



INDIAN ACCESS TO CHABAHR AND DUQM: CHALLENGES FOR PAKISTAN

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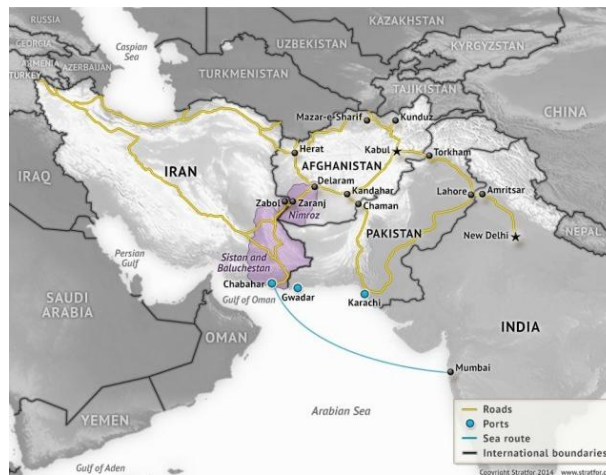


In a series of visits to the Middle Eastern countries, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has managed to strike strategic deals that will have a long lasting impact on the region.

One of these deals includes the Indian control of Iranian Shahid Beheshti port — phase one of Chabahar Port. The port, an \$85 million project completed with the help of India, and just 90km from Gwadar Port, creates a transit route between India, Iran and Afghanistan, bypassing Pakistan. According to this deal, New Delhi will have operational control of a part of this strategically located Iranian port on the Gulf of Oman for 18 months. It is also reported that the Indians plan to overhaul the port facilities of this section.¹ As per the original agreement of 2016, India is to equip and operate two berths in Chabahar Port Phase-I with capital investment of \$85.21 million and annual revenue expenditure of \$22.95 million on a 10-year lease².

¹ India to get operational control of Iran's Chabahar port, "*Dawn*" February 18, 2018
<https://www.dawn.com/news/1390165>

² India, Iran and Afghanistan sign Chabahar port agreement, "*Hindustan Times*" May 24, 2016
<https://www.hindustantimes.com/india/india-iran-afghanistan-sign-chabahar-port-agreement/story-2EytbKZe06zeClpR8WSuAO.html>



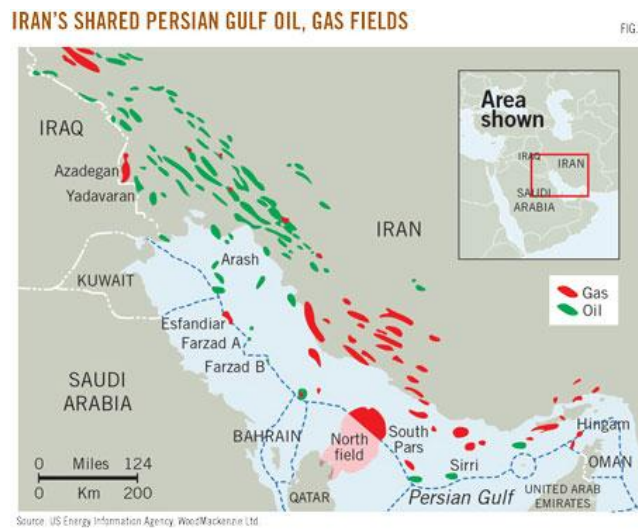
The second deal came as a result of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent trip to Oman. New Delhi and Muscat finalized an agreement that will see India gain access to the strategically located port of Duqm on Oman's southern coast. The port sits on the northwestern edge of the Red Sea through the Gulf of Aden. According to the initial reports, the Indian Navy will be able to use the port for logistics and support, allowing it to sustain long-term operations in the western Indian Ocean, a hotspot for piracy in the area. Furthermore, India will also gain access to a dry dock that will be used for repairing military vessels of India.³



The two deals allow India to not only fulfill its strategic purposes, but also cater to its economic and energy needs. Chabahar port sits right on top of Farzad-B gas field located in the Parsi block. The gas field was discovered around 10 years ago and is being developed by a consortium including Indian

³ India Gains Access to Oman's Duqm Port, Putting the Indian Ocean Geopolitical Contest in the Spotlight, "The Diplomat" February 14, 2018 <https://thediplomat.com/2018/02/india-gains-access-to-omans-duqm-port-putting-the-indian-ocean-geopolitical-contest-in-the-spotlight/>

companies. It is estimated that the whole project would cost \$11 billion.⁴ The Indians plan to liquefy this gas at Chabahar and ship to Indian western ports.⁵



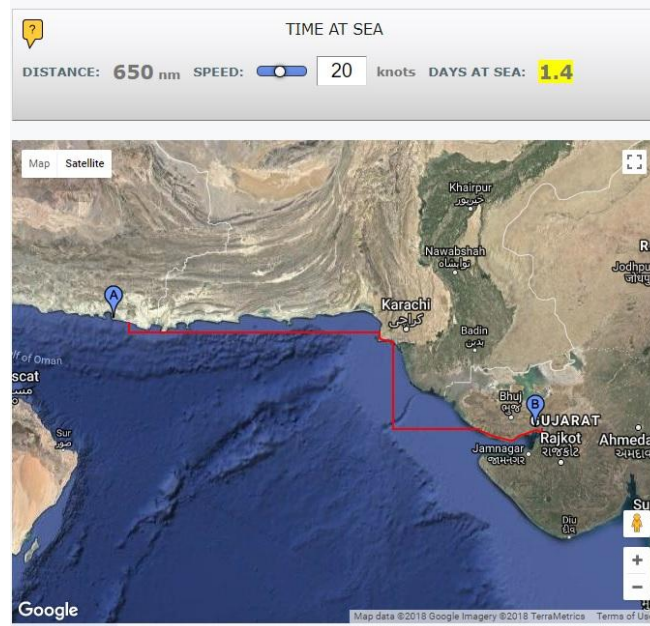
The Duqm port which allows India to carry out maintenance opens endless opportunities for the Indian military vessels. Now the Indian navy can freely operate in the Persian Gulf without the hassle of going back to its shipyards for maintenance and overhauling. So, without establishing a naval base in Oman, India will be able to hold a strong military presence in the region. India will also provide support to its vessels in case there is a piracy threat.⁶

The Indian presence at these two strategic ports means that India will be able to strengthen its maritime presence in the region. The shortest distance between Chabahar and the Indian port of Kandla is 550 nautical miles (NM) only. However, the current defined sea route is of 650NM. If India is able to establish a new lane, it will slash the travel time by at least 5 hours as large vessels travel at the speed of approximately 20NM/hr. By doing this, the Indians would also avoid the Pakistani coast by a long margin. This also means that India will be able to carry out trade with Iran at a travel time of almost one day (27 hours)

⁴ India Revises Costs in Developing Farzad-B Gas Field, "*Financial Tribune*" February 27, 2018 <https://financialtribune.com/articles/energy/82590/india-revises-costs-in-developing-farzad-b-gas-field>

⁵ Undersea Iran-India gas pipeline can bring cheaper LNG to India, "*Live Mint*" September 05, 2018 <http://www.livemint.com/Industry/wj8PfrvGGyAfH1p8aoPX9K/Undersea-Iran-India-gas-pipeline-can-bring-cheaper-LNG-to-I.html>

⁶ India Gains Access to Oman's Duqm Port, Putting the Indian Ocean Geopolitical Contest in the Spotlight, "*The Diplomat*" February 14, 2018 <https://thediplomat.com/2018/02/india-gains-access-to-omans-duqm-port-putting-the-indian-ocean-geopolitical-contest-in-the-spotlight/>

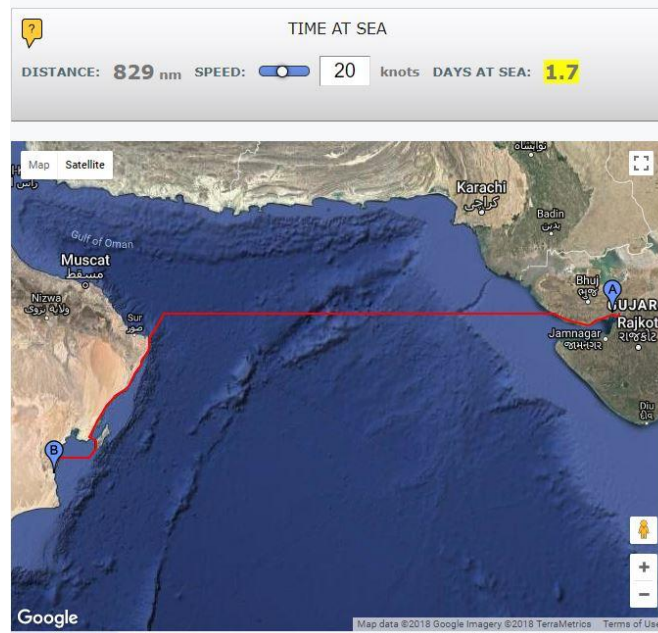


Existing lane

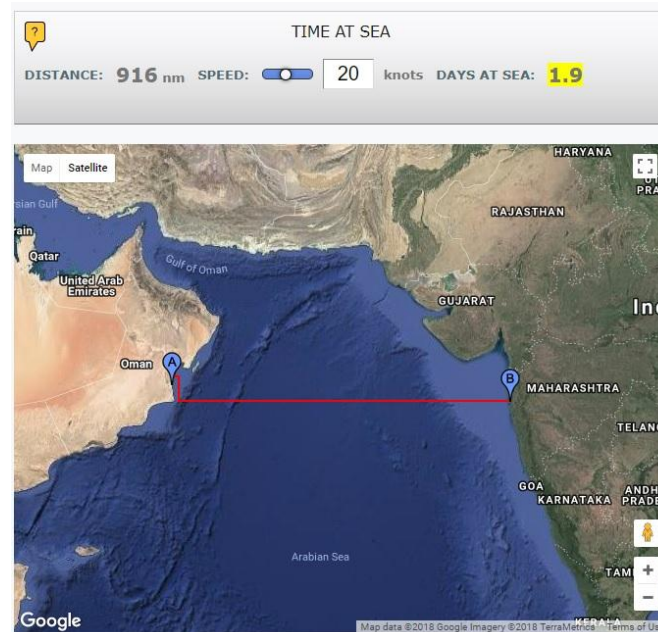


Proposed Lane of Communication

Similar is the case with Duqm which is 829 NM from Kandla and 916 NM from Mumbai. Whereas, it should also be noted that the distance between Duqm and Chabahar is only 400NM. This also means that the travel time between Duqm and India is less than two days. With a coast to coast time of less than two days and the option to repair and maintain ships at Duqm, India has put a serious threat to Pakistani strategic interest.



Duqm to Gujrat



Duqm to Mumbai

A strong Indian presence in the Persian Gulf also goes against the strategic interest of Pakistan. Pakistan would not like India to be continuously present in the high seas close to Pakistani proximity. This would effectively allow India to monitor the movement of Pakistani and Chinese vessels and a threat of naval quarantine cannot be ruled out.

However, it would still not be wise enough to state that Chabahar would undermine the importance of Gwadar, the largest deep sea port in the world, which would host much larger vessels than Chabahar. The success of both these projects is dependent on a stable Afghanistan. If Afghanistan cannot ensure a safe passage for the goods in transit, the trade numbers will not surge and as a result the purpose of these ports won't be served.

On the economic front there won't be a lot of competition, but still, Gwadar would have to attract a lot of ships based solely on the level of facilities being offered. Whereas, on the strategic front, Chabahar and Duqm pose serious challenges to Pakistan. Unfortunately, Pakistan has not invested much on its foreign ties over the past few years. As a result the country is facing isolation on the diplomatic front. The latest fiasco at the FATF speaks volumes about our failure. Whereas India has made inroads in quarters on whom Pakistan always relied upon. It is high time for Pakistan to start exploring and executing options to strengthen itself not just economically, but also strategically.