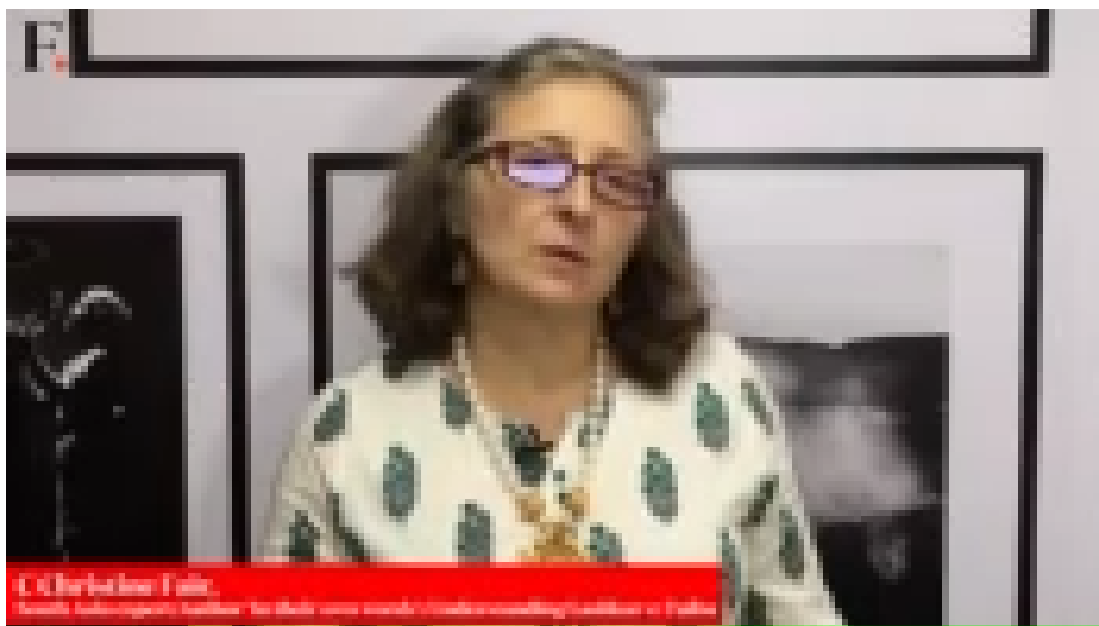


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Piles of second-hand motorcycles headed to the bowels of Afghanistan, serpentine queues of brightly painted trucks, petrol-filled jerrycans piled up by the roadside: there's nothing to show that this is among the world's most dangerous roads. But, the India-built Delaram-Zaranj highway in Afghanistan has the potential to change the strategic map of the region and the fight to develop it is at the heart of a geo-strategic struggle for influence between India and Pakistan.

The 215km-road, also known as Route 606, links Zaranj, the capital of Afghanistan's Nimruz province that borders Iran, to Delaram, a transport hub that connects to the Kandahar-Herat Highway.

I recently visited Zaranj and travelled the road built by India. I wanted to assess the infrastructural capacity and traffic through this border crossing. The border town integral to the highway's success already strains from the shipments coming from the Iranian port city of Bandar Abbas. While Chabahar, a deep-sea port India is building in southeast Iran, offers the

prospect to transform Zaranj, there is much work to be done.

04 Route 606 REMAINING

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What I found in Zaranj surprised my interlocutors in Kabul, many of whom were under the impression that the crossing is under-utilised. Far from it. This dusty town was a busy hub and at full capacity even though little traffic is coming in from Chabahar -- most of the vehicles are from Bandar Abbas.

If India hopes the road to be an alternative to Pakistan's warm water routes, New Delhi should consider helping Afghanistan augment the infrastructure. For one thing, the bridge that links the two countries is too narrow for two-way traffic. It takes interminably long for a single truck to make the crossing.

Trucks are stacked up along the Zaranj-Delaram highway, making it difficult for regular traffic. Trucks may have to queue up for up to two months, clogging the narrow road.

The customs and border facilities struggle with the operational tempo as do the counter-narcotics forces. Large amounts of precursor materials that convert opium to lucrative narcotics such as heroin pass through Zaranj but police lack detection devices.

As I spent two days in Zaranj speaking to drivers, businessmen and an array of officials, I could not imagine how this crossing could bear more traffic.

Once in Iran, Afghan truckers report a bevy of woes, beginning with usurious visa charges, extortion, and inadequate quotas of petrol to make the journey. Truckers told me that they feel as if they have no advocates. Everyone said they wish the border could be open all day, every day. They, however, claim the Iranians demure for various reasons. Truckers entering Afghanistan must countenance the Taliban as well as corrupt police officials.



The big picture

In 2003, India and Iran signed the so-called "Road Map to Strategic Cooperation". The centrepiece was the collaboration on the Chabahar port. India is also a stakeholder in the so-called North-South Corridor on which goods will move from India to Chabahar, pass through Iran via rail or road then onward to the Caspian and northern Europe.

Because Pakistan has denied India access to its soil, for New Delhi, Chabahar is a needed byway to Iran, Afghanistan and beyond. Moreover, it is 171km from Gwadar, the port China is building on Pakistan's Makran coast as a part of the so-called "China Pakistan Economic Corridor".

In 2005, India also began work on the ambitious Route 606. Built by the Border Roads Organisation (BRO) at a cost of Rs 600 crore, it was a constant irritant for Pakistan for various reasons.

First, is the nature of BRO itself, whose website explains it is "committed to meeting the strategic need of (India's) armed forces".

Second, Islamabad understood that the route would reduce Afghanistan's dependence on Pakistan for access to warm waters. Islamabad has used Kabul's reliance on Pakistan as a tool of economic arbitrage and to preclude India from having ground access to Afghanistan.

Third, Nimruz borders Balochistan, where Pakistan accuses India of interfering in collusion with Afghanistan. Fourth, it is yet another visible symbol of India's presence in a country that Pakistan seeks to render into a vassal of Rawalpindi, the home of Pakistan's opprobrious army.

Given Pakistan's control over the Taliban and other murderous organisations such as the Haqqani network, the road came under constant attack during construction and after it was handed over to Afghans in January 2009, by which time six Indians, including a BRO driver and four Indo-Tibetan Border Police men, and 129 Afghans were murdered. This road was to be the shortest route to move products between Afghanistan and Iranian ports.

India retrenched from the project after the UN Security Council imposed sanctions on Iran in 2006, ceding space to China. In 2015, under President Barack Obama, China, France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom and the US along with the European Union forged a historic deal with Tehran to limit its ability to develop nuclear weapons, bringing Iran back into the comity of nations. The so-called the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) cleared the path for India to re-engage in Chabahar.

India resumed work on the port with alacrity.

The shadow of Trump

Late 2018, the fate of Zaranj and Chabahar was in a limbo again, contingent upon the whims of the maladroit US President Donald Trump.

When he assumed the presidency in January 2017, he began eviscerating the accomplishments of Obama. In May 2018, Trump withdrew from JCPOA and threatened sanctions against anyone dealing with Iran.

This disquieted India for several reasons. First, India imports more than 80% of its crude, of which about 10% comes from Iran. Indian refiners prefer Iranian crude due to better pricing and terms.

Second, Chabahar, where India is developing three berths, would also have come under the sanctions. India is also building a rail link from Chabahar to the Afghan border. Not only would the snap-back sanctions restrained India's strategic goals, they would have also undermined the viability of the port.

Under the US law, Washington could exempt sanctions for activities that "provide reconstruction assistance for or further the economic development of Afghanistan". Many analysts, including this author, strenuously argued that India should stand its ground and push for relief.

India prevailed. The Trump administration offered New Delhi a waiver on both oil imports and Chabahar, including the planned rail link. It was a huge relief not only for India but also for Afghanistan.

If Afghanistan is to get the most from this border crossing, it will have to dedicate more resources to clean up corruption, enhance security and work with Iran to make life easier for the truckers.

While the twin problems of corruption and insecurity perdure throughout Afghanistan, Kabul should prioritise the Zaranj crossing, which has the potential to transform this dusty little outpost with few opportunities other than trucking and hocking smuggled fuel.

India, which enjoys good relations with Iran and Afghanistan, is well positioned to help. In doing so, India will advance its strategic interests in the region while continuing to provide the value-added projects that have endeared Indians to Afghans.

A new way forward?

In September 2018, the Trump administration foisted upon the region yet another special envoy, Zalmay Khalilzad, with the hope that he could secure a negotiated settlement with the Taliban and conclude the 17-year war in Afghanistan. Scholars of South Asia were sceptical: few people are as loathed and distrusted by all sides as Khalilzad, who was in India as part of a two-week tour of the region early January 2019. Khalilzad's mission seemed pointless given Trump's announcement in December that he would withdraw troops from Afghanistan.

Why would the Taliban negotiate an end when they need not defeat the Americans and their Afghan allies? The Taliban only need to keep fighting to demonstrate that the Americans and Afghans cannot defeat them. This is the definition of an insurgent's victory.

Why would Pakistan allow the Taliban to sue for peace unless that peace means Afghanistan's capitulation to Pakistan? Would Afghans—who loathe Pakistan for the decades of devastation it has wrought—ever agree to such peace terms?

And, why would the Taliban or their backers in Rawalpindi care about Khalilzad's efforts when Trump is talking withdrawal?

Whether or not the American Tweet State and Deep State agree on Afghanistan, it should be clear to all that Afghanistan needs a new way forward and I contend Chabahar—and Indian investment there—is central to this new future.

Contemporary Afghanistan is not the Afghanistan of 2001. Today, Afghanistan is connected to railheads with Iran, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. These rail heads are key to helping Afghanistan get its valuable resources out of the ground and to the markets.

Afghanistan was once dependent on Pakistan, it no longer is. Between 2012 and 2016, Afghan imports from Iran totalled \$1.3 billion against \$1.2 billion from Pakistan and \$1.1 billion from China. During the period, Pakistan was the largest destination for Afghan exports with \$283 million of goods, India was right behind with \$230 million, a figure that is expected to rise as Chabahar comes online.

Over the last year, India has shipped about 110,000 metric tons of wheat and 2,000 tons of pulses to Afghanistan through Chabahar. If Afghanistan can improve political and trade ties with its neighbours, it can cut down dependence on Pakistan. Once independent of its murderous neighbour, Afghanistan will be in a greater position to extract political concessions.

This does not mean that Afghanistan will be peaceful. Far from it. Pakistan will work assiduously to undermine these efforts. But it does allow Afghanistan to move forward, while strategically isolating Pakistan that is not terribly dissimilar from the decisions that India has made.

New Delhi has understood that Pakistan will continue to kill Indians. However, every Indian leader since the 1999 Kargil war has known that the country has much to gain by avoiding a war with Pakistan. The strategic restraint has paid off: India's economic growth has enabled it to invest in defence modernisation, to diminish the immiseration of its masses, and diversify its portfolio of strategic alliances.

This has not been cost free: every year, Pakistan's proxies murder dozens of Indians. In contrast, three Indians die every 10 minutes in road accidents. In 2017 alone, 147,913 persons died, many times more than the lives lost in all of India's wars with Pakistan, including Pakistan-sponsored terrorism in Kashmir.

Even in Afghanistan, a war zone, 5,000 civilians were killed in road accidents in 2017 against 3,438 left dead by anti-government forces or in friendly fire. My intention is not to trivialise either kind of death rather to put them into perspective and to argue that progress can continue on some fronts even though Pakistan remains committed to murdering citizens of both countries.

(The writer has authored the books *Fighting to the End: The Pakistan Army's Way of War* and *In Their Own Words: Understanding Lashkar-e-Tayyaba*)

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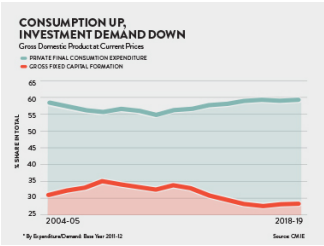
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