

Strategic Significance of the Gwadar Port for China's Dominance in Central Asia: A Constructivist Analysis

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Abstract

Central Asia's importance in the global energy and transportation industries has been bolstered by developments in Afghanistan and Ukraine. Investments in the Belt and Road Initiative and the Gwadar Port are the subject of this research. In recent years, China has increased its bilateral, regional, and international investment activity. Central Asia is strategically important due to its proximity to oil reserves and the ancient silk road, both of which are contested territories among global powers. The geopolitical, geostrategic, and geo-economics implications of China's investment in Central Asia are explored in this article. Using Mackinder's Heartland and a constructivist technique, this research assesses China's influence in Central Asia. In this probe, we placed a premium on hard data and impartiality. Using both direct and secondary sources, the researcher analyzed China's influence in Central Asia. The Gwadar port and the Belt and Road initiative are both very important. The paper finishes with a goal explanation and analysis of China's Central Asia participation.

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Introduction

Multipolarity appears to be the likely future of international politics, which has seen substantial shifts in recent years. The international system's power brokers are shifting (Cokins, 2017). Furthermore, geo-strategic, geo-political, and geo-economic objectives are pursued through economic competitiveness, an arms race, and a balance of power (Wigell et al., 2018).

This struggle for dominance may be seen all the way from the South Pole to the North Pole. To gauge China's current standing and future ability to exploit international politics, it's important to look at the way things are moving (Friedberg, 2005).

Several countries are investing ore and expanding in the maritime domain in the 21st century. It is becoming increasingly important for the economies and politics of developing countries to engage in naval activity. Ports connect a country's land and maritime economies. Its use affects a nation's progress (Peter, Dutton, Kardon, Kennedy, 2020). Recent international events have seen Gwadar Port's rise and Pakistan and China's closer connections. Gwadar is a Persian Gulf port. Gwadar, a natural warm-water, deep-sea port, projects from Pakistan's south-western Arabian Sea coastline (Gurmeet Kanwal, 2018).

The enormous region of Central Asia, known for its rich mineral deposits and ancient trade routes connecting Asia and Europe, has recently regained its former prominence. Central Asia is becoming a vital intercontinental transit route and alternate energy source due to Russia's incursion in Ukraine & Western sanctions against Russia and the United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan. The Eurasian Land Bridge, a network of railways connecting Europe and Asia, has become increasingly popular in recent years as such a solution to sea transit due to its location along the ancient Silk Road. There was a surge in rail travel connecting Europe and China as a result of market demand when the COVID-19 pandemic caused shipping delays and increased costs. Due to the destruction caused by the war in Ukraine and the deterioration of bilateral relations between Lithuania and China, the route via Kazakhstan, Russia, Belarus, & Poland is becoming increasingly significant (Yang Jiang, 2022).

Central Asian countries have been striving to lessen their dependence on Russia, which had been a major export market and a source for migrant labor, in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. They've bolstered ties with a number of countries, including China, India, Pakistan, Japan, South Korea, and Turkey, but China stands out as the most important (Gökтуğ ÇALIŞKAN, 2022).

China has both commercial and security interests in Central Asia. Although the Han people make up the majority of Chinese citizens, there are numerous other minority groups in the country. While the numbers may seem little in comparison to the whole, they are actually in the tens of millions, if not hundreds of millions, in absolute terms. As a result, China must prioritize the growth of its more underdeveloped multiethnic western provinces. There is a lengthy boundary between the western areas and the countries of Central Asia, and particularly the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) This fragile XUAR shares a 1,344-kilometer boundary with Tajikistan. Any unrest in XUAR, through which all Central Asian petroleum and gas pipelines must pass, would result in a devastating impact on China's economy (MGIMO, 2016).

Central Asian aristocracy are more amenable to Chinese help because of its emphasis on non-interference and also its tendency to be more secretive than aid from other countries. Central Asian countries risk becoming financially reliant on China if Beijing gains more influence (Tian, 2018).

Theoretical Construct

The demise of unipolarity can be attributed to China's ascent in the twenty-first century. In the face of China's resurgence, the United States must take steps to protect its global standing. This research aims to build a theoretical paradigm in which a sequence is produced by looking at China's ambitions to

economically dominate central Asia through the lenses of constructivism and Mackinder's Heartland Theory.

According to Mackinder's Heartland Theorists, countries with larger navies are better equipped to explore the world's oceans than those with smaller fleets. Aircraft use in the modern era has drastically altered territorial dominance and defense capabilities (Rosenstein, 2018). The Volga, Amu Darya, and Yenisey rivers, as well as the Caspian and Aral seas, form the heart of this geopolitical, geo-economics, and geostrategic paradigm. This Eurasia-based approach has brought geography to the forefront of international politics (Tillis, 2020).

The Heartland theory, to paraphrase it directly, posits that Eurasia (Central Asia) is the most advantageous region on the planet from a strategic standpoint. This hypothesis, metaphorically speaking, centers on the Eurasian continent. Mackinder said that the Eurasian region is at the epicenter of global politics due to its location within the global geopolitical environment. His argument was that the state that controls the Midwest will have the economic and geopolitical power to dominate the world (Chowdhury & Hel Kafi, 2015).

According to Mackinder's idea, the state that can exert influence over the region's geography and economy will be able to counteract the threats posed by its adversaries (Zivec, 2018). Mackinder's Heartland included all of Central Asia, this started throughout the east of Central Europe between the Black but also Baltic Seas & went all the way towards the northeast corner of China. Naval power could not go as far as a force situated in the Heartland could. Mackinder claims the Heartland, if ruled by colonial empire, would be in a position to harness its ample resources and strategic location to assert control across Eurasia and construct a formidable fleet capable of posing a threat to more insular nations like the United States, Japan, or England (Raza, 2020).

The Inner Crescent, a bow-shaped (semicircular) area that encircles the Heartland but has a connection to the sea, is largely held by China. Mackinder advocated for a more global perspective among strategists by including Asia and Africa. As far as he was concerned, all of these regions were once part of a single, cohesive world. This area was dubbed a "global island" by him. Because of this, the French author Raymond Aron referred to Russia's conquest of this area as "gaining virtually the entire world island" (Sempa, 2015). No amount of naval might could stop the entity that controls this region from upsetting the international power balance if it so chose (Gresh, 2020). From the heart of Germany to Volgograd, Russia, & Central Asia, geographical Heartland encompasses all of Slavic Eastern Europe (Zivec, 2018).

New developments in technology have made naval force only a part of a state's total might. The decline of the once-mighty British Empire followed a similar trend. When industrialization took control, their massive navies became useless (Connell & Aldrich, 2020).

On the other hand, Constructivism being the central paradigm of International Relations, investigates the origins of norms in diplomatic interactions. Stories that are accepted and spread within a society serve as a foundation upon which normative conduct is built, and from which conceptions of authority and influence are derived. People's shared knowledge is fostered by this social construct. Rather than being given extracellularly to such mechanism by human behavior or internal affairs, constructivists believe that interests and identities are structured by inter - subjective social constructs. This is done thru the consequential or constructive operations such as socialization or internalization, wherein actors interpret,

construct, as well as procreate material structures they either benefit from or are constrained by (Yoshimatsu, 2009).

U.S. policy toward a revitalized China needs to be codified, and this can only be done with an awareness of how Chinese people see themselves. Even China wants to have a navy that can operate in international waters. (Ross, Robert S, 2006). To emphasize, China is strengthening its position in space. In 2021, space power provides China with a more attractive path to worldwide reputation than attempting to rival US naval superiority. China's space ambitions could spark a nuclear weapons competition also with U.S (Jones, Andrew, 2021).

The mainstream realism theoretical framework is challenged by some who think that constructivism more adequately explains China's progress. Furthermore, constructivism will show that China's sustained development is peaceful in character and has the potential to benefit all concerned actors rather than disrupting world and regional order.

Beijing openly revised its officially projected trajectory, from a 'peaceful rising' to a 'peaceful development,' in reaction to this glaring underestimate of China's capacity for progress. The answer is yes (Turner, 2009). This may seem like a minor point, but it's actually part of a larger strategy to undermine the idea that China is a new world hegemon &, by extension, a danger to US dominance. Chinese leaders are well aware that the West would label their country hostile, unstable, and dangerous if it didn't aggressively attempt to create its own character. To avoid compulsion into adversarial relations with the world's greatest market, Washington needed to broaden the scope of its study to include contextual concepts that would make international policy choices that reflect certainties of Chinese culture and history. Joseph Nye, a former US Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, warns of the danger of creating a self-fulfilling prophecy when he says, "... based mostly on simplistic purely theoretical presumption certain there appears to exist a 50 per cent likelihood of China being more and more aggressive or a 50 percent possibility of it not; to regard China as such an adversary would now efficaciously discount 50 percent of the long term." Finally, Nye suggests that "the greatest way to sustain healthy and friendly Sino-American interactions" is through constructive dialogue with China (Turner 2009).

With the help of the constructivist framework, we can see that China's proactive involvement in regional issues has established a network of collaborators which enables the possibility that perhaps the emergence of China will generate a relatively harmless & sustainable regional order, similar to the market economy or geostrategic social mores seen through the old distributaries' framework (Yoshimatsu, 2009).

Historical Background of Gwadar Port

The quick expansion in world trade and markets is due to technology and economy-of-scale shipping. Ports provide the lowest route of conveyance for this ever-growing global trade. A port's efficiency can boost a nation's GDP. Ports provide logistic networks in addition to transportation. More traders from around the world will choose an efficient port for their trade, making it the country's international trade engine. Smith stated that business of all kinds naturally begins to develop and improve itself near the coasts and along the banks of navigable rivers because water transportation provides access to a larger market than land transportation does (Smith, 1776).

The name Gwadar is a portmanteau of two Balochi words: *guad*, signifying "wind," & *dar*, denoting "door." Gwadar Port's political history is rife with ruler-tribe confrontations. Gwadar performed multiple roles throughout the 19th century (Beatrice Nicolini, 2002).

Gwadar was initially described as a 'possible maritime point' in a 1954 USGS survey of Pakistan's coast; it was then under Omani administration. In 1958, Pakistan bought Gwadar from Oman for \$3 million. Since then, Pakistan has owned Gwadar, which is expected to become a trade, economic, and connectivity hub (District Development Profile, 2011).

Pre-CPEC developments

Pakistan first acknowledged Gwadar's significant implications in the 1990s, and work on the port's infrastructure began in 2000. The harbor was a Chinese construction. The cornerstone for the port was set in March of 2002 by then-Vice Premier Wu Bangguo. After the Karakoram Highway, the port has been called the "second significant milestone of China-Pakistan cooperation." The 'proposed new seaport of Gwadar' received 16.7 billion Pakistani Rupees from the government back in 2003 for the sole purpose of building roads to connect it to the remainder of Pakistan. The construction of the port was supposed to happen in two stages. The authorities delayed the first phase's conclusion until September 2005 in October/November of 2004. The harbor had to be excavated to a depth of 14 meters from its original 12.5 meters so that larger vessels could dock there. The initial phase of the project cost 14.9 billion Pakistani Rupees (\$217 million), with funding contributions from both Pakistan and China totaling \$81 million. The second stage would be to be privately built for \$865 million. To entice investments, a special economic 'tax-free' zone on 10000 acres of property had been proposed for Gwadar. That would open the door for export plants to be built. For the second stage of development in Gwadar, which included digging & expanding the port, overseas firms were guaranteed benefits (Frederick Grare, 2018).

Gwadar in a Modern Context (Belt and Road Initiative)

The BRI is a crucial factor in analyzing the China-Central Asia connection. In the fall of 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping advocated proposed China and also the Central Asian republics expand mutual economic linkages to strengthen regional cooperation. This would be a modern variant of the ancient Silk Road. Large-scale infrastructure projects were another idea of his (Wilson, 2016).

In its current state, the port is operational, but with some restrictions. We have already finished some of the proposed projects. The Chinese government-owned corporation COPHC has a 40-year lease on the facility, and Pakistan will get 9 percent of the terminal's and harbor's gross revenues (The Express Tribune, 2015).

The present incarnation of the venture was suggested in Islamabad in 2013 by Nawaz Sharif (then Pakistan's prime minister) and Li Keqiang (then China's premier). The CPEC Secretariat was officially launched on August 27, 2013. However, in 1959, with the inauguration of the Karakoram Highway, preparations were begun for a corridor connecting western China to the Arabian Sea via Pakistan. Pakistan hopes that this corridor will aid in developing trade and economic ties with India (Shahid, S, 2015).

Geo-Economic & Geo-Strategic significance of Gwadar as part of BRI

The BRI is a massive infrastructure project with far-reaching social and political implications. To a large extent, this is what propels China's close ties to the strategically located Central Asian countries. To

Beijing, it represents a paradigm shift in international cooperation, one that is driven by regional economic cooperation and development, Investment, regional development, and connectivity are the pillars of the strategy for Central Asia (Wu & Pan, 2018). It is believed that the BRI's obscurity is due to the fact that it is a changing model, despite the fact that it is comprised of bilateral strategies and also a flexible and open platform (Tian, 2018). China's goal with the BRI is to secure economic growth and bolster the country's economic standing over the long term. As per Larin & Matveev (2014), China's rising economic might and political hopes of a bigger role in international affairs are reflected in the BRI as a solution to China's economic requirements. China's involvement in global infrastructure projects, however, had already been on the rise before the BRI was unveiled. According to Dadabayev, China's power & transportation infrastructure spending are only a means to an end of achieving China's goals related to security, political stabilization, but also economic progress in Central Asia (Dadabayev, T, 2018a).

According to the Pentagon paper Energy Futures in Asia, Gwadar seaport is like China's Strings of Pearls, which projects its strength abroad and protects energy sources. China also achieves strategic dominance by constructing an electronic listening station at Gwadar to monitor shipments. Gwadar port would boost China's crude oil import and Indian Ocean presence. US fears China is seeking trading seaport benefits around the world to control strategic energy canals and high-water shipping (Claude Rakisits, 2015).

Strategic analysts had also noted how Pakistan's recent emphasis on Gwadar, a port which the country had ignored for decades, was a reaction to India's growing sea force in the Indian Ocean beginning in the 1990s. During the Kargil conflict, the Indian Navy launched Operation Talwar and Summerex. The exercises blocked Karachi Port, where a naval facility is located, to restrict Pakistan's commerce arteries. These incidents prompted Pakistan to examine Gwadar as an alternative. Its original depth of 12.5 meters (which can be increased by excavation to 20 meters) makes it suitable for large ships and tankers and also the construction of port facilities. China's strategic imperatives for developing Gwadar are geo-economic (closer to western China & new route to West Africa and Asia), global political (closer relations with Pakistan with link connecting Central, West, and South Asia), & geo-strategic (controlling the seaport). Gwadar is CPEC's crown gem in Pakistan (Government of Pakistan, 2019).

Gwadar offers a geo-economics answer to China's "Malaccan problem" by offering an alternative trade network. It minimizes China's goods' time and distance to Africa and West Asia. The journey would be 2,500 miles instead of 9,500, and it would take 3–4 days instead of two weeks. 23 When time–distance requirements for transporting commodities between countries are reduced, perishable goods that were not previously considered due to time constraints can be traded. It broadens the countries' trade. Gwadar's approach minimizes the cost per container, making it very cheap. An active commerce corridor connecting western China could help to develop Xinjiang together into transit center (Lucy Styles, 2017).

China's economic progress is crucial, and Beijing has called it a "peaceful ascent." China's culture doesn't hurt its economy. Despite challenges in private business, China's economy is strong. Rapid spread is creating a pool of human resources. China's political leadership realize economic growth will increase their power. China's growing relationship with Gwadar strengthens its relationship with Pakistan. China's participation in Gwadar is part of Beijing's expanding economic and political footprint in the Middle East, where its objectives do not necessarily align with Europe's. China's involvement in Gwadar could boost its mediatory role in the Pak-Afghan relationship and Afghan peace (Friedmann, 2005).

China's grip over Gwadar Port is geostrategic. Several indicators suggest Gwadar might become a naval harbor. China's location in the Northern Indian Ocean, 120 miles from the Strait of Hormuz, where 30% of

global oil flows, is also helpful. China's present station in Djibouti is restricted in scope, thus its presence in Gwadar considerably boosts its holdings in the region and gives several possibilities for high-quality monitoring in the Indian Ocean Region. Gwadar Port is a critical location for military listening posts to monitor Gulf naval and maritime operations (French, H. W, 2017)

In November 2016, a Pakistani military official announced that Chinese ships would join the Pakistani Navy in securing Gwadar Port. Any infrastructure demands a proportionate security mechanism. Pakistan can't absorb the cash inflow and is headed for a debt crisis, according to statistics. China would claim 'strategic equity' on the port and 'reinforce its grip on Pakistani assets (Scott N. Romaniuk and Tobias Burgers, 2019).

China's investment in Central Asia

Improving physical connection between China and its Central Asian neighbours and assisting the establishment of an effective multilateral security system are two of China's primary contributions to the region. This goal comprises "entrance" from the Indian Ocean & Persian Gulf and "exit" from Asia. China's commercial and military goals require secure energy flows. Energy insecurity has long been a concern for Chinese strategists, exemplified by the so-called "Malacca Dilemma," or China's dependency on ships first from Indian Ocean thru the Malacca Strait (Igityan, M, 2019).

Several BRI projects in Central Asia, including trains, roads, bridges, & telecommunication networks, have seen an increase in Chinese investment from \$1 billion to \$50 billion. As an example of its robust economic involvement, China has an annual gas trading agreement with Turkmenistan of 55 billion cubic metres and transfers 11 million tonnes of oil via the China-Kazakhstan Oil Pipeline every day. Xinjiang has land borders with Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan, and it also serves as a major trade corridor for 75% of all goods moving between China and Central Asia. It is possible that China would look to the Central Asian republics as a more reliable partner due to the many opportunities for regional collaboration and mutual economic benefits (Rafiq, 2020). Among the advantages of integrating Central Asian countries with CPEC is that oil products from Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, & Uzbekistan may be delivered to Russia and China via pipelines running through Russia's main routes (Jaleel, 2019).

China's Central Asia investment policy is systematic, massive, lasting, and motivated by strategic and economic considerations. The majority of Chinese contributions are in the shape of loans. Direct loans are China's primary method of investment and growth, backed by direct investments from abroad in the commodity, transportation, and energy sectors (Horn et al., 2019). Tajikistan & Kazakhstan are two Central Asian countries whose economies exhibit this trend. Several the region's countries are unreliable borrowers, so China has been able to capitalize on their willingness to lend. Before 2008, Chinese credit were modest, but that has changed dramatically. (Jaborov, 2018).

By the year 2020, the sum total of Chinese investment in Central Asia had reached \$40 billion, with more than half of that money going to Kazakhstan. As reported by the Uzbek president's press office, Chinese investment in the country skyrocketed in 2018, reaching \$1 billion in 2019, \$3 billion in 2020, and \$9 billion in 2021. Total Chinese investment in Kyrgyzstan in 2019 was \$301 million (Elizabeth Woods and Thomas Baker, 2022). After mentioning that the indicator had increased 25-fold in the last 20 years, from \$1.5 billion to \$38.6 billion in 2020, Xi Jinping established a goal to raise bilateral commerce with the region to \$70 billion by 2030. By the end of 2021, the number of Chinese companies doing business in Central Asia had reached 7,700, and China had invested \$40 billion there. Additional 50 million doses of Chinese-made

vaccines will be provided this year, and China will donate \$500 million in aid to Central Asian nations over the following three years (Kumenov, 2022).

When asked about the record-breaking \$17 billion in bilateral trade that took place between Kazakhstan and China in the first eleven months of 2021, the country's president, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, proudly mentioned it. Furthermore, he mentioned that half of China's \$40 billion investment in the Central Asian republics is located in Kazakhstan. When it comes to commerce, the President has offered some novel ideas, including a more flexible framework, fewer restrictions, and better management of customs procedures. He detailed how Kazakhstan had boosted shipments to China of over a billion dollars' worth of goods, including organic agricultural products and food. In order to diversify transit and transport lines and provide integrated logistics solutions, Kazakhstan plans to invest \$20 billion by 2025, as stated by the Head of State (Akorda, 2022).

Understanding of the structure of multilateral commerce shows well-known important features, which persist over the long term, despite appeals for diversification. In 2020, for instance, about 27 percent of China's total imports from Kazakhstan were mineral fuels. Similar to the previous year, the indicator for copper reached about 18.6% while the share of ores, slag, and ash equaled 20.6%. Cereals accounted for a negligible 0.8% of China's overall imports from Kazakhstan (Hajiev, Sh, 2019).

China wants to open its market to Central Asian partners through trade, but for the time being, it is not doing so. For instance, China has selectively restricted imports from Kazakhstan due to coronavirus fears. Consequently, exports from Kazakhstan to China dropped sharply as a result of this strategy. Between January and September of 2021, food shipments to China plunged 78%, while flour exports dropped 91%. In addition, by March of 2021, a backlog of 12,000 unused railcars had built up on the Kazakh side as a result of increased checks at the Chinese border. Contrarily, in the first eight months of 2021, the number of transit container shipments passing Kazakhstan to and from China increased by a third compared to the same period previous year, and 88% of those trains connect China and Europe (Kumenov, 2021).

Ores accounted for over 77% of China's total imports from Kyrgyzstan, while they accounted for only 72% of China's total imports from Tajikistan. Only mineral fuels, especially natural gas, are included in China's imports from Turkmenistan. In 2020, 99.5% of the market was taken up by this item. Mineral fuels are another key export from Uzbekistan to China. In the same year, mineral fuels accounted for about 43% of China's total imports from Uzbekistan. Cotton (27% of total imports) and copper (13.6%) are two other major textiles and metals (Eurasianet, 2022).

China is a vital trade, investment, and lending partner. 52% of Tajikistan's foreign debt (\$1.2 billion) and 45% of Kyrgyzstan's (\$1.7 billion) are from China. The indicator is high despite improvements in other Central Asian countries. Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan each owe China 16.9% of their GDP. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan have trouble repaying loans. Chinese firms get concessions. Transparency in Chinese-local company agreements increases social unrest in Central Asia (Umarov, 2020). China invests in Central Asia. Instead of subsidizing infrastructure, it's investing in bus factories, cement plants, agriculture, and renewable energy. China's state-owned banks and enterprises borrow from local partners or foreign countries (Van der Kley, 2020).

Conclusion

China is an important Central Asian economic partner for trade, investments, loans, and cooperative industrial and infrastructure projects. Despite China's growing influence in the region and repeated appeals for mutual advantages, the Chinese market remains closed to Central Asian producers. China's commerce with Central Asia is protectionist. Despite diversification, China's largest investment sector remains energy. Some countries in the region have trouble repaying Chinese loans. Regional countries must reevaluate their China strategy. They need a comprehensive review of economic cooperation with China's effects on manufacturing and agricultural production, international commerce, competition, and other macroeconomic variables. These assessments can disclose benefits and costs and help building a China policy that increases collaboration benefits.

Before and under the BRI, collaboration via Gwadar port has benefited Central Asian economies by facilitating commerce and paying infrastructural shortages. Economic interaction with China should follow rigid norms. Given Chinese investment, using key assets as collateral, such as mineral deposit extraction rights, should be examined or avoided.

Gwadar will boost China's military, geopolitical, & economic dominance in the Indian Ocean. Its geopolitical potency has high potential costs. India, Pakistan's competitor, opposes China's regional expansion. A "second front" will lead India to more active balancing against Chinese influence in the Indian Ocean, especially given their border issues. The more India feels threatened by China in the region, the more appealing the US becomes as a security partner. Beijing may not think India will join a Western alliance, but the quick disintegration of this significant bilateral relationship would challenge China's Indian Ocean position.

Better environmental protection surveillance is vital to ensuring China adopts current technologies in its projects. Along with fighting corruption, protecting national interests including employing locals, hiring domestic enterprises, and controlling natural resource extraction should be a priority.

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