

Iran's Policies Towards the Southern Coastline

İran'ın Güney Kıyı Şeridine Yönelik Politikaları

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Abstract

It is very important for Iran to be able to use its political-economic-military geography effectively in order to protect and maintain its national security and to strengthen the position of regional power. This requires Iran to develop coordinated, highly effective and pragmatic strategies for its mainland, coastline and maritime areas. In this context, the study demonstrates Iran's policies both on the mainland and at sea, including energy security, defense strategy, transportation-infrastructure projects and port investments towards the Southern Coastline. The unique aspect of this article is its simultaneous examination of land and maritime policies towards the entire southern coastline, as well as its presentation of Iran's energy, defense, and transportation-infrastructure activities in the Southern Coastline from a collective, detailed, and strategic perspective. The purpose of this study is to emphasize the importance of the Southern Coastline in firmly establishing, securing and maintaining Iran's national security and to examine and analyze the investments in the energy, defense and transportation-infrastructure sectors in this region in line with its national interests.

Key Words: Iran, Southern Coastline, Energy, Defense, Infrastructure

Öz

İran'ın ulusal güvenliğini koruması ve sürdürmesi, ayrıca bölgesel güç pozisyonunu pekiştirebilmesi için siyasi-ekonomik-askeri coğrafyasını etkili bir şekilde kullanabilmesi oldukça önemlidir. Bu, İran'ın ana kara, kıyı şeridi ve deniz alanlarına yönelik koordineli, son derece etkin ve pragmatik stratejiler geliştirmesini gerektirmektedir. Bu bağlamda çalışma, İran'ın Güney Kıyı Şeridine yönelik enerji güvenliği, savunma stratejisi, ulaştırma-altyapı projeleri ve liman yatırımları başta olmak üzere hem ana kara üzerindeki hem de denizlerdeki politikalarını ortaya koymaktadır. Bu makalenin özgün yanı, tüm güney sahil şeridini oluşturan Basra Körfezi, Hürmüz Boğazı, Umman Körfezi ve Hint Okyanusu'na yönelik kara ve deniz politikalarını eş zamanlı incelemesi ve aynı zamanda İran'ın Güney Kıyı Şeridine yönelik enerji, savunma ve ulaştırma-altyapı faaliyetlerini kolektif, detaylı ve stratejik bir bakış açısıyla sunmasıdır. Bu çalışmanın amacı, İran'ın ulusal güvenliğinin sağlam bir şekilde tesisi, güvence altına alınması ve sürdürülmesinde Güney Kıyı Şeridi'nin önemini vurgulamak ve ülkenin ulusal çıkarları doğrultusunda bu bölgede enerji, savunma ve ulaştırma-altyapı sektörlerine yaptığı yatırımları incelemek ve analiz etmektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İran, Güney Kıyı Şeridi, Enerji, Savunma, Altyapı

Introduction

It can be argued that Iran has effectively utilised quantitative (geography, natural resources, economic capacity, population, etc.) and qualitative elements (national morale, national character, diplomacy, quality of government, etc.) that have historically determined its national power. Iran, for example, has

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critical geographical features such as the Zagros Mountains in the southwest, the Lut and Kavir deserts further inland, and the Elburz Mountains on the Caspian coast. While these can provide the country with advantages in terms of military-security strategies, they can also pose some challenges in terms of transport-infrastructure construction. On the other hand, Iran's energy resources, concentrated in the south-western provinces of Khuzestan, Chahar Mahal Bakhtiari, Kohgiluyi Buyer Ahmad, Bushehr, Fars, Hormuzgan, contribute greatly to the country's national power. In addition, Iran's strategic energy resources are largely exported to the world through the Strait of Hormuz, posing serious geopolitical risks.

Iran is aware of such challenges and is developing some important strategies to overcome them both on its mainland and maritime areas. From this point of view, this study examines Iran's land and maritime policies towards this strategic geography, which is closely related to Iran's national security, through key topics such as energy security, defence strategies, transportation-infrastructure projects and port investments.

The regional studies on Iran to date have generally focused on sectarianism, ideology, ethnicity, nation-building, history and also have less discussed Iran's political-economic-military geography which is highly related to its national security. On the contrary, this study aims to put forward a comprehensive aspect for Iran's energy, defence and transportation-infrastructure projects. Therefore, it is of great importance to address Iran's policies towards the south and southwest region, which is critical to the establishment of Iran's national security.

The main objective of the study is to directly link Iran's national security with its policies towards the south and southwest region. The study, which is structurally a research article, will both utilize qualitative and quantitative research methods. The main hypothesis of the study is that the existing and potential threats to Iran's national security are mostly concentrated in the southern coastline and these problems are generally related to the defence, energy and transportation sectors. Therefore, Iran aims to guarantee its national security by developing a collective policy towards these areas.

The following research questions will be addressed towards the hypothesis stated above: What is the importance of the Strait of Hormuz, which is of great importance in the establishment and maintenance of Iran's national security, especially in terms of energy security and military deterrence? Since 2018, Iran has been subjected to the United States (US) secondary sanctions, what are the maritime and port strategies that Iran has pursued in order to reduce or overcome the impact of these embargoes and maintain its national development? What are Iran's investments in the Southern Coastline to es-

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establish energy security and strengthen its transport infrastructure? In order to contribute to its national security, with which allies and how can Iran develop collaborations in the Southern Coastline?

The fundamental argument underlying these research questions is as follows: It can be argued that after being subjected to the US economic sanctions in 2018, Iran developed various strategies at both national and international levels to overcome them. These strategies can be listed as developing alternative payment mechanisms in trade, finding new oil customers, improving land and railway infrastructure within the country, increasing the capacity of ports, and revising national security and defense strategies. In this study, the aim is to investigate and address the relevant research questions and arguments.

The Importance of the Strait of Hormuz in Iran's Energy Security and Military Deterrence

Iran is the second largest country in the world in terms of natural gas reserves and the fourth largest in terms of oil reserves. Therefore, the country is accelerating its investments in the southern region in order to ensure the security of hydrocarbon resources concentrated in the Gulf. One of Iran's strategic goals in the context of energy security is to transport the energy resources in the Gulf to the Indian Ocean via energy pipelines. In this context, Iran has planned to transport oil extracted from the southwestern provinces, which have rich oil reserves, to the Jask Port on the Indian Ocean coast via the Goreh-Jask Oil Pipeline. Since the Khark Island Oil Terminal, Imam Khomeini, and Bandar Abbas ports, where Iran's largest oil exports take place, are located within the Basra Gulf. Therefore, it is of great importance for Iran to continue its energy exports in the case of a possible clash or tension in the Gulf, as seen in the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War.

In this context, Iran's Gulf policy is fundamentally based on securing national energy resources and establishing military deterrence. This is also referred to as the "Comprehensive Deterrent Defense Strategy". Iran is pursuing an asymmetric warfare strategy based on flexible tactics, superior morale understanding, and leveraging geographical features to defend vital economic resources in the Gulf.¹

Energy Security

While the majority of Iran's oil reserves are located in the inner parts of the Basra Gulf and the southwestern provinces, the natural gas fields are found in

1 Kanan Ahmadzada, "Iran's Asymmetric Interventionism: The Analysis of the Proxy Warfare Strategy Since 2011", *Przegląd Politologiczny*, III, October 2024, p. 30; Kenneth Katzman, *Iran: Politics, Gulf Security, and U.S. Policy*, Congressional Research Service (CRS). Washington D.C. 2016, pp. 26-27.

the central part of the Gulf, in the Asaluyeh, Kangan, and South Pars areas, as well as in the waters off Bandar Abbas in the Strait of Hormuz. Therefore, the crude oil extracted from Iran's southwestern provinces is transported to the Imam Khomeini Port in Khuzestan province and to the island of Khark opposite Bushehr, and it is exported abroad through the terminals there.

Bender Abbas Port is the leading port for the export of petroleum products, primarily liquefied natural gas. First, crude oil is shipped by oil tankers from Imam Khomeini and Hark Island Oil Terminals to Bandar Abbas Port and then export abroad. Therefore, Iran plans to connect the oil fields in its south-eastern region to the ports of Bender Abbas and Jask via a pipeline. In this way, it will also reduce ship traffic in the Gulf.²

Iran's energy security is closely related to pipeline investments. For example, the pipeline originating from the Asaluyeh gas field extends from Bender Abbas through Iranshahr to the Pakistan border. This also constitutes the Iranian fragment of the Iran-Pakistan-India Gas Pipeline.³ Iran's strategic goal is to integrate the ports of Chabahar and Jask, which have coastlines on the Indian Ocean, with the country's natural gas and oil pipelines.⁴ In this context, Jask Port has been connected to the city of Goreh in the southwest of the country by an oil pipeline.

In addition to these, a natural gas pipeline has been constructed from Jask Port to Bender Abbas as part of the Iran-Oman Deep Sea Natural Gas Pipeline. The energy transmission line projects related to Jask and Chabahar are mostly within the scope of the Middle East to India Deepwater Pipeline (MEIDP) between Iran, Oman, and India.

These ports are of strategic importance in ensuring Iran's energy security. The port of Bandar Abbas, which is strategically located in the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), is planned to be replaced by the ports of Jask and Chabahar on the Indian Ocean coast sooner. For this reason, energy pipeline projects in north-south direction are now focusing on the Jask and Chabahar ports instead of Bender Abbas.

For example, there is an oil pipeline extending from the Neka Port, which is located on the Caspian Sea coast, to the southwestern oil fields, and

- 2 Sankalp Gurjar, "The Iran Challenge Unraveling India's Foreign Policy Dilemma", *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, VI/5, 2023, pp. 56-57.
- 3 Fei-fei Guo - Cheng-feng Huang - Xiao-ling Wu, "Strategic analysis on the construction of new energy corridor China-Pakistan-Iran-Turkey", *Energy Reports*, V, 2019, s. 830.
- 4 Ahmed Shams el-Din Leila - Mutasim Saddiq Abdullah, "The Economic And Strategic Significance of Iranian Ports: Jask Port As A Case Study", *Journal for Iranian Studies*, V/13, April 2021, p. 58; Golamreza Nasirpour, "Iran-India Relations with Future Prospects", *Geopolitics Quarterly*, XIV/4, Winter 2019, p. 172.

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the connection between Neka and Jask has been established with the completion of the Goreh-Jask Oil Pipeline. Additionally, a new oil pipeline in north-south direction from Neka to Jask is also on the agenda.

Also, the construction of a natural gas pipeline from Serahs, located on the Iran-Turkmenistan border, to Jask is planned. This project is actually closely related to the "Middle East-India Deep Sea Natural Gas Pipeline." Indeed, the deep-sea natural gas pipeline between Iran and Oman passes through Kuhe Mobarek, which is located north of the Jask Port. In this context, the aforementioned Jask Port and its surroundings will become a central port for Iran's oil and natural gas exports.

Tehran is concentrated on energy transmission line projects that will bypass the Strait of Hormuz in line with its energy security policies and is particularly trying to attract investment from China for these projects. Additionally, China's continued purchase of oil encourages Iran and leads to the acceleration of port projects. In this context, Iran's top priority in energy security is to make the Jask Port the center of oil exports, along with the Goreh-Jask Oil Pipeline and other pipeline projects.

Iran plans to make Indian Ocean ports central hubs for energy exports in the short and medium term, thereby restoring its oil exports to previous levels. Even though Iran has increased cooperation with China in this regard, oil tankers are under close surveillance by the United States. So, the risks in this trade still seem high.

Military Deterrence

Iran's defense tactics in the Gulf are largely based on tactics used in the 1980-1988 War between Iran and Iraq. Indeed, during the war, the Iranian Navy's preventive harassment fire and anti-ship cruise missile attacks were mostly unsuccessful. Thus, the asymmetric warfare methods of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Navy came to the forefront. In this context, the asymmetric attacks carried out by the IRGC Navy using small boats, corvettes, and mines have formed the basis of Iran's maritime strategies in the Gulf.⁵

During the Tanker Wars (1984-1988), the IRGC Navy implemented an asymmetric maritime doctrine based on "swarming," ambush tactics, and hit-and-run strategies carried out with small boats to render foreign vessels defenseless and drive them to a narrow coastline. Developed within limited resources and out of necessity, these creative tactics became the precursor to Iran's modern asymmetric warfare doctrine.⁶

5 Fariborz Haghsheenas, *Iran's asymmetric naval warfare*, The Washington Institute, Policy Focus (87), Washington D.C. 2008, p. 20.

6 The Office of Naval Intelligence. *Iran's naval forces-from gerilla warfare to a modern naval strategy*, Suitland, USA: Defense Office of Prepublication and Security Review, Fall 2009, p. 6.

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The operational responsibility areas of Iran's naval forces are divided into two regions: the Basra Gulf and the Indian Ocean.⁷ While the IRGC Fleet is responsible for the Basra Gulf, the Iranian Navy is considered responsible for the Sea of Oman.⁸ The Strait of Hormuz is also under the joint responsibility of both armies. However, the successes of the IRGC Fleet in the Gulf over the past 40 years, particularly during the Iran-Iraq War, have led to an increasing operational effectiveness.

Iran has also deployed air defense systems and missile facilities in the region to ensure the security of the Gulf. In this context, there are S-200 Air Defense Base in Bandar Abbas in the Strait of Hormuz and S-300 Air Defense Base in Bushehr. Additionally, there are ballistic missile launch ramps in Bender Abbas.

IRGC bases are stationed in the locations where energy resources are found in the Basra Gulf.⁹ IRGC aims to prevent foreign tankers from engaging in smuggling in this way. Equipped for unconventional warfare, these bases create significant deterrence during peacetime, while providing moral, geographical, and tactical superiority against enemies during wartime.

The asymmetric defense strategy of the IRGC in the Gulf is preventing the US from operating freely in the region. For this reason, the US is particularly trying to form an international naval coalition against Iran in the Gulf. In response, Iran is calling on Russia and China to support the region through joint exercises and naval patrols.

Iran's Maritime and Port Strategies

Iran, which has a coastline along the Indian Ocean, has become one of the leading countries in the field of international maritime affairs. The most important reason for this is Iran's status as a hydrocarbon-rich country and its export of crude oil from southern ports to foreign countries. However, as of May 8, 2018, Iran, which has been subjected to U.S. oil sanctions, has faced significant obstacles in commercial transactions and maritime activities. Removed from the international money transfer system "SWIFT", Iran needs alternative payment mechanisms and transportation vehicles to continue its oil exports.

- 7 Farzin Nadimi, *The IRGC and The Persian Gulf Region in A Period of Contested Deterrence*, The Middle East Institute, 2021, pp. 18-19.
- 8 Walter Posch, *The Iranian Security Apparatus (History – Present – Mission)*, Schriftenreihe der Landesverteidigungsakademie, Vienna 2024, p. 55; The Office of Naval Intelligence. *Iranian naval forces-a tale of two navy*, Suitland, USA: Defense Office of Prepublication and Security Review, February 2017, p. 22.
- 9 Anthony H. Cordesman-Alexander Wilner, *Iran and The Gulf Military Balance I-The Conventional and Asymmetric Dimensions- Fifth Working Draft*, Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS), 2012, p. 88.

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Before the US sanctions began in May 2019, Iran's daily oil exports were around 2.3 million barrels. This figure soon dropped to around 400,000 barrels per day.¹⁰ In June of the same year, this figure dropped to 300 to 240 thousand barrels per day.¹¹ This situation has put Iran, which is significantly dependent on oil in foreign trade, in a difficult economic position. Due to these difficulties, Iran aims to conduct oil exports through the swap method involving third countries and to continue its oil trade by making new moves in the maritime sector.

In order to circumvent the U.S. oil sanctions, Iran needs to establish a new payment system with its oil buyers, as well as develop its maritime and port strategies. This includes finding new oil buyers and ports, expanding its international port network, and ensuring the safety of oil tankers in international waters. From this perspective, this section discusses how Iran can utilize the northern and southern seas to overcome oil sanctions and with which actors and mechanisms it can cooperate in the oil sector.

Iran needs to develop new strategies, firstly, in payment methods and secondly, in the maritime area, which provides its connection with the world. To overcome the first problem, Iran could continue to trade oil in barter with neighbouring states. In addition, Tehran could try to make it more difficult to track international money transfers by involving third countries in the barter method. To overcome the second problem, Iran could try to find safe harbours for oil trade in the northern and southern seas, use foreign-flagged ships to secure trade routes, and turn off signal trackers to reach its customers. However, since oil tankers leaving Iranian ports are tracked by the United States thanks to advanced satellite technology, Iranian ships will have to resort to alternative methods to ship oil without being caught.

The United States can detect Iranian violations of the oil sanctions through two means. Firstly, it is monitoring Iran's money transfer movements in the international banking system to see which countries it is trading with and in exchange for which products. Secondary countries are also included in these transfer movements. However, since Iran is excluded from the international banking system, it can only achieve this through a bilateral trade mechanism established with the country it will be trading with. This is where the (SWAP) swap method comes into play. Accordingly, Iran can try to realise oil trade in exchange for various goods to be purchased from the relevant country

10 FRED (Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis) Official Website, "Crude Oil Exports for Iran, Islamic Republic of", <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/IRNNXGOCMBD>; Cathleen D. Cimino Isaacs-Kenneth Katzman-Derek E. Mix. *Iran: Efforts to Preserve Economic Benefits of the Nuclear Deal*. Congressional Research Service (CRS), Washington D.C. 2016, p. 1.

11 Henry Rome-Noam Raydan, "Infographic: A Visual Guide to Iran's Soaring Oil Exports", <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/infographic-visual-guide-irans-soaring-oil-exports>.

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in local currency. However, since the SWIFT mechanism is not used in payments, the transfer of goods and money cannot be made simultaneously, and therefore the trade in question is based on trust.

In other words, trade using the SWAP method is generally not preferred because it involves either payment first and then delivery, or delivery first and then payment. Additionally, there is a possibility that these transactions could fall under U.S.' secondary sanctions. In clearer terms, the oil trade conducted with Iran through barter in the relevant country's own currency (excluding smuggling) will be subject to scrutiny by the international banking system. For this reason, Iran plans to involve three countries in the barter method and export oil without using international money transfers. In short, Iran's SWAP agreements with third countries will create uncertainty about whether the exported oil originates from Iran or another country. Even if Iran overcomes its payment issues, it needs to effectively utilize land or sea corridors to sell its oil.

When looking at the alternative routes that Iran could use to bypass oil sanctions, the following options stand out: the shipping oil via ships in the Caspian Sea, using Bandar Abbas and Chabahar ports in the south, the railway and natural gas pipeline (IP) with Pakistan in the east, which is structurally impossible, the road with Afghanistan in the north, the railway with Turkmenistan in the north, and the oil pipeline with Turkey and the road with Iraq in the west.

The Caspian Sea and Indian Ocean coasts that Iran intends to use in the context of its oil exports bring with them certain challenges and opportunities. First, when the option of selling oil from the Caspian Sea is considered, Turkmenistan and Russia stand out among the actors that Iran can cooperate with. Russia and Iran are rivals in this regard as they are oil producers. Therefore, it is very difficult for Iran to sell its oil to third countries through Russia. However, if Russia wants to increase its merchandise exports to Asia, it can try barter trade with Iran. Accordingly, Russia would buy Iranian oil and export goods to Asian countries in return, and the Asian country would pay Iran in return. However, it is unlikely that Russia, the world's largest oil producer, would be able to buy large quantities of crude oil from Iran. Turkmenistan, on the other hand, exports crude oil to Iran and receives processed oil in return, and can sell natural gas to Azerbaijan via Iran through the barter method. Iran could use a similar method to reach its customers in Asia, which are large oil buyers, via Turkmenistan. Instead of using oil tankers in the Caspian Sea, it could use the railways with Turkmenistan.

Secondly, the Imam Khomeini Port, Bandar Abbas Port, and the Chabahar Port, which is exempt from sanctions, stand out as the ports on which Iran

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heavily relies for its crude oil exports. However, the likelihood of the US' intercepting oil trade via sea routes is quite high. For this reason, Iran's priority is to transport the oil fields in its south to Iraq and Pakistan via railways and energy transmission lines. In this context, Iran is trying to establish a railway connection between Imam Khomeini Port and Syria's Latakia Port. On the other hand, in order for Iran to trade oil with Pakistan, it first needs to complete the railway infrastructure extending to this country. In this context, Iran plans to construct a railway extending from the Port of Bender Abbas to the Port of Chabahar and from there to Gwadar Port in Pakistan.

Iran's Investments in Southern Ports

Since the US' comprehensive economic sanctions on Iran began on May 8, 2018, transportation and infrastructure investments in Iran's southeastern region have accelerated. For Iran, the development of the transportation infrastructure in the southeastern region is one of the main priorities in its foreign policy.¹² Indeed, Tehran sees this region as an important way out of the negative effects of economic sanctions. For this reason, Iran attaches great importance to the development of railway and land routes in the region, especially the infrastructure of Chabahar Port and also the construction of energy pipelines.

From this perspective, this section examines what investments Iran is making in the southeastern region to overcome economic sanctions. This section focuses on the positive contributions that transportation projects will make to the Iranian economy. In this context, the position of Chabahar Port in Iran's oil exports has been highlighted, and its potential role in the future of the Iranian economy, along with current investments, has been discussed.

Chabahar Port

In order for Iran to use the Chabahar Port actively and effectively, it must first complete the railway lines extending to this port and develop the road network. However, Iran has not completed the railways leading to both Pakistan and Chabahar. Due to these infrastructure problems, Chabahar Port is mostly suitable for container and dry cargo transport. The main ports of call for oil tankers are Bender Abbas Port, Imam Khomeini Port, and Bushehr Port. Therefore, Iran is dependent on the Strait of Hormuz for its oil trade. In this context, Iran give a great importance to the completion of infrastructure projects in the region, as the Chabahar Port could serve as a new outlet for Iran's oil trade.¹³

12 Ahmed Shams el-Din Leila - Mutasim Saddiq Abdullah, a.g.e., p. 61; Mehr News, "FM Zarif: development of Chabahar port, foreign ministry's top priorities", <https://en.mehrnews.com/news/145631/Development-of-Chabahar-port-foreign-ministry-s-top-priorities>.

13 The U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA), *Report on Iranian Petroleum and Petroleum Product Exports*, Washington 2024, <https://www.eia.gov/international/content/analysis/speci>

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Nevertheless, this port may help Iran find temporary solutions for its oil trade. Indeed, Chabahar Port, which is exempt from sanctions, stands out as a new logistics centre where Iran can open up to the world.¹⁴

Iran, which was subjected to U.S. oil sanctions in November 2018, has not disclosed which countries it exports oil to and in what quantities since that date. When examining the Iranian official reports from 2017 to 2019, only the total export and import figures are provided under the heading “trade in petroleum products.” In other words, Iran’s oil exports from the ports are being concealed. However, in the 2016 data of the same ministry, it is possible to find information on how much oil was exported from which port.

Chabahar Port does not have the technical infrastructure for oil tankers to load. The oil imports from the aforementioned port are mostly petroleum products transported by dry cargo ships. A similar situation applies to the Caspian ports of Amirabad Anzali and Noshahr. Iran’s “Neka” oil pipeline extends to the Amirabad Port. Nevertheless, the aforementioned port does not have the technical infrastructure for oil tankers to load. Therefore, petroleum products coming from Turkmenistan to the Amirabad Port are being dispatched from there to the aforementioned pipeline. However, there is no pipeline at the Chabahar Port similar to the one at the Amirabad Port. In addition, the lack of railway infrastructure in Chabahar also leads to the limited import of petroleum products through this port.

Iran plans to build a new dock, oil storage facilities, and pipelines to enhance the oil transportation capacity of the Chabahar Port. In addition, efforts are being made to improve container and dry cargo transportation at the port. In general, Iran considers the country’s ports as one of the most effective ways to circumvent sanctions. In this context, Tehran is making every effort to develop especially the southern ports, which are the main gateway for the country’s exports and imports. In this sense, Chabahar Port constitutes an important part of Iran’s national interests. In other words, Iran will need to use the Chabahar Port to find new oil customers, trade with Asian oil customers through barter, and attract investment to its country. In this direction, Iran will evaluate the investment opportunities in Chabahar, the port infrastructure, and the networks established with overseas ports. For example, while calling on investors in Asia to invest in this port, it will also bring up oil trade from this port. However, it will take 20 years for the Chabahar Port to become a

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al_topics/SHIP_Act/SHIP-Act.pdf, p. 21; Harsh V. Pant, *India-Iran Cooperation at Chabahar Port-Choppy Waters*. Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS) Briefs, 2018, p. 4.
14 Elaheh Koolae-Nabi Allah Emami Ivaki, “The Position of Chabahar in Deepening Cooperation between Iran and Central Asia”, *Journal of Central Eurasia Studies*, XVI/2, Autumn & Winter 2024, p. 274.

central port in Iran's crude oil trade.¹⁵ Accordingly, it is planned to construct a petroleum products refinery, LPG storage tanks, and a ship waste terminal on an 8-acre site at the port as part of a 15-year project.¹⁶

In summary, Iran plans to ensure energy security through Chabahar. The most important element of this plan is the Chabahar Port agreement signed between Iran and India in 2016.¹⁷ This project will also provide important infrastructure for the oil and natural gas pipeline extending from Chabahar to Afghanistan.¹⁸ However, the top priority is the completion of the railway line from Chabahar to Zahedan. The most significant challenge Iran faces is India's reduction of investments in the Chabahar Port, which it plans to connect to Afghanistan through Chabahar. For this reason, Iran is turning to Russia, which will provide significant economic and military contributions to its southern ports.

Highways

Iran places great importance on the coastal stretch in its southeastern region's highway projects. The roads from Zahedan, the capital of Sistan and Baluchestan, to Chabahar are paved and two-way roads. Nevertheless, Iran has focused on developing the coastal strip extending from Bandar Abbas to Chabahar instead of improving the aforementioned north-south route.¹⁹ In this context, Iran plans to construct a divided highway from the port of Jask Port, near the Strait of Hormuz, to the Chabahar Port.

The main reason Iran prefers the coastal corridor for its southeastern highway investments is its plan to ship oil tankers to the Jask and Chabahar ports. Planning to make the aforementioned ports suitable for oil exports in the coming years, Iran aims to develop transportation corridors to these ports

- 15 Sarbananda Sonowal, "Strengthening India-Iran Ties Through the Chabahar Port Project", *Iran Daily*, 14 May 2024, p. 1-2; Marinelink, "Chabahar Port builds LPG storage tanks", <https://www.marinelink.com/news/chabahar-port-builds-lpg-storage-tanks-460713>.
- 16 Esmaeil Dashtban - Abdolreza Alishah, "Analysis of Opportunities and Challenges for the Development of Free Zones in Iran Case Study: Chabahar Free Zone", *Annals of Global History*, II/1, 2020, p. 47.; Islamic Republic of Iran-Ministry of Road & Urban Development Official Web Page, "Iran's Ports and Maritime Organization - investment opportunities", <https://www.mrud.ir/en/Investment/Companies/Ports-and-Maritime-Organization>.
- 17 Moupriya Biswass, "A Deepening Strategic Partnership between India and Iran under the Modi Regime", *Electronic Journal of Social and Strategic Studies*, V/2, 2024, p. 231.
- 18 Mojibullah Angar - Vikas Deep, "The Economic Significance of Chabahar Port for Afghanistan: Opportunities and Challenges", *The Academic*, III/2, February 2025, pp. 253-255; Ghodrattollah Behboudi Nejad-Sanjay Kumar Pandey, "Iran: India's New Gateway to Central Eurasia, the Case of the International North-South Transport Corridor", *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs*, VIII/1, Winter-Spring 2017, p. 7.
- 19 Evgeny Vinokurov et al., *International North-South Transport Corridor: Investments and Soft Infrastructure*. Reports and Working Papers 22/2. Eurasian Development Bank, Almaty, Moscow 2022, p. 54.

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by road in the initial phase and by railway and oil pipelines in the long term. Before the agreement with India regarding the Chabahar Port, Iran's priority was the Jask Port. As the process progressed, with Chabahar being exempted from US sanctions, Iran prioritized it.

Jask Port

In order to get rid of its dependence on the Strait of Hormuz for its oil exports, Iran plans to use the Jask Port, which opens to the Sea of Oman. Because almost all of Iran's oil exports come from Khark Island and therefore tankers have to pass through the Strait of Hormuz. Therefore, a large part of Iran's oil sales should be transported from Hark to Jask. In this regard, the National Petrochemical Company of Iran has announced plans to move the country's central oil export terminal from the Basra Gulf to the Sea of Oman.²⁰ In this context, it is envisaged to establish oil refining and petrochemical facilities in Jask Port. In addition, the construction of the 1,100 km oil pipeline from Jask Port to Bushehr was completed in 2021.²¹

In other words, Iran is trying to develop its southern ports other than Chabahar despite US sanctions. Tehran is focusing on long-term plans to guarantee energy security. In this sense, Iran is focused on developing the infrastructure and transport lines of Jask and Chabahar ports.

Railways

Iran attaches great importance to the Zahedan-Chabahar Railway Project in its transport investments in the south-east. This north-south corridor will also form the basis of the line from India to Afghanistan. The 1.2 billion Euro project is expected to be completed in 4 years. India has undertaken the construction of the 500 km line from Chabahar to Zahedan in the total 1.6 billion dollar railway project to Afghanistan. Due to the US economic sanctions, India cannot allocate sufficient resources for this project. Iran Deputy Minister of Roads and Urbanisation Abbas Khatibi once said that 'We have not witnessed any special approach from the Indian company in return for our investments. Indian officials visited Iran, held negotiations and signed memorandums of understanding. However, no serious steps have been taken.'²² Stating that India did not pay special attention to the railway project and did not show sufficient

20 The U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA), *Country Analysis Brief: Iran*, Washington 2024, https://www.eia.gov/international/content/analysis/countries_long/Iran/pdf/Iran%20CAB%202024.pdf, pp. 4-5.; Islamic Republic of Iran-Prague Embassy. "Iran starts constructing a petro-refinery complex on Oman Gulf coast", <https://prague.mfa.ir/en/NewsView/530100>.

21 NS Energy, "Iran opens \$2bn Goreh-Jask pipeline for crude oil exports", <https://www.nsenergybusiness.com/news/iran-opens-goreh-jask-pipeline/>.

22 The Hindu, "Months after starting Chabahar rail project without India, Iran seeks equipment", <https://t.ly/03d2l>.

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dedication in the field of railways, the Iranian official said, 'Good progress has been made in Chabahar Port, but the Indian side has not been seriously involved in the Chabahar-Zahedan Railway Project.'²³

Oil and Natural Gas

Iran is planning to build a gas pipeline from Asaluye in Bushehr, where rich natural gas deposits are located, to Bandar Abbas, Iran Shahr and onwards to Pakistan. Although the Iranian section of the Iran-Pakistan (IP) Gas Pipeline has already been completed, Pakistan has not yet started working on its own territory. This project is planned to be connected to the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India Pipeline (TAPI). At this point, the TAPI Project has also been cancelled due to the crisis between Pakistan and India. In addition, the Islamabad administration is unable to realise the natural gas project with Iran due to the economic crisis. Iran's long dated plan is to connect the aforementioned natural gas pipeline to China. However, since the Pakistani section of the pipeline has not yet been completed, this does not seem possible in the short term.

Additionally, Iran plans to construct an oil and natural gas pipeline extending from Chabahar to Afghanistan.²⁴ Infrastructure works are ongoing in Chabahar for the building of a second airport, a gas pipeline and a refinery. Indeed, Iran is trying to transform Chabahar into a hub where large ships can enter and unload their cargo onto smaller vessels. On the other hand, the connection of Chabahar to Afghanistan via oil and natural gas pipelines is a highly significant project for Iran. Tehran plans to construct a 200 km natural gas pipeline between Chabahar and Iranshahr in the first phase. In this way, Chabahar will be connected to the Iran-Pakistan Gas Pipeline passing through Iranshahr. The mentioned natural gas pipeline will significantly contribute to the development of refineries, compressed natural gas (CNG) facilities, and the petrochemical sector, especially in the Chabahar region.

The Collaborations with Russia

The US' secondary economic sanctions have seriously affected India's cooperation with Iran in the context of Chabahar Port and economic corridors. In response, Iran started to turn towards Russia, another actor with which it cooperates within the scope of the INSTC. Iran's Bandar Abbas Port constitutes the basis of the aforementioned corridor. However, Chabahar Port was later added to this project. However, Chabahar is also located on the India-Iran-Af-

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Mehmet Seyfettin Erol, "İran'ın Orta Asya Politikası", Tayyar Arı, der., *Orta Asya ve Kafkasya: Rekabetten İşbirliğine*. MKM Yayıncılık, Bursa 2010, p. 447.

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ghanistan corridor.²⁵ Therefore, Chabahar is envisaged to be the hub port in the INSTC instead of Bandar Abbas. Moscow is already planning to invest in Iran's Chabahar Port and attaches special importance to its development.

Iran attaches great importance to cooperating with Russia in energy sector in order to overcome sanctions. It can be said that Russian companies have been prioritised in the production of oil and gas in Iran for many years. In this context, since 2017, Russian energy companies Zarubezhneft, Lukoil, GazpromNeft and Tatneft have increased their investments in Iran's oil and gas fields of Aban, Paydar-e Gharb, Ab Teymour, Mansuri, Changouleh and Cheshmeh-Khosh. Russia has become a priority investor in Iran's oil and gas sector and has pledged its support to Iran on international platforms.

Iran has emphasised its economic and military cooperation with Russia in the Strait of Hormuz. Thus, Iran has accelerated its military exercises with Russia in and around the Strait of Hormuz in recent years. This contributes to Iran's deterrence against the US in the region. On the other hand, Russia will contribute more to the development of Iran's oil fields, where Western companies have left after the US' secondary sanctions.

Iran's Search for Allies in the Gulf of Hormuz and Indian Ocean

The Western countries, especially the US is making efforts to create an 'anti-Iranian' naval coalition to operate in the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. On the other hand, Tehran has focused on improving its military security dialogue with the Gulf States. In addition, Iran has increased its co-operation with Russia and China to provide an important deterrent against the United States in the Gulf. Russia proposes to develop a Collective Security Concept in the Gulf. Russia's proposal is supported by both Iran and China. The long-term goal of the concept is to create a comprehensive organisation comprising the Gulf States and other regional and great powers.

It is noteworthy that Iran has invited Russia for the first time to co-operate in the Indian Ocean in recent years, despite their previous co-operation on the security of the Caspian Sea. Iran could seriously benefit from Russia's military power and capabilities in the Gulf.

Iran is seeking co-operation with China on the security of the Gulf. Accordingly, China will continue to buy oil from Iran and support the security of oil tankers in the Gulf. In other words, China, which continues to buy oil from Iran under sanctions, has decided to co-operate on the security of oil tankers in the Gulf. As a matter of fact, the naval coalition that the US is trying to es-

25 Mehmet Seyfettin Erol-Arzu Celalifer Ekinci, "İran'ın Orta Asya Politikası: İşbirliği Arayışları ve Güvenlik Sorunu", Mehmet Seyfettin Erol, eds., *Avrasya'nın Değişen Jeopolitiği: Yeni Büyük Oyun*, Barış Platin Kitabevi, Ankara 2009, p. 383.

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establish in the region harms not only Iran's interests but also China's interests. Therefore, Iran may try to form a new coalition with China and Russia in the Gulf against the US. Recently, it is observed that Iran has been making important initiatives both in Russia and China regarding the security of the Gulf. As can be seen from recent developments, Beijing has decided to cooperate with Tehran and Moscow on the security of the Gulf.

In the long term, two different military coalitions are likely to emerge in the Gulf. The first could be led by the US and the UK and the second by Russia, China and Iran. The three countries could further step up their joint exercises in the Gulf and the Indian Ocean. This step is undoubtedly a show of force against the US efforts to build a military coalition to ensure maritime security off the coast of Yemen.

Military exercises, in which the country's defence capabilities are tested, are also acts of deterrence aimed at instilling fear in the enemy. In the post-2012 period, Iran accelerated its military exercises and also conducted a joint military drill with China around the Gulf in 2017. Moreover, Iran, which carried out various exercises in the Caspian Sea with Russia since 2015, aims to carry this military cooperation to the Indian Ocean today. At this point, while China has carried out joint military manoeuvres with Russia against the US influence in the Asia Pacific, it has not engaged in any new exercises with Iran in the Gulf until quite recently. It can be argued that the main reason is China does not want to further escalate the tension in the Gulf after the US' secondary sanctions. China has even called on Iran not to escalate tensions on its sea lanes. In short, after the recent tensions along the Gulf and the Red Sea, Iran has been largely supported by Russia and China in its energy security, military strategies and transport-infrastructure security.

Conclusion

Throughout its history, Iran has been engaged in extraordinary struggles at both national and international levels to preserve its national independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity. The US' secondary sanctions against Iran in May and November 2018 posed perhaps the greatest threat to the country's national security since the 1980-88 Iraq-Iran War. To date, studies on Iran have mostly focused on the structure of the state, the rivalry between national currents, regional politics, as well as sectarianism and ethnicity, while addressing the government's struggle against external and internal threats to its national security. In doing so, Iran's strategies to protect and maintain its national security have been largely ignored.

Since 2018, as the US has accelerated its economic embargoes, Iran has had to develop solution strategies to overcome them. The most important way out for Iran has been the 'effective use of strategic resources, transport lines

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and ports along the Southern Coastline'. In this context, Iran has primarily focused on ensuring the security of its strategic energy resources. The fact that the energy resources concentrated in Bushehr Province have to cross the Strait of Hormuz by tankers has been recognised as one of the most serious risks for Iran's energy security for decades.

Iran's main strategy is to actively use the Jask and Chabahar ports for trade in goods and energy. However, it faces significant difficulties in this regard, especially in the current situation and structure of the ports, construction and development of transport lines. Besides, it has to guarantee its energy security by finding new oil customers and developing alternative payment methods.

The difficulties faced by Iran are not only linked to certain deficiencies in transport-infrastructure, economic embargoes and related structural-technical problems in trade transactions. It is also related to its political and economic relations with regional (Pakistan and India) and global partners (Russia and China). First of all, terrorism-security problems on Iran's border with Pakistan have led to a deterioration in relations between the two countries. This complicates the construction and development of energy and transport lines in the region.

Moreover, Iran-India relations also face a number of geopolitical constraints. These include the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in 2021, Iran's critical role in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)²⁶, US' secondary sanctions and Iran's desire to improve its relations with Pakistan. First, the Taliban leadership has some political disagreements with both Iran and India. For example, the Taliban has serious disagreements with Iran on issues such as the failure to establish an inclusive and legitimate administration, the management of water resources, commercial transactions, transport projects to China and terrorism-security problems in the country. Similarly, the Taliban has significant problems with India, mainly due to its religious style of governance and structure, transport projects, and its relations with Pakistan and China. Second, India views Iran's partnerships with China in transport corridors as competitive. However, Iran's development of transport networks in the context of the BRI will also promote the development of north-south links with India and Russia. Iran's developing political-economic ties with China and also being under US' secondary sanctions seem to be the main political-economic obstacles to its active support for India's corridors to the north and Afghanistan through Chabahar Port. Thirdly, New Delhi's historical disputes with Islamabad, particularly border issues and Iran's efforts to maintain positive relations with Pakistan, largely hinder Iran's capability to implement energy-transportation projects extending eastward.

26 Kadir Ertay Çelik-Mehmet Seyfettin Erol, "Kuşak-Yol Girişimi Bağlamında ABD'nin İran Politikasının Analizi", *Uluslararası Kriz ve Siyaset Araştırmaları*, III/2, 2019, p. 24.

In conclusion, Iran strives to effectively utilize the quantitative and qualitative resources that determine its national power and strengthen its position on the global stage. In this direction, Iran tries to manage its political-economic-military geography, natural resources and foreign policy in a highly coordinated, effective and pragmatic manner. In this context, it is important for Iran to develop successful policies towards the Southern Coastline in order to guarantee its national security and to extricate itself from its current state of entrapment. If Iran can manage its mainland, coastline and maritime strategies for this region simultaneously, comprehensively and effectively, it will have the chance to rise rapidly not only in regional politics but also in the global arena.

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