

Iran on the Cusp of Multiple Eurasian Land- and Sea-Bridges

by Ramtanu Maitra

March 5—Situated at the southwestern corner of the Eurasian landmass, Iran is perhaps the most well-connected to this landmass and areas beyond. Though blocked off in its east and northeast because of topography and instabilities in Afghanistan and the bordering areas of Pakistan, Iran's uniqueness is a result of its location and history. On its north, it abuts the Caspian Sea while southern Iran is on the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman. To its west, Iran is not only connected by land through Iraq into Arabia, but also because of its borders with Turkey, has a direct link with Europe. Additionally, on its north, Iran has land connections with the South Caucasus flanking the western shores of the Caspian, while it also has a direct land hook-up with Central Asia along the eastern shores of the Caspian. It is this unique location that has helped Iran emerge, in the past, not only as a very important center of civilization, absorbing the cultural fruits that various land and sea-linked countries had to offer, but also as a key trading nation.

In addition to its location and its focus on utilizing the land and sea connectivity with the region and areas beyond, Iran possesses many other ingredients to become a major economic center. Iran has vast reserves of gas and oil, which ensure not only a significant source of export earnings, but also provide stability to its power generation sector, at least in the short and mid-terms. Most

importantly, perhaps, is its cultural and civilizational strength that has helped to develop a core of manpower that can innovate and improve upon technologies required for nation-building.

However, in order to make its people fully productive, Iran has to deal with its increasingly dwindling water sources. It is the threat of a shortfall of water which could lead to serious delays, if not abandonment of many development projects, and which could prevent a more even redistribution of its population. There are reports that the Iran government is aware of the water problem and is planning to deal with it.

Speaking on the sidelines of the groundbreaking ceremony of the Siraf water desalination unit in Bush-ehr Province last December, Energy Minister Hamid Chitchian had said "plans are in place to provide re-





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Naghsh-e Jahan Square, the “image of the world,” in Isfahan (Esfahan), built in the early 17th Century during the efflorescence of culture under the Safavid dynasty.

gions straddling the southern coasts of Iran, with potable water by building 50 water desalination units,” the Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA) reported. Those plants will be built in different areas adjacent to the Persian Gulf and Sea of Oman. Also, in April 2015, the deputy head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI), Behrouz Kamalvandi, had told the Iranian media that Tehran is planning to build small nuclear power plants and desalination facilities in the southern part of the country.

What Made Iran a Special Place

Ancient Iran, known as Persia, had taken full advantage of these land and cultural linkages, particularly the land links. The Achaemenian Empire in Persia in the 6th and 5th Century B.C., stretched as far as Libya to the West, and extended beyond what is now the Afghanistan-Pakistan border in the east. In its northeast, it bordered the Aral Sea while in its northwest, it covered most of Greece. The expansion of the Persian Empire had its downsides as well. It provoked and attracted invaders.

The geographical identity that defines Iran today, was subjected to a myriad of invasions beginning in 330 B.C. by

1. Alexander of Macedon;
2. Skirmishes with the Scythians of the southern Caucasus, to its northwest;
3. The Arab invasion in the 7th Century, leading to the Islamization of Iran;
4. The Turkic Seljuk tribe from its west in the 11th Century, and;
5. Mongols, who believed in Shamanism or Buddhism and opposed Islamic tenets, in the 13th Century.

However, some of these ‘invasions’ did not always lead to the conquest of Persia/Iran, but more often integrated people from the bordering nations, leading to the enrichment and embellishment of Persia’s/Iran’s culture and overall improvement of the Persian people.

The explosion in literature, architecture, art and poetry during the 17th and 18th Century Persia/Iran under the Safavids, seen particularly in Isfahan, a capital of the empire for a period, was perhaps the legacy of [Iran’s historical past](#).

“The Safavids were Turkicized Iranians, probably of Kurdish origin, whose power base was among the Turkic tribesmen in northwestern Iran, Anatolia (Turkey) and parts of Syria. Safavids built their capital at Tabriz in Iran. Timurlane’s culture has held sway at Isfahan since then.”

The History of Iran cannot be defined in the context of the landmass that defines Iran’s territory today. But it does define the cultural and civilizational backbone of the Iranian people as a whole. For instance, many western historians identify Ibn Sina, al Biruni, Khwarazmi, al-Farabi, al-Ghazali and many others who have shined their intellectual light over a vast area in the past, as Arabs. In reality, they were all products, and benefactors of what the Persian/Iranian civilization had to offer. While the Arab origins of some of them are on record, the influence upon them of the civilizational splendors spread by all those who settled in Persia cannot be denied.

Silk Road Then...and Once More The Trading Hub

With this wide access to the Eurasian landmass in the pre- and post-Christian era, the Persian/Iranian nation had, unlike any other nation at the time, also led



Tasnim

The first cargo train from China arrived in Tehran in February 2016, after covering a distance of almost 10,000 kilometers.

to the development of various trade routes and what was then called the Silk Road. “In Iran, the Silk Road was of special importance. Considering the role of silk in ancient times, it can be said that the history of Iran and the Silk Road were intertwined. The Silk Road connected old centers of Iranian civilization that were located along the route. The trade and cultural exchange between the two great countries of Iran and China were carried out via the Silk Road. . . By playing a key role in the Silk Road, Iran made great contributions to the booming of the silk trade and to the exportation of this commodity to the West. During the Parthian era, the Silk Road was still an important route for the exchange of commodities between various countries.” [See previous link].

During the Parthian era, which the historians identify as between 247 BC to 224 AD, “Iran had signed the first trade agreement with China, which was under the rule of the Huns. Chang Ki Yen was the head of a 100-man delegation that visited Iran. In his account of his travel to Iran, he gave some very interesting information about life in the Parthian Empire. He wrote about a region located on the shores of the ‘Western Sea’ [Caspian Sea]. He said that the people of the region dedicated their time to farming. They were especially good at cultivating rice.” [See previous link].

Jumping almost 2000-plus years forward, it was noted that Iran finalized a cooperation agreement with China last November which would allow Chinese traders to use Iranian territory for exports to Europe. The agreement, which was signed between customs offi-

cials of Iran and China, is part of an ambitious Chinese plan to revive the ancient Silk Road and bring it one step closer to reality, added the *Iran Daily News* report, citing IRNA.

This old Silk Road connection between China and Iran was revived physically in February last year when a train, carrying 32 containers of commercial products from eastern Zhejiang province, [took 14 days to make the 9,500-kilometre journey](#) zig-zagging through Kazakstan and Turkmenistan. “The arrival of this train in less than 14 days is unprecedented,” said the head of the Iranian railway company, Mohsen Pourseyed Aqayi. The revival of the Silk Road is crucial for the countries on

its route,” he said at a ceremony at Tehran’s rail station attended by the ambassadors of China and Turkmenistan. The journey was 30 days shorter than the sea voyage from Shanghai to the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas, according to Aqayi.

The arrival of the train from Zhejiang was widely welcomed in Iran, but the route it followed also exhibited the limitation of the old Silk Road, or the variations of it that exist today. Such limitations exist for a number of reasons, some of which are entirely geopolitical, while some others are a result of the security mess that exists today in the Eurasian landmass, thanks to centuries of conflicts and confrontations brewed by the contesting colonial empires, particularly British Empire.

North-South Integration of the Eurasian Land-Mass

One such shortcoming, as of now, is that the Eurasian landmass is inter-linked by a ribbon-like transport corridor that runs north of the landmass and then dips somewhat tentatively (again, restricted by geopolitical wrestling of the powers-that-be that evokes conflicts and dissensions within the participating nations) from east to west, linking China to the Caspian Sea. The transport corridor dips southward heading into Iran. But the Eurasian landmass is almost 3,500 km in length, calculating from the China-Russia borders to Pakistan’s coast. What the British geopolitician Halford Mackinder, working to promote an unfettered expansion of the British Empire, sometimes through brutal con-



A railway viaduct on the Rasht-Astara section of the INSTC nears completion.

to notice that there is a [consecutive vertical row of countries](#) of Eurasia from Russia in the north to India in the south (Central Asian countries, Iran, Pakistan) that does not yet link either with the east or with the west. I would call this continuous belt of countries situated along the meridian of the center of Eurasia the ‘belt of anticipation.’

Sengupta pointed out in her treatise, *Logistical Spaces IV: Connectivity as the New Asian Paradigm* [see link above]:



Iran Daily

The Qazvin-Rasht-Astara segment of the railroad, to be finished this year, will complete the INSTC land route.

Nazarbayev’s ‘belt of anticipation’ is interesting, particularly since it indicates a vertical definition of the Eurasian space that is generally visualized as a horizontal expanse. This is essentially the logistical vision of a landlocked state which wishes to move out of the confines of traditional east-west routes of transportation. Much of the transportation linking Asia to Europe was historically conceptualized as east-west epitomized by the Silk Route. Of course this east-west corridor frequently had smaller north-south off shoots leading to southern ports.

quests, and then its preservation in the 20th Century, identified this area as the crucial hinterland that the Empire must brace itself to control. The Eurasian landmass actually extends from northern Xinjiang province of China, across the deserts and pastures through the mountain ranges along China’s western borders with Kazakstan, to the Arabian Sea, Gulf of Oman and Persian Gulf in the south. This is the heart of the Eurasian landmass. Once reintegrated, it will bring back those glorious yesteryears of Iran.

This was reflected in Kazak President Nursultan Nazarbayev’s definition of Eurasia. He argued back in the 1990s:

If we look at a geographical map then it is easy

Despite those obvious shortcomings, Iran, in addition to developing a rail-link to China through Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan to its north, is on the verge of making the north-south land transport corridor through Central Asia (eastern shores of the Caspian Sea), South Caucasus (along the western shores of the Caspian) and over the Caspian’s water using fully functional ships and barges. Moreover, Iran’s southeastern port of Chabahar on the Gulf of Oman is now getting fully developed to link up with India’s west coast by sea and has attracted Afghanistan to become a part of this land-sea corridor.

Development of the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), a multi-modal transportation route, was officially agreed upon in the year 2000 by Iran, Russia, and India at a meeting in St. Petersburg.

In essence, this corridor is designed to link South Asia, and the west coast ports of some Southeast Asian nations to Europe and Central Asia via the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf to the Caspian Sea running through Iran, Azerbaijan, and then through the Russian Federation to northern Europe.

The route is not fully ready yet. However, as per the recommendations of the 5th Coordination Council meeting of INSTC held in Baku, Azerbaijan, in 2013, a dry-run of the INSTC was successfully conducted by the Federation of Freight Forwarders of India (FFFAI) in 2014 on the routes; 1) from Nhava Sheva (Mumbai), to Bandar Abbas (Iran), to Tehran-Bandar Anzali (Iran) to Astrakan (Russia); and 2) from Nhava Sheva (Mumbai), to Bandar Abbas (Iran), to Baku (Azerbaijan).

As of now, the Asian trade travelling by INSTC unloads at Bandar Abbas, situated on the Persian Gulf, and then travels by rail to Qazvin (Iran) and then by road to Bandar Anzali to get loaded on a ship crossing the Caspian Sea (south to north) to get unloaded at Astrakan in the Russian Federation. From Astrakan, the cargo becomes rail freight travelling to northern Europe. That is where it stands now. But within a few years that could change.

Now that Iran has been unshackled from sanctions, the INSTC is going to be ready in 2019. The difficult part in the INSTC land route is unloading and reloading a number of times between Qazvin, Bandar Anzali, and Astrakan. This wastes time and money. However, this bottleneck will be removed later this year when Iran completes the building of this stretch. The railroad from Qazvin to Rasht runs through a mountain pass to bring the trade route to the southwestern corner of the Cas-



Iran Visitor

Above: Looking down on Bandar Anzali, close to Rasht. It is Iran's Caspian Sea port.



CC/Samaksasanian

Left: The Port of Astara, where Iran meets Azerbaijan, has been integrated into the INSTC.

pian Sea, and then will extend along the western shore of the Caspian to Astara, bordering Azerbaijan. On the Azerbaijan side of the border, the linking town has the same name,

Astara. These two towns are getting linked-up by a small stretch of railroad. The construction of the Rasht to Astara stretch of railroad on the Iranian side has begun.

The good news is that the railroad has been given the proverbial green light by the head of the Iranian railways, Mohsen Pour Seyed Aghaie. On Jan 12, 2016, *Trend News Agency* reported that Aghaie said that “the construction of the Rasht-Astara railway will begin in 2016 and finish in 2019.” The Qazvin-Rasht part of the railroad will be completed in 2017. In 2015, the railway companies of Iran, Azerbaijan, and Russia had signed a document to expedite construction of this 75 km-long Qazvin-Rasht-Astara railroad project.

In addition, the INSTC plans to develop some important spurs. One of them, already in place, is the



The Iran Project

Iran's Chabahar Port on the Gulf of Oman.

930-km rail link, running from Uzen in the oil and gas-rich western Kazakstan through Turkmenistan to the existing railroad in Gorgan in northwestern Iran, running close to the southeastern coast of the Caspian Sea. This link, begun in Dec 2014, [enables Iran and Turkmenistan to link with China and the Pacific Ocean through Kazakstan](#).

An apparent constraint of the INSTC at this point is the limitations of Iran's Bandar Abbas port to handle a significant growth in cargo-handling. Full-fledged utilization of INSTC will not be possible unless the expansion of the port is undertaken. Another weakness of the INSTC is its lack of linkages with Afghanistan.

Chabahar Port to Link-up with Asia East of Iran

While the INSTC is a north-south linkage between southernmost part of Iran to the South Caucasus and Central Asia by railroad, the other major economic development project to build connections in Iran is the development of Chabahar port, including building a free-trade industrial zone around the port. On May 23, 2016, the heads of state of Iran, Afghanistan, and India signed a trilateral agreement at Tehran to develop Chabahar Port located on the Gulf of Oman in the southeastern Iranian province of Sistan-Balochistan.

Iranian President Dr. Hassan Rouhani, welcoming the agreement, said on that occasion that connectivity is at the heart of this agreement. The development of Chabahar Port, and the free trade zone along with the 500-km rail-linkage between Chabahar and Zahedan, an Iranian city close to the Iran-Pakistan border, has the potential to benefit all three countries immensely. India has already built the 220-km Zaranj-De-laram highway—also known as Route 606—in 2009 which provides a direct road access to Afghanistan's Garland Highway. A highway link between Zahedan and Zaranj, a town in Afghanistan's Nimruz province, also exists.

The development of Chabahar Port will cut transportation costs and time between Iran and India's ports on its western coast by almost a third. Moreover, the access to Chabahar Port, and to Zahedan further north,



Tehran Times

Iran's key oil and gas facilities are concentrated in the western half of the country.



CC/Hadi Karimi

The Dasht-e-Lut is one of the driest and hottest places on Earth.

will enable India to reach four major Afghan cities, Kabul, Kandahar, Herat, and Mazar-e-Sharif, through Afghanistan's Garland Highway.

India's state-run Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) stated in April, 2016 that it was open to a \$20 billion investment in petrochemicals and fertilizer plants, an LNG plant, and a natural gas cracker in the Chabahar free trade zone. These investments would facilitate the flow of Iranian and potentially Central Asian natural gas to support India's growing energy demand. The same logic likely applies for Japanese and other energy security-minded investors. For their part, the [Japanese have already expressed interest in investing in the port.](#)"

A Physical Constraint To Overcome

Located in one of the most arid zones of this world, Iran is divided into six key and 31 secondary catchment areas. "Besides the Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman Basins, all of Iran's basins are located in the interior, where renewable freshwater sources are limited. Close to half of Iran's total renewable water is located in the Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman Basins, representing one quarter of its land mass. Conversely, the Markazi Basin covers more than half of Iran's land mass, but [holds less than one-third of the available freshwater.](#)"

What makes the [alleviation of Iran's water-shortage particularly challenging](#) is the fact that "Iran is mountainous; more than half of the country is at altitudes between 1,000—2,000 meters and 16% of the territory is

above 2,000 meters with some mountains of 3,000-4,000 meters."

Damavand Mount at 5,670 meters is the highest in west Asia and Europe. Some 11,000 square kilometers—equal to 0.9% of the land at the Caspian Sea coast—is below sea level. In the Central Plateau the lowest point in the Dasht-e-Lut [one of the hottest places on earth where surface temperature registers 160 degree Fahrenheit—Ed] is 156 meters. The mean altitude of the country is approximately 1,250 meters and that of the Central Plateau 900 meters.

In the Sefid-Rud valley [Sefid-Rud is a river that makes a water gap through the Alborz mountain range. It then widens the valley between the Talesh Hills and the main Alborz range, enabling a major route between Tehran and Gilan Province with its Caspian lowlands. In the wide valley before the Sefid-Rud enters the Caspian Sea south of Rasht a number of transportation and irrigation canals have been cut—Ed] as a result of the low altitude, dry winds from the interior move towards Guilan, creating an area of low rainfall which extends up to some 40 kilometers from Rasht (capital of Guilan Province). The great chain of Alborz and Zagros forms a "V shaped" natural barrier which inhibits the humid winds of the southwest and prevents the majority of clouds from reaching the center of the country, so steppes and deserts are created.