwadar Port will be the focal point for the trade centres servicing China, Afghanistan, and five Central Asian countries. In the energy sector, 5,320 megawatt (MW) of electricity has already been added in the national grid and the construction on the largest Diamer- Bhasha Dam has been started. In terms of roads, a total of 1,544km have been constructed and 1,456km is under construction (The Official Website of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, 2020a; 2020b). These projects will enhance Pakistan's energy capacity and upgrade its road and railway infrastructure.



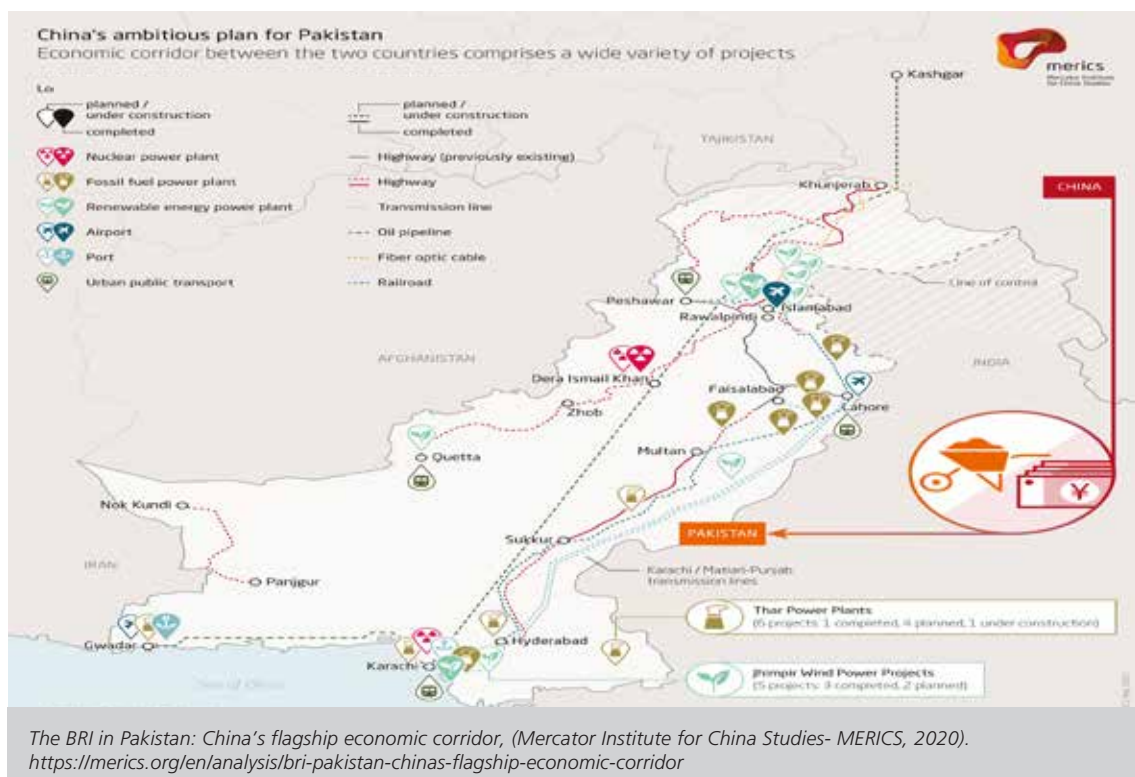
*A container is loaded on to the first Chinese container ship to depart after the inauguration of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor port in Gwadar, Pakistan in 2016. (China Daily, 2018)*

For China, CPEC has become an existential project. To continue the rise of its economy, China needs alternative routes to be less dependent on the Strait of Malacca. China's fast-growing economy is based on the oil imported from Gulf and Middle Eastern countries, and 80% of that oil passes through Strait of Malacca. The tension in the South China sea has increased when the trade war between the US and China escalated and intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic when both countries blamed each other for the spread of the virus (Zhong, 2020). On the other hand, because of border clashes between China and India on the issue of Ladakh, the conflict in the Indian Ocean is also rising. In the meantime, the US – in collaboration with India, Australia, Japan, and other littoral states– poses a great danger to regional stability and could potentially impede Chinese imports through the Strait. In this scenario, China needs alternative routes to

maintain the flow of energy and secure its trade with Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. Gwadar Port and CPEC will allow Chinese imports to circumvent the contentious areas and reach international markets safely. A second important reason for Chinese dependence on Gwadar and CPEC is that it provides not only the safest but shortest passage for Chinese goods. The distance via the Strait of Malacca is about 12,000km, while the route from Gwadar to Xinjiang province is roughly 3,000km, and the distance from Xinjiang to China's eastern coast is 3,500km, thereby reducing the transit time from 45 days to 10 days and eventually reducing the shipping cost across the regions (Gilani, 2020). Thirdly, the Gwadar Port and CPEC project also complement China's Western Development Plan for its restive Xinjiang autonomous region to at-

tract foreign investment. The importance of this project is evident by China's inclusion of this project in its 13th five-year development plan (Masood, 2019).

CPEC is also a gateway for China into the Muslim World. Though in contemporary international relations, China maintains its relations on a country-to-country basis. In this context, China's relations with Pakistan, Iran, Turkey, Afghanistan, and Central Asian states hold immense importance. The completion of road and railway constructions as part of the CPEC project will provide the shortest route to the landlocked Central Asian States. China has already started infrastructure development projects with Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan by completely bypassing Afghanistan – a country which has been ravaged by external occupation and war for decades. But the fact of the matter is



that if the neighbouring country of Afghanistan desires peaceful collaboration, then peace in Afghanistan is essential in the first place. Especially at a time when the American president Donald Trump has signaled to pull out its forces from Afghanistan after fighting two decades of a long, destructive war, the role of China, Pakistan, Iran, and the actual stakeholders of Afghanistan is highly important. China has already signed a \$400 billion deal with Iran that will be discussed in detail in the following section.

In the past few years, moreover, China and Turkey have come closer to each other. The previous mistrust between the two countries was facilitated by their reliance on third-party sources, such as Western media outlets, to understand each other. Both countries are important partners as leading forces in the Middle East and two ends of China's Belt and Road Initiative. Turkey is the gateway for China into Europe (Chen, 2019; Cheng & Li, 2020).

### China-Iran Deal: A Pragmatic Partnership

Recently, China and Iran have finalized a 25-year strategic deal that calls for China to invest \$400 billion in Iran's energy, telecommunications, infrastructure, railways, ports, and other sectors in exchange for Iran's heavily discounted supply of oil to China (Hincks, 2020). According to Iranian officials (Al-Monitor, 2020), the modalities of the deal have not yet been finalized. But the deal between the two countries is very important in the current rapidly changing geopolitical environment. The background of the deal is important to discuss in order to understand the future repercussions of the deal on regional as well as global politics.

In January 2016, the Chinese president Xi Jinping visited Tehran to begin a new chapter in the relationship of the two countries. The visit

took place a year after the US and other powers concluded a deal with Iran on its nuclear program, and before President Trump unilaterally pulled America out from this deal. Initially, the trade partnership was worth \$600 billion before the US imposed sanctions on Iran in 2018 (Geranmayeh, 2020). So far, China has abided by the US sanctions on Iran, leading to many of the Chinese state banks stepping back from their business with Iran and reportedly China pulled out of a major gas project (Hincks, 2020). But China continued to import oil from Iran, while the other European trading partners and India, who invested heavily on developing Iran's Chabahar port, succumbed to US pressure. While the deal was concluded in 2016, it took months to make progress on identifying the important sectors where Chinese investment is crucial for Iran's crumpled economy because of the US's political and economic sanctions. Now both countries have realized that the policies of the Trump administration have left both of them in a precarious position and they have no other option but to accelerate their talks on the deal.

A lot of concerns have been raised by Western mainstream media, as well as politicians and experts. In a recent statement, Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo asserted that "the United States will apply all Iran sanctions to the Chinese Communist Party and their businesses and state-owned enterprises" (Radio Farda, 2020). He termed the Sino-Iran deal as a collaboration of trouble-maker countries by stating that it "shouldn't be surprising that regimes that don't respect freedom at home and foment national security problems abroad would want to join hands" (Radio Farda, 2020). The New York Times published a series of reports and articles



which termed the deal as military cooperation rather than economic, and that it will provide Iran's suffocated economy with an outlet that could further deteriorate the situation in the Middle East (Fassihi, Myers, 2020). They went on to claim that the deal, if put into effect as was previously planned, could create new potentially dangerous flashpoints in the deteriorating relationship between China and the United States. Moreover, they have repeated the same old argument in a new fashion that Iran, as an economically unstable country, is taking great geopolitical risks by committing to China because this will lead Iran into debt by fostering a new form of colonialism (Fassihi, Myers, 2020).



*Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi (R) holds talks with Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif in Beijing, capital of China (Zhai Jianlan/ Xinhua)*

However, the deal seems to be built on mutual benefit as Tehran needs Beijing to boost its economy given that America has no plans to lift its sanctions and Iran refuses to enter into direct talks with the US unless its embargos are lifted. On the other hand, China needs Iran for the oil

**Meanwhile, the increasing cooperation of Pakistan, Iran, and China in the Indian Ocean region is likely to impact the US and Indian partnership in the long run.**

import and market. In an article published by The Washington Post, 'Trump's two main foreign foes plan a major pact' said, "Iran's turn towards countries like Russia and China has raised concerns about the inequitable price it may have to pay" (Tharoor, 2020). Washington's harsh policies towards Iran have pushed Iran and China closer to each other. Meanwhile, the increasing cooperation of Pakistan, Iran, and China in the Indian Ocean region is likely to impact the US and Indian partnership in the long run.

The strategic partnership between Iran and China can be termed as pragmatic, non-ideological and business-oriented. Iran is fully cognizant of the implications of China's rise as a global power. The Trump's administration secondary sanctions on Iran that obstructed its trade with European countries and India have compelled the Iranian leadership to view China as the only major power that can defy US economic dominance and, therefore, provide Iran with some political and economic protection against US pressure in the wake of the ongoing rivalry between China and the US (Hincks, 2020). Moreover, bilateral relations with China will not only bring tangible economic benefits but will also serve as a geopolitical tool that can be deployed to undermine China's cooperation with Israel and Gulf Cooperation Council countries. Through this long-term agreement, Iran can generate greater economic success and translate the lofty statements into a reality that Iran is crucial to China's

BRI project. Iran is also clear-headed about the fact that the global rivalry between China and the US is likely to continue to intensify in the coming years. Apart from gaining economic opportunities, Iran can get the Western states attention when they debate the negotiations of the economic ties with China. This global attention will also be helpful in bargaining future negotiations with Europe and the US over the issue of easing sanctions and following trade deals. Furthermore, Iran has sought full membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which will require China's approval.

Meanwhile, China fully understands that in the wake of the growing influence of India and the US in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean, Iran's cooperation is vital to Chinese interests. Moreover, Iran is also a major regional power that is located at the crossroads of the Middle East and Central Asia. Iran's Chabahar Port is located at a strategic point close to the Strait of Hormuz and is vitally important to the BRI. Though the Gulf countries are major oil partners for China, the unfolding of recent geopolitical developments suggests that China cannot afford to leave Iran in the hands of India who is playing at the other side of the game. China also believes that Iran still has a great deal of untapped potential for foreign investment that Beijing can capitalize on. Moreover, one should note that China is defending Iran at the International Atomic Energy Agency, and in June 2020, it pushed back a European-led resolution that rebuked Iran on the nuclear issue (Geranmayeh, 2020).

Though the broad contours of the deal are still unknown, it will certainly make the Sino-Iranian partnership stronger. China has so far refrained to comment on the deal but it will

have to carefully balance its deepened relations with Iran against the Gulf countries, which have recently become important economic partners of China in the Middle East. It is also unclear how the Chinese banking system and companies will operate while engaging with Iran given the US sanctions in place.

### Prospects of the Maritime Cooperation Between China, Pakistan and Iran

In this rapidly changing regional and global political environment, old loyalties are changing, and new alliances are being formed. The world powers are redefining their roles, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic has brought the fragilities of the political and economic landscape of the world into greater focus. The current divisions have given rise to a new era of cooperation, which is encouraging countries to find new ways to better pursue their interests. It has already been noted how the CPEC and Gwadar Port are vital to China's larger geopolitical and geo-economic interests. Amid the current rivalries in the region, China cannot afford to accept any harm to its core interests.

Chabahar and Gwadar ports were originally developed by two rival states in the Indian Ocean and, therefore, they were dubbed as competitors. Serious efforts were made in the past to declare them as sister ports but nothing much was achieved in practical terms. Now, as per the new reports, China might replace India in developing Chabahar port further, suggesting that the competition between the two ports might fizzle out. Both ports will act as collaborators and would alter the geopolitics of the Indian Ocean while cooperating with China. This cooperation is thus significant in multiple ways.

First, from the security point of view, the



proximity of Chabahar Port to an important chokepoint- the Bab el Mandeb strait, means any instability or incursion on that port would have a direct impact on Gwadar Port and the CPEC. It is apparent that, in the current geopolitical environment, India has aligned its interests with that of the US and Israel. So, India's continuous presence at the Chabahar Port could endanger the security of Gwadar Port and CPEC. Iran's inclusion in the BRI would help to secure CPEC as in the past the Baluchistan province through which the corridor mainly runs has suffered at-

tacks from the Iranian border. Neutralizing this security threat, which has been considered a major impediment for the success of CPEC, would be beneficial for the three countries (Siddiqui, 2020).

Iran has expressed its wish many times to join the CPEC. In a recent statement, the Iranian envoy to Pakistan, Mehdi Honardoost said: "We are ready to be a part of CPEC with all our capabilities and resources." He further added "maybe without the energy and transit support of Iran, the multi-billion-dollar project will not reach its

**In this way, China could act as a bridge between Pakistan and Iran in terms of promoting their cooperation, and several key projects in the field of energy cooperation that were halted under US pressure could be completed.**

final stage” (The Express Tribune, 2020). Furthermore, according to excerpts in the draft, Chinese development projects in Iran could complement ongoing development projects in Pakistan under CPEC. In this way, China could act as a bridge between Pakistan and Iran in terms of promoting their cooperation, and several key projects in the field of energy cooperation that were halted under US pressure could be completed.

Secondly, the Afghanistan issue has become even more important after the US president announced the withdrawal of American forces from Afghanistan. Without bringing peace in Afghanistan, the development of the whole region is out of the question. If there is instability in Afghanistan, it would likely affect peace in Pakistan, Iran, and the Central Asian States. In the current scenario, the Taliban have the strongest hold in most parts of Afghanistan. America has also negotiated a deal with them on February 29, 2020 (U.S. Department of State, 2020) termed as a ‘peace deal’. This indicates that the Taliban are an important party to this conflict, and without including them in the peace process, stability in Afghanistan is impossible. The governments in Pakistan, Iran, and China are already in negotiation with the Taliban and efforts are being made to restore peace on Afghan soil with mutual consensus among all the stakeholders to this issue.

Thirdly, the tri-partnership between China,

Pakistan, and Iran can safeguard the important Sea Lanes of Communication in the Indian-Ocean and control the sea trade from Strait of Hormuz and Bab-el-Mandeb that serve as the important choke points.

Fourth, Iran has realized that it is under intense pressure and faces an economic crisis due to an embargo on its oil exports, coupled with the coronavirus pandemic. Thus, Chinese investment in various projects would uplift Iran’s economy. There is no denying the fact that Chinese investment in Iran has dwarfed other deals Beijing had set out to invest in other countries under its BRI project. Eventually, Iran will make sure that its territory would not be used against Pakistan where China’s huge infrastructure project CPEC is near completion (Singh, 2020).

### **The China-Pakistan-Iran Trio Challenging the US-India Partnership**

The China-Pakistan-Iran maritime cooperation creates a worrisome situation from the perspective of the US and India. The implications of this partnership are particularly profound in the maritime area, especially at a time when China and India are clashing on the Ladakh and Sikkim borders, and India has lost many kilometers of territory to Chinese forces. India’s small neighboring countries have turned against its hegemonic policies in the region. Likewise, there is a cold war going on between China and the US that has been intensified after the COVID-19 pandemic, while the world economy is in shackles.

Indian strategic thinking had counted on the hope that after the development of Iran’s Chabahar Port, India could bypass Pakistan and include Afghanistan and the Central Asian States under its political clout, and advance mil-

itary activity inside Pakistan using Iran and Afghanistan's soil. But it seems that things are not as hopeful as was envisaged. Recently, Indian Newspaper The Hindu published a report that Iran has dismissed India from the Chabahar-Zahedan rail line project (Haidar, 2020). The news came following the China-Iran Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, because Iran could not wait longer for India's delayed funding due to sanctions imposed on Iran and the consequent pressure on India by the US and Israel (Nayar, 2020).

Furthermore, according to the leaked draft of the agreement, parts of which were published by the New York Times (Fassihi, Myers, 2020), it is evident that the Chinese construction companies are set to invest in multiple infrastructure projects including many free-trade zones in different cities like Abadan and on the Island of Qeshm - a major hub of Tehran for oil production and storage. Another important port city where China will build infrastructure is Jask, just outside of the Strait of Hormuz and 150 miles away from Gwadar Port.

**The military and economic empowerment of Iran with the help of China can allow Iran to adopt an aggressive posture in the Middle East that could exacerbate America's predicament.**

According to experts, even a small contingent of the Chinese navy at Jask could start greater joint military training and exercises between China, Pakistan, and Iran, further undermining

US and Indian interests (Singh, 2020). Likewise, the proposed strategic pact could permit China to have a military presence along the Pakistan-Iran coastline and assist a surveillance network to monitor Indian and US naval activities in the Indian Ocean region. The military and economic empowerment of Iran with the help of China can allow Iran to adopt an aggressive posture in the Middle East that could exacerbate America's predicament. This alliance further means that the US and its allies have to roll back from Afghanistan.

The UN embargo on transfer of military technology to Iran is expiring in October 2020. This means that it poses a serious challenge to Trump's administration to exert 'maximum' pressure on Iran. Iran's inclusion in the BRI would strengthen CPEC's resilience and change the trajectory of Pakistan-Iran relations. On July 16, 2020, China also initiated a regional forum with the Central Asian states known as 'China + Central Asia'. The ministers of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan agreed on the video conference "to promote the alignment of BRI to build interconnected partnerships, deepen pragmatic cooperation in various fields, carry out effective investment cooperation, and jointly promote the recovery and development of the economy" (Bhadrakumar, 2020). Apart from this, the use of Chinese currency Yuan as a commodity transaction payment would bring out the partnership of the purview of Western banks and the US sanctions. The 'petrodollar' may get shaky, which would have notable implications to the US economy.

### Conclusion

The China-Pakistan-Iran relations, especially in maritime cooperation in the context of BRI, will

have far-reaching implications for the region, particularly for the US and Indian interests. The US and India, in collaboration with other littoral states, are mounting pressure on China in the South China Sea from where China's main energy artery passes through. China recognized this increasing threat on the South China Sea front long ago and started looking towards alternative routes for its uninterrupted flow of energy. The signing of CPEC and development of Gwadar Port was a significant step towards China's new strategy. Recently, China has signed another similar deal with Iran for the development of Chabahar Port as well as the road and railway network that will connect to Xinjiang. This would mean that India can no longer exert its pressure and sabotage CPEC while using Iran's territory. The two strategically important ports would collaborate as part of China's BRI project and minimize third-party involvement in destabilizing the region.

Moreover, this trilateral cooperation is a point of concern for the US and Indian policymakers. In the recent past, both India and China tried to reduce tensions in the region through negotiations but the trust deficit and a viable solution to amicably resolve the issue were a stumbling block in the process. The recent border clashes between China and India and the joining of the US block by India against China, are causing major frictions at the strategic front. The cooperation between China, Pakistan, and Iran will regionally benefit them against extra-regional influences, while India's dependency on extra-regional powers like the US will limit its regional security interests against its border rivals: China and Pakistan. This situation can also impact US interests not only in the Indian Ocean but also in the Middle East. Through this

cooperation, Iran can uplift its falling economy and exert greater influence on the Middle East. The cooperation between the three regional powers is but an expression that they will not accept external forces' interference and influence that could undermine their geostrategic interests. This calls for a persistently cautious policy stance on the part of China, Pakistan, and Iran.

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