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The author provides a detailed assessment of the political challenges to creating a robust market for Caspian oil and gas. Conflict in the region is a result of long term relationships between India and other countries. While land-based gas pipelines may be the most economical, the likelihood of them being developed is low due to the geopolitical situation in the region.

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The Jeremiad of Oil and Gas Reserves in the Caspian Sea

Said M. Azam

The Caspian Sea is the largest enclosed inland body of water in the world with no outflows. It connects the three distinct regions of the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Middle East (Grigas, *The New Geopolitics of Natural Gas*, 2017). The Caspian Sea littoral countries are endowed by nature with an abundance of energy reserves. Besides, their central location and close vicinity to major world markets gives them a unique status because of the potential lower transportation cost of energy products from the region to markets in Europe, China, India and beyond. Energy reserves in the Caspian Sea Zone promise prosperity to the region itself and the world at large.

Indigenous communities look positively and forward to benefit from their natural resources and unique geographic location in the world. However, they fear that their natural riches and unique geostrategic location invite a new era of colonization; plunder of their natural resources by the rising world powers in Asia; and that their territories will be used as battlefields by the same rival powers. In turn, China and India both see central Asian countries and Afghanistan as a conducive environment for the growth of terrorism, extremism and separatism that eventually will impact their territories. Both sides have underpinning reasons to remain fearful of the other side.

The majority of countries located in close vicinity of the Caspian Sea, except for Afghanistan and Iran, are newly independent states which emerged after the dismemberment of the former Soviet Union. Most citizens in these countries are Muslims. The newly independent countries in Eurasia have not yet forgotten their deculturalization at the hands of their Tsarist Russian and Soviet masters. Harsh treatment of Muslim minorities at the hand of Chinese authorities in Xinjiang and the recent decision by the Indian government to revoke constitutional rights of Kashmiris turn on a new wave of alarm across Muslim communities in the entire region. What makes their plight exponential is a misplacement of indigenous resources by public officials either by wasting them or using them for purposes that do not help citizens of their relevant countries to attain prosperity or security. Beneath the apparent turmoil and chaos that dominates the entire region, prospects for a brighter tomorrow is never lost.

Hope has been growing for Central Asian gas and oil to reach European markets via the Trans Caspian Pipeline Networks (TCPN) as many legal, political, and technical challenges that hindered those transactions have been eliminated. Active engagement by regional and international actors who want Central Asian oil and gas to reach Europe via the TCNP (Cutle, 2019). Turkmenistan built the East-West Pipeline (EWP) during 2012-2015 at the time when there was little hope for the realization of this project. The East-West is a domestic pipeline connecting gas fields in areas close to the borders with Afghanistan and Iran to the Caspian Sea Coast.

The Trans Caspian Gas Pipeline (TCGP) is yet to be constructed. Only recently, hopes for the rebirth of the TCGP grew. The signing of the Caspian Convention in 2018 eliminated legal obstacles on the way to building the pipeline. The Foreign Ministry of Germany has officially included imports of gas from Turkmenistan in its energy security policy of 2018. Georgia and the European Commission signed the financing agreement in January this year for the initial engineering and design studies of the Trans Caspian Gas Pipeline, the “pre-FEED” (preliminary front-end engineering and design) studies, as quoted by (Cutle, 2019). Hopes went higher when US President Trump in his congratulation message on the occasion of the Persian New Year, Nawruz, to his counterpart President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov of Turkmenistan, hoped that recent developments; referring to the signing of the Caspian Sea Convention by Iran, Russia, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, and Azerbaijan in August of 2018; would help Turkmenistan to export its gas through TCGP to European markets eventually. The United States further ensured

its continued support and engagement in the energy affairs of the Caspian Sea region when in March 2019, its House of Representatives approved an Act to “prioritize and expedite” the US government efforts in supporting the Europeans in building infrastructures that strengthen diversification of energy supply sources to Europe (Cutle, 2019).

To the eastern side of the Caspian Sea lies gigantic energy markets, much bigger than the European market: China, India and Pakistan. While China is connected with three Caspian Sea littoral countries via oil and gas pipelines, India and the rest of South Asia have no linkage with any of these countries. The third-largest economy of the world, India, is not connected to any oil and gas pipelines from anywhere else in the world.

There are complex issues that have yet to be tackled before connecting Central Asian energy fields via pipelines with significant markets in South Asia. Prominently, security issues and geopolitical rivalries between major powers in the region have complicated the situation. The security situation in Afghanistan is one of the most challenging problems in the way to build a pipeline from Turkmenistan and other Eurasian countries to South Asia.

International sanctions on Iran are an additional major obstacle. The worst scenario will be if the current Iranian regime collapses, and it is not immediately replaced by a legitimate administration that is acceptable to the majority of Iranians, the country could be in further turmoil. Iranian society is one of the most diversified in the entire region. The Shia theological regime is moving towards its end after ruling Iran for four decades. The regime is facing consequential challenges at home. It is isolated at the regional level because of its agenda of exporting revolutions to other sovereign polities and also for being officially a Shia state. This makes Iran different from the majority of Muslim communities in the region and the world at large who are followers of Sunni Islam. In addition, and more importantly, for its intrinsic hostility with the West and the latter’s reciprocal policies of retribution in the form of sanctions on Iran.

The intrinsic hostility between Pakistan and India over the disputed region of Kashmir is the most dangerous problem which could thwart the dream of security and the desire for prosperity for the entire region. The rivalry between China and India entails impending tragic consequences for the entire region which might lead to conflict. That said, the newly appearing opportunities in the region, if well captured and built upon, will truly realize the dream for prosperity and also an enduring peace and stability. Afghanistan can become a key player, just like Georgia, to the west side of the Caspian Sea, in flowing Central Asian gas and oil to South Asian markets as well as to European and East Asian markets.

Strong commitment and support from regional countries, primarily from India, as well as the United States and the European Union, are required to achieve the goal. Even Russia can be a stakeholder in energy pipelines that will extend towards Afghanistan and beyond. Iran, too, can be an agent of positive contribution and can play a pivotal role by its active participation in the energy market. It falls on otherwise rival and hostile actors to cooperate to create a win-win situation.

Turkmenistan

Turkmenistan has the largest gas reserves in Central Asia and holds the fourth-largest reserves in the world after Iran, Russia, and Qatar. Turkmenistan is the most “autocratic, closed, and self-isolated nation” among all five Central Asian countries, all ruled by autocratic regimes. With a population of only five million, the natural resources have mainly benefited the political elites of the country. Almost 100% of Turkmenistan territory is conducive to oil and gas mining. Turkmenistan is home to the second-largest gas field in the world, Galkynysh, after South Pars in Iran. Gas from Turkmenistan has a higher level of hydrogen sulphide and carbon dioxide in addition to having greater pressure and temperature, which all add surplus cost for “exploration and development of gas fields.”

The country has made a record of inefficiency in consuming its own gas. To numerically present the inefficiency, in 2014, for example, Turkmenistan consumed ten times more gas than Finland which has a similar population. Even when Turkmenistan can export the expected 30 billion cubic meter (BCM) of gas via the TCGP, the quantity will present less than 20% of Russia's export to Europe. In addition, China would use its own leverage in preventing the TCGP from being built. China sees the export of gas from Turkmenistan to Europe to be affecting, negatively, its own imports of gas from Turkmenistan and therefore, the export of gas to Europe would "threaten" energy security of China (Grigas, *The New Geopolitics of Natural Gas*, 2017).

India, China, and Pakistan

India is projected to be the most populous country in the world by 2040. It is already the third-largest economy, after the United States and China. India is the fourth largest consumer of energy products after the United States, China, and Russia (IAE, 2018). The main obstacles in front of India, to connect via pipelines with major energy fields in its neighbourhood, are its intrinsic hostility with Pakistan, prolonged conflict in Afghanistan, and India's own habitual passive and late response to geopolitical developments in the region. (Grigas, *The New Geopolitics of Natural Gas*, 2017) (Chen, *China and India's Quest for Resources and its impact on the Rivalry*, 2018) and (Paul T. , 2018).

The Indian government and market received turbulences after drones attacked the Abqaiq oil refinery and Khurais oil field in Saudi Arabia on September 14, 2019. The attacked that crippled half of Saudi's total oil output and consequently eroded India's trust in Saudi as a safe and stable supplier of oil. The spokesperson for the governing party in India, Baharatiya Janata Party (BJP), who is also an energy expert, has been quoted as saying that India is now anxious after discovering that the Saudi facilities were so vulnerable. Narendra Taneja has not hesitated in saying that any further military action would lead to the disruption of energy products from the entire gulf region (Tewari, 2019). The BBC has quoted the spokesperson as saying 'right now, the worry for India is the price – but if the supply is not properly resumed ..., then we will have to worry about the supply'.

India imports over 80% of its oil from abroad. Western powers have accused Iran of the attack. Yamani militants, however, have accepted responsibility for the drone attacks that stopped 5% of world oil output. India failed early this year to convince Trump's administration to exempt India's oil imports from Iran from US sanctions.

Furthermore, the U.S government's decision to withdraw its forces from Afghanistan must have turned on horror alarms in New Delhi. U.S officials have been optimistic about a peace deal with the Taliban, which would facilitate a negotiated end to the longest war in the history of the United States. India views the Taliban movement as a proxy group created and managed by India's arch-enemy, Pakistan (Schwartz, 2019). The return of the Taliban to the center of power in Kabul seems to be very feasible as a result of US President Trump's decision to scale down and eventually withdraw all U.S forces from Afghanistan (Lesley Wroughton, 2019).

Observers of U.S military engagement in Afghanistan believe that the outcome of the hasty decision by President Trump will shift the geopolitical balance in the region in favour of Pakistan and also China, India's main regional rival. India, along with Russia and Iran, were the three major regional powers that opposed the Taliban regime when the latter was in control of Kabul. Whereas, Pakistan was the primary support source for the Islamic movement. Since 9/11, however, the Islamic Republic of Iran has been frequently accused by western governments for providing logistical support to the Taliban, who have been fighting the U.S. led international forces stationed in Afghanistan.

A high-profile Taliban delegation visited Tehran and met Foreign Minister Javad Zarif in recent days. Russia also seems to have mended its relationship with the Taliban. Moscow has hosted several peace talks between the Taliban and other political factions of Afghanistan over the last

one year (Marson, 2018), (Qazi, 2019) and (Roy, 2019). China, along with Russia and the United States, declared its support for a political settlement of the conflict in Afghanistan. Taliban officials have frequently been visiting Beijing to coordinate their efforts for a political solution with Chinese officials. Pakistan's support for a negotiated withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan was evident from the warm reception of Pakistan's Prime Minister Khan by president Trump during his previous visit to Washington (BBC, Imran Khan: Pakistan PM meets Trump in bid to mend ties, 2019) and (Schwartz, 2019).

India is the only major regional power that is yet to find its place in the political struggle between regional and international actors. These actors are fiercely competing against each other in ensuring their vested interests in the outcome of a peace deal and withdrawal of NATO forces from Afghanistan (Haidar, 2019).

Indian foreign policy architects must be busy to work out a strategy to keep India relevant to political developments in Afghanistan, where it has invested billions of dollars in the previous two decades. India must be worried about who will fill the void after American and other NATO forces evacuate from Afghanistan as a result of a negotiated settlement between western powers and the Taliban (Haidar, 2019). The outcome of any agreement will have consequences for the security and economy of India.

India has invested mainly in developmental projects, including building the parliament building in Kabul and the Salama water Dam in western Afghanistan. India has also provided military assistance to Afghan forces who have been fighting the Taliban since 2002. Taliban are known for having a cordial and close relationship with non-state actors who have been fighting against Indian interests in South Asia, including affiliates of al-Qaida (Schwartz, 2019) and (GANNON, Jihad, history link Taliban to al-Qaida in Afghanistan, 2019). India has been fearful, since the 1980s, that conflict in Afghanistan could further escalate tensions within India, a concern it shares with China. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 had similar impacts (Chen, China and India's Quest for Resources and its impact on the Rivalry, 2018).

China and India recognize that energy and other resource security is pivotal to their national interests. Both countries are substantially dependent on imports of oil and gas from outside their national boundaries. Therefore, an appreciation exists among leaders of both countries that aggressive competition between them would produce negative results for their growing economies. In contrast, cooperation with each other will be beneficial to both of them (Chen, China and India's Quest for Resources and its impact on the Rivalry, 2018). Despite the existence of such a pragmatic vision amongst the leaders of the two countries, China and India, have increasingly been using their newly found riches to build their military powers (Belanger, 2018). The two have rivalry between themselves over territories along their 3500 km shared border; over natural resources in Eurasia and elsewhere; and also over status at the regional and world level (Paul T. , 2018), (Shankar, 2018), (Chen, China and India's Quest for resources and its impact on the Rivalry, 2018), and (Pu, 2018).

They have been designing and implementing projects in the region and beyond to push one another to the periphery and to put itself into a dominating position (Paul T. , 2018). Both of them look at Muslim lands in Eurasia, South Asia, and the Middle East as supply stocks of energy products and other raw materials for their gigantic and still growing economies (Chen, China and India's Quest for resources and its impact on the Rivalry, 2018), (Pu, 2018), (Tabatabai, 2018) and (Grigas, The New Geopolitics of Natural Gas, 2017). At the same time, they have their military buildups in areas that would turn territories that belong to Muslims into their potential military action fields (Belanger, 2018). The treatment of Muslim communities by Chinese authorities has been poor. Also, the Indian government recently moved to revoke the constitutional rights of the Kashmiris.

Furthermore, the ruling party's push to amend India's Citizenship Bill will institutionalize discrimination against Muslims present in India (BBC, Xinjiang territory profile, 2018) and (Zahoor, 2019)

(Citizenship Amendment Bill: India's new 'anti-Muslim' law causes uproar, 2019). Their approaches, in reality, reflect their own appreciation and historical experience dealing with powerful and weak partners. They both have lived for over a century under colonial rule and what they term as a century of humiliation (Paul T. , 2018) and (Tabatabai, 2018). For them, now, the roles have switched. They have become stronger and see others as weaker partners.

The One Belt and One Road (OBOR) and Asia-Africa Growth Corridor are massive “geopolitical” projects by China and India. To counter China’s initiatives, India has sought to underpin its strategic cooperation with Japan, Australia, and Vietnam. India, together with Japan, has been trying to build an Asia-Africa Growth Corridor that will counter the OBOR. To counterbalance China’s expansion in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean, India has been conducting joint naval exercises with the United States and also offering to provide fuel and maintenance services to American naval vessels (Paul T. , 2018).

According to Professor Stephen Kotkin from Princeton University, China cannot materialize its dream of becoming a superpower of the world as the United States is today, because the latter has California and China does not. He further explains that China has been working to deeply integrate itself into Pakistan, which will enable the Asian giant to have its “California” and access to the Indian Ocean. A privilege that will enable China to materialize its aspirations to become the Superpower of the world (Kotkin, 2017). That explains the hypocritical approaches by Chinese authorities towards Muslims at home and in Pakistan. In Xinjiang, one in every eight Uyghur Muslims is held in custody centers by the authorities because they believe in and practice Islam (BBC, Xinjiang territory profile, 2018).

Pakistan is the largest recipient of Chinese Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). That investment, which is about \$60 billion (USD), is an invitation, in reality, of a catastrophic risk to the second largest Muslim country. If China intends to challenge the Indian marine force which is dominant in the Indian Ocean by using Gwardar and other ports in Pakistan; and challenge the US at the world level, by establishing tenure over the Chinese “California,” then a counteraction from India and the United States is possible. Whereas China truly becomes a world superpower, then the Muslim people of Pakistan may suffer similar fates as the Uyghur.

Russia

Russia has been using any opportunity and venue to reintroduce itself as a world power. It has frequently used Iran, for example, its physical territory and also its image, symbolically, as a Muslim nation, to further Russia’s sphere of influence over the greater Middle East (Tabatabai, 2018).

Russia’s hostile performance against the post-Cold War world order is well recognized. Yet, the rise of China as a major world power and its growing influence in Eurasia has caused Russia to fundamentally reconsider its position in regards to the geopolitics of energy in the Caspian Sea region (Cutle, 2019). Traditionally, Russia wanted Central Asian oil and gas to be transited to lucrative European Market via Russian territory. Commonly Russia would buy energy products from Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan at a lower price and sell the same products up to double the purchasing price to the Europeans (Grigas, The New Geopolitics of Natural Gas, 2017). Now, for Russia, the security priority of the Caspian Sea and Eurasia is larger than blocking Central Asian Republics from getting their energy products to Europe or elsewhere via the non-Russian Territory. To block Chinese “geo-economic inroads into the Caspian Sea littoral,” Russia might even be prepared to welcome European and American presence in Turkmenistan so that the West serves as a “bulwark” against the Chinese expansion. The new Caspian Sea Convention prevents military vessels from “non-littoral countries” from sailing in the Caspian Sea (Cutle, 2019). Russia and Iran have always wanted the Caspian Sea to remain out of reach by external powers. What then would be China’s role?

From the 1930s to date, Russia and Iran have sought to exclude non-littoral states from interfering in the Caspian Sea. In 2014 the crisis in Ukraine was at its peak, Iran was busy negotiating with P5+1 over its nuclear issues, and the United States was helping the other three littoral states, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, and Azerbaijan to upscale their defence capacities. Iran and Russia proposed at the fourth Caspian Summit a ban on foreign powers in the water of the Caspian Sea. All five littoral states agreed to the proposal. The American contribution to the three Caspian littoral states included the development of their own navies. NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) even sought to open bases in Kazakhstan and further boost ties with Azerbaijan. The agreement between the five Caspian littoral states, however, prevented NATO's and the United States' desired presence in the Caspian Sea zone. Furthermore, Russia and Iran have intensified and increased their joint drills and efforts in the Caspian Sea (Tabatabai, 2018).

Iran Iran holds the second-largest gas reserves in the world. Some estimates suggest that Iran holds the largest reserves. However, the country has not assumed its role in global gas and oil markets because of international sanctions and lack of pipeline infrastructures that would connect Iranian gas fields with major international markets. Iran has the greatest potential of providing gas to European, South Asian, and East Asian markets at competitive prices. Iran is considered to be the only serious competitor who can challenge the Russian dominant position as a supplier of natural gas to Europe. Not only via pipelines, but Iran could also be the most significant LNG production "wildcard" in the world (Grigas, *The New Geopolitics of Natural Gas*, 2017). When Iran eventually starts exporting its own gas via pipelines to Europe, it will do so more efficiently than Turkmenistan. Iran directly borders Turkey and Azerbaijan.

Traditionally it has been Russia preventing Turkmenistan and other Central Asian countries from exporting their energy products via non-Russian territories to international markets. In the case of Iran, it is primarily the United States preventing the country from supplying its energy products to global markets. The United States, as well as the Security Council of the United Nations and the European Union, have placed severe sanctions on Iran's energy industry.

Sanctions are a foreign policy tool used to ensure the interest of sanctioning states and institutions. But sanctions intentionally bring about pain and suffering for the affected nations (Nephew, 2018). As a direct consequence of Western sanctions, in recent weeks, tens of thousands of Iranians took to the streets in about 100 cities across Iran to raise their voice against their government decision for raising minimum gasoline prices by 50%. Iran is endowed with the world's fourth-largest crude oil reserves, and Iranians consider cheap gasoline as a "birthright." Similarly, the Iranian national currency has devaluated by 400% since 2015 (GAMBRELL, 2019). On December 05, 2019, a U.S State Department official told reporters that Iranian security forces might have killed over 1000 protesters during the unrest in the previous few weeks (Ryan, 2019).

The Shia theological regime and the United States have remained hostile to each other since the installation of the Islamic republic in Iran. Many in the West and the entire world are unaware of the good that the Islamic revolution of Iran has done for the protection of liberal values in the world by preventing pro-communist groups from taking power in Iran 40 years ago (Frankopan, 2015) and (Saikal, 2014). It will always be a matter of contention whether to credit the last monarch of Iran for uplifting the theological leaders in the society to counter the growing influence of pro-Moscow and pro-Beijing groups in Iran. Alternatively, one could impute the achievement to the leaders of the Islamic revolution for their preempting act and staging the revolution (Tabatabai, 2018). If Iran fell to communism in the 1970s and 80s, we would have had a different world, indeed. Once Iran became a red country, the entire region would have gone red too. The Jihad against the Red Army in Afghanistan might have failed, most probably, as a consequence of Iran becoming a communist state. As the phenomenon has not happened, it is easy for the unaware viewers to underestimate the power of Persian culture and Iran's influence over the greater Middle East, Eurasia, and South Asia.

It is another matter of contention whether the West would have been better if it stayed engaged in Afghanistan during the 1990s after the Soviet forces had withdrawn from the country or as a result of its intervention in the country in response to the 9/11 attacks in the United States. The United States and other NATO members supported the resistance of Afghan people against the Soviet Union. Afghans did not only liberate their own country but initiated the fall of the Warsaw Pact by forcing the Red Army to withdraw from Afghanistan after it had occupied the country for ten years.

Yet the Western world, which had generously flooded Afghanistan with billions of dollars' worth of arms and ammunition, to be used against the Soviet Forces, abandoned the tiny war-stricken and landlocked country to take charge of rehabilitating their country and social institutions. Western countries, as well as the rest of the world and particularly Afghanistan, have been paying the cost of shortsighted policies implemented by Western politicians whose motives are driven by their domestic partisan politics and limited office terms. Without having a legitimate replacement for the regime, the United States and its allies have been making another grave mistake by weakening the Islamic Republic, which might lead to the collapse of the state in Iran. The void that had been created in Afghanistan had been filled by non-state actors like al-Qaeda (GANNON, Jihad, history link Taliban to al-Qaida in Afghanistan, 2019). Whereas, an Iranian void might be filled by more serious challengers of the United States: China, Russia, and India. Besides, al-Qaeda, ISIS, and other similar groups could find their safe havens in Iran and the greater Middle East. Afghanistan did experience a collapse of the state and, consequently, a bloody civil war during the 1990s; it is conceivable that Iran could go through the same experience.

The Way Forward

India has several golden keys that it can use to influence the geopolitical architecture in the region substantially. One is India's market power. Neither can Pakistan rival that power, nor can the Taliban ignore it. India should use its growing and gigantic need for additional energy products as a bargaining chip in shaping the geopolitical structure of the region in its own favour. India can invite Russia to join it along with other members of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-and India gas pipeline project that is known as TAPI. Besides, India can team up with Russia to build independent pipelines that transfer Russian oil and gas to India via Central Asia and Afghanistan (Azam, 2019).

India can further enhance its role in shaping geopolitical mosaics in the region by reforming its own approach towards Afghanistan. It needs to relocate its focus from an elite-centred approach to a masses-centred approach. Instead of engaging in symbolic and high profile projects which provide targets for Pakistan-based non-state militant groups, India needs to adopt a visionary strategy according to which the whole region will grow economically. A promise of peace and stability for the entire region may ensure its own security and prosperity through helping smaller countries like Afghanistan to attain prosperity and peace for its citizens.

India is poised to have a strategic alliance with the United States and enjoy a cordial relationship with Afghanistan and Iran in addition to being a member of the SCO. It can use its status in the international community to further elevate its role in the peace process in Afghanistan. India can team up with other Afghanistan well-wishing countries to support Afghanistan's plea to be recognized as a sanction filter zone for international sanctions imposed on Iran by the United States, the EU and the UN Security Council. International sanctions have created major, though unintended, obstacles for Afghanistan, India, and other regional countries in having normal and mutually beneficial trade and business relationships with each other.

China's approach in meeting the security challenges in its neighbourhood during the previous three decades might entail lessons for India to adopt in the wake of withdrawal of international forces from Afghanistan. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, China, together with

Russia and three newly independent republics of Central Asia, formed a group that is known as the Shanghai Five. Its primary objective was to prevent the “evil forces of terrorism, separatism, and extremism from filling the political vacuum,” which could undermine security and stability within China’s own territory. China diagnosed poverty in Central Asia, as the leading cause for all of the three “evils.” Within this context, Chinese leaders developed the idea of opening up a “modern version of the Silk Road,” an initiative that would eliminate the root cause of terrorism, separatism, and extremism as well as offer China additional security “in the form of non-sea transport routes for oil and gas.” China has invested billions of dollars in the oil and gas sectors as well as in communication facilities in Central Asia since the mid-1990s. The “Shanghai Five” facilitated the creation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2001 (Chen, *China and India’s Quest for resources and its impact on the Rivalry*, 2018). India and Pakistan were admitted as members of SCO in 2016.

The inclusion of Russia in TAPI or an alternative pipeline project will make building an energy corridor from Eurasia to the Indian subcontinent more feasible. Russia possesses resources, as a regional power, which could be effective in withstanding potential challenges ahead of the pipeline (s). Many observers believe that Russia’s relationship has improved substantially with Pakistan in recent years (Butt, 2019). Pakistan imported LNG for the first time in 2015. In 2018, Russia agreed to build an LNG pipeline from Karachi to Lahore (Bhutta, 2016). Russia’s interaction with the Taliban represents an influence over the Islamic movement. More importantly, the Taliban consider TAPI as their own baby because the project had been designed when their regime was still in power in Afghanistan. Therefore, they even vowed to protect the project when its construction work started in Afghanistan last year (Alikozai, 2018).

TAPI or any other revenue-generating project will be attractive to the Taliban for another reason too. Amir Khan Mutaqi, a chief Taliban negotiator, while in Moscow, referred to substantial growth in cultivation, production, traffic and consumption of narcotics in the last two decades as a major problem for Afghanistan. By implication, he suggested that the Taliban would ban the whole narcotics industry if they return to power; the same way they had banned the cultivation of poppy during 2001, their last year in power. But opium accounts for over 30 percent of Afghanistan’s GDP. It also provides full-time jobs for over half a million workers in Afghanistan (Rowlatt, 2019). Should the Taliban ban the cultivation of poppy, to portray themselves morally superior, it would be detrimental for the economy of Afghanistan. Afghanistan’s economy is heavily dependent on international aid and opium production.

When most of the international forces leave the country, their respective governments will be less interested in providing developmental aid to Afghanistan. They have invested a tremendous amount of blood and treasury in the previous two decades to stabilize Afghanistan. Once India harnesses its own need with that of Russia and other regional countries, it has enough resources in hand to implement its foreign policy in a manner that will ensure the national interest of India in the region. India has successfully built a positive image for itself in Afghanistan as well as other Central Asian countries by taking a leading role in the reconstruction efforts in the last two decades in Afghanistan. Though, some observers believe that India’s delay in acting lost the momentum to China of brining Central Asian republics around its own economic orbit after the fall of the former Soviet Union (Chen, *China and India’s Quest for Resources and its impact on the Rivalry*, 2018).

Iran, as a country, has all the necessary qualifications to serve as a pillar of stability for the entire region. Unfortunately, the relationship between the Islamic regime in Iran with the United States on one side and with the Muslim countries in the region on the other side have made it difficult for Iran to play a constructive role. Either the current leaders of Iran remain in power, or they are replaced with others with a fundamentally different worldview. Regardless, Iran needs to redefine its position in the geostrategic architecture of the region.

The world around Iran has dramatically changed since the collapse of the former Soviet Union and the emergence of China and India (Tabatabai, 2018) and (Paul T. , 2018). While these changes present numerous opportunities for the entire region, they also bear impending challenges with grievous consequences for the sovereignty and wellbeing of Muslim communities from Kashmir and Xinjiang to the Caucasus. Iran, as an important heir of ancient Persia and great Islamic civilizations, can help the newly independent Muslim states in Eurasia to overcome their identity crisis after their almost century-long association with an alien culture, Czarist Russian and Socialist Soviet Union (Adams, 2010). Many of these countries, in addition to Afghanistan and Iran, formed the ancient Persia (Starr, 2013) and (Beckwith, 2009). By empowering smaller nations around itself, Iran can lead the entire region to greater prosperity and secure itself and its surroundings from negative externalities that would emanate from the presence of multiple world powers in its close vicinity.

It is unrealistic to expect the current theological leaders to introduce Iran as a secular state in which there is a clear separation between state affairs and religious matters. Also, replacing the current regime may not be possible through peaceful means. That said, the current regime cannot be accepted as a normal counterpart by other members of the international community. Therefore, under the current regime in Iran, the country cannot play its natural and constructive role in the region efficiently. The best approach would be that the incumbent leaders of Iran lead the kind of reforms that falls within their domain and simultaneously change Iran's role fundamentally. They can use cultural policies, to reintroduce Iran as an inclusive and cooperative society and polity at home and in its neighbourhood.

As a hypothetical proposal, the incumbent political leaders, many of whom are also religious scholars could consider reinstating Sunni Islam as the official religion of Iran. The majority of Iranians were forced to accept Shia Islam by the Safavids in the 16th century after the population had accepted and practiced Sunni Islam since the religion had reached Persia (Armstrong, 2002). Later rulers of Persia reinstated Sunni Islam in the 18th century, though it was short-lived because the Qajar dynasty, again, introduced Shia as the official religion of Persia (Armstrong, 2002). Since then, Iran has remained a Shia majority country, and with the Islamic revolution, the practice of Shiism has reached its peak (Saikal, 2014). Such a cultural revolution could disarm Iran's regional geostrategic competitors, many of whom happen to be also Muslim countries, of using Shiism as a pretext for isolating Iran from the rest of the Muslim community and the world at large.

Iranian policymakers can use the launch of their symbolic policy as a platform to open up Iran as an inclusive society for all Iranians and as a constructive member of the union of nations. With that, Iran needs to provide transparent and credible assurances to the world that Iran fully abides by international rules and norms while dealing with its counterparts in the international community. Similarly, the officials must assure Iranian citizens that their public affairs will be managed only by elected politicians whose mandates will be decided at polls not behind closed doors by a few individuals.

Without a fundamental policy change in Iran, the continuation of the status quo adversely affects the entire region. International sanctions on Iran negatively affect the economic and social wellbeing of all countries surrounding Iran and the Caspian Sea. The United States, European Union, and the Security Council of the United Nations (UN) need to provide plans that mitigate the negative impacts of their sanctions on Iran or Iran's neighbours.

As a proposal, for example, the United States could declare Afghanistan as a filter zone for its sanctions imposed on Iran. In such a case, the European Union and the Security Council of the United Nations would need to follow the US lead. That decision could mean that any trade between Iran and the rest of the world that happens via the territory of Afghanistan be considered sanctions free. Let Iranian oil and gas reach the Chinese market via Afghanistan and Azerbaijani oil and gas via Iran and Afghanistan to Indian and Pakistani seaports from where the products could also be re-exported to South Korea and European markets, for example. According to the mitiga-

tion plan(s), neither countries nor the firms involved in such transactions would be punishable by the sanctioning authorities.

Alternatively, the United States could recognize any products that originate from outside Iran, including oil and gas, that transit via Iran be considered sanction free no matter if the transit includes building pipelines or other infrastructures within Iran. Let's explain it through a hypothetical example. If Turkmenistan and an energy firm from North America agree on exporting Turkmen gas in the form of LNG via the territory of Iran to South Korea or anywhere else in the world, neither the company nor the government of Turkmenistan would face punitive action by the United States, UN, or EU. According to the same example, if the firm and the government of Turkmenistan decide to subcontract the building and operation of the liquefaction facility in the Chabahar port to two additional firms; one French and the other an Indian the latter companies are also considered exempt from any punitive actions.

Regional countries, international firms, and other entities who have an interest in the energy sector of the Caspian Sea need to establish a systematic and regular platform for the exchange of information and coordination of their efforts.

Conclusion There seems to be a low prospect of Turkmen gas reaching Europe or India in the near future. This is due to numerous challenges, including the hostility between India and Pakistan, the rivalry between China and India; the continued conflict in Afghanistan; the poor governance in Turkmenistan; the assertive attitude of Russia towards the current world order; and the chronic hostility between Iran and the West. It does not matter if, either the Russians block the flow of gas and oil via TCGP or the US prevents Iranian oil and gas from reaching European and Asian markets, the result is that such a status intensify rivalries between major powers in the region.

A holistic and inclusive approach by international and regional stakeholders can allow for Caspian oil and gas to reach global markets. Iranian President Hassan Rouhani threatened last year to block the flow of oil from the Persian Gulf. This was in response to their concern that the West might prevent Iran from exporting its oil to international markets. Iran explicitly threatens to block the flow of oil from the Persian Gulf, where the United States has multiple military bases in the Gulf States of United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Bahrain (Gause, 2019). If Iran is not able to export its gas to Europe, it will not allow, for sure, Turkmen gas to reach Europe via TCGP. Neither American nor European vessels will be available to protect the pipeline in the Caspian Sea.

It will be naïve on the part of European states and private firms interested in investing in TCGP or other major energy-related projects to not consider the overall geopolitical context of the Caspian Sea littorals and its greater neighbourhood.

About the Author

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