

Chahbahar Port: The Divergence of Interests Analysis

Muhammad Tayyab Usman

Lecturer, Govt Guru Nanak Graduate College, Nankana Sahab, Pakistan.

Email: tayyabusman866h@gmail.com

Mukhtar Ahmad

Assistant Professor, Govt Guru Nanak Graduate College, Nankana Sahab, Pakistan.

Email malikmukhtar1963@gmail.com

Muhammad Munib Khalid

Lecturer, Minhaj University, Lahore, Pakistan.

Email: munibkhalid@mul.edu.pk

ABSTRACT

South Asia's infrastructure development is driven by competition for regional domination and fears of strategic encirclement. India has aspired to project its maritime power all over the Indian Ocean since the beginning of the century. The "net security provider" concept may be most appropriate in South Asia and its littorals, but West Asia will test India's conciliatory and maritime capabilities in the years ahead. Iran's desire to reclaim its former prominence in regional and international politics underpins its Asia policy of seeking new markets and foreign investment for its energy sector. Iran has historically been pragmatic with India. This paper analyses India and Iran's policies in the context of Chahbahar port. Regarding the Chahbahar port, Iran and India have conflicting interests. Iran is not interested in giving up its balanced foreign policy by selecting either side, despite India's desire to utilise the port as a check on the CPEC.

Key Words: India, Iran, Chahbahar Port, Gwadar, Divergence of Interests.

Introduction

Since the end of the Cold War, India has been striving to develop a comprehensive partnership with Iran founded on energy and commercial cooperation, the construction of infrastructure in Iran and abroad, and putative military and intelligence links. Iran is of particular significance to India because it offers a direct route into Afghanistan and Central Asia, two regions wherein India is working on expanding its influence (Khan, 2001). Even though it is true that India, as a significant energy importer, is looking for a continuous supply of resources, this one-dimensional categorization of Indian-Iranian relationships is insufficient since it ignores other aspects of the relationship (Pethiyagoda, 2018). The relationship between India and Iran has considered everything to do with India's great-power aspirations and New Delhi's concurrent broad plan for Central Asia

and beyond. Energy is merely one factor, although an important one, that is taken into consideration within this larger framework (Mitra, 2019).

India and Iran have a crucial bilateral relationship, as evidenced by the former's aim to purchase over 25 million tonnes of crude oil throughout that fiscal year, up from either the 22.6 million tonnes purchased during the 2017–2018 fiscal year (NDTV, 2018). Academics worldwide have taken heed of India's growing clout in the Indo-Pacific. In line with its defensive-realist operating principles, these have developed it as the "net security supplier" for the South Asian region (Fair C., 2007). Its capabilities are well known within its littoral. India's contemporary domains of influence, commentary on how New Delhi can have the most impact possible within every domain.

In light of these sectors, also referred to as the "principal areas" of Indian Navy's interests, both nation of Iran along with the Gulf of Oman are geo-strategically crucial to India's pursuit of its goals in West Asia. Both nations have also agreed on the construction of Chahbahar, a multifunctional port facility (located in the Gulf of Oman) (Mitra, 2019). Moreover, India will be making significant investments in this port to establish a narrative opposed to the one that the Gwadar Port will establish in Pakistan, which China has constructed. India invests considerable attention in the Chahbahar Port in light of its Indo-Pacific Policy. It paves the way for a plethora of business opportunities by allowing the South Asian countries to sidestep its antagonistic neighbors and thereby opening up the commercial routes in Central Asia. The rapid growth of the Chahbahar Port has greatly aided the International North-South Trade Corridor (INSTC), which is expected to be 30% cheaper and 40% speedier than that of the existing shipping routes.

Geo-strategically, the port is protected spatially from a campsite or barricade placed by Iran's adversaries during times of tension. This provides protection against any restrictions placed on trade and provides India with a port that can keep an eye on the quickly evolving Gwadar port (Bajpai, 2017). Iran will be less susceptible under international criticism during times of escalating tensions thanks to the fact that the port is not located inside the Strait of Hormuz. It will rely less on the UAE to regulate the volume of shipments entering Bandar Abbas, its current primary port (Saroush Aliasgary, 2021). The port of Chahbahar is of exceptional significance; however, it is plagued by significant challenges in terms of both its physical infrastructure and the way the public views it. This study's objective is to reevaluate Iran and India's relationship with a particular emphasis on the Chahbahar port. This article addresses the fundamental issue of how important the Chahbahar port is for Iran and India by dividing it into three parts for easy reading and comprehension. In what ways do the interests of Iran and India regarding the Chahbahar port diverge from one another? A qualitative research design was used for the investigation. And secondary sources were used to gather the data. The historical interactions between India and Iran will be discussed in the first section, along with the strategies for convergence and divergence. The

Chahbahar Port: The Divergence of Interests Analysis

strategic importance of the Chahbahar port will be critically portrayed in the second segment, focusing on how it serves Indian interests. The final section will show how Iran and India have different interests and viewpoints towards the Chahbahar port. Basically, it's the matter of different perceptual and divergence of interests (Pablo Amorós, 2013).

Iran-India Interactions

The history of India and Iran's relationship spans five millennia. Iran and India have been close cultural and historical allies since the Aryans conquered southern India and established their empire in Iran. "Iran" can be translated as "the land of the Aryans." (Naaz, 2001). Therefore, compared to any other population in the world, the Indians are most closely related to the Iranians regarding their ancestry and culture. The Silk Road served as a conduit for trade and cultural interaction throughout history. The fact that Persian was recognized as the official language of India during the Mughal era is evidence of the close cultural ties between the two countries. About 70,000 Parsis now live in India due to the centuries-old ties connecting their two countries (Jorfi, 1994). Though they share a rich history and cultural ties, India and Iran could not develop strong relations during the Cold War (Soltaninejad, 2017).

Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi (1941–1979) feared Soviet aggression and joined the US-sponsored Baghdad Pact in 1955 with Pakistan, Iraq, Turkey, and the U.K. to contain the USSR by connecting strong states on its south-western border. Strategic ties between Iran and the United States were maintained throughout the Shah's reign. But after gaining its independence in 1947, India pursued a policy of non-alignment in foreign affairs, opting instead for multilateralism and rejecting the bloc politics of the superpowers. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru of India believed that superpower-sponsored alliances were a threat to world peace and security because they encouraged the spread of military might. Because of their divergent perspectives on the Cold War, India and Iran's relationship remained low-key, untrusting, or even hostile for several years. Foreign policy priorities for both countries were re-evaluated in the early 1990s due to shifts in the global environment (Ashwarya, 2017).

With the fall of the Soviet Union, the Cold War's balance of power shifted in favour of the U.S. Given America's history of intervening in weak states, power concentration at its end bred mistrust among second-tier states like Russia, China, India, and Iran. While they could not seriously challenge U.S. dominance, they tried to counteract the growing concentration of power in one region by strengthening their bilateral ties. As a result of this necessity, India and Iran have found common ground on a range of issues that have a significant bearing on their strategic situation. Both India and Iran were concerned about the emerging unipolar nature of the international system. To feel safe in the current unipolar international system, India and Iran have accelerated the pace of their nuclear programmes. The United States had already placed sanctions on any transfer of

nuclear technology and material to India because of the country's status as a nuclear weapons power. In 1996, India declined to sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), conducted a second series of nuclear tests in 1998, and announced its intention to develop a "credible minimum nuclear deterrent" in the future (Lahiri, 2008).

Despite this, India's declared moratorium on further tests and commitment to a 'no-first-use' of nuclear weapons showed sensitivity to U.S. non-proliferation concerns as it sought rapprochement with the hegemonic power. Unlike India, which pursued a specific nuclear policy, Iran adopted a hybrid approach. While seeking Russia and China's help to build nuclear reactors, Iran secretly built nuclear facilities to challenge America's containment policy and non-proliferation regime. Iran's behaviour in this regard has only served to isolate the country further politically and economically. Although they took different paths to increase nuclear security, India and Iran reacted to the superpower's hegemonic tendencies (C. Christine Fair, 2013). Because of the imbalance of power in the international system, countries like India and Iran have worked to find common ground on issues of mutual concern to shield themselves from the influence of the global superpower.

Strategic cooperation represented the commitment of the two states to achieve external balance, while trade and economic cooperation aimed at internal balancing and self-strengthening. It was anticipated that relations between India and Iran would continue to flourish after the Iranian revolution. However, regional events such as the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 hindered efforts to strengthen ties between the two countries. Iran supported the Northern Alliance led by Ahmad Shah Masud. In contrast, India supported the Soviet-installed government of Babrak Karmal, putting them at diplomatic odds in the early days of the conflict (Khalilzad, 1982). When Soviet forces withdrew from Afghanistan in February 1989, the situation shifted again because both countries were united in their opposition to the Taliban. Relations began to warm up after 9/11, in particular. Relations between India and Iran reached a high point in 2003 when Iranian President Mohammad Khatami visited India. While in India, President Khatami was the honoured guest at Independence Day festivities. The two nations have decided to form a strategic alliance. Iran's nuclear programme ultimately drove a wedge between the two countries, so the thaw did not last long. Since India was growing closer to the United States at the time, Iran's disagreements with the West weakened India's position. Therefore, India had cast three no votes on resolutions concerning Iran before the IAEA Board of Governors (IAEA). In 2005, Iran was condemned for failing to observe nuclear safeguards. In 2006, a resolution was passed to send Iran's dossier to the U.N. Security Council (UNSC). Iran was asked to halt plans for a Qom uranium enrichment plant in a resolution passed by the IAEA for the third time in 2009 (Hafeez, 2019). Nevertheless, there are a number of factors that are currently dictating Iran and India's friendly relations with one another. The first factor is made up of Muslims

Chabahar Port: The Divergence of Interests Analysis

who call India their home, and more specifically Shia Muslims. The situation that exists in Afghanistan is another factor that is contributing.

The abundance of energy resources in Iran is the third factor to take into account, as is the growing demand for energy in India. In addition, India's admiration for Iran is bolstered by the country's advantageous location as a link between Central Asia and the Caspian Sea Area. Because both of these regions are abundant in energy resources, China has increased its influence in both of them. Therefore, India is striving to increase its influence in the area. Beyond these reasons, India values Iran because of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), specifically the Chabahar port. Because of this port, Indian exports to Afghanistan and beyond will be greatly facilitated by the Delaram-Zaranj highway (S. Sandeep, 2019).

Geo-Strategic Significance of Chabahar Port

India committed to investing US\$100 million towards the rehabilitation and modernization of Iran's Chabahar Port in May 2013 in light of the port's economic and strategic importance. Additional funding for similar projects and plans that could improve the port's connections to other regions and states was also promised by India. As a potential gateway to Afghanistan and Central Asia, Chabahar Port is of great interest to New Delhi. In March of 2012, India first operationalized the port, sending 100,000 metric tonnes of wheat to Kabul as part of New Delhi's charitable aid to Afghanistan. Similarly, in 2013, Kabul shipped nearly twenty containers of dry fruits to India through Chabahar. India comprehends Iran's strategic significance. Iran serves as India's entry point to the nations of Central Asia, the Caucasus region, and North and Central Africa. Since 1947, when the Indian Subcontinent was partitioned, it has been more difficult for Indians to travel directly through Afghanistan and Central Asia. However, India can only gain access to Central Asia via Iran for security and commercial reasons. India has had extensive discussions with Tehran due to Iran's strategic importance (Fakhr ul Munir, 2021).

The International North-South Transport Corridor and the Chabahar Port are the two most important joint Indian and Iranian endeavours because they provide India with a gateway to Afghanistan, Central Asia, and Eastern Europe. Chabahar is designed to facilitate trade between Afghanistan and Central Asian countries and is located about 72 kilometres from the Pakistan-Iran border. The International North-South Transport Corridor connects Oman with Russia and then touches Eastern Europe via Iran (Marine and land routes through the Caspian Sea). This corridor results from a multi-faceted agreement between Syria, Oman, India, Bulgaria, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Ukraine, Russia, Turkey, Armenia, and Belarus. Iran's strategic importance will rise due to its role in the development and improvement of Chabahar Port, which is being done in partnership with India. Iran will feel less economic pressure worldwide if it can work with India. India and Iran are dependent on one another to progress their respective geostrategic and geo-economic interests in the area. India and Iran have

a close relationship.

Afghanistan is the epicentre of conflicts between Iran, India, China, and Pakistan. China and Pakistan are also involved. India and Iran are working to mitigate the influence of China and Pakistan in Afghanistan. By building Chabahar Port, India hopes to counter China's influence in the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean. India's connectivity to Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Eastern Europe is bolstered by the construction of Chabahar Port (Fakhr ul Munir, 2021). Having direct access to the Indian Ocean, Chabahar is the only port in Iran, and New Delhi is keen on developing the International North-South Transit Corridor. Pakistan stands in the way of India directly getting to Afghanistan and Central Asia. Nonetheless, Chabahar is India's only exit to Central Asia, Russia, and Europe and its only chance to influence the markets in those regions. India has no choice if it wants to balance China and Pakistan in Afghanistan and Central Asia other than to develop Chabahar. The International North-South Transit Corridor (INSTC) linking Chabahar will cut in half the distance between India and Europe and the cost of Indian trade through the Suez Canal, the Mediterranean, and the Red Sea. In 2002, India began developing and upgrading Chabahar Port in response to China's initiative to build Gwadar, a deep-water Sea Port in Pakistan.

The Chabahar Port in Iran is only 72 kilometres from the Gwadar Port in Pakistan. Due to rising pressure from the United States and the determination to seek and strengthen international pressure by applying tighter international sanctions against Tehran, Indian attempts to build the Chabahar Port were put on hold until at least 2002.

To counter China's dominance at Pakistan's Gwadar Port, India resumed construction on Chabahar Port in 2012, despite strong opposition from the United States. India, Iran, and Russia originally agreed to build Chabahar Port and transit corridors. Still, in 2012 – India's revival of the port led to eleven more Caucasus, Central Asia, Europe, and Middle Eastern countries joining the project. Each of these states was enticed by the prospect of the unfettered entrance to the Indian Ocean. India's International North-South Transit Corridor entails building a highway from Iran's Chabahar Port to Afghanistan. India has already built a road from Zaranj (Iran) to Afghanistan's Delaram region worth \$100 million. In addition to funding and technical support, New Delhi is also assisting Iran in constructing the Chabahar and Zaranj highways. India has planned to construct the 900 km long railway line from Chabahar to Hajigak region (Shashikumar, 2011).

Moreover, Hajigak, in Bamiyan, is well-known for its abundance of high-quality iron ore. Since Iran is a Shiite state, the presence of Shia Hazara in Bamiyan will likely increase trade between India and Iran. With the construction of Chabahar Port, Afghanistan's iron ore can finally be exported. Trade between India, Iran, and Afghanistan has the potential to fill the void left by NATO's withdrawal from Afghanistan by allowing Iran and India to counteract the influence of China and Pakistan in that country. Despite the lack of hard evidence for naval cooperation, India and Iran's shared transportation needs and the

Chabahar Port: The Divergence of Interests Analysis

potential for a fruitful maritime relationship could elevate their relationship to that of a strategic partner in the Central Asian region and the Persian Gulf (Rowden, 2020).

Both Iran and India will be at their strategic and economic peak due to the International North-South Transit Corridor and the Chabahar Port. India and Iran shall be in a position of strength due to this, and they will likely serve as an example to other countries interested in joining economic ventures. The International North-South Transit Corridor connects Europe with Asia economically, and the West's removal of sanctions against Iran will benefit both countries. For future economic growth, India is working toward an approach to Central Asian Eurasia that is costly in access. Iran is trying to reduce international pressure and establish a solid foundation upon which to build its economy and military (Rowden, 2020).

Iran-India at Divergence of Interests

Indian-Iranian ties have strengthened tremendously during the Modi administration. Former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee originally envisioned the Chabahar port; however, the Modi government has given it a boost on the side of INSTC plans. Though there have been some positive strategic shifts, India has not been able to break with its past completely. For its West Asian neighbours, India, for example, has a checkered history of providing timely and practical support. It was the situation in 1990, over the 1st Gulf War, with the attack of Iraq in 2003, the recent case of sanctions against Iran by the Trump Sanctions, even though an exemption was granted for the Chabahar port by Mike Pompeo, the US Secretary of State. Since the conclusion of the Cold War, India has maintained the position that it is committed to expanding its role as a provider of network security in the area to guarantee the safety and protection of all states that fall under its jurisdiction (Landay, 2018).

However, it has failed to take a firm stand in support of neighbouring states on numerous occasions, and its decision-making has been vague a lot of the time. Maintaining strategic and symbolic ties with the United States took precedence over India's interests regarding energy and regional stability. India's efforts to establish itself as a provider of internet security have been significantly hampered as a result of its policy of maintaining ambiguity. China has quickly and decisively established a foothold in the region, which includes the strategically vital Gulf of Oman, Persian Gulf, Strait of Hormuz, and Arabian Sea. This has significantly harmed India's position there as a result of the strategic importance of these bodies of water.

Although the Chabahar Port is a positive step forward and shall help India achieve its only economic goals while enlarging its influence in Eurasia and Central Asia, it is still far behind Gwadar in terms of the rate and scope of its development. Gwadar is currently leased to China for forty years, so China has a big head start in bringing in business (Isaac B. Kardon, 2020). It also has clear

geostrategic benefits for Pakistan and China, which are India's hostile neighbours. The advantages that will accrue to India due to Chabahar are regarded as being on par with those that will accrue to Iran and Afghanistan; however, these advantages are typically evaluated primarily in the context of the geopolitical and geostrategic opportunities that will be created. Thus, the port's economic viability is often disregarded in such studies. Chabahar will only be successful if it can compete with Gwadar. Suppose India is seriously transforming Chabahar into a hub for multilateral economic cooperation and a counter to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) (Mahajan, 2017). In that case, it will need to enlist the support of a wide range of countries. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states that have anti-Iran sentiments and are in constant conflicts with Tehran will need to be involved. As many proclaimed, India's next step, the INSTC, is progressing gradually and possibly rapidly, searching for stable and reliable alliances in the project to guarantee the port's financial success.

Additionally, India has contributed a capital investment amounting to 85.21 million dollars, and the end of Phase One is getting closer every day. This investment is being carried out in a series of five stages. India must now vigorously encourage the oil-importing caucus that express an interests in making investments regarding future, there in order to alleviate financial strain and guarantee the port will reach its full potential once it is completed. India's view of Chabahar has never strayed from the fact that it is a bilateral project designed to serve both countries and Afghanistan's best interests. The narratives that New Delhi has put forth claim on the Chabahar is intended to become the geo-strategic breakthrough on Indian behalf in trying to expand its circle of interest; it will contest China's advancement into IOR; so it will find success in trying to prevent further any lowering of India's influence in terms of geopolitics. The administration of India, or the External Affairs Ministry more specifically, has not declared it true in any official capacity; however, this is likely for reasons of plausible deniability (Mitra, 2019).

In spite of this, a number of analysts and academics have taken note of the narrative that was discussed above in light of the larger geopolitical reality that surrounds the neighbours. It is of the utmost importance that Iran has a viewpoint that is different than the one presented in this narrative regarding the significance of the port in geopolitics. Iran has no vested interest in India and China's cat-and-mouse game, so it doesn't take a side. Despite the widespread belief that this was intended to be a connectivity project that would strengthen ties between India and Iran, Iran first reached out to Pakistan and China for funding before even thinking about India. Iran's primary goal is to increase trade and, by doing so, alter the international community's perception of Iran as an untrustworthy trading partner (Amirthan, 2016). With this in mind, and given the relatively strong relationship Iran has including both Pakistan and China, Tehran officially supported the idea of each of these ports operating as "sister ports" to reduce future overcrowding, lower transportation costs, and even enable cheap exchanges of energy, resources, and

Chabahar Port: The Divergence of Interests Analysis

power. Therefore, it is becoming clear that New Delhi and Tehran have divergent goals regarding the significance of Chabahar (Ramachandran, 2018). While India is keen on keeping things bilateral and insisting that Chabahar is a geo-political response to Pakistan and China's construction and development of Gwadar, the two ports should work together given Iran. In light of this conflicting interests, policymakers in New Delhi must recognise the inherent disadvantage of their current position. Iran, in contrast to India, does not consider Gwadar to be a risk to its national security and, as a result, does not see any reason to oppose the project. China, which has thus far been successful in gaining Iran's approval and is making headway in its efforts to sponsor additional Asia's infrastructure and development projects, is a possible collaborator for building endeavors once it can calm Tehran's worries about how it does business (Daniels, 2013). China is becoming more and more interested in funding infrastructure improvements in Asia. India needs to take the long view in its relationship with Iran and provide Tehran with the trade and financial services it craves. The proposed merger of Gwadar and Chabahar into "sister ports" is not necessarily on the table.

But this means that India needs to agree to multilateral financing of the next steps of Chabahar's development from countries (other than China) which have shown curiosity in this port in the past, while still keeping the masses of the financing. It can only be accomplished if India maintains control of the port (Fair C. C., 2007). This is an option worth looking into. Japan and South Korea, among others, have expressed an eagerness to participate in the port's planning and construction stages. India's help will encourage these nations to choose this port over others in the region, and it will also encourage ships leaving those nations to make a port call. Landlocked Central Asian countries that hope to export gas and oil to various demanding stakeholders through Chabahar could also provide funding.

Conclusion

India will inevitably have the ambition to acquire a more significant fraction of maritime traffic that passes through Iran. As a consequence of this, it will inevitably experience difficulties with congestion at Chabahar. In order for relations between Iran and India to improve in the near future, commerce and indeed the non-oil sector would be vital. Iran is compelled to explore economic interchange choices in the East due to tremendous pressure from the United States. This is being done for Iran to fulfil its expanding demand or meet its goal of re-integrating itself along the world society. Indian goods still have the potential to be of significant advantage to both Iran and India, notwithstanding the sanctions that have been placed on Iran. To ensure the success of its Chabahar development programme, India must include countries such as Japan and South Korea, both of that have expressed an interests in the construction of further phases of the Chabahar project. Though India's initial aim in the port has been to build it autonomously and reap only its own advantages by this bilateral agreement, New

Delhi must change its attitude to cooperate with other nations if it wishes to accurately portray the hidden rivalry between Gwadar and Chabahar. The Gwadar port is receiving major financial support from China, which is also eager to extend this support to Iran. India lacks the resources to compete. Iran, on the other hand, aspires to reintegrate with the global economy through purely transactional means. In order to make the arrangement it has with Iran more fruitful, India will need to seek the assistance of other countries that have an interest in extending the Chabahar port.

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Chahbahar Port: The Divergence of Interests Analysis

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