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India's Chabahar Policy: Implications for China-Pakistan Cooperation

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ABSTRACT

India, Iran, and Afghanistan have finalized trilateral agreement, which will allow India's access to Afghanistan via the strategically located Iranian port of Chabahar. The Chabahar Port is located in southeastern Iran in the Gulf of Oman. The Chabahar route to Afghanistan will allow Indian goods to reach in Kabul without having to first bypass Pakistan, which has a limited trade relationship with New Delhi due to political tensions and a territorial dispute between the two countries. The Chabahar agreement will give strong challenges to the China-Pakistan Cooperation emerging at Gwadar Port. Simultaneously, it will also counter China's influence in Central Asia as well as West Asia.

Key Words : India, Iran, Afghanistan, China, Pakistan, Chabahar Port, Gwadar Port, Central Asia, West Asia

INTRODUCTION

India-Iran relations span from centuries marked by meaningful interactions between the two countries. Both the countries shared a common border till 1947 and share several common features in their language, culture and traditions. Moreover, South Asia and the Persian Gulf have strong commercial, energy, cultural and people-to-people links.[1] In the last few years, India's policy towards West Asia has often been viewed through the prism of Indo-Iranian relations. India's relationship with the West Asia region has dramatically changed than a generation ago. Between 1947 and 1986, India was too ideological towards West Asian region, paying insufficient attention to Indian national interests, particularly in its serious ties with Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Israel. At the present time, however, India is developing its new West Asia's strategy around these three states, with taking special care to cultivate all these relationships and pursue its substantial regional interests.[2] The recent 'Chabahar Agreement' between India and Iran made history and it is the result of India's pragmatic foreign policy since the emergence of the 21st century. Further, India, Iran, and Afghanistan have finalized the parameters of a trilateral agreement, which will allow India's access to

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Afghanistan via the strategically located Iranian port of Chabahar which sits on the Gulf of Oman. The Chabahar route to Afghanistan will allow Indian goods to reach in Kabul without having to first bypass Pakistan, which has a limited trade relationship with New Delhi due to political tensions and a territorial dispute between the two countries.[3] On the other hand, it will also counter China's influence in Central Asia as well as in West Asia.

The Chabahar Port: The Strategic Significance for India :

The Chabahar Port of Iran holds immense strategic and economic significance for India because it is located on the Arabian Sea's Makran coast in Sistan and Baluchistan Province. Pakistan's Gwadar Port also is situated only 72 nautical miles southeast of Chabahar. Both offer direct access to the Indian Ocean. India is helping to underwrite the development of Iran's Chabahar, while China has been financing Gwadar since 2002 complicating the ports' developments as a separation of Eurasia's new "Great Game".[4] Both China and India are seeking closer relations with Afghanistan and Central Asia. The planned transport and trade routes cut off thousands of kilometers for certain trade routes and will have the obvious effect of building solid ties.[5] There are several causes which have been playing a key role behind India's Chabahar Policy.

– The Chabahar Port is located in southeastern Iran in the Gulf of Oman. It is the only Iranian port with direct access to the Indian Ocean.[6]

– India-Iran-Afghanistan troika will give tough competition to the China-Pakistan axis emerging at Gwadar Port.

– After Chabahar in Iran, the next stop for Indian goods will be Afghanistan and then subsequently to the Central Asian states. At the same time as India has enjoyed cordial terms with the successive post 2001 governments of Afghanistan but the security situation is poor in major areas.[7]

– The Taliban, the major insurgent group in Afghanistan has no soft corner for India, since the latter historically supported the anti Taliban Northern Alliance. Gwadar too is witnessing security issues since Balochistan province is subject to low scale hostilities.[8]

– Despite enhanced Indo-Afghan diplomatic, political, and economic connections, Pakistan's role and influence in Afghanistan has not gaunt. However, the government of Afghanistan focusses more toward India; Pakistan has connections with several ethnic groups who represent a major portion of Afghan society.[9]

– Pakistan and China are strongly working together on the $46 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which culminates in Gwadar. China would not want such a huge investment going to waste. Therefore, there is every possibility that Beijing and Islamabad join hands to barricade the political and economic network of Afghanistan, so as to obstruct India's dreams of reaching Central Asia.[10]

India's Chabahar Policy :

India and Iran have several shared interests in Afghanistan and Central Asia. Both fear the adverse impact of prolonged instability and war in Afghanistan on their security interests. They also have concerns about the growth of Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan and about the Taliban becoming a dominant force there, which could have negative backlashes on their

interests in Afghanistan. For India, Iran's strategic location makes it a viable transit point to Afghanistan and Central Asia. Iran is at the crossroads of some important international transportation corridors, such as the North-South corridor, the East-West corridor (old Silk Road), the Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia (TRACECA) programme, the Asia Land Transportation Infrastructure Development (ALTID), and South Asia. Both countries have been working on completing these projects to realize Iran's transit potential.[11] The Chabahar Port is one such project that has assumed significant economic and strategic importance in recent times. It provides Iran with direct access to the Indian Ocean, which located on the Makran Coast off Southeast Iran. It is closer to Mumbai and Karachi than Bandar Abbas, the other main port of Iran, and the development of the port at Chabahar would reduce some of the pressure on Bandar Abbas as well as potentially the cost of transportation to the eastern parts of Iran, Afghanistan and Central Asia. Moreover, the fact that Chabahar, unlike Bandar Abbas, is located beyond the Straits of Hormuz adds to its significance. In a scenario where the Straits of Hormuz are shut down, trade and commercial activities at Chabahar will remain unaffected.[12]

The Chabahar port was partially built by India in the 1990s to provide sea-land access to Afghanistan and Central Asia, by passing Pakistan. India wanted to build the port as it would significantly reduce transport costs and freight time to Central Asia and the Arabian Gulf. The port is also central to India's efforts to avoid Pakistan and open up a route to landlocked Afghanistan with which it has developed close political and economic ties.[13] The Chabahar Port is in the interest of everyone, especially Afghanistan, whose only access at the moment is through Karachi Port hence subject to the variations of Afghan-Pakistan relations. Fully developed port would lower landlocked Afghanistan's dependence on Pakistani ports for assured access to the sea. As Pakistan does not allow transit facility from India to Afghanistan, access to the port and its surrounding free trade zone is more crucial for the land-locked country.

The development of the Chabahar Port in Southeastern Iran, the idea was first mooted more than a decade ago during the visit of the Iran's President, Mohammed Khatami, as the chief guest at India's Republic Day celebrations in January 2003. Both Delhi and Tehran value the Chabahar Port as a means to improve their geopolitical influence *vis a vis* Pakistan and pursue their common interest in providing Afghanistan and Central Asia alternative routes to the Indian Ocean.[14] Following the visit of Iranian President Khatami to India, the two countries signed a MoU to invest in infrastructure, including the Chabahar Port complex and the Chabahar-Faranj-Bam railway link, in order to promote bilateral trade. As a follow-up to this meeting, a consortium led by Ashok Leyland Project Services (ALPS), a Hinduja Group company inked a MoU with Ports and Shipping Organization (PSO) of Iran to develop the Chabahar Port and the rail link in 2004.[15] The NDA government has sanctioned nearly $85 million the construction of two berths at Chabahar and the development of a container terminal. The proposal for Chabahar Port came up in the context of Pakistan's plans to develop a green field port at Gwadar on Pakistan's Makran coast with substantive financial assistance from China at the turn of the last decade.[16] Tehran saw the Gwadar project as undermining Iran's position as the gateway to Central Asia and decided to develop Chabahar, which is located not too far to the West from Gwadar. New Delhi, which long bothered at

Pakistan's refusal to provide overland access to Afghanistan, viewed the Chabahar Port as a credible alternative to gaining physical access to Afghanistan. Land-locked Kabul welcomed the project as a way to ease its strategic dependence on Islamabad.[17]

On the eve of the previous Non Aligned Movement (NAM) summit in August 2012 in Tehran, India, Iran and Afghanistan signed a tripartite agreement providing Indian goods, heading for Central Asia and Afghanistan, preferential transit and tariff reductions at Chabahar Port. Moreover, China is taking over Pakistan's Gwadar port; therefore, India worried and imparted urgency to opening alternative route to Afghanistan. The strategic location of Gwadar, 180 km from the mouth of the Straits of Hormuz, offers Pakistan the chance to take control over the world energy jugular and interdiction of Indian tankers but Chabahar, being closer to Straits of Hormuz by another 76 km, neutralizes that advantage of Pakistan. The Chabahar Port provides a window of opportunity for India to bolster its trade with all Central Asia neighbors, Europe and Russia.[18] After NAM summit in 2012, two teams of experts, constituted by Indian Ports Association, visited Chabahar to identify the scope for investment. The team claimed that 70 per cent of the work in the first phase had been completed by Iran and identified three potential areas for investment in the second phase. These included the construction and operation of a multi-purpose cargo berth, construction of a container terminal and developing another bigger container terminal, which would require the most investment.[19]

During the 17th Indo-Iran Joint Commission held in Tehran in May 2013 that India agreed to invest US$ 100 million for the development of Chabahar. India is also contemplating and requesting Iran for long-term rights of 60 to 90 years for two Indian ports, Jawaharlal Nehru Port and the Kandla Port, with the view to develop them in a phased manner on the basis of long-term operation, maintenance and transfer. An Iranian delegation has already met with JN Port and Kandla Port officials. The issues have to be finalized including the manpower level, salary, taxation regime, electricity and fuel charges, taxes, port tariffs and support from the Iranian Government.[20] Further, there is a belief in Iran that India's role should not be limited to simply developing the port since this is something that Iran is already doing and is capable of doing on its own. Instead, it wants India to facilitate the transit of goods via Chabahar by encouraging Indian companies to use the trade route via Chabahar in place of longer and more costly transit routes. Even with the small-scale investment of US$ 100 million, Iran feels that the participation of the government in the development of the Chabahar port complex gives encouragement to private companies in India to invest in the port as well.[21]

The hopes for normalization of trade relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan have begun to evaporate. There is little prospect that Islamabad will agree to trilateral economic integration with India and Afghanistan. Delhi and Tehran must sit down with the new government in Kabul to negotiate trilateral trade and transit agreements that will ensure an early realization of all economic and strategic benefits that the Chabahar project promises.[22] Nitin Gadkari, the Minister for Shipping and Road Transport and Highways, visited Teheran on May 6, 2015 to sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) worth US$ 195 million for the development of Chabahar Port. Indian efforts are aimed at "significantly enhancing Afghanistan's overall connectivity to regional and global markets, and providing a boost to the ongoing reconstruction and humanitarian efforts in the country".[23]

Apart from India and Iran, Afghanistan too has a high interest in Chabahar and the transport corridor connecting it with the port. The Afghan leadership regards the Chabahar route as a more reliable alternative that would reduce dependence on Pakistan. Ghani and Modi pledged to work closely with Iran to make the Chabahar port a reality, and develop it as a viable gateway to Afghanistan and Central Asia. They have agreed to provide a major impetus to Afghanistan's economic reconstruction efforts.[24] Though, India has much progressed on the Chabahar front as part of its overall policy to bypass Pakistan and access Afghanistan. It did build the Zaranj-Delaram highway in 2009 to connect with the 2,200 kilometer two-lane road network, known as the Garland road, circulating inside Afghanistan, connecting major cities in the country. India spent about US$ 6 billion to build this connecting highway.[25]

India's renewed interest in Chabahar Port is a welcome shift from its extremely cautious approach to the issue in the past. Its indecision has provided an opportunity for others to extend their influence over Iran and the region. Now, the Modi Government has decided to re-enter the scene with a fresh determination to pursue its strategic interest, and look forward to regenerating warmth in its relationship with Iran. Given the unpredictability of Pakistani behavior and the latter's continued romance with radical elements, the transit route through Pakistan to Afghanistan is likely to remain as vulnerable as it is today. Therefore, the strategic importance of the Chabahar route, India has to play a critical role in developing and thereby realizing the full potential of Chabahar Port which will significantly boost its image as a proactive regional power that is building such critical infrastructure not only to maximize its financial and strategic gains but also to propel regional growth and prosperity.[26]

Following its previous policy towards Chabahar port and central Asia, once again Modi government has signed a historic deal with Iran and Afghanistan in May 2016 to develop the strategic port of Chabahar in Iran and agreed on a three nation pact to build a transport and trade corridor through Afghanistan that could help divide the time and cost of doing business with Central Asia and Europe. Developing the Chabahar port was seen as crucial for India because it will not only allow New Delhi to bypass Pakistan and access global markets but also counter China's expanding influence in the Indian Ocean region. But the project's land route through Afghanistan remains a security headache.[27]

Implications for China-Pakistan Cooperation :

China and Pakistan, both the countries have been big obstacles in the path of India's development, because both the countries have border dispute with India. China wants to control Indian influence in Afghanistan and Central Asia; therefore, China is supporting to Pakistan and developing its Gwadar Port to achieve Chinese interests. On contrary, India, Iran and Afghanistan have cordial relations, they are supporting to each other and consequently India is developing Iran's Chabahar Port so that India can easily send its goods to Afghanistan and central Asia. In other words, it might be argued that strategic cooperation among India, Iran and Afghanistan is the result of India's pragmatic foreign policy to counter of China-Pakistan cooperation.

China and Pakistan have agreed to build 'One Belt One Road' project more commonly known as China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is expected to bring about both peace

and prosperity in South Asia. This corridor will incorporate 2,000 kilometer transport link between Kashgar in northwestern China to Pakistan's Gwadar port on the Arabian Sea near the border with Iran via roads, railways and pipelines. However, it is a game changer project which will transform the fate of Pakistan and will help Pakistan modernize. It will improve the economy and trade, enhance regional connectivity, overcome energy crises, develop infrastructure and establish people to people contacts in both the countries.[28] With the support of China, Pakistan has gained significant importance not only in the region but the entire world. In the last few years, both China and Pakistan have been making concerted efforts to revive the historic Silk Road which is one of the oldest known trade route in the world and will provide a route for trade from Kashgar (China) to Gwadar (Pakistan). China-Pakistan Economic Corridor plan will help Pakistan to become one of the most strategically important countries in the region. It will also provide an opportunity to China to build a naval base on Gwadar port that will increase influence of China in the region and also counter US influence in the Asia-Pacific region.[29]

The "One Belt One Road" concept has international strategic importance. The "One Belt One Road" initiative covers many countries and regions with a total population of 4.4 billion and a total economic volume of US$ 21 trillion, 63 percent and 29 percent respectively of the World's total.[30] It is a vision with world changing implications, an unfolding plan that would merge much of Asia, Europe, Africa, Oceania and the West Asia much more closely together through a patchwork of diplomacy, new infrastructure and free trade zones.[31] The "One Belt one Road" Project consists of three routes, southern, central and northern route. The southern corridor begins from Guangzhou, which is the third largest city of China in South Central China. This route moves towards western parts of China and connects Kashgar with Pakistan at Kunjarab– a point from where China wants to link to Gwadar port in the Arabian Sea. It is the shortest and the most feasible option for China.[32]

Pakistan is a significant partner for China as it links China to the Central Asia, Southern Asian region and West Asia and its major deep-sea port Gwadar offers direct access to the Indian Ocean and beyond. Both countries have been working on enhancing their coordination and strategic communication to safeguard common interests. The CPEC represents a new model of Pakistan and China cooperation which will serve against the backdrop of complex and changing regional and international situations.[33] Both countries have developed strong bilateral trade and economic ties and cooperation over the years. China has gradually emerged as Pakistan's major trading partner both in terms of exports and imports. Bilateral trade and commercial links between the two countries were established in January 1963 when both signed the first bilateral long term trade agreement.[34] Both countries signed Free Trade Agreement (FTA) on November 24, 2006 and implemented from July 1, 2007. Later on, both signed the FTA on Trade in services on February 21, 2009 that became active from October 10 that year.[35] The CPEC is an under-construction mega-project which will achieve the political and economic objectives through trade and development and will also strengthen the economic and trade cooperation between the two countries. The CPEC, the construction period for which is from 2014 to 2030, has integrated links with the Chinese "One Belt One Road" and an extension of China's proposed 21st century Silk Road initiative.[36] This corridor will also be helpful in creating regional stability in South Asia. After completion of the corridor,

it will function as a primary gateway for trade between China and Africa and the West Asia. It is expected that this corridor will help cut the 12,000 kilometer route which West Asian oil supplies must now take to reach the Chinese ports.[37]

Gwadar is actually the tail of the silk belt, which will connect Kashgar through different communication networks. Gwadar holds central place in the project of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor because without making the Gwadar Port fully functional, it would be difficult to see the anticipated corridor as an energy corridor that appears as one of its main objectives behind the construction of the CPEC. Located near the Strait of Hormuz, which channels about one third of the world's oil trade, Gwadar could play a key role in ensuring China's energy security as it provides a much shorter route than the current 12,900 km route from the Persian Gulf through the Strait of Malacca to China's eastern seaboard.[38] It has been said that Gwadar will also put China and Pakistan in a strategically advantageous position along the Arabian Sea compounding the existing Indian concerns that stem from 'China's involvement in nearby ports such as Hambantota in Sri Lanka, Sittwe in Myanmar and Chittagong in Bangladesh.[39]

One the other hand, India is also energy hungry it looks forwards to developing Iran's Chabahar Port and believes it is central for India to open up a route to landlocked Afghanistan, where it has developed close security ties and economic interests and to have access to energy-rich Central Asian States.[40] The port has the potential to serve as a secure outlet as well as a storage and trans-shipment hub for the West Asia and Central Asian oil and gas suppliers through a well-defined corridor bypassing through Pakistan.[41] On the other, the operational control of the Gwadar port will enable China's access to the Indian Ocean, which is strategically important for China as it expands its influence across the region. Gwadar port will be connected with China's western province of Xingjiang through rail and road links. China eastern seaboards are 3,500 km away from the city of Kashgar in western China while the distance from Kashgar to Gwadar port is only 1500 km.[42]

As an economic enterprise, for the CPEC, the greatest challenge comes from competitors. The most significant is the Iranian port of Chabahar. Chabahar will effectively be a station for energy imports coming from the Gulf region and destined for Afghanistan and Central Asia. It will also be a gateway to the West Asia and possibly Europe for exports originating from Afghanistan and Central Asia.[43] Moreover, Indian involvement in Chabahar is linked to Pakistan's refusal to allow India access of transit to and from Afghanistan, therefore, India sees Iran as the next-best option. If Pakistan extends transit facilities to India, and then India may not be interested in building up Chabahar. In recent years, India has been particularly active in engaging Central Asian states for the sake of pursuing energy deals. India can be easily accommodated via the CPEC itself through eastern interface in Punjab and Sind and transformed into a stakeholder in the success of both Gwadar and the CPEC.[44] This initiative presumably is mainly intended to facilitate trade and is part of a larger Indian Ocean to North Sea initiative involving Russia and others, and mainly centered on the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas. Pakistani and Chinese observers, however, are worried that Tehran eventually will permit Indian naval forces to use the port and will regard developments at Chabahar as a response to China's own development of a Pakistani port and naval base at Gwadar, some 100 miles eastward."[45] There is one more obstacle in the

way of China-Pakistan cooperation, which is a Baloch rebel. Despite China-Pakistan's efforts, 450 kilometers stretch of road from Gwadar up northwards has not yet been constructed due to the law and order situation. Ethnic Baloch rebels who oppose Gwadar's development, have in the past blown up numerous gas pipelines and trains and attacked Chinese engineers,.[46]

After Chabahar agreement, China is worrying about its interests in Central Asia and West Asia. Chinese President Xi Jinping said, "There is no reason for jealousy in China about a milestone deal signed between India and Iran. India and Iran have agreed to develop a modern port near the Persian Gulf as well as road and rail links that would allow New Delhi to bypass Pakistan and strengthen trade between South and Central Asia. The plan comes at a time when Pakistan and China are busily forging a "community of shared destiny,"[47] because both the countries are working to develop the deep-water Gwadar Port. Chinese policy maker argued that it is reasonable if some people evaluate these projects from the perspective of geopolitics, hinting that China and India are in a race to win strategic trade routes. China is likely to be happy if India can join the ranks of improving infrastructure networks in the region. As a key strategic location connecting East Asia, Southeast Asia and Central Asia, India can promote infrastructure development that will be conducive to economic development in the entire region.[48]

Furthermore, after the US-Iran nuclear deal, the geopolitical environment became favorable to the Chabahar agreement. The United States, under the administration of President Barack Obama, brought the US and India closer together while improving US-Iranian relations. With the gradual drawback of US troops from Afghanistan and the deterioration of stability in the post-Arab Spring West Asia, the United States needs to encourage regional powers like India and Iran to act as stabilizers and sources of productivity.[49] With the April 15, 2015 nuclear deal between the P5+1 (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States+ Germany) and Iran, sanctions that made India pull back its zeal for the deal could be lifted. However, the current situation seems to favor open trade as a solution to the region's problems instead of regional antagonism and containment. The current situation of international politics offers a window of opportunity for the Chabahar Port project to be completed.[50]

Conclusion :

In a word, it might be argued that India's Chabahar policy is the result of her pragmatic foreign policy in South West Asia. The agreement between India and Iran has strong motive to develop the strategically located Chabahar port along with road and rail network in Afghanistan and central Asia. It will be a counter for China and Pakistan's alliance, which is against of Indian interests. After development of the port, it will provide a major boost for Indo-Iranian trade, and also provide a new route for Afghanistan's exports, bypassing Pakistan. In particular, the new port of Chabahar is designed to compete with Pakistan's port of Gwadar, which is being developed with Chinese assistance as part of the CPEC, because it is based on Chinese biggest agenda known as 'One Belt One Road', which envisages new land and sea routes connecting China to Western Eurasia and East Africa. The trilateral agreement between India, Iran and Afghanistan for a trade route from India to Afghanistan through Iran became a symbol of hope for the destabilized and underdeveloped region. It was also a sign of hope for India, which lags behind other regional powers in influence and

economic growth. This arrangement was intended to inject a vibrant and sustainable trading system into West, South and Central Asia. However, both regional and international influences prolonged the process of building a large port in Chabahar with a system of trade routes. This project will create probable shifts in the regional trade system and balance of power.

After the Chabahar Port agreement, India will strengthen its ties with Iran and consequently its economic presence in the Gulf region. Moreover, trade to and from Chabahar will allow India to increase commercial influence in Afghanistan, physically bypassing Pakistan, whose generally hostile stance towards India impedes New Delhi's ability to develop ties with Kabul. India's interests in Afghanistan are mainly focused on challenging Pakistan's position, but India is also interested in patter Afghanistan's natural resources and those of Central Asia. Iran stands to benefit from Chabahar as it will get an enhanced port from which to export more goods to India and the Asia-Pacific region at a time when it is seeking to reintegrate itself into the global economy. Simultaneously, Iran will also benefit from increased Indian investment. For their part, it seems that Indian firms are seeking to gain first-mover advantage in one of the world's biggest new emerging markets, at a time when Western companies are still hesitant about entering Iran. On the other hand, Afghanistan will also get a new trade opening to the Gulf, Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean, because their diplomatic relations are complex and frequently strained due to Islamabad's past support for the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan.

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