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## All aboard the New Silk Road(s)

**Iran, India, Afghanistan, Pakistan, China and the US are all scrambling to get the upper hand across Eurasia.**

Pepe Escobar  
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In the complex chessboard where the New Great Game in Eurasia is being played, both Kings are easy to identify: Pipelineistan, and the possible, multiple intersections of a 21st century Silk Road.

Few have noticed a crucial meeting that took place during the recent Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) summit in Tehran, between senior Foreign Ministry diplomats from Afghanistan, India and Iran. Their ultimate goal; a new **Southern Silk Road** connecting Iran to Central and South Asia through roads, railways and last but not least, major ports.

The crucial Silk Road port in this case is Chabahar, in Sistan-Balochistan province in southeast Iran. Tehran has already invested \$340 million to complete 70 per cent of the port construction - a decade-long project.

But with US and EU sanctions biting harder and harder, Tehran expects Delhi to come up with a closing \$100 million. India has already invested \$136 million to link Chabahar to Afghanistan's ring road system.

One does not have to be Alexander the Great to notice the fastest connection between Kabul and India would be through the fabled Khyber Pass. But that does not take into account the accumulated historical venom between Islamabad and Delhi - their constant promises to increase cross-border trade notwithstanding.

With Chabahar linking Iran directly to Afghanistan and India, in theory Pakistan is sidelined. But it's much more complicated than that.

### **All eyes on Eurasian synergy**

In theory, Washington won't tolerate its allies Kabul and Delhi not pushing further into isolating Iran (**which is not isolated** at all, as NAM graphically attested). In "facts on the ground" terms, there's not much the Obama administration can do.

For Delhi, getting closer with both Kabul and Tehran is all about its Eurasian strategy. It's in Chabahar, for instance, that Indian ships unload tonnes of **humanitarian aid** bound for Afghanistan. Moreover, Delhi has already invested over \$2bn since 9/11 to improve infrastructure in Afghanistan.

India and Pakistan are fierce rivals in a push to seduce the elusive markets of the Central Asian "stans" - Afghanistan included. At the same time, Delhi badly lags in this race behind its prime geo-economic rival, Beijing. No wonder Delhi has launched a new, self-explanatory strategy: "**Connect Central Asia**".

The prime competitor is - who else - China.

Chabahar means "Four Seasons"; that is, a port that may be used all year long. Thus its importance in the broader Iran-India strategic partnership - not only in terms of Central Asia but for India's commercial relations with Southwest Asia and the wider Middle East.

Crucial Southern Silk Road developments ahead include India linking Chabahar with the iron ore riches of Afghanistan's Hajigak (home of up to \$3 trillion in mineral wealth) and Iran building a railway between Mashhad and the heavily Persianised Herat in western Afghanistan.

So India is looking westwards while Iran is looking East. As for Afghanistan - which, crucially, imports half of its oil from Iran - finally it will be connected to the Arabian Sea via Iran, thus relieving its dependence on Pakistan.

### **It's Chabahar versus Gwadar**

Enter Pipelineistan - via the key Iran-Pakistan umbilical cord in the making: **the 2,700 kilometre-long IP** gas pipeline, from Iran's gigantic South Pars field through Balochistan and Sindh and into Punjab.

According to National Iranian Gas Company (NIGC) managing director, Javad Oji, the stretch from Iranshahr in southeast Iran to Zahedan and the Pakistani border is 90 per cent ready. The 900 kilometre-long pipeline on the Iranian side should be active one year from now. It's up to Islamabad to finish its stretch.

Totally in character in terms of interminable Pipelineistan soap operas, IP used to be IPI (Iran-Pakistan-India) - but Delhi pulled out, forced by relentless pressure from the Bush and Obama administrations.

And it's here that the going gets really tough - because there's nothing Beijing would love more than turn the former IPI into IPC.

According to China's minister of national defence, Liang Guanglie, on a recent visit to Delhi, "**China has no plans for Indian Ocean military bases**".

Tell that to the Pentagon.

What Beijing does want, with relish, is to build Indian Ocean ports. The \$1.5bn Hambantota Port in Sri Lanka that opened only three months ago was mostly financed by China. Beijing is also investing in the Dawei and Kyaukpyu ports in Myanmar. And then, of course, there's the Holy of the Holies: **Gwadar**, in southwest Balochistan in Pakistan.

Gwadar was built mostly with Chinese money - over \$220 million. It was managed until virtually yesterday by Singapore - a contract signed in 2007. But then, in a Pipelineistan bombshell, Singapore decided to pull out. The official motive is that Islamabad did not grant 584 acres of Pakistan Navy land for **Gwadar's free zone**.

The unspoken motive is the extremely dodgy security panorama in Balochistan. As the Baloch have received virtually no benefits from the exploitation of their local wealth, Islamabad is now facing a renewed offensive of enraged Baloch nationalists.

### **The roads less travelled**

So guess who will take over Gwadar? China - who else?

This is strictly in line with China's **complex energy strategy** - which essentially translates into an escape from the straits of Malacca and Hormuz. By 2015, no less than 75 per cent of China's oil imports may have to transit the Malacca bottleneck if Beijing does not act fast coming up with alternative ports.

Beijing is bound to invest no less than US \$10bn in Gwadar - and will get a \$12bn oil refinery and oil city project back on track.

As much as India bets on Chabahar, China bets on Gwadar as a key transshipment hub linking it to Central Asia and the Gulf.

Technically, Chabahar is closer to the Gulf of Oman while Gwadar is in the Arabian Sea. Pakistan is not exactly being isolated - because Tehran and Islamabad have already discussed, at the highest levels, a possible connection between Chabahar and Gwadar. Iran, by the way, is also developing Gwadar's power grid.

The key fact remains inescapable; both are absolutely key pawns in the New Great Game in Eurasia - and also happen to be at the heart of Pipelineistan.

IP will go through Gwadar - with the now distinct possibility of a Chinese-built extension parallel to the Karakoram highway all the way to Xinjiang. And Gwadar may also become a terminal in case the perennially plagued Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline is ever built (that is, if the Taliban finally get their cut).

Washington, of course, has its own New Silk Road ideas, linking Central to South Asia. But that's a mirage in the desert without incorporating Iran - linked to both Pakistan and India (which imports 12 per cent of its oil - and rising - from Iran, increasingly paid for in Indian rupees).

That Silk Road is more like an American cheeseburger, in the form of the Northern Distribution Network (NDN) - a logistical/military marathon snaking across Central Asia so the US and NATO may supply their war in Afghanistan bypassing "unreliable" Pakistan.

And the cheeseburger becomes a Big Mac when it expands to the not-so-hidden American desire of implanting, or re-implanting, the Empire of Bases all over the Central Asian "stans". US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's recent schmoozing of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan fits exactly this purpose.

What's absolutely certain is that no major Eurasian power - especially Russia and China - will subscribe to Washington's silken package. The indigenous New Silk Road(s) linking South Asia to Central Asia, Southwest Asia and China may be seen as a process not dissimilar to South American emancipation where regional actors, for instance, are working on a decent highway connection from Brazil's Atlantic coast to the Pacific, and not having to route all their regional communication traffic via the US.

This is all about a great escape from the Atlanticist-dominated routes of trade, commerce and finance. The New Silk Road(s) will be built by Asia - and not by the West.