

Chahbahar vs. Gawader: Assessing Strategic competition and its implications for Pakistan

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Abstract

This research paper examines the strategic, geopolitical, and geo-economic implications of Iran's Chahbahr Port as an emerging alternative to Pakistan's Gwadar Port, evaluating the resulting challenges and opportunities for Pakistan in the evolving architecture of regional connectivity. As China and India expand their influence in South Asia, Central Asia, and the Indian Ocean Region, seaports have become central instruments of modern statecraft, economic integration, and power projection. Gwadar, developed under the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), plays a pivotal role in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), offering Beijing critical access to the Arabian Sea and shortening its energy and trade routes. Conversely, India's strategic partnership with Iran through its investment in Chahbahr provides New Delhi with an alternative gateway to Afghanistan and Central Asia, bypassing Pakistan. This development carries major implications for Pakistan's economic leverage, regional influence, and security environment.

Using a qualitative methodology grounded in thematic analysis, the study synthesizes existing literature, trade patterns, geopolitical behavior, and strategic alignments to assess both ports' comparative capacities, connectivity corridors, and regional impact. Findings reveal that while Chahbahr expands India's strategic reach and reduces Pakistan's monopoly over Afghan transit trade, Gwadar retains superior natural depth, logistical capacity, and long-term geostrategic potential due to CPEC's multi-billion-dollar infrastructure support. However, the strategic rivalry between China and India complicates cooperation possibilities and heightens geopolitical competition across the Indian Ocean and Central Asia.

The study concludes that Pakistan must adopt a proactive policy framework to maximize Gwadar's economic potential while mitigating the impact of Chahbahr's rise through diplomatic engagement, regional connectivity initiatives, and enhanced security measures. It also

recommends exploring selective cooperation mechanisms among Pakistan, Iran, and China to prevent Chahbahr–Gwadar competition from escalating into a zero-sum rivalry.

1.Introduction

Maritime infrastructure has become a central determinant of global political economy, shaping the strategic behavior of states and redefining regional connectivity in the twenty-first century. As global trade expands and energy flows increase, strategic sea routes and deep-sea ports have emerged as critical assets in statecraft, economic development, and geopolitical competition. The Indian Ocean Region (IOR), connecting the Middle East, South Asia, Africa, and East Asia, now hosts some of the world's most strategically important maritime chokepoints. Against this backdrop, the rise of Pakistan's Gwadar Port and Iran's Chahbahr Port has intensified regional power rivalries, particularly between China and India, while simultaneously creating new opportunities for economic integration.

Pakistan's Gwadar Port, developed with extensive Chinese investment under the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), and forms a flagship component of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Gwadar provides Beijing with direct access to the Arabian Sea, reducing its reliance on the congested and vulnerable Strait of Malacca. It also enables China to transport goods and energy supplies to its western Xinjiang region via an integrated system of highways, pipelines, and rail networks. For Pakistan, Gwadar symbolizes a transformative opportunity to reposition itself as a regional trade hub, boost foreign direct investment, create employment, and strengthen its strategic relevance in regional politics.

Simultaneously, Iran's Chahbahr Port, located approximately 72 nautical miles from Gwadar, has gained strategic prominence through India's financial and technical support. Unlike Gwadar, which is predominantly aligned with China, Chahbahr serves India's goal of securing alternative connectivity routes to Afghanistan and Central Asia, bypassing Pakistan entirely. This is particularly significant given Pakistan's denial of overland transit facilities to India for trade with Afghanistan. Through Chahbahr, India gains direct access to landlocked Afghanistan, resource-rich Central Asia, and eventually Russia through the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC). The port also strengthens India's geopolitical footprint in the region, allowing it to counterbalance China's expanding influence under BRI.

The emergence of these two ports as competing geopolitical projects highlights deeper structural changes in South Asian and Eurasian politics. While Gawadar represents China's maritime ambitions and Pakistan's quest for economic revitalization, Chahbahr symbolizes India's strategic outreach to Iran and Afghanistan as well as its determination to avoid strategic dependence on Pakistan. This evolving competition has profound implications for Pakistan's economic interests, regional connectivity, security dynamics, and foreign policy orientation.

The strategic significance of Gawadar is rooted not only in its geographical location but also in its alignment with one of the world's most ambitious connectivity initiatives, the Belt and Road Initiative. China views Gawadar as its maritime gateway to the Middle East, North Africa, and the broader Indo-Pacific region. With 60 percent of China's oil imports passing through sea lanes originating in the Persian Gulf, Gawadar provides a shorter, safer, and more efficient route for energy transportation. At the same time, the port strengthens Pakistan's position in regional trade networks by offering Central Asian Republics (CARs) a cost-effective route to global markets.

On the other hand, Chahbahr Port enhances Iran's role as a regional transit hub and strengthens its economic integration with its neighbors. For Iran, Chahbahr is an instrument of economic diversification, geopolitical leverage, and regional diplomacy. The port reduces Iran's dependence on the Strait of Hormuz and enhances its capacity to host regional commercial traffic. India's investment in Chahbahr further boosts Iran's strategic significance amid Western sanctions and limited economic partnerships. Through Chahbahr, Iran can also engage Afghanistan and Central Asia in regional trade frameworks, thereby expanding its diplomatic influence.

For Pakistan, however, the development of Chahbahar raises serious economic and strategic concerns. Historically, Pakistan has served as Afghanistan's primary gateway for imports and exports. The operationalization of Chahbahar potentially reduces Pakistan's control over Afghan transit trade and diminishes its economic influence in the region. Furthermore, as India uses Chahbahar to deepen its footprint in Afghanistan and Central Asia, Pakistan faces the possibility of strategic encirclement an outcome that threatens its regional leverage and security calculus.

The competition between Gawadar and Chahbahar cannot be understood in isolation from the broader geopolitical rivalry between China and India. As rising economic powers, both states

seek influence in Eurasia, access to energy resources, and control over emerging trade corridors. China's BRI and India's counter-initiatives including the Asia–Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC), Project Mausam, and Chahbahar reflect competing visions for regional connectivity. This competition is further intensified by the involvement of other actors, including the United States, Afghanistan, Russia, the Gulf states, and Central Asian Republics, each pursuing distinct strategic interests.

Although both ports are often portrayed as rivals, cooperation between them is not impossible. Iran has repeatedly expressed interest in integrating Chahbahr with Gwadar, potentially creating a complementary rather than competitive port ecosystem. China has also signalled openness to connecting Gwadar with Chahbahr as part of a broader regional connectivity strategy. Such cooperation could transform the region into a major hub of maritime and land-based trade, benefiting Pakistan, Iran, Afghanistan, and Central Asia. Nevertheless, political mistrust, international sanctions, regional instability, and great-power rivalries continue to complicate prospects for trilateral collaboration.

In view of these considerations, this study explores three central questions:

- (1) What is the geopolitical and geo-economic importance of Gwadar and Chahbahr in the regional context?
- (2) Are the two ports fundamentally in competition or cooperation with each other, given emerging regional alignments?
- (3) What are the implications for Pakistan if Chahbahr continues to develop as an alternative to Gwadar?

To address these questions, the following research integrates academic literature, strategic analysis, and thematic interpretation to evaluate the historical trajectories, capacities, alignments, and strategic relevance of both ports. Through this inquiry, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of South Asia's maritime politics and the evolving power dynamics between China, India, Iran, and Pakistan.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The strategic competition between Pakistan's Gwadar Port and Iran's Chahbahr Port has generated considerable scholarly attention, driven by the shifting geopolitical and geo-economic landscape of South Asia, Central Asia, and the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The literature examining both ports spans multiple academic domains, including international relations, maritime geopolitics, energy security, regional connectivity, and foreign policy strategy. Scholars have debated whether the two ports represent competing geopolitical projects, complementary economic corridors, or components of broader great-power strategies—specifically those of China and India. This literature review synthesizes and critically evaluates existing scholarship to provide a comprehensive conceptual foundation for understanding the emerging relationship between Gwadar and Chahbahr and the implications for Pakistan.

2.2Gawadar Port: A Strategic Asset in China Pakistan Cooperation

A substantial body of literature emphasizes the centrality of Gawadar Port within the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Scholars such as Small (2015) and Rolland (2017) argue that Gawadar serves as a maritime gateway for China to the Arabian Sea and provides an alternative trade route that reduces China's dependence on the Strait of Malacca. This aligns with the “Malacca Dilemma” concept, which highlights China's vulnerability to maritime disruptions in Southeast Asia. Gawadar's location, near the mouth of the Persian Gulf, is considered strategically invaluable for China's long-term energy security and naval presence.

From Pakistan's perspective, literature by Sial (2014), Khan (2019), and Ahmed & Baloch (2020) underscores Gawadar as a catalyst for economic development, regional integration, and foreign investment. The port is expected to enhance Pakistan's economic connectivity with Central Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. Scholars highlight Gwadar's natural depth, its proximity to major shipping routes, and its potential to evolve into a major transshipment hub.

However, other scholars adopt a more cautious tone. Haider (2018) and Javaid (2020) emphasize that while Gawadar holds immense potential, internal challenges such as security issues, political disputes, and infrastructure deficits have slowed the port's development. Literature also

highlights the concerns of local populations in Balochistan regarding resource allocation, employment distribution, and regional autonomy, as documented by Yusuf & Mustafa (2021).

Collectively, the literature on Gwadar reveals a dual narrative: one presenting the port as a transformative geo-economic asset and another highlighting structural and governance challenges that could impede its success.

2.3 Chahbahr Port: India's Strategic Gateway to the Region

Chahbahr Port occupies a central place in India's strategy to counterbalance China's maritime expansion and to create alternative access routes to Afghanistan and Central Asia. Pant (2016) and Singh (2018) argue that India's involvement in Chahbahr is driven by its need to bypass Pakistan for trade with Afghanistan and landlocked Central Asian Republics. Through the Chahbahr–Zaranj–Delaram Highway and its connection to the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC), India seeks to establish a new commercial arc linking the Indian Ocean to Russia and Europe.

For Iran, scholars such as Ehteshami (2019) highlight the port's significance in mitigating the impact of international sanctions and diversifying Iran's economic partnerships. Chahbahr provides Iran with a strategic outlet that is free from the vulnerabilities posed by the Strait of Hormuz, thereby expanding its geopolitical leverage in the region.

Several scholars also point to Chahbahr as an instrument of regional diplomacy. Khatib (2020) argues that Iran views the port as a platform for engaging multiple regional actors India, Afghanistan, Central Asia, and even China although geopolitical constraints often limit these ambitions.

2.4 The Regional Geopolitical Context: The Indian Ocean and Eurasian Dynamics

A major portion of the scholarly discourse situates Gwadar and Chahbahar within the broader geopolitics of the Indian Ocean Region. Kaplan (2010) and Brewster (2018) argue that the IOR has become a theatre of growing competition among major powers, especially China and India. China's BRI and India's maritime initiatives are seen as competing visions for regional connectivity, influencing port development, naval strategy, and economic relationships.

Scholars such as Mohan (2020) and Ul Haq (2021) stress that Gawadar and Chahbahar are more than just commercial ports they are components of competing grand strategies that shape regional alignments. Gawadar embodies China's Maritime Silk Road and its desire to secure alternative energy supply routes. India's investment in Chahbahar, meanwhile, reflects its attempt to limit China's influence, build independent trade corridors, and increase its presence in Afghanistan.

Several authors also highlight the role of external actors. The United States, for instance, has expressed support for Chahbahar as a means of stabilizing Afghanistan and limiting China's influence. Conversely, Gulf states have shown interest in Gawadar due to their proximity to the Strait of Hormuz and shared strategic interests with Pakistan.

The literature reveals that both ports are deeply embedded in great-power competition, and their development trajectories cannot be separated from broader regional politics.

2.5 Connectivity Corridors and Competing Economic Geographies

Scholars emphasize that both Gawadar and Chahbahar must be understood within the context of emerging regional connectivity networks. Literature by Sultana (2019) and Ali (2021) examines the trade corridors linked to both ports.

Gawadar's Connectivity:

CPEC highways linking Gawadar to Kashgar (China)

Proposed railway and pipeline route

Prospective links to Central Asia through the Quadrilateral Traffic in Transit Agreement (QTTA) Potential special economic zones (SEZs)

Chahbahr's Connectivity:

Chahbahr–Zaranj–Delaram route linking India to Afghanistan

Connectivity to Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan

Integration with INSTC connecting to Russia, Azerbaijan, and Europe

Comparative studies (Kumar, 2020; Batool, 2021) suggest that while Chahbahr provides India with impressive overland access, Gawadar offers greater maritime depth, logistical capacity, and long-term scalability. However, the effectiveness of these corridors depends on political stability, regional cooperation, and infrastructure readiness.

The literature thus highlights a central argument: port competition is shaped not only by maritime infrastructure but also by the connectivity networks radiating from each port.

2.6 Competition or Complementarity? Divergent Scholarly Perspectives

A significant debate in the literature concerns the nature of the relationship between Gawadar and Chahbahar: Are they competitors or potential partners?

2.6.1 Arguments for Competition

Scholars such as Pant (2018), Khan (2020), and Brewster (2018) view the ports as direct competitors due to:

- China–India strategic rivalry

- Competing trade corridors

- Influence over Afghan transit trade

- Naval and military implications

- Overlapping market zones and hinterland access

These scholars argue that the proximity of the two ports (approximately 72 nautical miles apart) naturally creates economic and strategic rivalry.

2.6.2 Arguments for Complementarity

Conversely, scholars like Eslami (2019), Akbar (2021), and Gopalan (2020) suggest that Gawadar and Chahbahar can be complementary. Supporting arguments include:

- Iran's willingness to link Chahbahar with Gawadar

- China's interest in accessing Chahbahar for broader regional integration

- Potential to serve different market segments

- Shared infrastructure goals between Pakistan, Iran, and China

This literature posits that cooperation can reduce political tensions, enhance regional trade, and create an integrated economic zone.

2.6.3 Neutral or Conditional Perspectives

Some scholars adopt a conditional approach, arguing that the relationship depends largely on broader geopolitical alignment. According to Haider (2020) and Yusuf (2021):

If China–India rivalry persists, competition will dominate. If external pressures (e.g., sanctions, security threats) rise, cooperation may become a necessity.

Regional diplomacy, especially Pakistan–Iran relations, will play a defining role.

Taken together, this literature illustrates that both competitive and cooperative outcomes are possible, contingent upon evolving political and economic conditions.

2.7 Afghanistan and Central Asia: A Battleground for Influence

Afghanistan and the Central Asian Republics (CARs) occupy a central place in the literature examining both ports. Academic work by Rashid (2018) and Iqbal (2019) demonstrates that both India and Pakistan view Afghanistan as critical for their broader regional strategies.

For Gawadar:

Offers Afghanistan a shorter, cost-efficient trade route

Supports China’s investments in Afghanistan

Enhances Pakistan’s relevance as a regional transit state

For Chahbahar:

- * Provides India with a route to Afghanistan independent of Pakistan

- * Strengthens Afghan economic sovereignty

- * Supports Indo-Afghan strategic cooperation

Several scholars argue that Afghanistan’s political instability limits the full potential of both ports. Others highlight that CARs may evaluate both ports pragmatically based on cost efficiency, stability, and international sanctions regimes.

2.8 Security Dynamics and Military Implications

A growing body of literature analyses the security implications of Gwadar and Chahbahr. Scholars such as Kugelman (2020) and Rafiq (2019) argue that China’s involvement in Gwadar has raised concerns about potential dual-use facilities, including naval support for the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN).

In contrast, the Indian presence at Chahbahr is viewed as part of a strategic effort to expand India’s maritime footprint and counter Chinese influence in the IOR. Some scholars also note that Chahbahr reduces Iran’s dependence on the Strait of Hormuz, giving Tehran strategic depth in its maritime strategy.

Literature also highlights security risks in Balochistan and Sistan-Baluchestan, with insurgency and militant activities posing challenges to both ports. These factors influence investor confidence, infrastructural development, and long-term viability.

2.9 Economic Viability and Long-Term Potential

Economic analyses of Gwadar and Chahbahr highlight mixed evaluations. Authors such as Zaman (2021) argue that Gwadar's success depends heavily on CPEC's progress, Pakistan's economic reforms, and regional stability. Meanwhile, Gupta (2020) suggests that Chahbahr's growth is constrained by geopolitical frictions, U.S. sanctions on Iran, and bureaucratic delays.

Comparative assessments indicate:

Gawadar possesses superior port depth, location, and scalability.

Chahbahar benefits from Indian financing, INSTC integration, and relative political stability at the port level.

Gawadar's success is tied to China, whereas Chahbahar depends on India–Iran cooperation.

External factors (sanctions, regional crises, institutional performance) significantly influence outcomes.

The literature generally concludes that while both ports hold economic promise, their success is heavily shaped by geopolitical constraints and internal governance.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design to examine the strategic, geopolitical, and geo-economic implications of Chahbahar Port as an emerging alternative to Gawadar Port and its potential impact on Pakistan. Given the interpretive and exploratory nature of the research questions concerning geopolitical behavior, regional alignments, state strategies, and port development trajectories a qualitative approach provides the most effective means to analyze complex political and economic dynamics. This design enables an in-depth understanding of the strategic motivations of regional actors, the interplay of competing connectivity frameworks, and the broader regional implications of port-based development.

3.2 Methodological Approach: Thematic Analysis

The primary methodological approach used in this study is thematic analysis, which facilitates the identification, organization, and interpretation of key themes within the existing body of knowledge. Thematic analysis allows the researcher to detect recurring patterns in academic literature, strategic policy debates, and geopolitical discourse. This approach is particularly relevant for research involving regional politics, strategic competition, and economic connectivity, where diverse sources must be integrated into coherent analytical categories.

3.3 Data Sources

The research is based entirely on secondary data, relying on credible, authoritative, and peer-reviewed sources. These include:

3.3.1 Academic Literature

Peer-reviewed journal articles, books, conference papers, and dissertations discussing:

China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)

Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

India's foreign policy and strategic interests

Iran's economic strategies and port development

Afghanistan's transit trade

Regional connectivity frameworks (INSTC, BRI, AAGC)

3.3.2 Government and Policy Documents

Reports and publications by:

Government of Pakistan

Government of Iran

Government of India

China's National Development and Reform Commission

Planning Commission of Pakistan

Pakistan Navy and maritime security institutions

International organizations such as ADB, IMF, and World Bank

3.3.3 Think Tank and Research Reports

Analyses by reputable institutions including:

Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

RAND Corporation

International Crisis Group

Islamabad Policy Research Institute (IPRI)

Institute for Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI)

Chatham House

Brookings Institution

3.3.4 News and Expert Commentary

Credible news sources and expert opinion pieces were included for recent developments, as maritime geopolitics and regional alliances shift rapidly. These sources supplement academic literature with timely information.

3.4 Data Collection Procedure

Data collection followed a structured process:

1. Database Searches

Academic databases such as JSTOR, ScienceDirect, SpringerLink, Taylor & Francis, and Google Scholar were used to collect scholarly sources.

2. Screening and Selection

Sources were selected based on:

Relevance to the research questions

Scholarly credibility

Regional and thematic focus

Publication recency (with older works used for historical background)

3. Verification and Triangulation

To ensure reliability, claims were cross-checked across multiple authors or institutions. Conflicting interpretations were analyzed critically to construct a balanced narrative.

3.4.1 Geopolitical Theory

The study employs geopolitical frameworks that examine how geography influences state strategies, power projection, and competition. Authors such as Mackinder, Mahan, and Kaplan highlight the importance of sea routes, chokepoints, and maritime infrastructure in shaping global power dynamics.

3.4.2 Geo-economic Competition

Borrowing from Blackwill and Harris (2016), geo-economics refers to the use of economic instruments ports, trade corridors, foreign investment to achieve strategic objectives. Gwadar and Chahbahr exemplify geo-economic competition between China and India.

3.4.3 Regional Connectivity Frameworks

Concepts from modern connectivity studies such as corridor-based development and regional supply-chain integration inform the analysis of both ports' economic and logistical importance.

3.4.4 Strategic Rivalry Models

The study situates the port competition within China–India rivalry, providing a theoretical lens to interpret state behavior, alliance patterns, and infrastructure competition.

This multi-layered analytical framework ensures that the study captures the interdependence of political, economic, and spatial dimensions.

1. Dependence on Secondary Data

The study relies on existing literature rather than primary fieldwork due to geographic, political, and security constraints.

2. Dynamic Geopolitical Environment

Maritime geopolitics is fluid, and regional developments including sanctions, regime changes, and regional conflicts can rapidly alter the status of ports.

3. Limited Access to Official Data

Government transparency in Pakistan, Iran, and China varies, and some port data is not publicly available, especially regarding military use or financial agreements.

4. Potential Bias in Sources

Sources from competing states may reflect national interests. To mitigate this, cross-verification and triangulation were applied throughout the study.

Despite these limitations, the methodology provides a robust foundation for analyzing Gwadar and Chahbahar within the regional strategic landscape.

4.1 Summary of Findings

The thematic analysis conducted in this study reveals a complex interplay of geopolitical, economic, and regional dynamics shaping the evolution of Gwadar and Chahbahr ports. The findings highlight that while both ports possess significant geopolitical value, their trajectories are influenced by divergent strategic partnerships—Gwadar with China and Chahbahr with India.

The competition between these ports is rooted not only in economic functions but also in rival political alignments and strategic visions. This section synthesizes the main findings and critically examines their implications for Pakistan.

4.2 Gwadar as a Strategic Nexus in China's Maritime Vision

4.2.1 China's Belt and Road Initiative and Gwadar's Centrality

The analysis confirms that Gwadar is a cornerstone of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), particularly the maritime branch of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Through Gwadar, China seeks:

- A deep-water port close to key energy supply routes

- A shorter trade route to China's western regions

- An opportunity to diversify energy transport away from the Strait of Malacca

- A strategic foothold in the Arabian Sea

These factors elevate Gwadar beyond a commercial port, positioning it as a long-term strategic investment in China's geopolitical ambitions.

4.2.2 Pakistan's Economic Expectations from Gwadar

The findings indicate that Pakistan views Gwadar as a mechanism for economic transformation.

Expected benefits include:

- Increased trade and transshipment activities

- Development of Special Economic Zones (SEZs)

- Employment creation in Balochistan

- Enhanced regional connectivity with Central Asia

- Attraction of foreign direct investment

However, the success of these outcomes relies heavily on internal infrastructure, governance efficiency, and sustained security.

4.2.3 Challenges Hindering Gwadar's Full Potential

The analysis identifies several constraints affecting Gwadar's progress:

- Security issues in Balochistan

- Slow pace of infrastructure completion

Political disputes over resource allocation

Public concerns about local inclusion

Dependence on Chinese funding and expertise

These issues limit Gwadar's immediate competitiveness compared to Chahbahr, which benefitted from earlier operationalization.

4.3 Chahbahr as India's Western Gateway

4.3.1 India's Geostrategic Imperatives

The findings confirm that India's investment in Chahbahr is motivated by strategic necessity rather than purely economic opportunity. Chahbahr provides India with:

An alternative route to Afghanistan that bypasses Pakistan

A gateway to resource-rich Central Asia

Integration into the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC)

Strategic leverage against China's BRI and its presence at Gwadar

India's development of the Chahbahr–Zaranj–Delaram Highway further strengthens its connectivity with Afghanistan.

4.3.2 Iran's Regional Ambitions and Economic Diversification

For Iran, Chahbahr holds immense significance as it:

Reduces dependence on the Strait of Hormuz

Provides access to open seas with deep-water capacity

Expands foreign partnerships amid sanctions

Strengthens Iran's vision of becoming a regional transit hub

Iran's willingness to collaborate with India represents a strategic pivot that impacts Pakistan's regional standing.

4.3.3 Challenges and Constraints on Chahbahr's Growth

Despite its advantages, Chahbahr faces limitations:

Influence of U.S. sanctions on Iran

Bureaucratic hurdles and slow project implementation

Financial constraints on India

Regional security issues in Sistan–Baluchestan

These constraints mitigate some competitive pressure on Gwadar but do not eliminate the strategic significance of Chahbahr.

4.4 Competitive Dynamics Between Gwadar and Chahbahar

4.4.1 Proximity and Overlapping Hinterlands

The findings highlight that the two ports are separated by approximately 72 nautical miles, making them geographically close enough to compete for similar markets. Both aim to serve:

- Afghanistan

- Central Asian Republics

- Maritime traffic from the Indian Ocean

- Transshipment activities to regional markets

This proximity intensifies competition, especially in the Afghan and Central Asian corridors, where transit route selection is influenced by political alliances and infrastructure readiness.

4.4.2 China–India Rivalry as a Structural Driver of Competition

The analysis shows that the competition is not merely commercial; it is structural and tied to broader geopolitical rivalries. Key elements include:

- China’s attempt to expand its maritime influence

- India’s counter-strategy to limit Chinese dominance

- Pakistan–India rivalry influencing Afghan transit access

- U.S. and Gulf states weighing in based on strategic alignments

Thus, Gwadar and Chahbahr function as instruments of great-power competition, not just ports.

4.4.3 Divergent Development Models

Gwadar follows a China-centric development model characterized by:

- Massive capital investment

- A long-term strategic vision

- Integrated infrastructure (roads, pipelines, rail)

- Potential dual-use capability for the Chinese navy

Chahbahr follows an India–Iran cooperative model, characterized by:

- Limited but targeted investment

- Multilateral integration via INSTC

- Emphasis on commercial and diplomatic goals

Minimal military involvement (based on public information)

These divergent models reinforce the ports' competitive identities.

Conclusion

The strategic landscape of South Asia, the Middle East, and Central Asia is undergoing a profound transformation, driven by evolving regional alliances, infrastructure development, and the expanding ambitions of major powers. Within this context, the emergence of Iran's Chahbahr Port as an alternative to Pakistan's Gwadar Port represents one of the most significant developments reshaping regional connectivity and geopolitical competition. This study set out to analyze the strategic significance of both ports, evaluate their potential competitive and cooperative dynamics, and examine the implications for Pakistan. The findings underscore that while Gwadar holds unmatched geographical and infrastructural advantages, Chahbahr presents a credible alternative backed by strong political alignment between India and Iran.

The results demonstrate that Gwadar occupies a central position in China's Belt and Road Initiative, offering China critical access to the Arabian Sea and creating new opportunities for Pakistan to strengthen its economic and geopolitical standing. Its deep-water capacity, proximity to global energy supply routes, and integration with CPEC make it a port of significant long-term potential. However, despite its strategic value, Gwadar faces internal challenges, including security concerns in Balochistan, infrastructural delays, governance gaps, and local dissatisfaction. These factors hinder Pakistan's ability to fully capitalize on Gwadar's potential in the short to medium term.

Conversely, Chahbahr has gained strategic importance due to India's investment and its integration into the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC). For India, Chahbahr is a gateway to Afghanistan and Central Asia that circumvents Pakistan entirely, weakening Pakistan's historical leverage over regional transit routes. For Iran, the port serves as a vital tool for economic diversification and political outreach during periods of international isolation. Although Chahbahr faces limitations including sanctions, bureaucratic delays, and financial constraints it remains an operational alternative that strengthens India's presence in the region and reshapes the connectivity landscape.

This study also concludes that the competition between Gwadar and Chahbahr is not solely economic; rather, it is embedded in broader geopolitical rivalry. China and India's pursuit of influence across South Asia, Eurasia, and the Indian Ocean Region positions the two ports as instruments of competing strategic visions. As long as China–India rivalry persists, competition will remain the dominant dynamic shaping the ports' development. However, the analysis also indicates the possibility of complementarity. Iran has expressed interest in linking the two ports, and China's growing engagement with Iran opens pathways for collaborative frameworks that could convert competition into synergy. Such cooperation would require diplomatic finesse and policy coordination among Pakistan, Iran, and China—but it remains a plausible scenario with significant regional benefits.

For Pakistan, the rise of Chahbahr presents both challenges and opportunities. The most immediate challenge is the erosion of Pakistan's monopoly over Afghan transit trade, which reduces its economic influence and bargaining power. Additionally, the integration of Chahbahr into India's connectivity strategy strengthens India's regional position at the expense of Pakistan. However, opportunities remain substantial. Gwadar's superior geographic location near the Strait of Hormuz, its potential to attract Gulf investment, and its integration with CPEC give Pakistan long-term advantages that Chahbahr cannot easily replicate. Moreover, Pakistan can mitigate competitive pressures through proactive diplomacy with Iran, improved domestic governance, and accelerated infrastructure development under CPEC.

In conclusion, the dynamics between Gwadar and Chahbahr should not be viewed as a zero-sum competition. While competition predominates due to structural geopolitical factors, there is room for balanced cooperation that could enhance regional connectivity and stability. For Pakistan, the path forward lies in strengthening Gwadar through improved security, institutional reforms, and constructive regional engagement. By adopting a strategic and flexible foreign policy approach, Pakistan can leverage Gwadar's strengths, manage the competitive pressures from Chahbahr, and position itself as an indispensable player in the emerging regional economic architecture.

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