

Geopolitics in Indian Ocean: Access to the Mackinder's Pivot Area

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ABSTRACT: *India is a growing economy and in order to keep the pace so, it needs a continuous supply of resources. Looking around, central Asia is an important area to fulfil India's energy demands. This region is also important for India from security point of view. India knows that any untoward activity in this region can have grave repercussions over it also. So in order to do away with such things and to continue as a growing power, India has to deepen its ties and engagements in the region. The study is a humble attempt to prove the importance of Iran for India to enter the Mackinder's "Heartland area" and the geo-politics in which India is involved.*

Key Words: *Central Asia, India, security, geopolitics, Iran.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Geopolitics is the use of geography in International Relations. In other words, we can say that when geographical location motivates a change in foreign policy, is called Geopolitics. In 1904, Mackinder put forth his "Pivot Area" concept, referring to the Eurasian region. His concept stated that one who controls this land controls the world islands (Asia and Europe) and one who controls the world islands controls whole world. Believing in this concept, all great powers of world like Russia, China and Britain tried to gain control over this region. Russia formed Soviet Union, which included states of this region also. After the disintegration of USSR in 1991, fifteen states gained independence among which five states were the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, the Republic of Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and the Republic of Uzbekistan. These five states are collectively referred as "Central Asia". It has also informed strategic thinking of great powers seeking territorial expansion or global influence. These five republics hold considerable geopolitical significance for global security. The independence of these republics and the globalisation of India, both events occurred at the same time. The region is returning to the Great Game of 19th century, but with some new players such as Russia, US, India China, Iran, etc. As the game was going in the Eurasian region, the regional states became the natural participants of this New Great Game. This New Great Game became more complicated by the involvement of new state and non-state actors. In order to enter this geopolitical cult, the countries like Russia, US, China, Iran, Turkey, Georgia started put forth proposals that suited their interests. Not only these nations, but also the countries who have no direct access to this region show their interest in the region through joint ventures, if not directly.

1.1 Significance of Central Asia for India: The importance of Central Asian region is not only for civilisational and historical reasons, but also for geopolitical and economic ones. The regional strategic location is very important for India. The region being located at the cross roads of the Russia (superpower of cold war time), Middle East (a serious conflict zone), China (the emerging superpower), Afghanistan and Pakistan-the hub of religious extremism, makes it an extremely pivotal region.¹ India has security and economic interests in the region. For India, Central Asia has strategic significance as far as Kashmir factor is concerned. The region being located in the north of India and having close geographical proximity with Kashmir, any strategic change or development can have implications over Kashmir also.² Moreover, the geopolitical location of Central Asian region affects India's relations with China, Pakistan, the US and other powers.³ Indian energy demand is expected to grow by 95 per cent by 2030.⁴ Central Asia has several favourable factors, which drag Indian attention and interest.⁵ Development of means of communication further increased the importance of this region. Trans-Asian Railway projects and other transit route will provide the routes for large-scale flow of cargo from Asia and Pacific region to Europe and West Asia.⁶ Energy resources being the main aspect of geopolitical importance represent a connection link between countries and regions for strengthening mutually beneficial interactions. The newly emerged CARs added a new strategic dimension to the global geo-political sphere in general and Asian in particular.⁷ In the last few decades, India and central Asian republics have established strong relations in the fields like textiles, chemicals, mining, hydro-carbon, mineral processing, construction

and industrial production. The region is one of the largest beneficiaries of India's technical and economic cooperation (ITEC) program.⁸ Though India is improving and increasing its potential in the region, China which shares border with three Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan has become a threat to India's ambitions due to its growing military, economic and defence cooperation in the region.⁹ China is making huge investments for the development of Central Asian oil fields in order to fulfil its energy demands. U.S. is also trying to increase its area of influence and to undermine Russian and Iranian gains.¹⁰ Looking through security perspective, India has not built any security architecture in the region. Until recent Conference in Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) was, the only regional organisation in which both India and Central Asia were parts together. Recently India became full member of SCO of which the five republics are also members. However, this organisation is more dominated by China and Russia. Above all India is largely involved in the traditional security issues like tensions with Pakistan and China, relationship with US and its effects over Indo-Iran relations.¹¹ Dr. Arvind Gupta Director General of IDSA argues that India-Central Asia relations have immense Challenges as well as opportunities. Opportunities existed in avenues like relaxation in visa process and people-to-people contacts. He further argues that for regional stability, a cooperative security framework is needed.

1.2 India in Central Asia: India got independence in 1947 and it followed the Non-Alignment Policy though not completely. It remained away from the Western bloc but leaned towards the Eastern bloc. Following this policy, India saw itself as a successful model of modernity after decolonization. Soviet back in the Central Asian region provided India a link to be in the everyday lives there via television, music and cultural exchanges.¹² After the breakdown of USSR, India lost its years old ally. However, the breakdown of USSR meant that India was getting a new set of neighbours, though India shared its historical and geo-cultural relations with the region. India made a good beginning by opening five Indian missions, several Prime Ministerial visits and by providing substantive developmental aid and technical support. India not only had a motive to hold a strong position but also wanted to respond to the great power diplomacy in Central Asia. India tried to enter the energy sector and uranium reserves.¹³ Yet India was not able to expand its geostrategic and geo-economic interests.¹⁴ After opening of the economy, India's trade mechanism got disrupted and state's role was reduced. Certain domestic issues also changed India's track especially the insurgency in Jammu and Kashmir and India was left to concentrate over its relations with South Asian Nations, leaving hardly any room for Former Soviet Space. However, after realising the changing dynamics of geostrategic and geo-economic environment in the region, India has given a pivotal place to this region in its foreign policy. The second half of 1990's saw the establishment of Taliban regime in Afghanistan, China's rise, Indo-Pak nuclear tests and finally Pakistan's rise in central Asia. These dramatic changes made India to implement the "Look North Policy" which was based on same principles of "Look West Policy". India's main motives for its engagements in the region were to contain Pakistan's rise in the region, to curb the potential threat of terrorism, which can affect India also, energy politics and to prevent China from getting monopoly in the region.¹⁵

India signed Bilateral Joint Working Groups (JWG) on counter-terrorism with Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan and attempted to expand defence cooperation with the Central Asian Republics for joint military training and production of military hardware. However, despite all these efforts, India recorded less political sway and economic success in the region. India has a huge range of ideological attributes and civilisational validation that could entail good advantages and can potentially facilitate its speedy access into Central Asian energy resources. This region is a fertile ground for Indian thought and culture to grow. These elements are an edge and can lead India on forefront against other powers in the region.¹⁶ The only hurdle India is facing is that India lacks direct access to the region but energy became a motivating factor for India to look for alternatives. Other factors like the non-traditional security threats of terrorism and drug trafficking made India to take interest in Afghanistan also.¹⁷ This situation made the Chabahar port geo-strategically important for India.

2.1 The Iranian Option:

India-Iran relations have been deepening with respect to most of the issues like security, energy, and the North-South Transport Corridor. When Iranian president Mohammad Khatami visited India in 2003, both countries initiated transportation relations and signed a number of agreements including a "Memorandum of Understanding on the Road Map to Strategic Cooperation."

For India, Iran is important to resolve its transportation Issues and to achieve its varied objectives in Central Asian region. Iran also thinks that it has complimentary interests with India largely. India can provide massive infrastructure investments, cost-effective intellectual and material assistance to Iran so that Iran

will be able to extract maximum benefits from its ports, roads, and rail projects. After India realised the significance of Iran and its strategic location, India's Border Road Organization financed US\$136 million for the opening up of a road link between Chabahar port in Iran and Afghanistan's main ring road highway system. This 215-kilometer roadway, completed on January 22, 2009 connecting Zaranj to Delaram is a part of a larger network that forms a circular route connecting Herat and Kabul via Mazar-e-Sharif in the north and also Kandahar in the south in Afghanistan and finally connecting Afghanistan to Uzbekistan.

For India, the available transit routes are through China, Afghanistan and Iran. India and Iran entered into an agreement with Turkmenistan to open up a route in 1995. India transported goods to Bandar Abbas and then via rail to Iran's Caspian Sea ports of Bandar Anzale and Bandar Amirabad and then to further world.¹⁸

In contemporary times, India-Iran relations are guided by three main factors viz local conflicts in South Asia like Afghanistan, Port building i.e. Gwadar and Chabahar etc, general issues like Central Asia seen as a market and global factors like US, Israel. However, when India voted against Iran at the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) board meeting in September 2005, it raised apprehensions with regard to their bilateral ties. The relations again started developing since February 2007 when the Minister of External Affairs Pranab Mukherjee visited Tehran and laid special focus on bilateral relations. In 2008, president of Iran Mahmoud Ahmadinejad visited India and showed positive attitude towards India's vote against Iran, and expressed his view that India Iran relations are "deeper than a vote".¹⁹

India and Iran also want to create a trading bloc along with Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan to promote trade and commerce in Central Asian region. Indo-Iranian trade is growing steadily. Commercial non-oil export import has been bouncing reaching up to \$4.74 billion in the fiscal 2016-17, compared to the lowest level of \$3.93 billion in 2011-12.²⁰ Earlier the figure was not considered optimal given the good political relations between the two countries. Iran holds great significance for India due to its strategic location. India considers Iran as an important partner as it could become India's gateway to Afghanistan and Central Asia. Both countries are keenly working to realise Iran's transit potential. The first project, which connects India to Central Asia via Iran, is the Chabahar port project. The port has also been called as the Golden Gate to these land-locked countries.²¹ Chabahar port has immense strategic value for Iran as well as India. It is located outside the Strait of Hormuz thus reducing the Iranian economy's vulnerability to a blockade of the Strait by hostile powers. It gives Iran direct access to the Indian Ocean. Being the only deep port of Iran, it will enable Iran to receive high tonnage ships. The port will also lead to Industrial development in and around the port and will provide employment opportunities to the people of the Iran's least developed province of Sistan-Baluchistan. Chabahar for Iran came as an opportunity to end its year of isolation. The trilateral agreement followed the conclusion of the US-Iran Nuclear Agreement in 2015, so that Iran could re-engage on economic issues and explore new avenues for cooperation. However, after the Trump Administration's opposition to the nuclear deal, the challenge today is to sustain this momentum of relations. The geo-political issues between Iran and Saudi Arabia are growing as Tehran is being accused of proxies in its neighbour states of Yemen, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. Although U.S. has cleared itself by the statement issued by Secretary of State Rex Tillerson that Washington does not want to "interfere with legitimate business" done with Iran, "whether they be from Europe, India, or agreements that are in place or promote economic development and activity to the benefit of our friends and allies." But shifting American foreign policy priorities may affect the future of Chabahar port as the geopolitical tensions are rising in the region.²²

For India, the port's importance lies in the fact that it provides India a gateway to reach the resourceful region of Central Asia and European markets. The port will open numerous geo-political and economic opportunities for India. It is important for India as it will provide an alternate route to reach Afghanistan and the Central Asian republics. Afghanistan being a land locked country will now be having another outlet to the sea. It will reduce Afghanistan's dependence on Pakistani ports and in turn will reduce Pakistan's influence over Afghanistan. So far, New Delhi used airlifting cargo, which made it difficult for India to increase its involvements in the war torn country of Afghanistan. It will increase India's leverage in Afghanistan. Indian companies will have opportunities to venture into Afghanistan and explore its enormous mineral wealth. In the long term, it will act as a hub for Indian trading operations to venture into the oil and mineral-rich Central Asia.

Although the basic purpose of Chabahar port is commercial and to provide Afghanistan a transit route, it can also provide India the facility to check Pakistani and Chinese activities in the Gulf and Indian Ocean Region as well as activities of Pakistani Navy. Chabahar port will increase India's involvement in the region and India will emerge as a significant player in the Middle East. The project of Iran Pakistan India pipeline (IPI) could not take off due to economic sanctions over Iran. Now when the sanctions are over and Iran is engaging itself in economic activities again, IPI project can be revived. However if Pakistan will not show

willingness, the Chabahar will be an opportunity. India has an option of deep water pipelines i.e. Chabahar port Oman- Iran- India deep sea pipeline.²³ This pipeline will strengthen ties between Iran and Oman and will help them to collaborate on Ashgabat Agreement.²⁴

The increasing ties between the three countries of India, Iran and Afghanistan have made Afghanistan to change its way away from Pakistan and has in recent years opted to trade via Iran's Bandar Abbas port. The other reason is that Pakistan is supporting Taliban in Afghanistan. Nearly 60 percent of Afghan imports were transited through Pakistan in 2008-09, which steadily came down to 30 percent in 2016. It can be expected that Afghan trade via Pakistan may further come down after Chabahar will provide its way.²⁵ The deal will also help all players to build trust, which is needed to generate more meaningful trilateral cooperation on global terrorist challenges like ISIS and the narcotic trade in Afghanistan, which are of great concern to all involved.

Some observers view Chabahar as a counter force to China led Gwadar port, which is depicted by the easy accessibility of the Chabahar port on Iran's southern coast from India's western coast. India is keenly engaged in enhancing regional connectivity in view of China's attempt by Belt and Road Initiative to redraw regional boundaries.²⁶ Cordial relations between India-Iran-Central Asia are important for transforming the face of trade in the region. North-South Corridor will rely on road and rail networks to connect Chabahar port and Bandar Abbas with Central Asia and Afghanistan after connecting Mumbai-the commercial capital of India and the Iranian ports of Chabahar and Bandar Abbas by maritime transport. In September 2000, Indian, Iranian and Russian ministers of transportation signed an agreement to establish The International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) to provide a shorter and convenient maritime route. Belarus, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Oman, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan and Turkey also joined the three countries. Chabahar port is located both in South-North and East-West transit corridors and can play as a transport gateway, as well as a central commercial link between CIS countries, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Russia and Europe. Chabahar port as a free trade zones (FTZ) will give a momentum to the development of South-North transit corridor and in turn to international trade in the region. India and Iran being partners to the international North south corridor can facilitate their trade and commerce through this corridor by making use of the Chabahar port. Iran was linked to central Asia after the Mashhad-Sarakhs-Tajan railway was completed in 1996. Central Asia also saw a slow decrease of their dependency on Russian rail and road ways. Iran being connected to the central Asian region via land and having warm port facilities could boost up India's trade and other involvements in the region. Connecting the International North-South Corridor and Chabahar port together could boost trade between Central Asia and the world and would cut the cost of transportation of goods.²⁷ INSTC is an attempt to link south Asian markets with Europe via Iran and Russia. Historically this route has been used for trade between south Asia and Europe. it was in 2000, that Russia, Iran and India signed an agreement in St. Petersburg with a vision for north south transit corridor starting from Indian ports via Arabian sea to Iranian port of Bandar Abass, through Iran to its Caspian part then to the Russian part of Caspian and then through route along river Volga to Northern Europe. After the functioning of Chabahar port, INSTC will get another option and will in turn boost up trade.²⁸ INSTC is 40% shorter and 30% cheaper as compared to suez canal.²⁹ India's long term interests in the development of Chabahar port is the INSTC. This port will make India to join Mashhad where from it can join Russia and Europe through Baltic States. Studies have shown that this route will decrease transportation time and cost by 60% and 50% respectively.³⁰ Iran has a hope that development of Chabahar port will decrease pressure on Bandar Abbas. China and Pakistan fear that after completion, India will install its naval vessels there. However, India claims that purpose of this port will be commercial only. These apprehensions are important as China led Gwadar port (located on Pakistan's Makaran Coast) is only 72 km away from Chabahar. China sees Chabahar as a counter attack on its presence in Indian Ocean.³¹ India is having small expert openings in the region but land route offers new opportunities for construction and heavy manufacturing industries. Chabahar can help Iran to reach Pre-sanction economic level. Prior to Chabahar, Iran used only one port of Bandar Abbas to export goods. This port's receiving capacity is 100,000 ton cargo ships. However, most of the shipping is conducted via 250,000-ton cargo vessels. Iran uses United Arab Emirates for offloading and then transferring goods onto smaller ships. New port of Chabahar will mak

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