

## Chabahar: The Decay of Geo-strategic Importance of Afghanistan and Pakistan

*Mr. Qais Mohammadi<sup>1</sup>*

### Abstract

*This research paper is aimed at finding the long run consequences (for Pakistan and Afghanistan) of investment on Chabahar. Chabahar is an alternative to any other route from Pakistan that connects South Asia with Central Asia. However, the research found out it as beneficial to diversify the transit routes of Afghanistan. In the long run Iran would connect south and central Asia bypassing both Afghanistan and Pakistan and directly connecting Chabahar to Central Asian Region (CARs). To do so, Iran would undermine the security of cargo in Afghanistan or provide more facilities, cheap transit fees, and better infrastructure. This will consequently decrease the geo economic, geopolitics and Geo strategic importance of Afghanistan as a whole and will limit Pakistan.*

*Key Words: Chabahar, Central Asia, Geo-Economic, Geo-Politic and South Asia*

### 1. Introduction

Afghanistan is a landlocked country, which is mostly using its neighbor's (more than 80% transit through Pakistan) transit routes to import from and export to the rest of the world (Mamoon, pg. 23). Not in line with its commitment to the UN Convention on Law of Sea, which makes special provisions for granting landlocked countries access to international seas, Pakistan has violated the Afghanistan Pakistan Transit and Trade Agreement (APTTA) more than 110 times in the last decade. Pakistan has always used their transit routes as a tool to achieve their goals in Afghanistan. Afghan businessmen have sustained a lot of losses, because of sudden increase in tariffs, transit fees and demurrage. Sometimes, Afghan trucks are stopped for several days in Pakistan which result in rotten agriculture products. Chabahar is a better alternative for Afghanistan to connect to open sea and get rid of all the pressure Pakistan has been putting for a long time. On the other hand, Iran sees Chabahar as an alternative for all the currently available routes that can connect Central Asia with South Asia. This trend will lead Iran to becoming the transit hub of the two regions, not Afghanistan and Pakistan.

South Asia: Countries such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Bhutan are located in South Asia. India among these countries have the second largest population (1.252 billion) in the world (NSO, page).

*1. Assistant Professor, Kardan University Kabul Afghanistan*

India is among the most rapid growing economies of Asia, which has also been as a potential market for goods and commodities. South Asia is of interest to energy rich CARs because of their increasing demands for energy.

Central Asia: Countries such as Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan are located in Central Asia. The total population of this region is estimated about 68 million people. If we add some other countries of the region with this, like Iraq, Syria and Iran the population will increase to more than 250 million people. Therefore, it is a potential market for goods produced in South Asia.

## 2. Importance of connecting Central Asia with South Asia

Now that economies are emerging and growing rapidly in the region it is vital to explore new markets and connect them via the shortest, most effective and most secure routes. South Asia with 1.7 billion population is a well-established potential market for commodities and products produced in many regional countries. Besides, India's rapid growth has attracted the attention of energy rich Central Asian Republics (CARs), who wants to find a market for their commodities. Furthermore, Central Asia is a potential market for goods produced in South Asia; for example, pharmaceuticals are Pakistan's top performing exports to CARs with 42.5 % share of total exports to CARs. India also exports pharmaceuticals to CARs but its share in total exports to CARs is only 25.5 % of its total exports to CARs (Mamoon page 4). CARs and South Asia see each other as potential markets for their abundant energy resources and other products respectively. This means connecting South and Central Asia is vital for the development of this region. Karachi-Torkham-Aqina is not the only route that can connect South Asia with Central Asia, which could increase transit revenue of both Pakistan and Afghanistan and highly increase geo-economic and geo-strategic importance of the countries meanwhile, Wagah-Peshawar-Torkham route, which roughly extends up to 800 km, is probably the shortest possible route between India and Afghanistan, which would greatly reduce the logistics cost of shipping goods from India to Afghanistan and beyond (Mamoon page 4). Unfortunately, none of these routes is currently used to connect India to CARs because Pakistan is rightfully concerned about losing its share in the Afghan and Central Asian Markets.

## 3. Pakistan's Concern:

Officially 40% and unofficially above 70% of Afghanistan's imports come from Pakistan, however, latest tensions between the two countries has highly affected their trade turnover and Pakistan has clearly lost its market share in Afghanistan. On the contrary, preferential tariffs for India has increased its market share in Afghanistan at the cost of Pakistan. This well further deteriorate, If Pakistan provides transit route for India to access Afghanistan and CARs. Most likely, cheaper pharmaceuticals and other products of Indian origin will dominate CARs, as a result, Pakistan will not be able to sell its products to their most significant markets. Much like pharmaceuticals there are other Pakistani products which are likely to lose out to India (Mamoon page 3). Therefore, Pakistan is better off abstaining India from accessing these markets.

### 3.1: Problem:

By creating Gawadar sea port, not only Pakistan wants to be the only supplier of goods to Central Asian but also be the sole beneficiary of connecting Central Asia and South Asia. Therefore, highly increasing the Geo-economic significance of Pakistan and undermining that of Afghanistan. Because, this port surpasses Afghanistan and connects Pakistan with Central Asia through Iran. Under current circumstance, any products other than Indian origin will be traveling from Gawadar to Iran and then Central Asia, consequently giving Pakistan the opportunity to conquer the markets on their own, challenging the market share of India. As a result, the cheapest and most efficient route of Waga-Peshawer-Torkham-Aqina will not be used to connect the two markets.

#### 4. Chabahar:

Thanks to Iran who came up with the idea of currently Chabahar-Afghanistan-CARs. Chabahar port is strategically located on the southeastern coast of Iran, an extension of Pakistan's Makran Coast, in the Sistan and Baluchestan province close to the confluence of Indian Ocean with the Gulf of Oman. The port has been declared a Free Trade Zone, situated about 70 km west of the equally important Chinese-funded Gawadar port of Pakistan. The geographical position of this port is well suited for movement of trade to\from Afghanistan, (Sodhi page 1). As a matter of fact, Afghan and Indian policy makers see this port as an alternative to the ports of Pakistan which are currently being used by Afghan traders, and other ports of Iran (Bandar Abbas) which is currently used by Indians to connect to Central Asia. On completion of this project, the network will provide cheaper and easier access to four major cities of Afghanistan namely Herat, Kandahar, Kabul and Mazar-e-sharif. In fact, if this project continues to progress without any hurdle, India's trade can have clear passage to\from the resource rich region of Central Asia, (Sodhi page 2). One way or another, Pakistan is losing its most significant markets to India and the rest of the world, not only because of its low quality products, but also because, Pakistan is becoming a not so friendly neighbor in the region.

#### 5. India's Perspective of Chabahar:

India is not only interested in the Central Asian markets but also has always been very keen to engage with Afghanistan economically and strategically, thus, it finds Chabahar port as an easier sea-land route to Kabul, Iran and Central Asia. Chabahar acquired further importance when Pakistan refused to provide a land route for India via Wagah border in Punjab, (Sodhi page 1). However, the initial rout of Karachi-Torkham-Aqina is several hundred kilometers shorter, once invested on Chabahar, Iran can compensate for the length of this rout by cutting transit fee and provision of other incentives. That will lead to, Iran becoming the connecting bridge between Central Asia and South Asia, leaving out Afghanistan and Pakistan. India will not only have increased leverage in Afghanistan but will also establish its strategic presence in the region. In the long term, it will act as a hub for Indian trading operations to venture into the oil and mineral-rich Central Asia, (Sodhi page 4).

#### 6. Iran's Perspective of Chabahar:

Iran located in the cross roads of three continents (Asia, Europe and Africa) is one of the countries whose strategic location has brought it many transit opportunities. The strategic port of Chabahar,

which is located in the south of Oman River, is the nearest and easiest route of connecting land locked CARs to the open ocean. The plan of developing Chabahar in Iran was completed in 1352. Development of Chabahar as a free trade zone is crucial to connecting North of Iran with the south, (Ezati page 1). Moreover, 2000 Km of sea border to international waters and large number of neighbors 6 of which are land locked including Afghanistan makes it an ideal transit country. Chabahar being a free trade zone will be much desirable for all the six countries to invest in. Chabahar is one of the three sea ports predicted by United Nations, which will be used to connect the silk way corridor, (Ezati page 3). Currently it is assumed that India will export its goods to Central Asia from Chabahar through Afghanistan, however, The existence of advanced railway systems, roads and economic infrastructure in Iran gives it an advantage over Afghanistan in the region. Furthermore, Afghanistan has limited roads and railways which doesn't make it ideal for transit, specially, given the weak security and economic infrastructure in Afghanistan, it is difficult to use its mountainous and troublesome routes. On the other hand, Chabahar-Ashgabat via Iran is shorter (1869 km) than, Chabahar-Herat-Ashgabat (more than 2500 km), making it efficient for transit. Thus Iran will be, not in the so far future, used to connect Central Asia with South Asia.

### 1.1 Chabahar-CARs Vs Chabahar-Afghanistan-CARs:

Considering the following comparison table, we can see that there are more benefits in using Iran as a transit country to access Central Asia than using Afghanistan. Yet, if Pakistan is willing to open Waga-Peshawer-Torkham, it will not only be, the shortest and most efficient transit route on land but, will also avail the Geo-economic importance of both Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Chabahar-CARS	Chabahar-Afghanistan-CARS
1. Short (1869 km)	1. Longer (more than 2500 km)
2. Not mountainous	2. Mountainous and complicated
3. Railway available	3. Railways not constructed
4. Safe and Secure	4. Mostly not safe and secure
5. Economic Infrastructure	5. Limited economic infrastructure
6. Free Trade Zone	6. No Free trade zone but preferential behavior towards India
7. More developed country	7. Less developed country
8. Full Law enforcement	8. Limited law enforcement

*Source: Author's Compilation*

### Solution and Recommendations:

It will be in the interest of the whole region to open Waga border for transit, Pakistan will gain more through tougher competition with India, Afghanistan and India will gain from increased trade turnover. Besides, both Pakistan and Afghanistan will remain strategically the best transit corridor for the region and can maintain a large amount of transit income this way.

1. Afghanistan should continue to diversify its import routes and should abstain from depending on one country, keeping in mind the notorious behavior of Pakistan.
2. Afghan policymakers should never stop trying to convince Pakistan for opening Waga border. And should always, unless otherwise required, use Waga border for their exports to India.
3. The afghan government should attract more funds to establish standard transit infrastructure in the country so that Afghanistan is a choice for Indian traders as a transit route.
4. The afghan government has to provide preferential treatment to all Indian transits in Afghanistan.
5. Pakistani policymakers should reconsider their decisions in this regard and cooperate with Afghanistan and Iran for their own national interest.
6. Once Chabahar, Iran is used as transit route to access CARs, it would be very hard to reroute the traders to any other route even if more efficient. Because then, Pakistan will not only be competing with Iran for transit routes but also with India for markets. In the long run, Iran would provide easier and better treatment and much better infrastructure that can convince traders to keep using Chabahar.

#### References:

1. Dawood., M & Mukhtar, Z.J. (2010). Extending Transit Facility to India: Implications for Pakistan's Bilateral Trade with Afghanistan. *Pakistan Institute of Trade and Development, MRPA*.
2. Sodhi, H. (2015), "Chabahar – A strategic gateway. *Forum for National Security Studies (FNSS), CAPS*.
3. NSO. (2015). India statistics book 2015. *Ministry of Statistics and Program Implementation, Sardar Patel Bhawan, New Delhi*.
4. دکتر عزتی، عزت الله. شکری، شمس الدین. (۱۹۳۱)، " بررسی جایگاه چابهار در ترانزیت شمال جنوب و نقش آن در توسعه شهر های همجوار"، پوهنتون آزاد اسلامی، ایران.
5. پویان، رضا حسین پور. فرزام، حمید صابر. پارسائی، اسماعیل. (۰۹۳۱)، " ظرفیت های مکانی توسعه منطقه آزاد چابهار: فرصتها، تنگناها و راهکارها" پوهنتون تربیت مدرس، ایران.
6. دکتر سادات، زهرا. عبدالله، بهار. (۳۹۳۱)، " ارزیابی عوامل موثر در توسعه صنعت گردشگری منطقه آزاد چابهار" نشریه علمی- پژوهشی انجمن علمی معماری و شهرسازی ایران، ایران.