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India's Connectivity Projects and Necklace of Diamond Strategy in Central Asia

Prof. Ramakrushna Pradhan, Dr. Santwana Pandey and Dr. Ram Babu

In its renewed engagement with the Central Asian republics in the aftermath of the Soviet disintegration, the only prominent hindrance that has constrained New

Delhi's direct entry into the heartland region is the geographical barrier. In order to overcome them, India has redesigned its strategies and initiatives under the aegis of Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation. Furthering the connectivity strategy in 2012 India has launched its "Connect Central Asia Policy" intended to enhance political, economic, cultural and commercial relations between

both the regions. Several connectivity projects including the transit pipelines were initiated with a strategic vision, however, has failed to harvest desired results attributing to the geographical factors. The non-availability of direct access to Central Asia either through Pakistan or Afghanistan and the strategic

blockade of India by Chinese OBOR have compelled India to look for any other formidable alternative to enter into Central

Asia. It is in this context, this article argues for pushing India's 'Necklace of Diamond' strategy to connect Central Asia through ports and harbours via Iran and the Caspian Sea. International North South Transportation Corridor (INSTC) spearheaded by India having completed its trial run, this article argues that the Necklace of Diamond strategy would yield effective results in a time bound manner.

The most serious international crises, whether systemic or circumstantial, are having a significant impact on Central Asia's

Introduction

connectivity with regard to transportation, energy, and water. These crises range from the

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Taliban's restoration of an Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan to the conflict in Ukraine, not to mention climate change. The countries of this landlocked region (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) are searching for foreign partners for existential reasons, and the troubling context in which they are evolving has legitimised and even encouraged this search. However, the actions they have taken in this regard since the beginning of the war in Ukraine on February 24, 2022, show an obvious desire to avoid Russia, which has been heavily sanctioned by the West. The result is that Central Asian transport networks are expanding in two directions: to the west, where Kazakhstan and the Caspian Sea serve as important links in Sino-European trade routes; and to the south, via land or water (the development of port links from Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan to Azerbaijan and Iran). In the energy industry, Kazakhstan is using the Caspian Sea to continue shipping oil to European markets despite Russian blockades of its main oil pipeline. Turkmenistan sends gas to China and South Asia, where the country's hydroelectric projects as well as those of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are being impeded by developments in Afghanistan. Although, a growing number of initiatives are being launched to promote smart management of the region's significant energy, water and other geopolitical resources, the most polarizing issue in Central Asia, remains its geographical landlockedness.

After centuries of being satellite of the Soviet Union and backyard of Russia cut off Central Asia having direct international trade with countries of the world. The disintegration of the Soviet Union and the on-going Ukraine war presented an opportunity for the Central Asian countries to engage in international trade bypassing Russia. However, the avoidance of Russia shouldn't be the dominance of China in the regional trade market which Central Asia is unprecedentedly witnessing at this moment. Off course Chinese economic engagement and investments in the region has greater geo-economic effects on the countries of the region

yet alternative options such as India would certainly be a viable preferences for the countries given India's worldview in contrast to Chinese Dream. The only thing that gives unmatched leverage to China in comparison to India is its direct access to Central Asia without having any transit through a third country. The case with India having similar political willpower and economic muscle tones down due to lack of direct access to Central Asia. However, India as of now has discovered an alternative route to Central Asia via Iran through the Chabahar port. Further the Necklace of Diamond strategy of India would enable New Delhi to have a smoother entry into the region for actualising its much needed strategic interests.

India's Connectivity Projects in Central Asia

India and Central Asia constitutes strategic neighbours and natural allies. Both the regions are geographically proximate, share common history and cultural affinity. Notwithstanding the great historical linkages, New Delhi's presence in and policies towards Central Asian countries over the past decades have demonstrated the challenges of competing with China on energy issues, with Russia on matters of regional security, with Pakistan on issues of Islam and secularism and with the U.S. on matters of regional influence. India so far has managed to secure only a tenuous foothold in Central Asia with a tag of late comer. When considered alongside other major players, India has yet to translate the aspirations of its recent connect Central Asia policy into reality with strategic and sustainable policy action. Hence, until recently India was considered as a minor player with minimal presence in the region lacking clarity, vision and Continuity in its policy towards the region. It neither had the political will power nor the economic strength to pursue its agenda in Central Asia unlike China and its policy initiatives are lagging far behind those of China, Russia and the US.

India and Central Asia had been enjoying civilizational and historical relations since millennia. Central Asian region is an

extended and strategic neighbour of India. As such the heartland region constitutes a natural ally of India given its geographical proximity, shared history and cultural affinity. Historically, both the Asian neighbours share an exceedingly superb bonding and thorough friendship through the ages (Joshi 2010; Kumar 2007). Until the Sovietisation of Central Asia, India's relations with the countries of the region are positive, and relatively uncomplicated. There were no major issues of dispute between India and the Central Asian khanates. Traditionally, India's relations with the Central Asian Republics have always been close (Kaushik 1970). However, between 1917 and 1991, India's contacts with Central Asia states were largely mediated through Russia. Although, India during this period had maintained certain privileged links with Central Asia that too were filtered through Moscow. Even in the 1971 Indo-Russian Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation India was definitely the junior partner. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, five new independent entities commonly known as Central Asia were emerged unto the world scene. Due to the strategic significance and geopolitical virtues of the Central Asian states locating at the heart of Asia has attracted tremendous global attention. Even during this period the rising presence in Central Asia have been those of the US, Europe and China as well as Japan and Korea, but not India. India till date is a low profile country in the region with the tag of latecomer. Historically, deep rooted civilisational linkages, thorough friendship, cultural affinity and economic bonding largely remained disconnected throughout the years between these two Asian neighbours until recently. Neither the Central Asian countries nor India felt any compelling need to include each other in their geopolitical calculus. The onus lies on India for the dormant relations it has maintained with Central Asian states since the breakup of the Soviet Union. But the huge possession of natural resources, its sharing of border with the instable Afghanistan and religious affinities with radical Pakistan made it very crucial for India from geopolitical and geo-

economic perspective. Despite seminal importance of Central Asia for New Delhi, India time and again failed to concretize its relations with the region even in the changing geostrategic environment of post-cold war world politics. Even at a time when Chinese hegemony is all over the region with its massive economic scheme of Belt and Road Initiative, New Delhi seems a disinterested power. Nevertheless, the recent emphasis accorded to Central Asian Republics by Indian Prime Minister Mr. Modi by terming their relationship as that of a 'Partnership for Prosperity' New Delhi perhaps has signalled its arrival in the heartland region (Pradhan 2020). However, this is just a drop of the entire ocean. In this milieu, this research article argues that India has vital economic and security interests in the CARs and needs to develop a comprehensive, long-term strategy to protect and promote its geopolitical interest in this region. For that, India's direct access to Central Asia is a preeminent requisite. Let's look at the connectivity options for India to enter into the Central Asian region.

Ancient Silk Route

Central Asia and India were connected through land routes since antiquity. Notwithstanding, the great mountain of Hindu Kush, Karakoram, Kuen Lun and Western Himalayas, trade links were established for socio-economic development of both the regions. The caravan traders acted as the medium of exchange of art, culture, ideas and technology (Warikoo 1996: 113). Cities like Khotan, Bukhara, Badakhshan, Tibet and Kashmir were developed into major trading centres. This in turn helped to develop an east-west trade corridor connecting India with Central Asia. Due to its close proximity to Central Asia and linkage with the Silk Routes system, Kashmir acted as an important transit linkage between the two regions.

Nevertheless, Kashmir was not directly connected to Central Asia. Whatever communication took place, it was only through the circuitous and difficult mountainous trade routes that passed through Ladakh and Chinese Turkestan on the one side and Chitral and

Pamirs on the other (Ibid: 114). This route continued to be the main trading link between the two regions for quite some time. However, with the growing intensity of Anglo-Russian rivalry during the second half of the nineteenth century, curbs were imposed on imports from Central Asia. This further relegated the position of this transit routes to secondary position and consequently trade from the region came to a halt. With the partition of India, the trading link seems to have been closed almost entirely. But the fact remains that the overland communication between India and Central Asia still remains an important channel of communication.

Karakoram Pass – Indian Gateway to Central Asia

Karakoram Pass lies exactly on the China-India border, just north of Aksaichin area. It was illegally occupied by China in a military invasion carried out in 1962. The saddle shaped pass is at a height of 18172 feet and is 148 feet wide (The Economic Times 2020). This is the reason for which, this pass is called as the highest pass on any trade route in the world. What is surprising is the fact that in spite of being at such a height, it never snows heavily in this pass, even though extremely biting and piercing cold winds and snow blizzards are always experienced. The entire region in the vicinity of Karakoram pass is totally barren, bleak, and desolate and devoid of any vegetation or grass any time of the year. Since this trade route joined Leh with Yarkand and subsequently with Kashgar, places which have always been on the Silk route, it would immensely help India to revive its trade linkages with Central Asia. In addition, Karakoram pass is always negotiable at any time of the year. This allows the trade to continue without any interruption all year-round.

Chinese Road: Xinjiang-Tibet Highway No. 219

This is a connecting road to the ancient Silk Route that traditionally linked India and Central

Asia through China's Xinjiang province. Materialisation of this road would enable India to build transit pipelines from the resource rich Central Asia to its territory. XUAR (Xinjiang-Uyghur Autonomous Region) in the process has become an important hub for nay mode of transportation. It also needs to be understood here that China and Central Asian countries have already facilitated various transit transport systems to overcome their inter-regional trade problems through this region. This is also the road that directly follows an alignment in a north-south direction along the existing railway lines and roads in Central Asia (Kazakhstan), Western China (Xinjiang) and India (Stobdan 2008: 1-3). The road includes, Almaty, Korgas, Yinning, Kuqa, Aksu, Kashgar, Yarkand, Yecheng (along the Xinjiang-Tibet Highway no. 219), Mazar, Shahidulla, Sumxi, Derub, Resum, Shiquanhe, Gar, Kailash, Burang and Lipu-Lekh (Ibid).

The total distance of this road is less than 3,000 kilometres as compared to the over 5,000 kilometre long route via Iran. More importantly, the route under consideration (Kazakhstan, China, and India) already exists and it is only a matter of cross-border connectivity.

Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India Pipeline (TAPI)

The Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline, otherwise known as Trans-Afghan Pipeline (TAP) is the biggest natural gas pipeline in South Asia. It is developed and sponsored by the Asian Development Bank (ADB). The pipeline will transport Caspian Sea natural gas from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan to Pakistan and eventually to India. The original project was started in March 1995. The project covers 1040 miles (1680 kilometers) route from Dauletabad in Turkmenistan through Herat, Helmand and Kandahar in Afghanistan to Quetta and Multan in Pakistan and then on to Fazilka in India (Report 2011: 6).

The original project was signed between Turkmenistan and Pakistan in March 1995.

India joined the project in 2008. A Gas Pipeline Framework Agreement was signed by the representatives of the four participating countries on 25th April, 2008 in Islamabad. In this meeting it was decided that the route would follow the ancient trading route from Central Asia to South Asia and that the construction would start in 2010 and supply of gas by 2015 (Sachdeva 2017). The pipeline with the initial capacity of 27 billion cubic meters (bcm) of natural gas per year was expected to be operational by 2014. But due to myriad constraints and political problems among partner countries and insecurity in the areas of Baluchistan and western Afghanistan and India's concern about the security of supply and pipelines traversing through Pakistan and Afghanistan delayed the project.

Iranian Route

India needs Iran to achieve its varied objectives in Central Asia. Iran, for its part, sees a tremendous complementarity of interest with India. Both governments are optimistic about the commercial benefits of Central Asia markets and hope to share the benefits of the North-South Transit Corridor. Iran will require massive infrastructure investments to extract maximum benefits from it, and India is lined up to provide cost-effective intellectual and material assistance in the development of information technology networks, ports, roads, and rail projects.

With the completion of the Mashhad-Sarakhs-Tajan railway in 1996, the landlocked Central Asian states became linked to Iran and saw a slow decrease in their dependency on the Russian railways and road system (Balooch 2009: 26). The Indian Government's Border Road Organization financed around US\$136 million for the opening of a road link between the deep ports at Chabahar in Iran and Afghanistan's main ring road highway system. The 215-kilometer road from Zaranj to Delaran was completed in January 22, 2009 (Ibid). This is part of a garland road network in Afghanistan that forms a circular route connecting Herat and Kabul via

Mazar-e-Sharif in the north and also Kandahar in the south, thereby potentially connecting Afghanistan to Uzbekistan (Pradhan 2020; Ibid: 28).

Iran-Pakistan-India Pipeline (IPI)

The idea of an overland, trans-Pakistan pipeline was first proposed in 1989 by Ali Shams Ardekani, acting Deputy Foreign Minister of Iran, and RK Pachauri, the Director General of the Tata Energy Research Institute (TERI) in New Delhi (Temple 2007: 6). The idea received a positive reaction in Iran. Pakistan initially refused to sign in the project worrying about India's long-term benefits, but later on agreed to the project since it would profit from both access of energy and transit fees. However, the initial response from New Delhi was sceptical. India was worried of leaving her long-term energy security in the hands of the frequently hostile Pakistan and trouble torn Afghanistan. New Delhi then seemed to be least interested to allow energy concerns to override the vagaries of its international relations with the region and outside.

Although the project was initiated long back, it is only in 2006 with the help of Asian Development Bank (ADB) a series of studies and research were carried out for facilitating the project. Asian Development Bank also agreed to finance the project. Agreements were signed among partner countries on all elements except pricing and contractual structure of the pipeline project. The matter of pricing is the most difficult issue among all. Since the pipeline is expected to provide a stable supply of gas from Iran to Pakistan and India for the next 40 years, all the three countries are wary of signing a deal that they may regret later.

The Iran-Pakistan-India pipeline project has been regarded as the strategically most important. This is the southern route from Central Asia and the Caspian Sea basin. This is also considered economically most viable of all the routes that connect India with Central Asia. This route is more political than geographical. As it would run through unstable Afghanistan

and non-state terror actors marred Pakistan, this pipeline causes much concern to India when it comes to security and reliability issues.

Further western policy makers fear that if most of the Central Asian and Iranian energy resources are diverted to China and the Indian Sub-continent, the West can be deprived from alternate sources of energy thus the Western opposition to the eastward export of Iranian and Central Asian energy is understandable. NATO's continuing occupation of Afghanistan may have a link with energy exports. Perhaps, energy is also one of the causes of the West's troubles with Iran.

Nevertheless, it may be difficult to get technical and financial support for this pipeline project from the Western countries, as they are opposing it. But any other alternative cannot be completely ignored. It is noteworthy to mention here that Gazprom of Russia, which is rich and technically competent, has shown interest in the project. Diverting Iranian gas to markets like Pakistan and India would leave the lucrative European market free for Gazprom to continue exploiting without facing competition from Iranian gas.

It is the most feasible route for energy imports to India from the former Soviet republics through Afghanistan and Pakistan. India can also export its products to Central Asian markets using the same route but the main constraint for India's access to Central Asia via Pakistan is the hostility between these two long-time rivals and instability in Afghanistan. Since the removal of the Taliban regime, India has been developing relations with Kabul but unfortunately, Pakistan's hesitation to help New Delhi has ruined the prospects of this pipeline being materialised.

India's 'Necklace of Diamonds' Strategy

The "Necklace of Diamonds" strategy, a phrase first used by India's former foreign secretary Lalit Mansingh while speaking at a think tank in August 2011 (Jha 2022). Similar assertion has been reiterated by India's Minister of External Affairs Mr S Jaishankar, in his recently launched book 'The India Way.' He has unequivocally

written that "this is a time for us to engage America, manage China, cultivate Europe, reassure Russia, bring Japan into play, draw neighbours in, extend the neighbourhood and expand traditional constituencies of support (Jaishankar 2020)." This indeed very well reflects the current foreign policy outlook of India. Using the word "manage" for china is – seems to be in the sense of competition or rivalry, and responsive, without delays. Extending neighbourhood refers to engaging with new emerging countries, including South Caucasus and Central Asia, which have not been given a handful of attention in previous administrations. India believes that despite China's official narrative, BRI is not just an economic development project, nor is it value-free. Its ultimate purpose is to build a Sino-centric Eurasian order in which Beijing's influence and power have significantly expanded. Through the expansion of financing of international trade and financial assistance in terms of reasonable interest, China is believed to create new spheres of influence which put countries in jeopardized situations. The recent examples are infrastructure projects in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Pakistan and Djibouti. Region-wise, all these four countries are incredibly significant for China as they fall in the trade route of its oil imports and their exports to Africa, the Middle East and Europe. Basically India's "necklace of diamonds" strategy is a counter to China's "String of pearls" and regional hegemony that puts the interests of India at risk.

India has begun developing the "Necklace of Diamonds" strategy as a countermeasure. This tactic, also known as the counter encirclement plan, tries to garland China. In order to counter China's objectives, India is enlarging its naval bases and strengthening ties with nations that are strategically located. India has adopted a basic strategy of countering China through the following broad means (Jagaran Josh 2023):

- Changi Naval Base in Singapore: It is one of the locations where Prime Minister Modi inked a deal in 2018. The Indian Navy now has direct

access to this base according to the arrangement. The Indian Navy can use this facility to refuel and rearm its ship while it is travelling through the South China Sea.

- Sabang Port, Indonesia: The military of India was granted access to Sabang Port in 2018, which is situated directly at the entrance to the Malacca Strait. One of the most recognised choke points in the globe is this strait. Through this region, a sizable portion of trade and crude oil is transferred to China.
- Duqm Port in Oman: On Oman's southern coastline, there is a port called Duqm. The port makes it easier for India to import crude from the Persian Gulf. Additionally, the Indian facility is situated directly between two significant Chinese pearls, Gwadar in Pakistan and Djibouti in Africa.
- Assumption Island, Seychelles: India and Seychelles decided to build a naval facility in this area in 2015. The military now has access to India. Given that China is fervently seeking to expand its influence on the African continent via the maritime silk route, this facility is crucial from a strategic perspective for India.
- Chabahar Port, Iran: The deal to build this port was inked by Prime Minister Modi in 2016. The port serves as a trading route to Central Asia and a gateway to Afghanistan.

While all other facilities provide India with a strategic Naval base, the Chabahar port holds significance among all in the sense it is a strategically very sensitive port for India for its geopolitical location between east and western corridors of the Arabian Sea having direct contacts with both India and Central Asia bypassing any other countries of the region.

Chabahar Port in India's connectivity strategy

The port of Chabahar is located in south-eastern Iran in the Gulf of Oman. / It is the only Iranian port with direct access to the ocean. It is considered a gateway to golden opportunities for trade by India, Iran and Afghanistan with Central Asian countries. The Chabahar port actually contains two separate ports called Shahid Kalantari and Shahid

Beheshti. Indian firm India Ports Global Limited took over operations at the Shaheed Beheshti Port (PIB 2022). The port development should not be viewed in isolation but also from the prism of other opportunities which India can derive from this venture. However, India-Iran bilateral relations are complex, and a variety of additional variables need to be considered in order to predict the viability of Chabahar Port from an Indian perspective.

Significance of Chabahar Port for India

- Direct Route to Afghanistan: It will ensure the establishment of a politically sustainable connectivity between India and Afghanistan. This will, in turn, lead to better economic ties between the two countries.
- Pakistan denies the use of its territory by Indian trucks bound to Afghanistan.
- Chabahar Port will also help Afghanistan for its trade with other countries.
- The result will be less Afghan dependence on Pakistan and, hence, less Pakistani influence over Afghan domestic politics, which will benefit India strategically.
- Countering China: Chabahar port will be beneficial to India in countering China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) as well as Chinese presence in the Arabian Sea which China is trying to ensure by helping Pakistan to develop the Gwadar port.
- Gwadar Port is just 72 km away from Chabahar Port.
- Trade and Commerce: With Chabahar port becoming functional, there will be a significant boost in the import of iron ore, sugar and rice to India.

The import cost of oil to India will also see a considerable decline.

- According to the Ministry of Commerce, Chabahar port, along with INSTC, offers 30% cheaper imports than the Mediterranean-Suez route.
- Natural gas from Central Asia can be exported to India via the Chabahar port. India is already a part of projects

like Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India (TAPI) pipeline.

- Also, India has already increased its crude purchase from Iran since the West imposed ban on Iran was lifted.
- Humanitarian Operations: From a diplomatic perspective, Chabahar port can be used by India as a point from where humanitarian operations in Central and South Asia can be coordinated.
- Link to International North-South Transport Corridor: Chabahar port will boost India's access to Iran, the key gateway to the International North-South Transport Corridor that has sea, rail and road routes between India, Russia, Iran, Europe and Central Asia.

INSTC: A Cost effective Transit Option

The International North-South Transport Corridor is 7,200 km long multimode network of ship, rail and road route for moving freights between India and Russia through Iran, Europe and Central Asia. This project was proposed and initiated by India, Russia and Iran in St. Petersburg in September 2000. The objective of the corridor is to increase trade connectivity between major cities such as Mumbai, Moscow, Tehran, Baku, Bandar Abbas, Astrakhan, etc. The agreement was signed in 16th May, 2002 and first dry run of two routes was conducted successfully in 2014 (Chaudhury 2017). The result was amazing as the cost of transportation were reduced by \$2,500 per 15 tons of cargo (MEA 2017). Since India is facing road blocks in materializing the TAPI and IPI pipeline projects due to its transit through Pakistan, INSTC offers India bounties of opportunities to sideline Islamabad by working out the INSTC option through the Bandar Abbas and Chabahar port of Iran to Mundra and Mumbai through the Arabian Sea. Also from the cost-benefit analysis point of view this has been seen as less expensive than other available routes and importantly it is secure and free from any sort of hostages.

Recent studies show that INSTC can reduce the time and cost of container delivery by 30-40 per cent and once the flow

of goods from the two Iranian ports begin the corridor will be able to move 30 to 50 million tons of goods per year (Stobdan 2017). Given the importance of Chabahar Port to Iran's infrastructure development plans and its entry points for Iran, Central Asia and India; operational capacity of two terminals at Chabahar – Shahid Kalamtari and Shahid Beheshti; greater prospect for enlarging both the operational and practical scope of Chabahar to become a vital gateway to Central Asia as it gives ready access to a number of trade corridors (existing and planned); India's foothold in Chabahar as a result of the 2016 India-Iran Agreement, which underscores the Indian commitment to build, equip and operate the port (two terminals and five berths with cargo handling for 10 years) makes the transportation from Chabahar not only viable but also competitive in terms of distance, cost, delivery, market access, sustainability and safety of goods and cargo to and from Eurasia. Besides, the Chabahar transit route would potentially provide the landlocked countries of Central Asia with the shortest land route to conduct maritime trade with countries in the Indian Ocean region (Stobadan 2017).

Conclusion

The continuous border skirmishes undoubtedly discourage India to have any sort of trade linkages either through China or Pakistan and Afghanistan. In such scenario, the only viable alternative available for India is the sea routes for trade and commerce. The Iranian port of Chabahar as depicted in this study holds utmost significance. Since India is looking for an inlet to Central Asia and it is heavily dependent on Gulf Oil and gas, a safe, secure and hassle free port is always up for take for New Delhi. Chabahar in the Iranian sea is perhaps the best option for India not just from international trade point of view but also from seeking an entry to the greater Central Asian region in quest for energy and other strategic resources. Therefore, in this article, emphasis has been

laid on the Chabahar port in India's Necklace of Diamond Strategy to counter Chinese hegemony in the region through ports beyond the otherwise strategic measures through bases.

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