



India's Persian desire – analysing India's maritime trade strategy vis-à-vis the Port of Chabahar

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ABSTRACT

Since the turn of the century, India has seen itself as the dominant maritime power in South Asia and has aspired to project this power across the Indian Ocean Region. The principle of a “net security provider” has, thus far, been most applicable in South Asia and around its littorals, but it is West Asia that will really test India's diplomatic and maritime capabilities over the course of the coming years. West Asia has a complex structure of diplomatic and strategic intricacies, that India has to manoeuvre through, in order to achieve its interests. Adding to this, India has had to adopt a careful balancing act juggling its West Asian interests with those that it has elsewhere. The roles of trade, strategy, and ideology have never been as intertwined as they are in the contemporary age, and this region and the challenges it poses is the most complex weave India that is likely to face as it pushes forward into a new age of international relations. This paper addresses the bilateral realities of India and Iran in the context of India's maritime strategy, and the geostrategies of other regional players such as China and Pakistan.

KEYWORDS

India; Iran; West Asia;
Maritime Affairs; Chabahar
Port; Gwadar

Introduction

India's expanding influence in the Indo-Pacific has been noted by scholars and policy makers across the world. Its capabilities are well known around its littorals, and, following its defensive-realist notions of operations, it has even established itself as the “net security provider” of the South Asian region.¹ This author, in his prior work, has also expressed his views on India's spheres of influence in today's world, dilating upon the manner in which New Delhi needs to maximise its influence in each of these spheres.² In consideration of these spheres, as also the “primary areas” of interest noted by the Indian Navy,³ both, the Gulf of Oman, and the country of Iran, are strategically invaluable to India's interests in West Asia.

India and Iran currently share a healthy bilateral relationship, with the former planning on importing close to 25 million tonnes of crude oil in this fiscal year, (an increase from the 22.6 million imported in 2017–2018).⁴ Both countries have also agreed upon a versatile port facility in Chabahar (in the Gulf of Oman), in which India is heavily investing, so as to create a narrative that is in opposition to that of the Gwadar Port in Pakistan, being built by China. The Chabahar Port is of immense importance to India in consideration of its

Indo-Pacific Policy. In terms of trade, it opens up various avenues by allowing the South Asian country to circumvent its hostile neighbour and unlock Central Asia's trade routes. The rapid progress made in the establishment of the Chabahar Port is a tremendous boost for the International North-South Trade Corridor (INSTC), which is estimated to be 30% cheaper and 40% shorter than the current trade routes.⁵ Strategically, the port is geographically protected from any encampment or barricading from the enemies of Iran in times of tension, thereby providing insurance against any inhibitions in the free flow of trade⁶ and, in turn, providing India with a port from which to maintain vigilance over the rapidly upcoming Gwadar port. For Iran, it not only opens up further avenues for international trade, but also provides economic security, as the port is not located within the Strait of Hormuz, thus leaving the country less vulnerable to international pressure in times of heightened tensions,⁷ and alleviating its dependence on the United Arab Emirates to manage shipment sizes coming into its current primary port, namely, Bandar Abbas.⁸

Despite the Chabahar port showcasing the gains available from international cooperation in the 21st Century to countries that are capable of practising effective diplomacy, there is suboptimal coherence and confluence surrounding the narratives, perceptions and realities of Chabahar, both figuratively and empirically, amongst the policy makers in both, New Delhi and Teheran. While India seems to want the port to rival Gwadar in Pakistan, Iran has openly stated that it wants the port's role to be otherwise.⁹ Taking cognisance of this apparent incoherence, this paper will explore:

- Realities around Iran's relations with Pakistan and China.
- India's current standing and its concerns with Iran.
- Future course of action for India to secure its interests in Chabahar.

Iran's relations with Pakistan and China

It is critical to note that Iran, as a sovereign State, has been so severely criticised and encumbered by international sanctions since the latter half of the previous century, that its current bilateral relations are majorly (and primarily) transactional in nature. It wants to significantly change its global image and increase its economic exchange with countries. Iran's chronic disputes with the United States of America (US) have led to severe sanctions being imposed on its most lucrative source of income – oil. In November of 2018, the United States imposed the “toughest ever” sanctions on Iran, calling upon various countries to bring their oil imports from this controversial country to zero.¹⁰ However, these sanctions faced a significant impediment in China, which is Iran's biggest customer for crude oil. Beijing refused to cut its imports down to zero due to both, its own demands, and the close relations that it shares with Iran.

China's grand Maritime Silk Route (MSR) initiative mandates that Beijing maintain close relations with the Tehran. China has strong bilateral trade connections with Iran, and has even pushed for Iran's inclusion as an observer in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) to facilitate multilateral connections.¹¹ In addition, China has often acted as the cushioning factor in the tense relations Iran experiences with the West, and played an instrumental part in the Iranian nuclear deal during the Obama administration.¹² China understands how important an open economy is to Iran, and knows that

its own economy is far too large and oil-thirsty to allow Iran to collapse under pressure from the US. China's energy interests in Central Asia puts Iran well within its sphere of interest. By means of the MSR, China is looking to expand its economic influence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) in general, and the Gulf of Oman and the Persian Gulf in particular. In the larger scheme of things relevant to China's ocean policy, Beijing seeks to connect the South Asian and Central Asian economic corridors, wherein both Chabahar in Iran, and Gwadar in Pakistan will play a crucial role.

Pakistan historically shared a close relationship with Iran based on a bedrock of religion and culture. More recently, however, there have been major developments that have caused rifts in this bedrock and are transforming this cooperation into a competitive relationship. The outstanding issue of Baluchistan – and especially the 2016 arrest of Kulbhushan Jadhav – represent contemporary turning points in the Pakistan-Iran bilateral relationship. Pakistan is evidently very uneasy with the developing closeness between Iran and India, especially after the comments made by Iran's president, Hassan Rouhani, rejecting the Pakistani claims of involvement of India's Research and Analysis Wing (R&AW) – India's spy agency – in Baluchistan.¹³ In the face of this growing reality, the Chabahar port had become a flaming cause for concern, which Iran has officially doused by stating that it does not wish this port to rival Pakistan's port of Gwadar and is actually endorsing the idea of these ports operating as "sister ports".¹⁴ This idea was also echoed by Pakistan's Minister of Maritime Affairs, Mir Hasil Khan Bizenjo, at the inauguration ceremony of the Chabahar port.¹⁵ Despite all these developments, the fact remains that Pakistan came to the aid of Gulf countries during various crises, and had also received unequivocal support from them in return. Supplementing its dominant military presence in the region, Pakistan has utilised its cultural and ideological homogeneity with its neighbours to great strategic benefit.¹⁶ India, on the other hand, generates an image of vacillation, passiveness, and ambiguity with regard to the provision of active support.¹⁷ Further, on multiple occasions during the Cold War, as also during outbreaks of armed conflicts between India and Pakistan, India has found itself opposing these countries, many of whom had supplied Pakistan with a tremendous amount of aid and military wherewithal to be used against India.

India's contemporary concerns

Under the Modi administration, both India and Iran have made gigantic strides forward in cementing bilateral relationships across the globe. The Chabahar port was originally envisioned during the term of former Prime Minister, the late Atal Bihari Vajpayee, but it is under the Modi administration that this port, along with India's larger INSTC plans, has witnessed a significant boost. Despite such valuable strategic developments, however, India has, by and large, failed to escape its past. For instance, India has in the past, including the fairly recent past, frequently failed to come to the aid and support of its West Asian counterparts. This was seen during the first Gulf War in 1990, the Iraqi invasion in 2003, and most recently, in the case of the Trump Sanctions against Iran, despite US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, granting an exception to the Chabahar port.¹⁸ India wishes to extend its role as a net security provider in the region – a policy it has held ever since the end of the Cold War – to ensure a guarantee in terms of protection and security to all States within its aegis¹⁹ – but has repeatedly failed to take a conclusive stand in favour of

States that are figuratively right next door, and has often left room for a great deal of ambiguity in its decision making. This pseudo-constructivist method is rapidly unravelling to expose its vulnerability to the West. In all three cases mentioned earlier, the United States and its policy interests were the defining element in India's decision making. India's interests were not considered from the position of its own energy requirements or its neighbourhood security, but, instead, were viewed from the position of the requirement to maintain strategic and symbolic American relations. This ambiguous approach has stymied, in significant manner, India's plan to be seen as a net security provider. China – another rapidly growing dominant power in West Asia, noting the importance of the Persian Gulf, the Gulf of Oman, the Strait of Hormuz, and the Arabian Sea – has swiftly moved into the region and established a formidable presence, much to the detriment of India's interests.

The Chabahar Port is a welcome development and will further India's long-term economic aspirations of expanding its reach into Central Asia and Eurasia, but in terms of the pace and scale of development, Chabahar lags significantly behind Gwadar. Gwadar, which is under a 40-year lease to China, has a clear head-start in terms of attracting business, and provides obvious geostrategic advantages to both of India's inimical neighbours – Pakistan and China. The benefits to be gained from Chabahar are assessed to be equally immense for India, but are often analysed solely in terms of the geopolitical and geostrategic possibilities emerging for Iran, India, and Afghanistan. As such, these analyses often overlook the economic viability of the port.²⁰ In order for Chabahar to be a success, it must become competitive vis-à-vis Gwadar. In order to effectively oppose the China-Pakistan-Occupied-Kashmir Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the MSR, India needs to bring various other countries into the fold if it wishes to truly turn Chabahar in a multilateral haven of economic interaction. This will need to include countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council, which are, however, reflexively anti-Iran and have had continuous conflicts with Tehran. Now that the INSTC is steadily, and perhaps, as many argue, rapidly, moving forward,²¹ India's next initiative needs to be to find viable and steady partners in the project to ensure that the port is not an economic failure. Having divided its investments into five phases, and with the culmination of Phase One on the horizon, India has already provided a capital investment worth \$85.21 million.²² India now needs to lobby heavily for the oil-importing caucus to show interest in future investments in the port, so as to ease the pressure on its wallet, and to ensure optimal utilisation of the port upon its completion.

India has always seen Chabahar solely as a bilateral project to advance its interests as well those of Iran, and consequently, those of Afghanistan. The narrative that New Delhi has created around the port is that it exists in competition-to, if not in opposition-to the Chinese-managed port of Gwadar, as the principal transit port in the region; that Chabahar is meant to be the next strategic frontier of India's own expanding sphere of influence; that it is intended to challenge the spread of China into the IOR; and, that it will manage to stop any further curtailment of New Delhi's geopolitical influence, by either of its two neighbours. The Indian government, or more specifically, the Ministry of External Affairs, has not, of course, explicitly confirmed this in any element of officialdom, but this is merely to ensure an element of deniability. The afore-stated narrative has, nevertheless, been noted by a variety of analysts and scholars in context of the larger geopolitical realities surrounding the two neighbours. Of considerable significance is the fact that this narrative is not congruent with Iran's understanding of the geopolitical role of the

port. It is imperative to note that Iran does not have a direct stake in this cat-and-mouse game between India and China, and, therefore, does not unequivocally favour either country over the other. Contrary to the popular narrative that has been established around this project as one that had been, from its inception, been envisioned as a connectivity-project to help grow India-Iran ties, it is interesting to note that Iran had originally invited Pakistan and China to contribute to the project before ever considering India.²³ Iran's principal objective is simply to boost trade, and, in so doing, to change its symbolic standing in the global commercial domain. In view of this, and given the relatively close relationship that Iran enjoys with both Pakistan and China, Tehran has repeatedly tried to dispel the notion that Chabahar is a strategic rival to Gwadar, and has even endorsed the idea of both these ports acting as "sister ports" for easing future congestion, reducing transportation costs and even allowing cheaper transfers of energy, resources and electricity.²⁴

A conflict of interest about the role of Chabahar between New Delhi and Tehran is, therefore, increasingly visible. While India wishes to retain bilateral control and maintain the narrative of Chabahar being a geopolitical answer to China's and Pakistan's joint development of Gwadar, Iran believes that both ports should act in conjunction with one another. Given this conflict of interest, policy makers in New Delhi need to understand that they are inherently at a disadvantage if they continue to maintain their current position. Iran does not share India's fears or concerns, and does not consider Gwadar a strategic threat that needs to be opposed. Furthermore, having already seen Iran's economic interest superseding any "growing relations" with countries, China, which has already won Iran's favour and is increasingly looking to sponsor more infrastructural projects in Asia, is a viable partner for future projects if it is able to appease the concerns Tehran might have about its modus operandi. India needs to think from a long-term perspective and facilitate its strategic relationship with Iran by providing it with what Tehran desires most – trade and finance. This does not necessarily mean agreeing to the proposal of Gwadar and Chabahar becoming "sister-ports". It does, however, imply that New Delhi must push for multilateral funding of future phases of the development of Chabahar, from countries (apart from China) that had previously shown interest in this port, whilst still retaining a majority share in the investment. This is certainly something that could be explored as a possible alternative. Countries such as Japan²⁵ and South Korea,²⁶ amongst others, have shown interest in being included in the development phases of the port. The provision of active support by India in furtherance of this interest being evinced by such countries will also ensure that ships setting sail from these countries will favour calling at this port over any other in the region. Funding could also be acquired from landlocked countries in Central Asia looking to export their oil and gas to an array of interested parties via Chabahar.

Recommended way forward

With the INSTC moving forward, India is bound to aspire for a greater share in the quantum of maritime traffic going through Iran. Consequently, it is bound to face congestion issues at Chabahar. To pre-emptively tackle this, it should consider the recommendations of the INSTC Dry Run Report by the Ministry of Commerce and Industry²⁷ which recommends that while establishing the policies that govern the berthing of ships

in ports being sponsored by India, India needs to push for priority being given to vessels calling at such ports from the Indian sub-continent, during times of congestion. Further, as Chabahar lies east of Bandar Abbas port, which is as of now one of the busiest ports in the region, it should gradually and transitionally replace the latter as the principal port for berthing ships from the Indian subcontinent. This will require a phase-wise implementation of the development plan and will further alleviate any future congestion issues that may arise. In this development plan, India should also push to position itself as the sole operator responsible for the movement of cargo – especially containerised cargo – on the INSTC, from the point of origin to the place or port of delivery. It is observed there are cultural differences that influence the thought processes of Iran and Russia, but agents from both these countries hold Indians in very high regard.²⁸

Trade is an integral factor for India-Iran relations to progress in the foreseeable future, and the non-oil sector will be crucial. Due to immense pressure from the US, Iran is being forced to look for alternative options of economic exchange in the East to meet its growing demand and to achieve its objective of reintegrating itself with the international community at large. Despite the sanctions being placed on Iran, Indian commodities still can of be crucial benefit to both parties. Tea is consumed at the rate of 110–120 million kilogrammes annually in Iran, and, as a result of the US sanctions, Tehran may look toward New Delhi to meet this demand.²⁹ An increase in interest is already being noted as Sri Lanka, a major exporter of orthodox tea to Iran, is also encumbered by US sanctions.³⁰ Because both Iran and Sri Lanka conduct international trade principally in US dollars, they are finding it increasingly difficult to trade with one another. India can circumvent this issue as it has already done so in the oil sector, when the two States inked a deal of trading crude oil using a rupee payment mechanism.³¹ The Iranian government has also agreed to put Indian tea in the top category of import items.³² Similarly, in the case of Basmati rice, exports are expected to increase once a rupee-based trading mechanism is in place.³³

India needs to bring countries like South Korea and Japan, which have shown interest in developing future phases of Chabahar, into its development programme in respect of Chabahar. While India's original interest in the port was to develop it independently and garner sole benefits from this bilateral deal,³⁴ its unwillingness to collaborate with other countries is something that needs to change if New Delhi wishes to do justice to its own narrative and understanding of the tacit competition between Chabahar and Gwadar. India cannot match the financial resources that China is putting into Gwadar – which that the East Asian giant will be also willing to offer to Iran. Iran, for its part, wishes to reintegrate itself into the global economic fold in a solely transactional manner. India needs to make its deal with Iran more lucrative with the aid of countries which have an overlapping interest in developing Chabahar port and in inherently opposing the China-Pakistani venture in Gwadar.³⁵ Adding to this, it needs to be noted that a substantial amount of Iran's national income is generated by means of providing transshipment facilities to other countries.³⁶ Chabahar Port is set to become Iran's first deep-sea port, which, upon completion, would be able to host 82 million metric tonnes annually, far exceeding the cargo-capacity of Bandar Abbas, which cannot take ships larger than 100,000 GRT.³⁷ It is in Iran's best interests for international trade to find commercial appeal in utilising the requisite transshipment facilities at Chabahar. Also, as can be seen in the case of India receiving the waiver from American sanctions because of their trilateral partner, Afghanistan,³⁸ a multilateral investment in the port could serve as the much-

needed insurance that Iran needs and could provide a guarantee of protection to the port from any crippling policies of the West in the future. India can facilitate this interest by opening up avenues for investment for the upcoming phases of the port's development by multiple partners.

In pursuing this track, India is bound to face challenges owing to the vulnerability of potential investment partners such as South Korea and Japan to US pressure in respect of the American sanctions against Iran. Both these countries temporarily halted their oil imports from Iran completely, after the sanctions were imposed by the Trump administration.³⁹ Such a trend that might be a recurrent one, considering the vehemently anti-Iran policy track that the USA has adopted. That said, the best way forward is to attempt to successfully exploit Iran's ambitions to expand and increase its non-oil imports to the IOR and East Asia, and to meet Iran's growing demand of high-technology inputs for its information-technology (IT) sector.⁴⁰ Iran's shift towards a "knowledge-based economy" is still at a nascent phase and requires heavy contributions in technology and technical skills.⁴¹ Due to the imposition of sanctions, American, European and Japanese companies have no access to this growing market, allowing unhindered growth for the Chinese in the country.⁴² India, being an IT powerhouse in South Asia, can get enter this space and provide competition to the extant Chinese investment in Iran. An India-Iran technology investment forum is a feasible way to garner confidence amongst the private sector, both at home and abroad. The new regulations and policies implemented domestically by the Iranian government to "support knowledge-based firms, increase competition, and protect intellectual property rights" constitute a positive sign that New Delhi can capitalise upon in order to generate investor interest.⁴³

Iran's principal interest lies in securing and maintaining its oil exports which inherently include securing its Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) across the Indo-Pacific. Given their role in the supply of global energy, both, the Strait of Malacca and the Strait of Hormuz, are critical to the pursuit of Tehran's interest. In 2016, the Strait of Malacca accounted for a transit of 18.5 million barrels of oil per day, while the Strait of Hormuz accounted for 16 million.⁴⁴ Considering India's influence in South Asia, its growing aspirations, and its bonhomie with Singapore and Vietnam, if India were to increase cooperation with Indonesia⁴⁵ in order to ensure the security of its exports through the South Asian region, Iran is likely to be strongly inclined to boost its security partnership with India.

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Notes

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