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# MAKRAN GATEWAYS

A Strategic Reference for  
Gwadar and Chabahar

Philip Reid

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**MAKRAN GATEWAYS**  
**A STRATEGIC REFERENCE FOR**  
**GWADAR AND CHABAHAR**

**PHILIP REID**



INSTITUTE FOR DEFENCE  
STUDIES & ANALYSES

रक्षा अध्द्ययन एवं विश्लेषण संस्थान

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# MAKRAN GATEWAYS: A STRATEGIC REFERENCE FOR GWADAR AND CHABAHAR

## AN OCEAN APART

In 1955, Jawaharlal Nehru shared his perceptions with India's Defence Minister, K.N. Katju, on what is now referred to as the 'Indian Ocean Region' (IOR), 'We have been brought up into thinking of our land frontier during British times and even subsequently and yet India, by virtue of her long coastline, is very much a maritime country.'<sup>1</sup> Eurasia's 'southern ocean' differs in an abstract sense, from the Atlantic and Pacific basins, in so much as it has primarily functioned, since the late-medieval and early-modern eras, as a closed strategic space: accessible, at least at practical latitudes, by only a handful of narrow channels. More significantly perhaps, its extensive littoral region has been relatively isolated from the Eurasian and African hinterlands by the absence of navigable, ocean-fronting river systems. The near continuous chain of mountains running from Eastern Europe to the recesses of Mongolia, presents a formidable terrestrial barrier to meridional lines of communication. This vast geographical feature was identified by successive twentieth century geopolitical thinkers, beginning with Halford Mackinder, as delineating the southern flank of a Eurasian 'Heartland': Mackinder's signature and heavily critiqued concept, that first hypothesized an inner continental recess, permissive neither to maritime activity, nor projectable 'sea power'.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Zorawar Daulet Singh (2017), 'Foreign Policy and Sea Power: India's Maritime Role Flux', *Journal of Defence Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 4, October-December 2017, pp. 24.

<sup>2</sup> H.J. Mackinder (1904), *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (April), pp. 421-437.

Alfred Thayer Mahan, a transatlantic contemporary of Mackinder, with whom his works are often juxtaposed and erroneously ‘antithesized’, famously articulated ‘sea power’ as a model of statehood premised on the control of strategically significant choke points and harbours, as opposed to the administration of large territories. Mackinder firmly understood ‘sea power’ and Mahan’s influence is evident in his seminal paper. While the integrity of the original ‘Heartland’ thesis has been undermined several times since its publication in 1904, by an unprecedented level of maritime and areal power projection, the region’s geographical verities have largely continued to exclude the principal land powers of continental Eurasia: Russia, China and Iran, from a significant role in the IOR. Strategic control of the Indian Ocean, for nearly five centuries has been the privilege of extra-regional navies and since the mid-1970s has generally been viewed as lying well within the United States’ global as well as India’s regional, sphere of influence.

China’s recent emergence as a maritime actor however has unsettled the region’s two established naval powers. The Maritime Silk Road (MSR), the seaward-facing component of President Xi’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has rebranded and attempted to de-securitize a largely extant portfolio of Chinese littoral investments in the IOR. Concurrently however, Beijing’s maritime and economic diplomacy in the region has been colloquialized by Western and Indian commentators as the ‘String of Pearls’ strategy, a metonymy that reflects the enduring legacy of Mahan. Contemporary assumptions regarding the true strategic relevance of Chinese activity in the Indian Ocean however, are difficult to reconcile with both a *longue durée* perspective of Chinese national history and the immense geographical constraints the Navy of the People’s Liberation Army (PLAN) presently faces. It is an underlying assumption of this paper that this mercurial presence of a distant state, historically associated with neither institutional sea power, in the true Mahanian sense, nor the oceanic space in which it now seeks to establish a presence, must be conceived of in a category entirely distinct from the terrestrial component of the Belt and Road Initiative, launched concurrently with the MSR in 2013. In a recent paper, *Silk Roads and Strings of Pearls*, David Brewster suggests that, in purporting to establish, for the first time in the modern era, three permanent hinterland economic corridors, The Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB)



portends discontinuity in the strategic nature of the entire IOR.<sup>3</sup> Two geographical sub-regions, both flanking the Indian subcontinent, are particularly relevant to his argument: Myanmar, which already hosts transportation links to the Chinese interior from the Bay of Bengal, and likewise the coastal Makran, where for two decades, the ports of Gwadar and Chabahar have been marketed by their various stakeholders as potential ‘gateways’ to the Eurasian hinterland.

### **KASHGAR TO GWADAR: THE CASE FOR THE CPEC**

The peoples indigenous to the Makran are recognized in the Iranian national epic as the *Oritse*, from whose principal livelihood results the coast’s presumed Persian etymology: *Mahi Khuran* meaning ‘fish-eaters’. Abu I-Qasim Firdowsi, as per the Warner translation of his book of Sikander, presciently observes the geo-economic character of the region, through which the defeated Shah is obliged to retreat:

*They spake not Persian, whether old or modern,  
Or Arabic, or Turkman, or Chinese;  
They lived on fish alone;  
there was no means of bringing aught by road.*<sup>4</sup>

Despite describing the closest convergence of Mackinder’s 1904 abstract with the open ocean, Makran’s rugged and barren topography has historically stifled the growth of ocean-facing emporia along a barren and sparsely populated coastline. Overland trade from antiquity to the early-modern era was, by and large, channelled westwards from East and South Asia towards the commercial hubs of the Levant. Northern India’s only terrestrial link to the Eurasian Heartland and this profitable network, was by way of its North-West Frontier. A vibrant medieval legacy is evident

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<sup>3</sup> D. Brewster (2017), ‘Silk Roads and Strings of Pearls: The Strategic Geography of China’s New Pathways in the Indian Ocean’, *Geopolitics*, Vol. 22, No. 2, pp. 269-291.

<sup>4</sup> A.G. & E Warner (1905), *The Shahnameh of Firdowsi*, Volume VI p.50, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co, London.

from a superficial comparison of national architectures, food and dress in Central and South Asia. However, the growing scale and concentration of long-distance maritime commerce from the late 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards expedited the demise of the civilizational axis between Mughal conquerors and their ancestral homeland that is presently eulogized in Indo-Uzbek bilateral relations. Along with the wider Silk Road network, this commercial thoroughfare, receded considerably and remained largely dormant on account of the first Anglo-Russian and then Indo-Pakistani, enmity. It was this 'frontier' configuration that largely influenced the views of Mackinder, Mahan, Curzon and other Edwardian writers.

A series of events however, during the course of the twentieth century, illustrated that the spatial sanctity of the Eurasian Heartland was less categorical than Mackinder had first suggested. Indeed, the railroad that had given the geographer such cause for alarm, rather than facilitate continental hegemony over the Eurasian periphery, was the first to bring 'sea power' to the Heartland. Beginning in 1941, a truly unprecedented supply line of Allied war materiel was established from the Iranian port of Khorramshahr into the Caucasus and Central Asia along a route that came to be known as the 'Persian Corridor'. While not discussed here in great detail, lend-lease support for the Soviet war effort via the Persian Corridor, has been validated by a wide body of research as having proved instrumental in the outcome of the twentieth century's most decisive conflict.<sup>5</sup> During the subsequent impasse, the influence of the world's pre-eminent sea power, once again flowed through ports at both ends of the hermetic Makran coastline. This time the objective was to 'contain' rather than assist the Soviet Union and the remote influence of Mackinder on western Cold War foreign policy is traceable through the authorships of Spykman, Morgenthau, Kennan and Kissinger. The regression of his sea-land power watershed is aptly demonstrated in this region by a visible

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<sup>5</sup> D. Johnson (2016), 'The Persian Gulf Command and the Lend-Lease Mission to the Soviet Union during World War II', Army Historical Foundation (United States), <https://armyhistory.org/the-persian-gulf-command-and-the-lend-lease-mission-to-the-soviet-union-during-world-war-ii/> (Accessed 15 Dec 2018).

continuum of events from the 1950s to the present day: the Helmand Valley Project; the anti-Soviet Jihad; the NATO Partnership for Peace Program (PFP); plans for a natural gas pipeline and, finally, a Sea-Air anabasis into Afghanistan supplied, for the greater part, through the port of Karachi. While the Cold War balance of power dictated the constancy of Western benefaction in Southern Eurasia, a more abiding structure was being contemplated in the mould of a burgeoning 'China-Pakistan Axis', an accepted axiom since at least the late-1950's, and now the title of a celebrated analysis by Andrew Small.<sup>6</sup> Borrowing from another medieval precedent, the Karakorum Highway (KKH) was commenced by the two governments in 1959, one year after the Sultanate of Oman had ceded its Makran enclave to Islamabad. At the time a Baluch fishing village, Gwadar is now the site of the largest proposed expansion in Pakistan's littoral infrastructure in over two decades.

The port of Gwadar is widely regarded as the flagship project of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). At its core, the CPEC represents an elaboration of the earlier Karakorum Highway project, and, serving as a *de facto* flagship terrestrial corridor for the Belt and Road Initiative has drawn Chinese financial commitments in excess of \$60 billion. The Karakorum 'brand' is an important component of the CPEC, despite a project portfolio that emphasizes the wider economic development of Pakistan. Indeed, the linear, pan-regional trajectory of the CPEC, presupposed in the term 'corridor', remains difficult to ignore and is reinforced by the concentration of most non-infrastructure Chinese investment along the course of the Indus Valley. Beijing's apparent bias in respect of CPEC's 'Eastern' route however, passing through the Punjab and Sindh, is as logical as it is a reality of the Pakistani state. Not only is the Indus more suited to commercial power generation and transportation on the scale anticipated by the CPEC, but instability in the western provinces, in the view of some, a function of their economic paucity, entrenches both this divide and the associated cycle of violence.

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<sup>6</sup> A. Small (2015), *The China-Pakistan Axis: Asia's New Geopolitics*, Oxford University Press, New York.



Some commentators in New Delhi are now questioning whether the so-called ‘Central’ and ‘Western’ routes of the CPEC, which are meant to encompass Baluchistan and Khyber-Pakhtukhwa (KPK), represent anything more than political expedients for the nationwide acceptance of greater Chinese involvement in domestic affairs.<sup>7</sup> The presumed calculus underpinning Beijing’s decision to invest on such a considerable scale in the economy of its South Asian ally, has been reviewed at length and, as the weight of analyses suggest, is as reasonable as it is multi-faceted. The bottom-line incentive for example, inherent to Chinese overseas development financing, where state-guaranteed loans are made in US Dollars but the cost of labour and materials typically underwritten in Renminbi, is as viable in this instance as anywhere within the Belt and Road target region. While China’s state banks have customarily held the PRC’s vast foreign exchange surpluses in low-yield US Government and other treasury bonds, certain coal-fired power station investments in Pakistan, as a case in point, are expected to yield creditors in Beijing just under a thirty-five percent annual return on equity.<sup>8</sup>

The existence of an honest profit motive is doubtless one component of a wider investment strategy that also evinces a mercantilist tendency towards the consolidation of China’s overseas resource base, particularly in East Africa and Latin America. Baluchistan’s largely unexploited mineral wealth<sup>9</sup> offers potential in this regard and has also attracted attention from Saudi Arabia, Pakistan’s other reliable creditor.<sup>10</sup> Niche marketing opportunities, Pakistan’s access to European textile markets for example,<sup>11</sup> render the various sub-components of the SREB and MSR particularly

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<sup>7</sup> Author interview with a regional expert at a leading New Delhi Think Tank in November 2018.

<sup>8</sup> P.K. Singh (2017), ‘China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC): Connecting the Dots’, Occasional Paper, United Services Institute, New Delhi, p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>10</sup> S. Jain (2018), ‘CPEC: Geo-positional balancing in a fragile state’, NMML Occasional Paper, Nehru Museum and Memorial Library, p. 15.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

attractive for certain industrial sectors and justify their synchronization with Beijing's five-year domestic development plans. China faces numerous long-term structural issues, including an ageing population, chronic oversupply of capital goods and diminishing returns from a four-decade old export-driven growth model. The argument that CCP leadership is seeking to bring about the offshoring of mainland China's less productive manufacturing sectors, is reasonable and follows a suitable Asian precedent in Japan's 'flying geese' model. The requirement for a reduxing of 'brand China' is corroborated not in the least by the official narrative but also by signs of aspiring regional leadership: the PLA's militarization of the South China Sea, the pursuit of parallel institutionalization and the internationalization of the Renminbi. In Xinjiang, where President Xi has repeatedly asserted the equivalence of stability with economic development, the logic of value-chain ascension corresponds with domestic security priorities. The province has, until recently, been one of the world's fastest growing economic regions and Urumqi's domination of trade with Central Asia offers a clear model for the expansion of Kashgar-centred trade with Pakistan via the Karakorum Highway.

This oft-cited cluster of interrelated geo-economic explanations comprises the rump of Belt and Road analysis that has been circulated and recycled for the past five years. International criticism of the Chinese economic role in Pakistan is beginning to broadly conform to a pseudo-'Washington' consensus being reached elsewhere in opposition to the BRI. This typically emphasizes human rights infringements, the opacity of tender processes and the unsustainability of debt burdens. It has been suggested, in recent assessments made by the IMF, World Bank and Asian Development Bank (ADB), that Pakistan's economy is unable to sustain Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in excess of \$2 billion per annum without negative inflationary consequences.<sup>12</sup> The financial crisis that has been unfolding in Pakistan may be blamed in part, on rapid financial inflows that have occurred under CPEC.

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<sup>12</sup> S. Jain (2017), 'CPEC Master Plan a Charter of Servitude?' *PGURUS*, 16 May 2018, at <https://www.pgurus.com/cpec-master-plan-a-charter-of-servitude> [last accessed on 19 December 2018].

Admittedly, the peculiarities of Pakistan's civil-military governance structure both obscures and deepens the debate and displays of public hostility to the Chinese presence are perhaps less well-publicized. Yet, the Pakistani case study does not deviate markedly from a broader reactionary phenomenon, discernible across the Belt and Road target region. Five years on, President Xi's project to rebrand and consolidate China's 'going out policy' is undoubtedly beginning to encounter resistance in a number of different forms and conspicuously negative or controversial outcomes are often seized upon by critics. Writing for the *American Interest*, S. Frederick Starr notes that 'in many parts of the world, BRI is encountering serious pushback, as grantees begin reading the fine print of agreements they have signed or are being asked to sign'.<sup>13</sup> The consequences of success or failure however are greatly exaggerated in the case of Pakistan: both a nuclear power and in the opinion of some, a borderline failed state. Perhaps the most compelling realization concerning the legitimacy of CPEC, relates to its very status as a 'corridor': as a defiant trans-Himalayan artery connecting the Chinese interior with the Indian Ocean. This is a potential retraction that, if verifiable, undermines the spirit of the original KKH.

The upgradation of the road network and the ability to attract foreign financing has undoubtedly served to uphold the writ of the Pakistani state, particularly in peripheral areas such as Gilgit-Baltistan (GB), Baluchistan and North-Eastern KPK. However, it is the transcontinental and therefore the most geopolitical aspirations of CPEC that have increasingly come under scrutiny. An analytical consensus among some external observers is beginning to contest the extra-regional practicability of both the KKH itself and a parallel three-thousand kilometre, \$5 billion oil pipeline, touted to transport twelve million tonnes of Gulf crude per year to markets in Pakistan and Western China.<sup>14</sup> The pipeline, first proposed by Islamabad

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<sup>13</sup> S. Starr and Wimbush S. Enders (2019) 'U.S. Strategy Towards Afghanistan and (The Rest of) Central Asia', *American Interest: Policy, Politics & Culture*, January 24, at <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2019/01/24/u-s-strategy-towards-afghanistan-and-the-rest-of-central-asia/> [Accessed 1 July 2019].

<sup>14</sup> RAND (2014), 'China's Strategy Towards South and Central Asia: An Empty Fortress', RAND Corporation Research Report Series, p. 75.

in 2006, remains a significant source of conceptual legitimacy for the CPEC given the apparent dearth of economic complementarities between Xinjiang and Pakistan and observes a precedent notably set by the inauguration of a pipeline from Kunming in Southern China, to the port of Kyaukpyu, Myanmar, in 2014. The commercial viability of the Karakorum pipeline however, is greatly undermined by a number of geographical and political obstacles that largely offset the alleged cost savings of its cartographical abridgement. The proposed route via the Khunjerab Pass would necessitate a rise of over fifteen-thousand feet from a sea level interface. This would in turn, require a substantial, costly and, in places, vulnerable network of supporting infrastructure. According to one assessment, with per barrel cost estimates as high as \$10,<sup>15</sup> if a Chinese oil company chose to move 250,000 barrels per day overland through Pakistan, a quantity comparable with China's present imports from Kazakhstan, it might actually lose as much as \$1 billion per year compared with moving oil by sea.<sup>16</sup> When considering the relative success of China's infrastructure projects in Central Asia, it must be remembered that the Sino-Kazakh and Sino-Turkmen pipelines have only been considered viable, although the opacity of state transactions in the transit countries still obscures much of the detail, because there is no alternative to terrestrial pipelines in the Eurasian Heartland, apart from railroads. Even so, a proposed expansion of the latter through Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan was postponed indefinitely in 2017, the reason widely believed to have been a revised Chinese cost-benefit analysis of the project.<sup>17</sup>

The necessary investment and implied subsidy is not inconceivable within the spirit of the CPEC. However, the passage of a pipeline and the colocation of isolated pumping stations would dissect a region prone to

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<sup>15</sup> S. Jain (2018), p. 4.

<sup>16</sup> RAND (2014), p. 76.

<sup>17</sup> M. Lelyveld (2017), 'China's Gas Plans Unsettled by Oversupply', Article: Radio Free Asia, [https://www.rfa.org/english/commentaries/energy\\_watch/chinas-gas-plans-unsettled-by-oversupply-08142017104724.html](https://www.rfa.org/english/commentaries/energy_watch/chinas-gas-plans-unsettled-by-oversupply-08142017104724.html) (Accessed 23 January 2019).

both seismic and political instability. These two local peculiarities will also impede the routing of long-distance commercial traffic through the narrow passes of KPK and Gilgit-Baltistan. The single-lane KKH through the Khunjerab pass, is unsuited to twenty-four-wheel heavy container transporters, an acknowledged minimum for a viable freight corridor.<sup>18</sup> Sceptics often note, that more than one thousand local and Chinese labourers died during the construction of the original highway on account of the region's malignant combination of natural hazards: landslides, glaciers and hanging valleys.<sup>19</sup> This offers some degree of explanatory power in assessing why, when Sino-Pakistani trade reached \$7 billion in 2009, the recorded share of trade via the Khunjerab remained a mere four percent.<sup>20</sup> More than half a century after the inception of the KKH and following five years of aggressive 'Kashgar to Gwadar' rhetoric, the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation Program (CAREC) trade flow performance monitor (CPMM) noted in its 2019 annual report that traffic through the Khunjerab Border Crossing Point (BCP) remains limited to certain factors of production that relate largely to China's own construction interests in Pakistan: cement and machinery.<sup>21</sup> These considerations support a growing heretical narrative, prevalent even among some Chinese scholars,<sup>22</sup> regarding the rationality of a direct economic corridor and hydrocarbon conduit between Pakistan and Xinjiang, a region relatively abundant in oil and gas.

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<sup>18</sup> S. Jain (2018).

<sup>19</sup> J. Garlick (2018), 'Deconstructing the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor: Pipe Dreams Versus Geopolitical Realities', *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 27, No. 112, p. 524.

<sup>20</sup> S. Sering (2012), 'Expansion of the Karakorum Corridor', IDSA Occasional Paper, Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, p. 20.

<sup>21</sup> CAREC (2019), CPMM Annual Report 2017, The Asian Development Bank, CAREC Program, p. 22.

<sup>22</sup> S. Jain (2018), p. 4.

## A MALACCAN MYTH?

The strategic discourse surrounding the use of the Karakorum route has, above all else perhaps, been collocated with China's perceived exposure to its Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs): the 'Malacca Dilemma' coined by Hu Jintao more than two decades ago. This dilemma is not a 'myth', fabricated by the CCP, as has been suggested by critics,<sup>23</sup> nor is the issue of Beijing's strategic vulnerability easily circumvented by references to the *jus in bello* use, of alternative straits through the Indonesian Archipelago. The term denotes a genuine conceptual problem for the Chinese leadership and is a metaphor for the wider and somewhat immutable geographical disadvantage the PRC faces in respect of assuring maritime access to its industrial inputs, particularly oil, and export markets. It is a situation compared by David Gompert,<sup>24</sup> with that of Imperial Germany in the late-nineteenth century. Beijing's liability to potentially hostile sea power in the Indo-Pacific, is only being authenticated by increased referencing of the latter term in conjunction with an evolving regional maritime security architecture, in which China will play no part.

The value to Beijing of an ocean-fronting salient through Pakistan is clear, and premised on the geopolitical logic articulated by David Brewster, recognizable to students of Mackinder. The Indus Valley is the most direct route between Western China and the open ocean, abridging the journey from China's eastern seaboard by several thousand kilometres. While its cost-effectiveness remains the subject of debate, it has been confidently estimated that oil imported from the Persian Gulf via the tentative Gwadar terminal may take as little as ten days, compared with up to forty-five via conventional shipping routes.<sup>25</sup> A single-customs regime also offers the

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., pp. 2-5.

<sup>24</sup> D. Gompert (2012), 'Sea Power and American Interests in the Western Pacific', National Defence Research Institute, RAND Corporation, p. 62.

<sup>25</sup> M. Hussein (2017), 'China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC): Challenges and the Way Forward', Thesis, p. 32, Calhoun: The NPS Institutional Archive DSpace Repository, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, California, <https://calhoun.nps.edu/handle/10945/55626> [Accessed 3 July 2019]



potential for commercial expediency ahead of alternative overland routes through Central Asia, where complications arise for Beijing in overcoming not least the region's Balkanized polity but also a delicate Sino-Russian equilibrium in Moscow's historical sphere of interest.

If the Malacca Dilemma is taken to be a salient strategic driver, at least from Beijing's perspective, of the CPEC, Gwadar's credibility as the sea-land interface in a broader continental stratagem to 'outflank' hostile sea power, is still ambiguous. Indeed, the potential import volumes being discussed are almost negligible when compared with China's aggregate demand. According to one US analyst, the Kyaukpu-Kunming pipeline, with twice the design capacity of the prospective Karakorum line, accounted for only 6.7 percent of China's total oil imports in 2015 and this figure is projected to drop to 3.4 percent by 2030.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, onshore transfer at Gwadar, or indeed in Myanmar, does little to mitigate the dilemma facing China in respect of its Sea-Lines of Communication because, as James Holmes of the United States Naval War College observes, the initial portage must still occur by sea and in many respects, interdiction is less problematic for the United States or Indian navies in the Arabian Sea.<sup>27</sup>

The upgraded draft of the port, dredged by Chinese engineers in 2005 to a depth of 12.5m, evidences the lack of any immediate ambition for the transshipment of other strategic material, by tankers and liners of a practical deadweight tonnage.<sup>28</sup> This critical shortcoming, along with an absence of water and transportation links, hampered the ability of the Singapore Ports Authority to feign Gwadar's competitiveness with alternative hubs such as Dubai or the Duqm project in Oman, during its management tenure.<sup>29</sup> Brewster argues that it was as a result of this perceived failure, that the problematic marketing of Gwadar as a 'gateway' to the Chinese interior,

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<sup>26</sup> D. Brewster (2017), p. 285.

<sup>27</sup> RAND (2014), p. 76.

<sup>28</sup> S. Jain (2018), p. 5.

<sup>29</sup> A. Bansal (2018): 'Geo-positional Balancing', India Foundation Lecture: The Nehru Memorial Library, New Delhi, (28 September).

became incumbent on Beijing after the Chinese Overseas Port Holding Company (COPHC) assumed control of port operations in 2013.<sup>30</sup> Despite the heavy marketing of ‘Gwadar-Kashgar’, it is worth noting, as does Sandhya Jain in her emphatically titled article *CPEC: A Master Plan of Servitude*, that the re-routing of Chinese external trade through Gwadar was not mentioned in the eponymous document, published in 2017.<sup>31</sup> This is not likely a careless omission. While a useful expedient, a transnational economic corridor is simply not a credible foundation for China’s long-term policy towards Pakistan. While recent rumours of Beijing’s *de facto* rescission on CPEC are exaggerated, these may be understood in the context of numerous abatements, suspensions and re-financing of constituent projects<sup>32</sup> during the course of 2018 and the observance by some analysts, of a waning ‘corridor’ narrative in the Chinese media.<sup>33</sup>

The CPEC nevertheless continues to satisfy numerous criteria on both domestic agendas: an illustrative example of the ‘win-win’ outcome evangelized by President Xi in order to differentiate the Belt and Road ‘brand’ from the Breton Woods incumbents. Whilst the CPEC’s conditionality is evidently steeped in favour of its creditors, the absence of demands for internal reform: a provision that will append the balance-of-payments support Islamabad is presently negotiating with a number of International Financial Institutions (IFIs), exemplifies the gap in development finance that the BRI seeks to exploit. The CPEC’s perceived iniquities are neither geographically nor institutionally consistent, and the use of terms such as ‘servitude’ and ‘exploitation’ stands in need of careful qualification.<sup>34</sup> The impetus for China’s heightened involvement in Pakistan owes much to the military’s interest under the Musharraf presidency and the CPEC’s greatest beneficiary may likely prove to be the Pakistani Armed

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<sup>30</sup> D. Brewster (2017), p. 277.

<sup>31</sup> S. Jain (2017).

<sup>32</sup> S. Jain (2018).

<sup>33</sup> J. Garlick (2018), p. 526.

<sup>34</sup> R. Kaplan (2009), ‘Pakistan’s Fatal Shore’, *The Atlantic* [Accessed 30 September 2018].

Forces. Indeed, the military case for an alternative naval hub to Karachi, a requirement made apparent to Islamabad during the Kargil War, is more readily perceptible than the commercial one that has been made in parallel with Gwadar's development as part of the CPEC.

Gwadar's situation on the Makran Coast extrapolates the conceptual remit of a *transnational economic corridor* beyond the Indus River Valley to that of a truly regional trunk system, centred on Islamabad and Lahore. However, 'Kashgar to Gwadar' also possesses considerable implications for a state so vulnerable to centrifugal pressures and the elongation of Pakistan's transport network will facilitate the incorporation of Pakistan's restless peripheral regions into its national security architecture. Several analysts have noted that the aegis of guaranteeing project delivery, will tilt the civil-military balance further in favour of the Pakistani Armed Forces, the principal distributary node for CPEC funding and security, particularly in Balochistan. It is worth noting that attacks by militant groups reached a six-year low in 2017,<sup>35</sup> most notably in KPK and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) as a result of a joint offensive by the armed forces. The apparent success of Operation Zarb e-Azv stands in contrast to the numerous western-supported offensives that have targeted Pakistan-based militants operating against coalition forces in Afghanistan. A cursory comparison of these divergent outcomes reveals two deeply-entrenched material interests for the Pakistani military establishment: the profitable management of permanent instability and the creation of an amenable security environment for the progression of the CPEC.<sup>36</sup>

Regardless of whether a new round of Western financial support will, against the wishes of the US State Department, effectively act as an indirect guarantor for the CPEC, negative momentum surrounding the corridor narrative has fostered the theorem that Gwadar is indeed a 'pearl', rather than a 'gateway'. It is this view that resonates most acutely in New Delhi.

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<sup>35</sup> M. Hussein (2017), p. 55.

<sup>36</sup> M. Ibrar, J. Mi, M. Rafiq and A.L. Karn (2016), 'The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor: Security Challenges', 2016 2nd Asia-Pacific Management and Engineering Conference (APME 2016).

For these observers, the multiple deficiencies of the dilemma ‘myth’ places the true significance of ‘Kashgar to Gwadar’ rhetoric in a secondary context: a contrived distraction as part of a wider strategy. One commentator in New Delhi, understood the development of Gwadar, or more specifically of the adjacent Jiwani peninsular, as being highly complementary to China’s first overseas base in Djibouti, portending a ‘pincer’ disposition of Chinese naval deployments on both oceanic approaches to the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>37</sup> Another expert, observing the CPEC at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA), described Beijing’s wider investment package as a grand ‘sweetener’ in furtherance of this singular objective.<sup>38</sup> Yet, frustratingly it seems, for the analytical community, there exists no *mea culpa* that evidences hegemonic, potentially hostile Chinese ambitions in respect of Gwadar. It is fitting therefore that, what has been widely perceived as India’s conspicuous public relations response to Chinese activity on the Makran Coast, is in fact an alternative Heartland ‘gateway’, less than 200km to the west of Gwadar.

### A PORT FOR ALL SEASONS

While the singular majesty of the Himalaya has continued to prove an enduring obstruction to terrestrial lines of communication to and from the Eurasian interior, the same cannot be said, at least since the mid-Twentieth Century, of the Iranian Plateau. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Russian Imperial government was solicited by a number of commercial prospectors regarding the construction of a *Trans-Persian Railway*, from the Persian Gulf to the Russian frontier. Three such proposals were rejected in 1889, 1900 and 1905 on the grounds that the relative isolation of Northern Persia from the coast, was integral to the preservation therein, of Russia’s commercial monopoly.<sup>39</sup> This cautious posture was abandoned

<sup>37</sup> Author interview conducted with a leading regional expert in November 2018, Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi.

<sup>38</sup> Author interview conducted with a leading regional expert in November 2018, Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi.

<sup>39</sup> D. Spring (1976), ‘The Trans-Persian Railway Project and Anglo-Russian Relations, 1909-14’, *The Slavonic and East European Review*, Vol. 54, No. 1 (Jan.), The Modern Humanities Research Association and University College, London, pp. 60-82.

however, after Germany made clear its desire to extend the Berlin-Baghdad Railway to Khanaqin, a border town within Russia's Persian sphere of influence.<sup>40</sup> The British establishment was, at first, similarly divided on the railway question: the Foreign Office by and large favourably disposed to a proposal made by St. Petersburg following the 1907 entente. A 'North-South' axis across Persia was, in the zero-sum fervour of Edwardian great power relations, deemed the lesser threat than a German 'West-East' axis. The view from the India Office on the other hand, best exemplified by Curzon's vocal opposition to the project, reflected a deeply-entrenched inclination towards the defence of the subcontinent and its landward approaches.<sup>41</sup> An agreement was only finally reached on the eve of war in Europe, as it became apparent that Russia would ultimately defer to the expansion of its own latitudinal network in Northern Persia, affecting the strategic balance in Afghanistan.<sup>42</sup>

It was during this episode however, that the Makran fishing village of Chabahar, first gained strategic prominence in the modern era. The British insistence on Bandar Abbas, the nucleus of her maritime influence in coastal Persia, as the southern terminal for the railway, implied the prospect of British merchandise flooding Russia's commercial sphere in the north.<sup>43</sup> St. Petersburg instead proposed a longer rail-route via Kerman from Chabahar, on account of the port's remoteness, particularly from Russian interests. The choice of a site so proximate to the frontiers of India, only reinforced the view of Curzon and others that the Tsar's ministers were still pursuing a policy of advancement on the core of the British position in Sistan-Balochistan, the sovereignty of which was, in any case, disputed.<sup>44</sup> Construction was interrupted by the outbreak of hostilities and did not begin again until the late 1920s, the ascendant House of Pahlavi settling for a line from Bandar Shahpur at the head of the Persian Gulf. It was

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 70.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 79.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p.75.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

consequently this Western corridor that was to prove so crucial to the regional balance in the second conflict with Germany.

The South-North line of communication that forty decades earlier had been deemed a threat to Russian interests, was secured by the Anglo-Soviet invasion of Iran, and incorporated into the Persian Corridor. In a 1942 article for *Foreign Affairs Magazine*, Edwin Wright, working at the time for the US State Department, weighs the viability of three potential routes for Soviet resupply across the Iranian plateau. His proposed 'eastern' corridor does not encompass Chabahar specifically but refutes the potential of an overland route from Karachi to Central Asia via Zahedan and Mashhad, on the grounds that are not entirely extraneous in the present: the region's isolation, paucity of water and the dilapidated condition of shipping on the Caspian.<sup>45</sup> He concludes that such a route could never become a 'major artery'<sup>46</sup> and indeed, this remained the case through the Cold War.

The British withdrawal from East of Suez in 1972 created an existential security vacuum in the Indian Ocean. The perceived Soviet threat to the Persian Gulf and wider IOR had to some extent been mitigated, by provisions of the Baghdad Pact and in the context of the early Cold War balance of power, the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), delineated a cartographical bulwark of pro-Western alliances and armaments relationships, along the Heartland's southern frontier. The Persian 'Corridor' had, in this sense, become a frontier. An expansion of the United States Navy (USN) in the Indian Ocean was not possible due to post-Vietnam congressional frugality and it was instead proposed that Iran's naval assets would be incorporated into a new security architecture for the IOR. On account of its isolated location and oceanic frontage, Chabahar was chosen as the site of a prolific expansion in Iran's naval capacity. This renewed interest in the Makran Coast took place in the context of one of the

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<sup>45</sup> E. Wright (1942), 'Iran as a Gateway to Russia', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (January 1942), pp. 367-371.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 369.



largest arms build-ups in modern history, financed by windfall revenues from the 1973 oil shock. The port also complimented the Shah's domestic agenda and was intended to serve as a focal point for economic activity in the underdeveloped Sistan region. The proposed base, the construction contract for which was awarded to Brown and Root, was to accommodate six Spruance destroyers, to be built in Mississippi for the Iranian Imperial Navy,<sup>47</sup> and by some accounts, included plans for a dry-dock and maintenance facilities capable of hosting an American Carrier Task Force.<sup>48</sup>

In the same year that these plans were abruptly ended by revolution in Tehran, strategic perceptions of Chabahar were once again inverted on the 'North-South' axis by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The port subsequently became a focus of Soviet doctrine in a number of ways. Moscow's sense of insecurity along its southern frontier was still very much conditioned by the events of the previous war and the vulnerability of the Russian industrial heartland to *overland lines of communication* from the Southern Eurasian littoral,<sup>49</sup> an apprehension justified by the establishment of CENTO. By the late 1970s, a regional war with the United States in the area to the north of the Persian Gulf,<sup>50</sup> was a realistic contingency for planners in Moscow. In the event of a general conflict, the latter would ultimately have been faced with the question of whether to cut oil supplies to the West. The construction of military bases in Southern Afghanistan greatly enhanced the ability of the Soviet Air Force to project power into the Persian Gulf. It could also, as Michael McGwire observed in a 1988 report, have been used to provide cover for an airborne insertion into

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<sup>47</sup> D. Morgan (1980), 'Iran's Ambitions Fed U.S. Strategists, Weaponers', *The Washington Post*, 13 January 1980, at [https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1980/01/13/irans-ambitions-fed-us-strategists-weaponers/12839d79-32e5-4849-a4d5-108a0aecab99/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.ea1c0fbd465f](https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1980/01/13/irans-ambitions-fed-us-strategists-weaponers/12839d79-32e5-4849-a4d5-108a0aecab99/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.ea1c0fbd465f) [Accessed 1 December 2018].

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> M. McGwire (1988), 'The Middle East and Soviet Military Strategy', Middle East Report, No. 151, p. 13, 'The Great Powers and the Middle East' (March-April), Middle East Research and Information Project, Inc. (MERIP), pp. 11-17.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

Chabahar from where the interdiction of seaborne crude could be executed with greater effect.<sup>51</sup> Able to be resupplied overland from Central Asia via Zahedan and not too proximate to hostile facilities in Pakistan and Oman, Chabahar was, and indeed remains, an ideal location for monitoring or imposing a blockade on maritime traffic to and from the Persian Gulf.

Further considerations at the time related to Moscow's suzerainty over its Eastern oblasts in the event of the Trans-Siberian Railroad's degradation. Under such circumstances, Chabahar would have provided one possible point of maritime egress, by which Moscow could have transferred military supplies to Vladivostok.<sup>52</sup> Writing in 1981, Dennis Ross also notes that while they persistently fought Western containment, the Soviets seemed to believe that they were obliged above all, to contain, encircle and isolate the Chinese; and to do so required a physical presence in the Persian Gulf and adjacent areas.<sup>53</sup> The port's passing *ex hypothesi* relevance during this period, however, did not manifest in a substantial improvement of either Chabahar's capacity or its hinterland integration. Yet, the validity of this Cold War paradigm remains entirely defensible.

Known domestically as Bandar Beheshti, the port is today administrative centre of the Chabahar County in the Iranian province of Sistan-Baluchistan and the headquarters for the Islamic Republic's Third Naval District, hosting both a naval station and the 10th Tactical Air Base.<sup>54</sup> Lying outside the Hormuz Strait, Chabahar's economy prospered from the Iran-Iraq war and the port has continued to retain some significance for local commerce. The principal source of attention in recent years however, has been interest in the development of the Shahed Beheshti terminal in the mould of an international transshipment centre, with an orientation towards Afghanistan

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<sup>51</sup> D. Ross (1981), 'Considering Soviet Threats to the Persian Gulf', *International Security*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (Fall), pp. 177.

<sup>52</sup> M. McGwire (1988), p. 14.

<sup>53</sup> D. Ross (1981), p. 168.

<sup>54</sup> Office of Naval Intelligence (2017), *Iranian Naval Forces: A Tale of Two Navies*, Office of Naval Intelligence Washington DC, Cleared for public release by Defence Office of Prepublication and Security Review (DOPSR Case 17-S-0836), Maryland, United States.

and Central Asia. In early 2018, India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi referred to Chabahar as India's 'Golden Gateway'<sup>55</sup> and the port has served as the current administration's flagbearer for Indian connectivity with Central Asia. The port has acted as a symbol of Indo-Iranian cooperation and the revival of antecedent links between the two countries. This 'dialogue between civilizations', a term also heavily used in Indo-Uzbek bilateral discussions, is premised on an abundance of cultural affinities and the perceived eminence in New Delhi of India's Mughal heritage, selective accounts of which are often woven into the fabric of post-colonial narratives.

While a highly commutable anachronism, diplomatic overtures between New Delhi and Tehran often belie the vibrant animosity that existed between their medieval forebears. Although the Grand Trunk Road, one of Asia's oldest and longest commercial highways, was revived and upgraded under Mughal rule, successive skirmishes were fought with first the Safavid and then Afsharid Persian dynasties for the right to draw revenue from its trade. Indeed, it is in this pattern of conflict, that one may identify the roots of the contemporary tribal cleavages in Afghanistan. During the latter two decades of the twentieth-Century, the acceptance of Karachi as the *de facto* Makran 'gateway' to Central Asia has to some extent been reinforced by the rise of the Taliban and western policy towards the region. It has often been noted that the Karachi-based trucking cartels competing for lucrative contracts to supply NATO bases in the south of Afghanistan, had also provided the financial catalyst for the Taliban's rise in Kandahar in the mid-1990s,<sup>56</sup> out of a need to restore stability along the highway to Herat and Central Asia. Although it would be overly simplistic to suggest

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<sup>55</sup> Ariana News (2018), 'Modi Describes Chabahar As "Golden Gateway" to Afghanistan', *Ariana News*, 18 February 2018, at <https://ariananews.af/modi-describes-chabahar-as-golden-gateway-to-afghanistan-central-asian-region/> [Accessed 5 July 2019].

<sup>56</sup> G. Peters (2016), 'Traffickers and Truckers: Illicit Afghan and Pakistani Power Structures with a Shadowy but Influential Role', *Impunity: Countering Illicit Power in War and Transition*, Center for Complex Operations (CCO), National Defence University, Washington D.C.

that nearly forty years' of conflict in that country has been a struggle for strategic control of the overland route to Central Asia, this geopolitical corollary is one that cannot be ignored when considering the evolution of the Gwadar-Chabahar dichotomy.

### **RECLAIMING A LEGACY**

While the rich overland trade of late-medieval Kandahar was a prize worthy of competitive power politics, the European Maritime era saw lines of communication in this region orthogonalize from that of 'corridor' to 'frontier', entrenched by Anglo-Russian suspicion and then the establishment of an independent Pakistan in 1947. The linear territory of the Islamic Republic, which cannot be conceptually divorced from the South-Westerly course of the Indus River, decussates the Mughal legacy almost at a right angle. Although there is little reason to suggest that such a unique combination of historical factors should be considered universally applicable, the 'zero-sum' arithmetic of this particular connectivity picture is laid bare not only by the continued refusal of Pakistan to allow Indian transit trade to Central Asia via its territory but also by the aspiring trajectory of the CPEC as the principle gateway to and from Central Asian markets.

It is due primarily to this set of circumstances that Chabahar has, for the third time in a century, found currency in International Relations. A renewal of interest in the port took place in the context of a rapprochement in Indo-Iranian relations which had suffered greatly during the early Cold War and from the 1979 revolution. The diplomatic opening for an Indian 'gateway' to Central Asia, coincided not only with the dissolution of the Soviet frontier in 1991 but with the rise of violent fundamentalism in the Sunni Belt, an issue of mutual interest for Tehran and New Delhi. Indian involvement in the port was first suggested in 2003, three years after an agreement on the International North-South Corridor (INSTC) was signed by representatives from Russia, India and Iran, in St. Petersburg.<sup>57</sup> Building

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<sup>57</sup> M.S. Roy (2015), 'International North-South Transport Corridor: Re-energising India's Gateway to Eurasia', IDSA Issue Brief, Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi, p. 3.

on the 'Silk Road Spirit' of the first Post-Soviet decade, the INSTC embodies the Russian Federation's own contribution to twenty-first century connectivity milieu and is predicated twofold on the positive legacy of Indo-Soviet relations and a prospective 'Mumbai-Moscow' abridgement of the Suez maritime route that bears a conceptual resemblance to China's Malacca alternatives.

The status of the Chabahar project however has, for nearly two decades, remained ambiguous and New Delhi's official position continues to reckon on two dependable alibis. The first is an enduring need to streamline the numerous bureaucratic and logistical inconsistencies along any potential route and, secondly, Tehran's difficult relationship with the West. That Indian enthusiasm for Chabahar has contoured the whims of US-Iranian brinkmanship is, to some extent, a credible explanation for the slow progress. The project's apparent hiatus from the bilateral agenda, between 2005 and 2012 can certainly be contextualized by the confrontational relationship between incumbent administrations in Washington and Tehran, as well as an immediate preoccupation with Iraq and Afghanistan.

The half-decade that followed the Andijan incident in Uzbekistan, also saw a demise in the burgeoning relations between the Central Asian Republics and the West. What occurred *ad interim*, may be reasonably described as a general reorientation, or even a rebalancing, by Central Asian states away from their southern frontier towards the Heartland. This was epitomized by the consolidation of the SCO during this period and the emergence of various counter-narratives in respect of North-South connectivity. In 2005, Russia and Uzbekistan signed a security agreement called the 'Treaty of Allied Relations', tantamount in the eyes of some, to a military pact, encompassing joint exercises and discount weapon sales.<sup>58</sup> The rapid escalation of violence in Southern Afghanistan

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<sup>58</sup> A. Sahgal and V. Anand (2010), 'Strategic Environment in Central Asia and India', , in Nirmala, J (ed.) *Reconnecting India and Central Asia Emerging Security and Economic Dimensions*, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, Washington D.C., p.47. [www.silkroadstudies.org/new/docs/publications/1004Joshi-V-Strategic.pdf](http://www.silkroadstudies.org/new/docs/publications/1004Joshi-V-Strategic.pdf) [Accessed 15 December 2018]

and a failed Indian bid in 2005, for a stake in Kazakhstan's energy sector, were parallel developments that symbolized this increasingly prohibitive backdrop to the development of Chabahar.<sup>59</sup> Though obstructive, this episode proved to be something of an interlude. In 2008, all five Central Asian states presented a unified position in choosing not to recognize South Ossetia, suggesting that the Heartland reorientation was by no means absolute and capable of being balanced by other interests. The end of the Niyazov-era in Turkmenistan, heralded a window of strategic opportunity that produced the Central Asia Gas Pipeline (CAGP) to China, and the conceptual rejuvenation of a southern export corridor via the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline, finally approved by the Asian Development Bank in 2009.<sup>60</sup>

In 2011, the Obama administration outlined its vision for the region within the framework of a 'New Silk Road Initiative' (NSRI) that broadly combined the Petraeus strategy for Afghanistan with the concept of a 'Greater Central Asia', advocated by the Eurasian lobby in Washington since the mid-1990s. It is an often overlooked fact that the United States formally entered the Asian connectivity arena two years before the announcement of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013. Yet while both visions lack institutional substantiation and to some extent rely on antecedent projects and proposals: TAPI and CASA-1000 in the case of the NSRI, the Obama Administration appeared more content for the interpretation and implementation of the NSRI to be outsourced to regional actors. It is for this reason that the Belt and Road Initiative has been able to largely usurp the 'New Silk Road' rubric and this has been reinforced by a general confusion in the media.

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<sup>59</sup> P. Stobdan (2015), 'Central Asia: India's Northern Exposure', IDSA Monograph Series No. 44, Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, pp. 28-29. See also N. Kaushiki (2013): 'The New Great Game and India's Connect Central Asia Policy: Strategic Perspectives and Challenges', *Journal of International and Area Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (December 2013), p. 91, pp. 83100, Institute of International Affairs, Graduate School of International Studies, Seoul National University.

<sup>60</sup> A. Sahgal and V. Anand (2010), p. 66.



The 'Connect Central Asia' policy (CCAP) was unveiled by the Indian Minister for External Affairs in Bishkek in 2012.<sup>61</sup> Earlier that year India had utilized the port of Chabahar for the first time to transport one hundred thousand metric tonnes of wheat to Afghanistan, honouring its long-standing commitment to the country's development.<sup>62</sup> The transshipment had been made possible by the construction of Route 606 by the Indian Border Road Organization (BRO) in 2009, connecting the Afghan orbital road system to the Iranian border at Zahedan and the need for an upgradation of Chabahar, had been pressed by Indian representatives during the 16th Indo-Iranian Joint Commission meeting in 2010.<sup>63</sup> Nirupama Rao, India's Foreign Secretary, at the time emphasized that the Chabahar project lies 'at the heart of the common vision that India and Iran have for Afghanistan and the region as a whole'.<sup>64</sup>

India's initial \$100 million commitment to the development of the port was therefore considered a relatively small figure and attracted a degree of scepticism, not least because its announcement in 2013 coincided with the passing of Gwadar's management to the COPHC. This pattern of reciprocity was to become an entrenched feature of the Makran dichotomy that persists to the present day. Nothing demonstrates more perhaps, New Delhi's reactive approach to the CCAP than the inter-ministerial task force on Chabahar created by the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) five months later, again in the wake of proactivity by Beijing, in this instance the extension of a credit facility to Tehran for the port's development, as part of the inauguration of the BRI.<sup>65</sup> That it took the announcement of

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<sup>61</sup> N. Kaushiki (2013), p. 84.

<sup>62</sup> A. Bhatnagar and D. John (2013), 'Accessing Afghanistan and Central Asia: Importance of Chabahar to India', ORF Special Report ISSUE # 4OC TOBER 2013, Observer Research Foundation, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/accessing-afghanistan-and-central-asiainimportance-of-chabahar-to-india/> (Accessed 25 Nov 2018).

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> N. Rao (2010). 'Speech at IDSA-IPIS Strategic Dialogue on India and Iran: An enduring relationship', Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, [https://idsa.in/KeynoteAddressIndiaandIrananenduringrelationship\\_nirupamaroy](https://idsa.in/KeynoteAddressIndiaandIrananenduringrelationship_nirupamaroy) (Accessed 23 December 2018).

<sup>65</sup> A. Bhatnagar and D. John (2013).

the CPEC in 2015, for New Delhi to finally grant Chabahar Track One recognition, illustrates the mutual exclusivity inherent to certain overland lines of communication, immediately apparent to the Edwardian Great Gamers, and increasingly palpable in an otherwise dogmatic connectivity narrative in Asia.

### **WARM WATER, FROZEN HARBOURS**

The 2016 Trilateral Agreement on the ‘Establishment of an International Transport and Transit Corridor’, making it incumbent on New Delhi to build and assume operational responsibility for Chabahar, remains to date, the most concrete expression of Indian interest in the port’s hinterland potential and was accompanied by paid-up capital and a ten-year commitment in revenue expenditures. With the inauguration of the Shahed Baheshti terminal in December 2017, the Modi government finally had a concrete monolith to substantiate CCAP rhetoric and placate domestic jingoism on the Gwadar issue.<sup>66</sup> The year following Shahed Beheshti’s inauguration however, saw no shipments through Chabahar to either Afghanistan or Central Asia. While state control of the media in China and Pakistan has permitted domestic perceptions of Gwadar to be carefully managed, New Delhi has been obliged to obfuscate Chabahar’s development, within a generalized North-South connectivity narrative that fuses India’s commitment to Afghanistan, participation in the INSTC and the CCAP.

In 2011, the Uzbek national rail conglomerate completed a seventy-five kilometre stretch of railroad, funded by the Asian Development Bank (ADB), from Uzbekistan’s border crossing with Afghanistan to the city of Mazar-e Sharif.<sup>67</sup> In order to leverage India’s most high-profile

<sup>66</sup> S. Watson (2017).

<sup>67</sup> P. Stobdan (2017), ‘To make Chabahar a “Game Changer” Central Asian States Need to be Roped In’, IDSA Comment, Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, at file:///C:/Users/idsa209/Documents/Material/INSTC\_To%20make%20Chabahar%20a%20Game%20Changer%20Central%20Asian%20states%20need%20to%20be%20roped%20in%20\_%20Institute%20for%20Defence%20Studies%20and%20Analyses.pdf [Accessed 29 September 2018].

contribution to Afghanistan's reconstruction and stimulate interest in Chabahar, Route 606 has been marketed as a constituent segment of a hypothetical transport corridor, connecting Tashkent and other Central Asian capitals, with a gateway alternative to the port of Bandar Abbas. Iran's largest port has enjoyed low intensity throughput from the region since independence and has become the de facto gateway for exporters in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. Indeed, the Central Asian interest in Chabahar's potential is actually predicated less on Afghanistan than Iran and a more reliable route via Mashhad and Zahedan.

The actual significance of an eastern corridor across Iran however, for India's 'multi-vectored' South-North connectivity platform is unclear. The association of a direct Chabahar-Mashhad transportation link with the INSTC, had been inhibited by refusal of Islam Karimov, the Uzbek president since independence, to accede to Russian-led initiatives, and its coordination has relied on the Ashgabat Agreement. Signed by Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Iran, Oman and Qatar in 2011, this multilateral initiative is perhaps the most explicit track one commitment to a southern corridor for the Central Asian Republics and was provided with an immediate impetus by the completion of the Turkmen-Kazakh section of a North-South trunk railroad linking the two countries with Iran, in 2013.<sup>68</sup> India acceded to the Ashgabat agreement in 2016 and was formally accepted in early 2018.

Although the synchronization of the INSTC with Chabahar's wider significance for Central Asia remains only aspirational, New Delhi has tacitly permitted the coalescence of the two projects under the single rubric of 'North-South' and this has had a mutually-reinforcing effect on momentum. A 2015 INSTC conference hosted by the Indian Freight Forwarders Association in Mumbai was the most high-profile attempt since the announcement of the CCAP, to market the port to an international audience. Chabahar was presented as both the leading port of the INSTC

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<sup>68</sup> M.S. Roy (2015), p. 6.

and the most predisposed towards trade with Central Asia.<sup>69</sup> The timing of the follow-on conference in October 2018, with visits to the Indian capital by Vladimir Putin and Shavkat Mirziyoyev, vividly illustrates New Delhi's strategy to transfer momentum between the two projects.

The geopolitical realities of 'North-South' are however, for New Delhi and Moscow, entirely divergent. As was the case in 1907, the prospect of an overland connection across Iran, is a source of ambiguity for Moscow. Any major rail, road or pipeline further enhancing the discretion of the Central Asian republics in international trade relations is not without serious implication for an already weakened Russian position. The strategic impact of the Sino-Turkmen pipeline, completed in 2009, was immediate, largely irreversible, and has been the subject of rigorous analysis. Despite public statements to the contrary, Moscow has exercised predictable back-room resistance to the aspirations of Central Asian states for broader market access via prospective pipelines and other infrastructures, notably Nabucco but also TAPI and CASA-1000, all three projects in receipt of steady political support from the United States.<sup>70</sup> Not wishing to be seen in the role of connectivity 'spoiler', an accusation sometimes levied against India, Russia has instead, since 2015, proposed the construction of a Karachi-Lahore natural gas pipeline in Pakistan, undermining TAPI and providing an illustrative example of the 'blocking' potential of CPEC lines of communication.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Ministry of Commerce & Industry (2015), International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) Conference, India, at [https://commerce.gov.in/writereaddata/uploadedfile/MOC\\_635986655921421162\\_INSTC\\_Conference\\_Report\\_Final.pdf](https://commerce.gov.in/writereaddata/uploadedfile/MOC_635986655921421162_INSTC_Conference_Report_Final.pdf) [Accessed 24 march 2019], pp. 22 & 65.

<sup>70</sup> See S. Blank (2015): 'Russia and the TAPI Pipeline', Eurasia Daily Monitor, Volume 12, Issue 227, (December 18), <https://jamestown.org/program/russia-and-the-tapi-pipeline/> [Accessed 23 December 2018]; and V. Fedorenko (2013), 'The New Silk Road Initiatives in Central Asia', Rethink Paper 1-2013, The Rethink Institute, Washington DC.

<sup>71</sup> S. Blank (2015).

Moscow's remaining sphere of influence in Central Asia and Afghanistan is undoubtedly best served by existing terrestrial lines of communication. Whilst the expansion of a naval facility at the head of the Persian Gulf may yet present an opening for Iran's largest supplier of conventional arms, the full realization of the Ashgabat Agreement, as a 'southern corridor' for the Central Asian Republics, particularly the region's most dynamic economy, Uzbekistan, runs counterintuitive to the geopolitical logic of Russia's legacy influence in Central Asia. Soviet preponderance over the Strait of Hormuz receded with the end of the Afghan war and it is not unreasonable to suggest that the Eastern overland corridor is perhaps now viewed from Moscow in more antiquated terms of strategic exposure rather than strategic opportunity. This was scarcely concealed by Russian transport executives who dominated the 2018 INSTC conference. Interestingly, while the continued Russian preference for the already heavily-congested Bandar Abbas, a port that is unable to handle vessels in excess of 100,000 tonnes,<sup>72</sup> was as conspicuous as a general scepticism towards Chabahar, a concurrent presentation delivered by an agent of the Iranian State Railway trust articulated the route from Chabahar to Sarakhs on the Turkmen border as one integral to Tehran's interpretation of the INSTC<sup>73</sup>

As one might expect, this divergence of interests is publicly acknowledged by neither Moscow nor New Delhi, both sides content to aggregate North-South momentum to buoy the national agenda. President Mirziyoyev's dialogue with the Modi government, the most publicly ebullient administration yet on the issue of Chabahar,<sup>74</sup> resulted in no formal commitment from either side. It also resulted in an agreement from Tashkent only in principle, to support Moscow's solution to its Suez

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<sup>72</sup> M. Tanchum (2014), 'Iran's Chabahar port transforms its position', *The Jerusalem Post*, (1 May), (Accessed 22 December 2018).

<sup>73</sup> A. Pourbarkhordari, (2018), 'INSTC Transit via Iran, The Tarkib Transit Company', Conference on International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC), FIATA World Congress, <https://www.fiata2018.org/presentation.php> [Accessed 10 December 2018].

<sup>74</sup> Author interview (2018) with a leading regional expert in December, Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi.

dilemma. The term ‘natural allies’ has been coined repeatedly on two sides of the India-Russia-Uzbekistan triangle, it is however in India’s balancing of the third relationship, that an understated impediment to India’s Golden Gateway becomes apparent.

Chabahar’s operational management was formally transferred to India Ports Global at the end of December 2018, replete with all too-familiar references in the Indian media to ‘bypasses Pakistan’.<sup>75</sup> It is not clear however, besides the signalling of strategic intent, what the Indian assumption of operational responsibility at Chabahar will portend during the course of its tenure. Two shipments, have been made from Afghanistan via Chabahar port in 2019. While the first, five hundred and seventy tonnes of dried fruit, coincided with a ‘Chabahar Day’ business expo and was inaugurated in February with all the fanfare of prior ‘showcase’ convoys through the port,<sup>76</sup> the second shipment of eighty tonnes made in June, appears more indicative of the ‘trickle’ trade that can be expected *ad interim*. Much of this will, as it stands, consist of pulses, fresh and dried fruit.

While the symbolic value of Kandahari watermelon on the streets of New Delhi is not to be understated, the volumes and composition of the cargo passing through Chabahar will not be sufficient to underwrite a Makran ‘Gateway’, a prospect that has always relied on global interest in Central Asia’s mineral wealth. Among the twelve agreements signed as part of the trilateral agreement in 2016, Ircon International, India’s state-owned railway conglomerate, was selected to construct a \$1.6 billion, five hundred-kilometre railroad northwards from Chabahar to the border-city of Zahedan, connecting the port with both Route 606 and Central

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<sup>75</sup> R. Laskar (2018), ‘India takes over operations of Iran’s strategic Chabahar Port, can bypass Pak on way to Afghanistan’, *Hindustan Times*, 24 December, at <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-takes-over-chabahar-port-operations-from-iran-will-ship-supplies-to-afghanistan/story-kWKZeStt1MfQR4s5Voz4fL.html> [Accessed 29 December 2018].

<sup>76</sup> A. Panda (2019), ‘A First: Afghan Shipment Heads to India Via Iran’s Chabahar Port’, *The Diplomat*, at <https://thediplomat.com/2019/02/a-first-afghan-shipment-heads-to-india-via-irans-chabahar-port/> [Accessed 25 June 2019].



Asia via the wider Iranian rail network.<sup>77</sup> As part of the agreement, India's EXIM Bank pledged a \$500 million line of credit to fund work on the railway. This proposal had been discussed informally between Iran and India since 2003 and at a ministerial level since 2011, when a bid by an Indian consortium was accepted by the Afghan ministry of Mining and Petroleum to exploit the Hajigak Mine in Bamiyan Province, Afghanistan: the largest untapped Iron Ore deposit in Asia. Hajigak is widely regarded as the ultimate end of any prospective Chabahar to Zahedan rail link and the foundation of its business case. Although this year's shipments undoubtedly demonstrate the potential of the single-lane highway already in place, the absence of a more commercially viable thoroughfare from Chabahar, particularly for bulk shipping, remains a conspicuous impediment to the fulfilment of India's commitments both in respect of Afghanistan's reconstruction and the Ashgabat Agreement.

## THE TWO BALOCHISTANS

The distinction between showcase 'dry-runs' and the genuine commencement of transshipment operations is as equally opaque in the case of Gwadar, and like Chabahar, the port remains unable to claim the economic relevance that would justify the Track One patronage it has enjoyed for over a decade. This is not to say however that the aggressive marketing of both ports has not resulted in external investment, yet it remains to be seen whether the underlying rationale in these instances has been less commercial than geopolitical. Certainly, of the two, Chabahar boasts the greater potential for establishing manufacturing and downstream petrochemical industries as ready, cheap natural gas is abundant in Iran<sup>78</sup> and the constraints facing the COPHC, as it tries to seduce investors, are the same as those faced by the Singapore Ports Authority over a decade

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<sup>77</sup> S. Watson (2017), 'Does India's Chabahar Deal Make Sense?', *The Diplomat*, at <https://thediplomat.com/2017/05/does-indias-chabahar-deal-make-sense/> [Accessed 15 October 2018].

<sup>78</sup> A. Sajjanhar (2018), 'India and Iran Resolve to Focus on Connectivity and Economic Cooperation', IDSA Comment, 20 February, at [https://idsa.in/idsacomments/india-and-iran-resolve-to-focus-on-connectivity-and-economic-cooperation\\_asajjanhar\\_200218](https://idsa.in/idsacomments/india-and-iran-resolve-to-focus-on-connectivity-and-economic-cooperation_asajjanhar_200218) [Accessed 23 December 2018].

ago. Nevertheless, late 2018 saw a Saudi delegation arrive in Gwadar and sign four contracts for trade and development with Pakistan. Although the visit did not result in the hoped-for emergency funding for Islamabad's current account crisis, Saudi Aramco has agreed, in principle, to invest in a new oil refinery in the port, permitting Pakistani media to declare the extrapolation of the CPEC, to the Arabian Peninsular.<sup>79</sup> Indeed, the scramble to furnish Makran's leading 'gateway' port has consumed a long-standing Saudi-Iranian rivalry in Balochistan. A Tehran-based news agency reported only weeks prior to the Saudi visit that more than fifteen projects in the petrochemical sector are currently under construction at Chabahar.<sup>80</sup> This had followed the signing of a strategic partnership memorandum between the Chabahar Free Zone Organization (CFZO), Negin Makran Petrochemical Complex and China Petroleum and Chemical Industry Federation (CPCIF)<sup>81</sup>

This heightened economic diplomacy occurred during an upsurge in Balochistan's low-level insurgency that in its most recent cycle has been in existence since 2003 and the development of the Makran ports continues to act as a focal point for Baluch national indignation. In October 2018, five construction workers, who had reportedly been working on a CPEC-related housing project, were killed close to the Jiwani peninsular near Gwadar.<sup>82</sup> Responsibility was claimed by the Baloch Liberation Army

<sup>79</sup> S. Khan (2018), 'Saudi investment in China-Pakistan economic corridor may upset Iran', *Deutsche Welle*, 2 October, at <https://www.dw.com/en/saudi-investment-in-china-pakistan-economic-corridor-may-upset-iran/a-45725957> [Accessed 23 December 2018].

<sup>80</sup> Mehr News Agency (2018), '18 petrochemical projects underway in Chabahar, Qeshm', *Mehr News Agency*, 15 October, at <https://en.mehrnews.com/news/138707/18-petrochemical-projects-underway-in-Chabahar-Qeshm> [Accessed 23 December 2018].

<sup>81</sup> K. Eghbalnejab (2018), 'China, Iran sign strategic petrochemical deal', *Marketwatch*, at <https://www.marketwatch.com/press-release/china-iran-sign-strategic-petrochemical-deal-2018-04-25> [Accessed 23 December 2018].

<sup>82</sup> ANI (2018), 'BLA accepts responsibility for Gwadar, Rajanpur attacks', *The Business Standard*, at [https://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ani/bla-accepts-responsibility-for-gwadar-rajanpur-attacks-118110100106\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ani/bla-accepts-responsibility-for-gwadar-rajanpur-attacks-118110100106_1.html) [Accessed 3 April 2019]

(BLA), its spokesperson asserting that the attack is a ‘clear message to China’.<sup>83</sup> ‘We warn China to halt working on all the projects including a planned naval base in Jiwani’, he continued, ‘the BLA will continue to resist against the occupation of the Baloch Ocean and coastal belt’. This abject endorsement of a war on the CPEC was followed by two conspicuous and consecutive attacks: the first on the Chinese consulate in Karachi in November,<sup>84</sup> in which several members of the Pakistani security forces were killed and subsequently a rare suicide vehicle attack on the Police Headquarters in Chabahar.<sup>85</sup> Despite their public condemnation of the violence, India and Saudi Arabia were, as is often the case, linked to the attacks by state agencies in Pakistan and Iran respectively, the latter also implicating the United States and United Arab Emirates.<sup>86</sup>

The apparent reciprocity of the November 2018 attacks, and their correlation with a parallel commercial narrative, presents something of a paradox at the heart of the Makran dichotomy. Saudi Arabia and India are each leading stakeholders in Gwadar and Chabahar respectively. However, the intelligence agencies of both governments, in the context of their respective regional power struggles with the littoral states, are widely assumed to be the principal sources of patronage for insurgent networks on opposite sides of the border.<sup>87</sup> Indeed, the governments of Pakistan and Iran have repeatedly warned one other about harbouring

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> BBC (2018), ‘Karachi attack: China consulate attack leaves four dead’, *BBC News*, 23 November, at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-46313136> [Accessed 23 December 2018].

<sup>85</sup> Associated Press (2018), ‘Rare suicide car bombing in Iran kills at least two’, *The Guardian*, 6 December, at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/dec/06/rare-suicide-car-bombing-kills-people-iran-chabahar> [Accessed 23 December 2018].

<sup>86</sup> The New Arab (2018), ‘Sunni jihadists blamed as suicide bomb targets police station in southeast Iran’, *The New Arab*, 6 December, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2018/12/6/suicide-car-bomb-targets-police-station-in-southeast-iran> [Accessed 7 December 2018].

<sup>87</sup> M. Hussein (2017), p. 24.

both militants and outside intelligence agencies that conduct attacks on their own territory in Balochistan. While both countries claim foreign interest in port-affiliated projects as evidence of progress in the connectivity narratives they foster, these remain, for the greater part, unverifiable paper commitments. The suggestion that the conspicuous external advocacy of the two ports since 2016 has been underwritten by little more than great power or sectarian rivalries, may yet prove prescient.

In her maiden budget, Indian Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman has slashed the allocation of funds for the development of Chabahar Port, for the financial year 2019-20.<sup>88</sup> This should come as no surprise. Neither should the familiar reassurances of Indian commitment emanating from diplomatic circles in Tehran and New Delhi. The agreement pertaining to the Chabahar-Zahedan railroad lapsed in April 2017, drawing protest from the Iranian government.<sup>89</sup> The credit facilities for Ircon to begin laying the track, arranged under the 2016 agreement, were never released and have remained frozen at ministerial discretion. Indeed, the railroad perhaps represents a more reliable marker of New Delhi's strategic sincerity than the familiar Chabahar-annotated incrementalism that feeds the Indian news cycle. In 2018, officials in New Delhi conceded that the forecasted completion date being discussed for the fruition of the rail link, exceeded six years.<sup>90</sup> This is a similar timeframe claimed by the Iranian National Railways Association when Mahmoud Ahmadinejad broke ground on Iran's contribution to the project in 2010, and no definitive schedule is currently in place.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> H. Pant (2019), 'The Chabahar Disconnect, Commentaries', The Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/the-chabahar-disconnect-52964/> [Accessed 12 July 2019].

<sup>89</sup> J. Sood (2017), 'India to put Chabahar rail link on fast track', *Live Mint*, at <https://www.livemint.com/Politics/V5K4oNJ3WSIpExfQ585zZI/India-to-put-Chabahar-rail-link-on-fast-track.html> [Accessed 23 December 2018].

<sup>90</sup> Author interviews conducted with Indian government officials in October-November 2018, New Delhi.

<sup>91</sup> Iran Daily (2010), 'Chabahar-Zahedan-Mashhad Railroad Project Starts', *Iran Daily*, at [http://old.iran-daily.com/1389/9/16/MainPaper/3840/Page/4/MainPaper\\_3840\\_4.pdf](http://old.iran-daily.com/1389/9/16/MainPaper/3840/Page/4/MainPaper_3840_4.pdf) [Accessed 17 July 2019].

Yet Indian and Iranian media continues to claim that the ‘ambitious’ International North-South Transport Corridor is ‘expected to make use of’ Chabahar and 2019 will see the Government of Pakistan press ahead with its Master Plan for the urban development of Gwadar.<sup>92</sup> A high-profile, twenty-four hour gun battle between BLA insurgents and Pakistani security forces at Gwadar’s flagship five-star hotel in May, occurred one month after the China Communication Construction Company had broken ground on what will be Pakistan’s largest international airport, serving a city of little more than a quarter of a million people.<sup>93</sup> In the 2018 tender for the city’s updated master plan, Pakistan’s Ministry of Planning, Development and Reform notes that, on account of the ‘symbiotic relationship that exists between a port and the city that surrounds it; one cannot be developed without the other’.<sup>94</sup> Yet this is exactly what is occurring. Whilst Beijing’s supply-side domestic economics has often attracted attention for its ‘ghost cities’ and ‘highways to nowhere’, seldom has such industrial-scale folly been erected in a location of greater strategic significance.

## OVERCOMING STRATEGIC RESISTANCE

The contemporary picture presented to analysts observing the region therefore, is the somewhat anomalous co-location, either side of a remote international border, of two underutilized economic superstructures that boast neither any qualitative distinction beyond their relative location nor

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<sup>92</sup> S. Hood (2019), ‘India’s Iran policy needs an intricate balancing act; New Delhi has Chabahar port, US ties at stake and China waiting on sidelines’, *FirstPost*, at <https://www.firstpost.com/india/indias-iran-policy-needs-an-intricate-balancing-act-new-delhi-has-chabahar-port-us-ties-at-stake-and-china-waiting-on-sidelines-6869401.html> [Accessed 4 July 2019].

<sup>93</sup> A. Ahmed (2019), ‘Pakistan’s Gwadar International Airport will be the largest in the country’, *Gulf News Asia*, at <https://gulfnews.com/world/asia/pakistan/pakistans-gwadar-international-airport-will-be-the-largest-in-the-country-1.63033953> [Accessed 7 July 2019].

<sup>94</sup> Government of Pakistan (2018), ‘Gwadar Smart Port City Master Plan’, Ministry of Planning, Development and Reform, at <https://www.pc.gov.pk/uploads/tender/ToR-Integrated-Gwadar-Smart-Port-City-Master-Plan-Version-2.pdf> [Accessed 4 July 2019].

benefit from the economies of scale that might be associated with sites closer to national centres. The correlation of forces however, moderating the advancement of the two ports as regional ‘gateways’, diverges considerably. Given the long incubation of the Sino-Pakistan axis, if it were not for the marginal economic complementarities between two regions separated by the highest mountain passes in the world, it is unlikely that project management in a diminished security environment, would prove any greater impediment to Beijing’s realization of the Eastern CPEC corridor than the challenges encountered in its own western provinces. It is not uncommon for ambitious infrastructure projects to suffer delays and the standard set by Chinese engineers during the last decade is conspicuous precisely because it is the exception rather than the rule. India’s Golden Gateway however, lies at the centre of a more complex mesh of diplomatic triangles, the ultimate effect of which produces the resistance that is neutralizing Chabahar’s wider potential.

By all accounts the private sector appears to be giving up on Chabahar. India Ports Global has recently cancelled its second bid for an operating partner in the port and several international firms supplying equipment for the Shahed Beheshti Terminal have been reluctant to honour contracts for fear of antagonizing the United States. This is despite Chabahar’s highly publicized exemption from targeted sanctions.<sup>95</sup> The commercial value of this year’s two transshipments represents a fraction of Afghan-Indian bilateral trade which, exploiting two recently implemented air freight corridors, is otherwise experiencing a positive upcycle.<sup>96</sup> Is the catch-all alibi of Washington’s embargo however, able to withstand a thorough interrogation of the Makran’s geopolitics? No contract was ever signed for the exploitation of Hajigak, despite media speculation to the contrary and sixteen years of diffidence has demonstrated that Indian leadership on the Makran Coast is inherently reactive. Tehran’s recognition of this

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<sup>95</sup> H. Pant (2019).

<sup>96</sup> PTI (2018), ‘India-Afghanistan trade likely to reach \$2 bn by 2020: Afghan Ambassador’, *Economic Times*, at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/foreign-trade/india-afghanistan-trade-likely-to-reach-2-bn-by-2020-afghan-ambassador/articleshow/64978930.cms> [Accessed 25 June 2019].

fact was evident, along with a strong undertone of betrayal, in a publicized invitation to ‘link’ Gwadar with Chabahar, released concurrently with the cessation of Indian crude purchases in May.<sup>97</sup>

In a 2010 paper for the Silk Roads Studies Program, Arun Sahgal, a retired Indian Army officer, and Vinod Anand make reference to New Delhi’s strategic ‘hesitation’ in Central Asia, on account of its longstanding relationship with Moscow.<sup>98</sup> This requires little corroboration in respect of the years following the Soviet dissolution. Rather than accede to demands for stronger bilateral ties – Islam Karimov’s first visit outside the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) was to India, New Delhi repeatedly deferred to Moscow when dealing with the nascent republics.<sup>99</sup> Subsequent diplomatic failures in Central Asia have demonstrated that where caught between Moscow’s enduring prerogative and the more antiquated sense of entitlement being claimed in bilateral dialogues, the latter ultimately represents only a colourful *mise en scène* for India’s regional obligations as a rising power. It is often noted for example, that India’s attempt to fully exploit its upgradation of the Ayni airfield in Tajikistan, a country with whom New Delhi had enjoyed a strategic partnership in confronting the Taliban, swiftly buckled under Russian pressure.<sup>100</sup> A similar explanation is being offered in respect of India’s ostracism from the Afghan peace process despite decades of involvement in the country.<sup>101</sup> Where such reflexive deference can be shown in localized issues, it is unlikely that seasoned Indian ministers will hesitate in respecting Moscow’s strategic sensitivity to its southern flank.

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<sup>97</sup> Xinhua (2019), ‘Iran says ready to connect Pakistan’s Gwadar to Iran’s Chabahar port’, *Xinhua News Agency*, at [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-05/24/c\\_138086073.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-05/24/c_138086073.htm) [Accessed 3 July 2019].

<sup>98</sup> A. Sahgal and V. Anand (2010). See also S. Blank (2013), ‘India’s Strategic Failure in Central Asia’, *The Diplomat*, 11 June, at <https://thediplomat.com/2013/06/indias-strategic-failure-in-central-asia> [Accessed 10 December 2018].

<sup>99</sup> A. Sahgal and V. Anand (2010), p. 55.

<sup>100</sup> Blank S. (2013).

<sup>101</sup> N. Kaushiki (2013), p. 88.



Despite seventeen years of reconstruction rhetoric, the assumption that an Iranian-hosted North-South connectivity solution for Afghanistan and Central Asia, truly converges with American interests, is also questionable. The option of supply lines through Iran had, one might argue, been available to Washington since at least 2001, when support for the international coalition, was provided by Iranian intelligence<sup>102</sup> and Tehran offered the use of Chabahar and airfields near the Afghan border. The enduring preference for Karachi on the other hand is a natural evolution of the US-Saudi relationship and the diverse channels of leverage Washington retains over Islamabad, and the issue of the port remains a source of conflict between the Departments of Defense and State, between Republican and Democratic administrations alike, in dealing with the region. Not only would additional capacity in Chabahar's port and industrial parks enfranchise Iran's economic autarky in several sectors but the port's commercial upgradation could be used to 'de-securitize' an expansion of Iran's bluewater footprint, a potential consequence not easily reconciled with the strategic landscape confronting CENTCOM and Washington's Gulf allies.

That a significant proportion of Iranian external trade is, on account of that port's limited capacity, currently re-routed via the United Arab Emirates, is also convenient for the broader US-Saudi position. Given the port's significance as a rival commercial and public relations narrative, Riyadh's opposition to Chabahar will prove as dependable as New Delhi's intolerance of Gwadar. In February this year, Iran suffered one of its deadliest terrorist attacks in decades when a Sunni militant group killed twenty-seven Revolutionary Guards in a suicide attack.<sup>103</sup> Although thought to have been timed to coincide with a conference on Middle Eastern security in Warsaw, the location of the attack, the town of Khash located on the principle highway between Chabahar and Zahedan, was also a strategic choice. With the multi-faceted Saudi subversion of Chabahar

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<sup>102</sup> M. Sadat and J. Hughes (2010), 'U.S.-Iran Engagement Through Afghanistan', *Middle East Policy Council Journal*, volume XVII, number 1.

<sup>103</sup> BBC News (2019), 'Iran suicide bombing "kills 27 Revolutionary Guards"', *BBC News*, at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-47231959> [Accessed 16 July 2019].

unlikely to cease, Washington is able to freely claim support for the project in Kabul, with little concern for the existential implications of its realization on the ground.

Despite local instability, both projects nevertheless continue to elicit domestic support in their respective national centres, where a single port, each at opposite ends of the Makran Coast, accounts for a disproportionate level of the maritime economy and fleet homeporting. Yet the fulfilment of these national objectives does not rely on broader conformity with either the CPEC, INSTC or the Ashgabat Agreement. In attempting to rationalize the political constraints to North-South connectivity, the geopolitical profile of the two states claiming sovereignty over the Makran Coast is worthy of consideration: the core of the contemporary Iranian state being the Tabriz-Tehran/Isfahan-Mashhad nexus and in the case of Pakistan, the Indus Valley. Meridional lines of communication from the Makran, that do not append these existing networks, reinforce the centrifugal instability that the two states currently face. From an Iranian perspective, the net benefit of an expansion of Chabahar's hinterland connectivity is ambiguous if one accepts the axiom that the historical trajectory of Sunni influence runs from South to North in the region, whereas Persianization has contoured the Iran's topography from West to East. The greater emphasis Tehran has placed on developing lines of communication with a strong antecedent is not without significance in this regard: the Kyrgyz portion of the Iran-Afghanistan-Tajikistan-Kyrgyzstan-China road project for example and the Anzob tunnel in Tajikistan.<sup>104</sup> Consistent Iranian enthusiasm for a railroad from Zahedan to the Shia majority Hazarajat region of Afghanistan, even if India were to be the ultimate commercial beneficiary of the Hajigak concession, follows the same logic. Conversely, as one commentator in New Delhi conjectured, a North-South corridor between Tashkent and Chabahar might constitute an axis for an expansionism of Sunni influence in Eastern Iran and this perception is likely to be reinforced by the emerging Saudi sphere of influence in Sistan-Balochistan.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> A. Bhatnagar and D. John D. (2013).

<sup>105</sup> Author interview with a regional expert at a leading think-tank in New Delhi in December 2018.

Both Makran ports are already connected with the principal national transshipment hub via coastal roads. Chabahar is equidistant from Bandar Abbas and Zahedan, and Gwadar's six hundred-kilometre connection with Karachi was upgraded with Chinese financing in 2004.<sup>106</sup> As was suggested by one analyst based in New Delhi, there is very little incentive to import via Gwadar as, once unloaded, overland transportation to domestic markets, or even the Chinese border will, in any case, be made via Karachi.<sup>107</sup> Gwadar is perhaps most appropriately situated to serve the Baloch interior and Afghanistan, yet the latter's historical claim on the former, often less recognized than the popular issue of the Durrand line, is likely to inform Pakistani sincerity regarding the construction of direct communications between the two regions. Indeed, the only polity in the region that is truly consolidated by a North-South 'gateway' axis is Afghanistan, whose hereditary Pashtun monarchy is drawn from the most agriculturally productive and commercially active stretch of the country between Kandahar and Gereshk. By diverting substantial trade from Kandahar however, any corridor to or from Chabahar via Delaram and Herat, the city most receptive in Afghanistan to Iranian influence, possesses considerable implications for Afghan sovereignty and the ongoing peace process. Such concerns had, in 2002, prompted Hamid Karzai to block a proposal for an extension of the Iranian network to Herat.<sup>108</sup>

The prospect of a South-North Sunni 'axis' linking its isolated western provinces with the radical influences of the Pashtun Belt, Baluchistan and the Arabian Peninsula, is also an existential problem for Beijing. The opening of the Karakoram Highway to Pakistan in 1979 that facilitated the creation of new networks between Pakistan and Uighur traders and new communities of Chinese-origin Uighurs in Pakistan and the Gulf,<sup>109</sup> was followed by a particularly violent decade in Xinjiang's ongoing insurgency.<sup>110</sup>

<sup>106</sup> RAND (2014), p. 74.

<sup>107</sup> Author interview with a regional expert at a New Delhi-based think-tank in November 2018.

<sup>108</sup> J. Garver (2007), 'Development of China's Overland Transportation Links with Central, South-West and South Asia', *The China Quarterly*, No. 185, March 2006], Cambridge University Press, pp. 1-22, Bell and Bain Glasgow.

<sup>109</sup> D. Brewster (2017).

<sup>110</sup> RAND (2014).

Historical records show that where the issue of security in Xinjiang arises, the Khunjerab Pass is less a corridor than a frontier. Indeed, deportations of Pakistani nationals and warnings to Islamabad to curb its support for Uighur separatists, continue amidst the hyperbole of ‘Kashgar to Gwadar’. A capacity ceiling of the Karakorum corridor that limits its scope to strategic activity, one adequately epitomized by the present one-way southwards flow of machinery and construction materials from Xinjiang, remains optimal for Beijing. The securitization of the Khunjerab Pass will however, entrench defence cooperation between Pakistan and China and offer Beijing greater discretion in providing paramilitary assistance to sub-national actors in the region’s stateless voids. It is seldom acknowledged that China’s low level support for the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan, was facilitated via the Karakorum Highway.<sup>111</sup>

This paper largely asserts the double redundancy of the ‘Malacca Dilemma’ and ‘String of Pearls’ hypotheses in respect of the CPEC. China’s political stake in Pakistani economic development alone sufficiently explains the risk profile of its investment strategy. The considerable losses anticipated by some analysts for Chinese investors<sup>112</sup> are more than justified not only by strategic rivalry with India but also by Beijing’s requirement for influence in the Persian Gulf and the wider Islamic World, including Xinjiang. Where however, may space be identified for the continued analysis of Chinese ambitions on the Makran Coast? References to ‘Weiqi’, a traditional Chinese board game that requires opponents to surround one another with a greater number of stones, are appearing in contemporary analyses on Gwadar and Chabahar. The association of this term with Xi Jinping’s IOR strategy, became popular after the analogy was made in 2011 by Henry Kissinger, who in turn leant heavily on the work of David Lai, a research professor at the U.S. Army War College. Jeremy Garlick provides the Weiqi thesis with a more amenable lexicon in his recent article *Deconstructing the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor*, with the use of the term ‘geo-positional

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<sup>111</sup> S. Sering (2012).

<sup>112</sup> James Kyng (2016): ‘How the Silk Road Will Be Financed’, *Financial Times*, 9 May, at <https://www.ft.com/content/e83ced94-0bd8-11e6-9456-444ab5211a2f>, [Accessed 9 December 2018].

balancing', the principal aim being one of strategic negation: seeking neither to 'build up onshore military bases nor to remain entirely offshore, but to establish a non-military presence at selected sites'.<sup>113</sup> He concludes that 'these can be maintained long-term in order to keep a powerful rival geopolitically honest by making it aware of the incoming actor's presence'. From such a perspective, the potential to signal the expansion of Gwadar arguably represents a greater utility than the port itself, a hypothesis that explains the remarkable delay in the port's Phase II development plan.

A future Chinese naval facility at Gwadar, as conceived by Indian analysts, merely alleviates, and does not solve the Malacca Dilemma. As David Brewster notes, there are considerable doubts about the military value of ports such as Obock, Gwadar or Hambantota to the Navy of the Peoples' PLAN, in the event of a major pan-regional conflict.<sup>114</sup> It is difficult to see how the sudden influxes of Chinese investment could fundamentally alter the vulnerability of China's extensive SLOCs across a body of water where India, maintaining seven major naval bases and three listening posts,<sup>115</sup> enjoys such geographical prevalence while the United States projects inconspicuously yet potently from numerous littoral facilities and Diego Garcia. The strategic value however, of a prominent naval station opposite the Hormuz Strait, along the isolated southern coastline of an 'all-weather' ally, is obvious and proceeds from the same logic evident in Soviet planning during the 1980s. The discretion to play spoiler in the regional balance of power will cost little more than the rescheduling of some low-quality debt and it is reasonable to suggest that such an outcome will be sought by Beijing as and when the opportunity arises. However, warnings of China's maritime 'ascendancy' remain premised on deeply superficial assumptions in respect of a nation that, for nearly four thousand years, has been oriented inwardly, with 'her strategic frontier resting upon the steppe'.<sup>116</sup>

<sup>113</sup> Jeremy Garlick (2018), p. 529.

<sup>114</sup> D. Brewster (2017), p. 279.

<sup>115</sup> RAND (2014).

<sup>116</sup> D. Meinig (1956), 'Heartland and Rimland in Eurasian History', *The Western Political Quarterly*, Vol. 9, No. 3, (September), University of Utah on behalf of the Western Political Science Association, pp. 553-569.

A 2014 RAND Corporation paper uses the term ‘empty fortress’ in respect of China’s strategy in Central Asia: a reference to the Shu Han general Zhuge Liang, who successfully repulsed a numerically superior enemy from the defenceless city of Xicheng, without a fight.<sup>117</sup> While the question of its economic legitimacy will continue to be drawn into the increasingly factionalized debate over the Belt and Road Initiative, it is more probable that it is in fact the CPEC that constitutes Beijing’s empty fortress on its Western periphery, one justifying a substantial absorption of financial risk. This appears adequately reasonable when considering the number of options for regional connectivity Beijing currently has, as set out in the Belt and Road Initiative, including several through less volatile regions. As China gradually assumes the Russian mandate in Central Asia, CCP leadership too may accept the logic that the region is most advantageously maintained as a closed strategic space and as a platform for disruptive power projection into the Middle East. A solvent and assertive Pakistan appears incongruous with India’s ambitions in Central Asia and the conjecture that the combination of geography and institutional bias will channel the consolidation of Chinese influence along a path of least resistance towards the Eurasian Heartland, is geopolitically sound and supported by Beijing’s markedly divergent strategy towards its landlocked neighbours.

The Makran Coast is fertile ground perhaps, only for this game of Weiqi and a significant number of actors in the region, including the two littoral states, ostensibly benefit from its protracted underdevelopment and existing lines of communication. A unique combination of landward isolation and relative proximity to the Hormuz Strait however offers considerable hypothetical appeal for planners and the glossy veneer of ‘gateway’ connectivity distracts from each port’s far greater strategic utility as a hypothetical ‘gatekeeper’ to Asia’s seaborne hydrocarbon supplies. This paper has consciously avoided the respective business cases being made in support of the INSTC and Chabahar overland corridors, which remain, at best, aspirational and speculative. As Nehru and Panniker were amongst the first to note however, modern India is very much a maritime country and it is not unreasonable to suggest that India retains a deep interest in the

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<sup>117</sup> RAND (2014), p. 27.

existing global maritime economy. For New Delhi, the Eurasian connectivity picture must be conceived of in purely strategic terms. While India must balance multiple interests, the continentalization of the world economy, an inescapable undertone of the Silk Road Economic Belt, would benefit some states more than others. This will not include India.

While, India's involuntary assimilation into Beijing's game of Weiqi adds another layer of complexity to great power politics in the region, the denouement presented in this conclusion seeks to reinforce the idea that India and the Central Asian states are the greatest beneficiaries of Chabahar's gateway potential. In 2016, Pakistan applied to join the Ashgabat Agreement and the use of Gwadar is now being actively promoted in Central Asian capitals. It is becoming increasingly apparent that the question of Kashmiri sovereignty now affords New Delhi a conveniently intractable foundation for broader strategic opposition to the BRI. Few nations are as well-positioned as India to take advantage of Chabahar's exceptionalism in respect of Iranian sanctions, and this factor, in combination with the renewal of a strong popular mandate for the Modi administration this year should, in theory, be driving the Connect Central Asia Policy forward. Overestimating the potency of other states in a maritime domain where India is so advantageously predisposed whilst simultaneously abandoning competitive power politics on the continent is a flawed and geopolitically insincere approach. Management of the Makran dichotomy over the next four years therefore will prove a symbolic bellwether for India's rise as a great power: both in terms of New Delhi's strategic autonomy, and by likewise acting as a platform for Indian leadership in confronting the existential strategic challenge of the Silk Road Economic Belt.



The spirit of 'Connectivity', a salient motif in early-twenty first century international relations (IR), has provided an amenable context for a review of geo-determinism in IR theory and the defence of classical geopolitical models as analytical frameworks. No contemporary case study is perhaps more admissible in this regard than the scramble for connectivity leadership in Central and South Asia. The fascination with terrestrial alternatives to the global maritime economy is not new and is deeply rooted in the European Industrial Revolution and advent of the steam locomotive, and both 'Silk Road' revivalism and 'New Great Game' realism, have been popular embellishments in Eurasia lobbies since the collapse of the Soviet Union. This found renewed impetus with the extravagant launch of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013 and the roll-out or revamping of a connectivity platform has become mandatory for any established or aspiring regional power. An ability to swiftly deliver low-cost, unconditional infrastructure solutions has provided Beijing with the strategic space to pursue a number of national objectives within the scope of a burgeoning leadership role in the developing world, not unlike that claimed by India during the Cold War. This is despite being a relative newcomer to the official connectivity milieu. The real and perceived implications of the PRC's new brand of foreign policy are perhaps most compelling in the Indian Ocean and Central Asia: two historical east-west thoroughfares that collectively constitute something of a final frontier checking Beijing's direct access to European markets and Gulf hydrocarbons. This paper examines the geopolitical context of two ports whose concurrent development has raised the strategic profile of the Makran Coast: the littoral interface between these integral geographic regions and the two sub-components of the Belt and Road Initiative. As conspicuous markers for a number of overlapping regional rivalries, Gwadar and Chabahar provide a succinct and localized dichotomy for the analysis of the twenty-first century connectivity phenomenon.

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