



Navigating the coastal Persian Gulf-Makoran Sea corridor: harnessing the past for sustainable maritime trade

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Abstract

Historically, maritime trade has been a major driver of economic growth and cross-cultural interchange, especially in antiquity. Because of its advantageous position and extensive maritime history, the Persian Gulf has been essential in bridging cultures and promoting the exchange of ideas and products. This article explores the historical evidence of maritime trade in the Persian Gulf, emphasising its revolutionary influence on the region's history, especially during the pivotal Bronze Age. The article also emphasises how important it is to acknowledge the Persian Gulf's historical significance as a crucial commerce route connecting Europe, Africa, and East and West Asia. The paper uses these realisations to support the growth of Chabahar Port as a pillar of economic independence and regional collaboration. Through the application of historical lessons and the embracement of sustainable maritime trade, the Persian Gulf and the Makoran Sea have the potential to resurface as centres of cultural and economic interaction, thereby promoting global wealth and connectedness.

Keywords Archaeology · Makoran sea · Persian gulf · Sustainable trade · Chabahar · Trade cooperation

Introduction

Rich in history and strategic significance, the Persian Gulf has always been essential to trade, cross-cultural interaction, and economic growth. It has been a crossroads for civilizations for millennia due to its advantageous location, which links the Makoran Sea, Mesopotamia, the Mediterranean Sea, and the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean.

The southern Persian Gulf saw a sharp increase in archaeological interest in the 1960s. In order to promote a better understanding of the past, Arab governments started providing significant financial support to archaeological initiatives in this area (Mortazavi and Mosapour Negari 2017: 46).

In contrast, the Iranian Islamic Revolution and the ensuing Iran-Iraq War caused an unparalleled fall in archaeological research in the northern Persian Gulf, which is home to the vast plains of Iran, throughout the 1970s and 1980s. The pause in archaeological investigations has resulted in

notable deficiencies in our comprehension of the historical background of the area.

Notwithstanding these difficulties, a rich and intricate history of cross-cultural communication and human interaction is shown by the archaeological data from the Persian Gulf. The Persian Gulf has always been a lively and interconnected region, from the first marine trade routes that linked it to Mesopotamia and the Indus Valley in the fourth and third millennia BCE to the thriving towns of the Bronze Age and the transnational commercial hubs of the Islamic era.

Maritime heritage and economic resilience: political archaeology as a catalyst for sustainable development

It is crucial to first identify politics and its underlying motivations in order to completely understand the phenomena of politics impacting archaeological knowledge and the underlying causes for this practice. Examining the idea of “looking back to the past,” which has frequently aimed to match political goals with historical narratives, is necessary in light of this. What causes this inclination, and what role does it play in relation to the previously described idea?

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We must take into account the underlying assumptions that influence how humans perceive and comprehend the world in order to provide an answer to this question. Recognising that humans are fundamentally subjective and unable to observe the world in a completely objective and presupposition-free manner is important. Our unique experiences and recollections invariably shape our viewpoints, causing us to perceive and pursue data that confirms our preconceptions. The saying “A man sees and seeks what he is looking for” was aptly put out by Lasswell and Kaplan (1950: 75).

Because of this innate subjectivity as well as the ability of political objectives to reshape narratives, archaeological information may be used politically. Politicians frequently ignore or minimise contradicting facts in favour of their own political interpretations of the archaeological record. This historical revisionism can have serious repercussions, affecting public opinion and eroding faith in the objectivity of archaeological study. Archaeologists must work towards impartiality and academic integrity in order to counteract this manipulation, making sure that their interpretations of the past are supported by solid data and thoughtful research. In addition, they have to be watchful in defending archaeological materials and raising public awareness of the importance of archaeology in maintaining and comprehending our common human past. We can better protect the integrity of archaeological knowledge and make sure that it is used as a tool for understanding the past rather than for manipulation or political benefit by acknowledging the inherent subjectivity of human perception and the possibility of political influence.

Sadly, the vital function of the Persian Gulf-Makoran Sea corridor has been eclipsed by Iran’s heavy reliance on fossil resources. Free trade zones have showed promise in

creating economic ties with other regions, but government intervention has prevented them from realising their full historical potential.

In contrast, the development of ports along the southern Persian Gulf coast has created favorable conditions for the region to resume its historical significance. This is evident in the thriving air travel networks operated by Qatar Airways and Emirates. In essence, modern-day Meluhha, encompassing a broader area in the southern Persian Gulf and Makoran Sea, is replicating the role once played by ancient Meluhha in the second and first millennia BC. Meluhha encompassed parts of the southern Persian Gulf, Oman, and the Arabian Peninsula (Mortazavi 2010: 60; Mortazavi and Mosapour Negari 2017: 54). The construction of the Gwadar commercial port in Pakistan, situated near the Bronze Age site of Sutkagan Dor, a key settlement in the heart of Meluhha, underscores the enduring importance of the East-West communication link via the Persian Gulf and Makoran Sea (Mortazavi and Mosapour Negari 2017: 51). In the present era, the development of Gwadar port in Pakistan by China and Chabahar port in Iran by India is fueled by a strategic rivalry for geographical control over resources and markets, driven by concerns about encirclement. Both Gwadar and Chabahar hold immense significance, not only for Pakistan and India but also for China, Iran, and the Central Asian Republics (Fig. 1). These ports serve as essential hubs in the worldwide marine network, providing their various stakeholders with both strategic and financial benefits (Ahmad 2017: 87). The Persian Gulf-Makoran Sea corridor, once a hub of trade and cultural exchange, has the potential to reclaim its historical significance by leveraging its strategic location and fostering economic cooperation among nations. By harnessing the past and embracing the

Fig. 1 Relative locations of the Gwadar and Chabahar Ports (After: Google Earth Pro (2024, March 24)



transformative power of maritime trade, the region can once again become a global crossroads connecting civilizations.

The bronze age maritime trade routes in the Indian ocean world: the Persian Gulf-Makoran Sea corridor

Strong evidence of substantial long-distance trade networks throughout the third millennium BCE may be found in the urban civilizations of southeast Iran and the Indus Valley. The connection of these locations is attested to by the archaeological findings of a variety of products, including stamp seals, beads, carnelian, steatite, lapis lazuli, terracotta, sculptures, figurines, dice, and ceramics (Possehl 2002a: 221–225). These findings suggest the existence of a complex network of trade routes, both overland and maritime, that linked the Indus Valley to Mesopotamia through the Iranian plateau, particularly southeast Iran, the Makoran Sea and the Persian Gulf. Overland routes were the primary trade arteries during the early part of the third millennium BCE (Tosi 1983: 57).

It is noteworthy that overland trade routes gradually lost way to sea trade in the second part of the third millennium BC. The Indus Valley was significantly impacted by this change in transportation, which increased its need on Persian Gulf settlements (Jansen 2002: 121–22). Around 2500 BC, a population from the Indus Valley began to settle in Shortugai, Badakhshan, coinciding with this change. After bringing lapis lazuli overland to their home country, traders from the Indus Valley shipped it by sea to the Arabian Peninsula and possibly even Egypt (Jansen 2002: 121). These maritime routes, which connected eastern and western civilizations during the second half of the third millennium BC, will be discussed further below. Evidence supporting the existence of these routes includes archaeological findings such as anchorages and wells discovered along both coastlines (During Caspers 1971: 21).

The adoption of maritime trade necessitated the establishment of strategically placed trading posts along the Persian Gulf (During Caspers 1972: 170). Based on current archaeological evidence unearthed through excavations, During Caspers suggests that the most prominent maritime route ran along the Arabian coast of the Persian Gulf (During Caspers 1971: 21). The author of this paper, however, maintains that the Iranian coast of the Persian Gulf offered a more reliable and convenient avenue for long-distance trade. This side of the Persian Gulf was also closer to Mesopotamia, facilitating more efficient connections between the two regions. Therefore, more comprehensive surveys and excavations are warranted to identify and map maritime

trade routes along the Iranian coast of the Persian Gulf during the fourth and third millennia BC.

This section delves into the four major trade routes that dominated the Bronze Age (Fig. 2), emphasizing ongoing research and archaeological discoveries that continue to expand our understanding of these trade networks.

First Maritime route: Makoran Coast to Dilmun (Fig. 2, blue line)

Bahrain and Failaka islands, as well as the surrounding coastal appendages, were part of a significant maritime trading route that linked the Dilmun culture with the Makoran coast of southeast Arabia. Along this trip, the Umm an-Nar culture of southeast Arabia was also covered, specifically that of the island of Umm an-Nar, Hili in the Buraimi Oasis (both of which are now a part of the United Arab Emirates), and the Jamdat Nasr cairns close to Buraimi. These locations provide unequivocal proof of trade with the Indus Valley and Mesopotamia (Jansen 2002: 121; During Caspers 1971: 21; During Caspers 1972: 170).

Second Maritime route: Persian Baluchestan Coast (Fig. 2, green line)

A second sea route joined the southern split of the overland route through the Bampur Valley, tracing the coast of Persian Baluchestan. The discovery of marine shells showing interaction with the Makoran coast implies that Bampur (periods V–VI) was still engaged in international trade in the latter part of the third millennium BCE (During Caspers 1970: 320; Biggs 1970: 333; De Cardi 1968: 135). Tepe Yahya also maintained a connection to the Persian Gulf via an overland route that terminated at a landing place for shipping (Burney 1975: 193).

Third Maritime route: Pakistan Makoran Coast (Fig. 2, red line)

The third maritime route ran along the coast of Pakistan Makoran, where two fortified Harappan seaports, Sutkagen-Dor and Sotka-Koh, formed the westernmost extensions of the Indus Valley (During Caspers 1971: 22). Numerous objects, including seals, beads, and ceramics, bearing witness to interactions between Mesopotamia and the Indus Valley, have been unearthed in Mesopotamia (Possehl 2002b: 37).

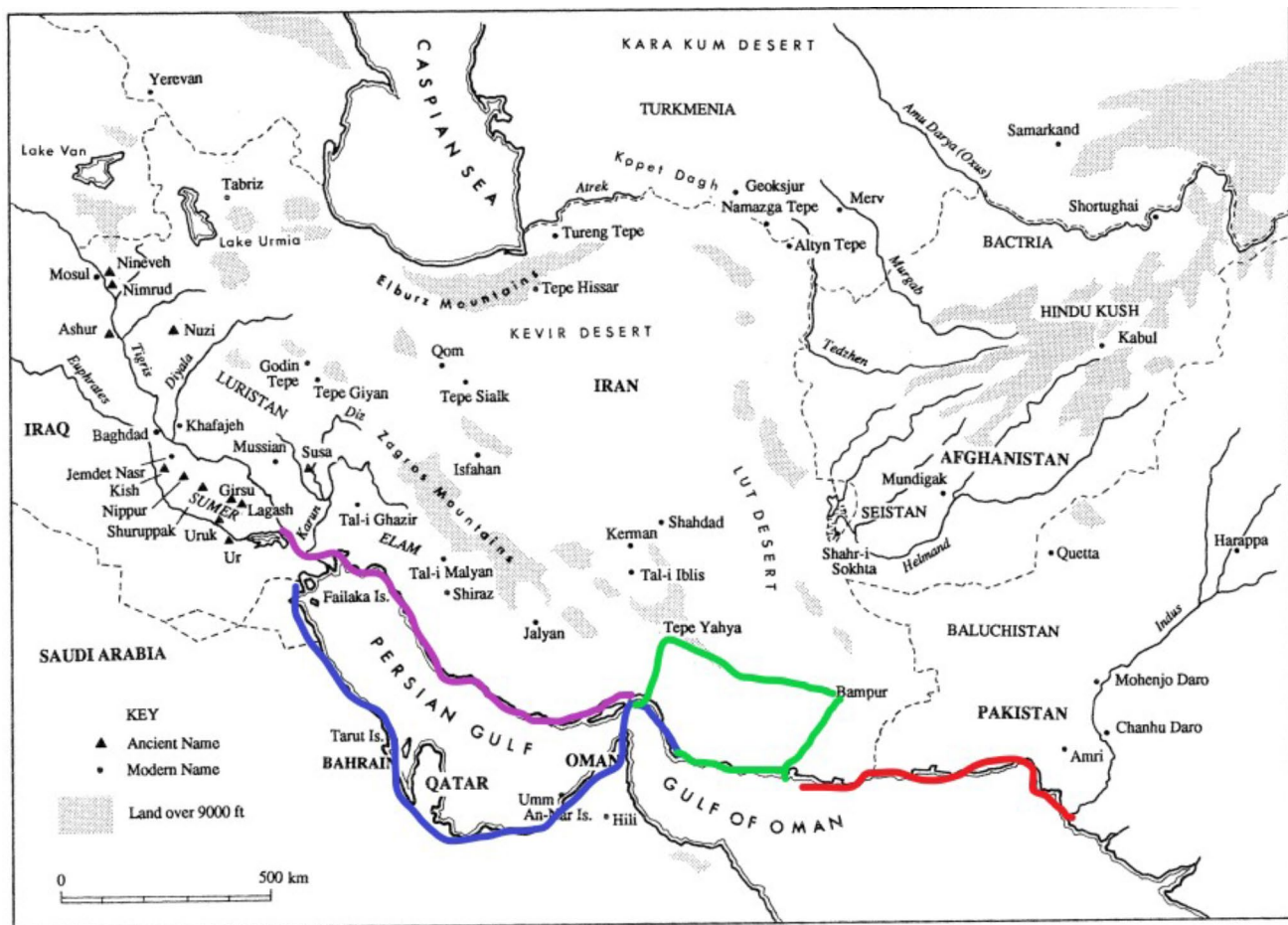


Fig. 2 Four Major Trade Routes of the Bronze Age around the Persian Gulf and the Makoran Sea (After: Potts 1993: 381, Lines added by author, 2024). 1- Blue Line: First Maritime Route, Makoran Coast to

Dilmun; 2- Green Line: Second Maritime Route, Persian Baluchistan Coast; 3- Red Line: Third Maritime Route, Pakistan Makoran Coast; 4- Purple Line: Fourth Overland Route, Bandar Abbas to Mesopotamia

Fourth overland route: Bandar Abbas to Mesopotamia (Fig. 2, purple line)

The Mesopotamian plain can be reached by an overland trade route that passes through southern Iran (Fars), connecting Madavan, Fasa, Sarvistan, Shiraz, Behbahan, and Ahwaz with Bandar Abbas at the Persian Gulf's mouth. Based on archaeological findings, this road connected Elam to the Bampur Valley in the third millennium BCE and continued via Makoran to the Indus River plain (During Caspers 1971: 22).

It is important to note that these trade routes were not static and often evolved over time in response to changing political, economic, and environmental factors. Ongoing archaeological research continues to shed light on these intricate networks and the profound impact they had on the development of civilizations in the Bronze Age.

Modern commerce rooted in ancient trade: the enduring legacy of the Persian Gulf and Makoran Sea

Ports are vibrant hubs that link local companies, promoting innovation and economic integration. Development of port infrastructure is essential for stimulating economic growth since it increases employment, trade, and connectivity both domestically and internationally (Bryan et al. 2006; Mangan and Cunningham 2000). Regional development initiatives, on the other hand, are concentrated on enhancing the socioeconomic circumstances and standard of living in a region through the creation of jobs and other economic activity. Analysing historical societies' business practices—like those of the Bronze Age in the area under discussion—provides important context for understanding how contemporary cultures could develop their commercial sectors sustainably. Economic growth and prosperity can be greatly enhanced by government policies that combine modern standards and advances with the commercial

practices of ancient civilizations. The historical underpinnings of the region's business practices have been revealed by archaeological research, offering important insights for current economic growth. I will examine the three most significant worldwide examples of past trade routes' continuing influence on contemporary commerce in order to get deeper into their lasting effects.

China-Pakistan economic corridor (CPEC) (Fig. 3)

The US-led military operation against Iraq and Afghanistan in reaction to the 9/11 terrorist attacks changed the regional and international scene, sowing the seeds for the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in the 1990s. Pakistan's economic problems were made worse by having to take on the burden of the fight on terror when the US withdrew from Afghanistan. Furthermore, in 1990, the US imposed severe sanctions on Pakistan in retaliation for an agreement between China and Pakistan on a missile and nuclear programme. China revised its long-standing alliance with Pakistan in reaction to these events and devised a fresh strategic plan to deal with the shifting regional and international

conditions. This resulted in the creation of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a ground-breaking geopolitical and geoeconomic alliance meant to boost Pakistan's economy and deepen its connections with China (Ramay 2016). China is an old culture with a diverse and complex dynasty history. Long a foundation of its security policy has been the idea that China is the "Middle Kingdom," and that everyone from outside the country is a "barbar." (Hunt 1984: 5). China's foreign policy, however, also takes into account its longstanding custom of interacting with foreigners—a move referred to as the "cosmopolitanism policy." China's first contacts with the outside world came about in the Han period when it connected via the Silk Road with Jib (Kashmir, a region of South Asia). Early in the 7th century BC, Chinese explorers such as Fa Hsien and Xuanzang made visits to this area, setting the stage for a prosperous flow of products and ideas (Javaid and Jahangir 2015: 159).

Deep religious ties were cultivated by these historical exchanges, especially with regard to the growth of Buddhism and Islam into different regions of China and the Xinjiang province. Along with commercial connections, these religious affinities helped to gradually close geographical gaps

Fig. 3 China Pakistan Economic corridor (CPEC). (adapted from: <https://cpec.gov.pk>)



and create long-lasting cultural and economic ties between these two ancient civilizations. Buddhist pilgrims travelled the Silk Road from Kapica to northern India, or what is now Pakistan's Gilgit region, spreading their religion and cultural influences (Butt 2007: 22). In the first century of the new millennium, Gandhara art from Pakistan also had a significant influence on Chinese art. Numerous Chinese artefacts have been discovered during archaeological excavations in the Indus Valley, especially at Hyderabad and Bhambore, which are located about 30 miles east of Karachi. This finding highlights the rich cultural exchange that exists between the two regions (Javaid and Jahangir 2015: 159). In fact, the Persian Gulf and Iran's southern regions are included in the legacy of these antiquated ties. A link between the Chinese and the Parthians developed once the Silk Road flourished and China became increasingly familiar with its western neighbours; at this time, ports such as Canton and Siraf were important hubs. The Parthians blocked direct communication between China and Rome in an effort to control the era's economic movements (Mortazavi 2009: 68).

In addition to cultural interactions, trade between China and Pakistan was bolstered by the well-known caravan routes and the Silk Road (Butt 2007: 24), which connected Gwadar, Pakistan, with Kashgar, Xinjiang, China, two Muslim-majority regions. Along the famous caravan routes and the Silk Road, China and Pakistan had strong commercial relations in addition to cultural exchanges (Butt 2007: 24). Geographically speaking, this area was extremely important to the subcontinent and China's historical trade connections, especially the Silk Road. Chinese commerce convoys reached modern-day Pakistan (on the western border) after passing through Xinjiang and Ladakh for financial transactions (Javaid and Jahangir 2015: 159). Chinese explorers were also instrumental in forging ties with Bangladesh (previously East Pakistan). These relationships are first documented in the "Periplus of the Erythrean Sea." China maintained close contacts with eastern Pakistan (now Bangladesh) during the period of foreign Muslim invasions. Similar to this, the Mughal and Afghan emperors in the subcontinent established economic and political ties between their two nations (Chaudhri 1970: 78).

In Pakistan's southwest, 460 km from Karachi is the deep-water seaport of Gwadar. This port's closest point in Oman is about 380 km to the northeast. The Iranian frontier is located 75 km west of Gwadar, at the mouth of the Persian Gulf (Naseem 2014: 520). Naseem quoted a colleague as saying, "Gwadar, once a secluded fishing village, has transformed into a bustling seaport, surprising even Pakistani researchers." (Naseem 2014: 520, citing Hassan 2005). Because of its close vicinity to the Strait of Hormuz, an essential shipping route for the transit and trade of oil, its strategic significance increases dramatically (Hassan

2005; Naseem 2014: 520). China developed Gwadar Port, which is ideally located at the confluence of three important regions: South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East (Ahmad 2017: 89). It is interesting to note that Gwadar was a crucial component of Oman until 1958, when Pakistan annexed it and turned it into a district of Makoran (Government of Balochistan and IUCN Pakistan 2007). Drawing inspiration from the historical experiences of their forefathers, who thrived near Gwadar's strategic location, Pakistani politicians are actively seeking to revitalize its former glory. Notably, this vision, initiated during the presidency of Pervez Musharraf, has not waned in subsequent eras; instead, it has gained renewed emphasis, paving the way for the comprehensive development of the region. This unwavering commitment reflects a deep understanding of the historical significance of Gwadar, which Pakistani leadership has diligently safeguarded over time (Mortazavi and Mosapour Negari 2017:58).

Central Asia regional economic cooperation (CAREC) (Figs. 4 and 5)

CAREC is financed by six international institutions: the ADB¹, EBRD², IMF³, IsDB⁴, UNDP⁵, and the World Bank. Although it is financed by multiple international multilateral institutions, CAREC should be considered a primarily Asian institution, due to its principal sources of financing (ADB and China) and its geographical scope. CAREC aims to optimise the rapid economic expansion of China and Japan to the east, Russia to the north and India and Pakistan to the south, as an opportunity for member countries to emerge as trade and transport hubs on the international stage. CAREC finances infrastructure development in participant countries and facilitates coordination between multilateral institutions which have traditionally not cooperated with one other. CAREC aims to expand trade and improve competitiveness through a focused, results-driven programme of regional projects and initiatives in transport, trade facilitation, energy, trade policy and economic corridor development (Laruelle 2012: 21).

In essence, the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) Programme is an amazing collaboration between ten countries and development partners aimed at advancing shared prosperity and development in Central Asia (Fig. 4). Since its inception in 1997, CAREC has played a pivotal role in accelerating economic growth and

¹ Asian Development Bank.

² European Bank for Reconstruction and Development.

³ International Monetary Fund.

⁴ Islamic Development Bank.

⁵ United Nations Development Programme.



Fig. 4 Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) Corridors (Excluding Iran). (adapted from: <https://www.carecprogram.org>)

reducing poverty in the region. The six CAREC transport corridors are building a truly global future for the region, linking markets in northern People’s Republic of China to Azerbaijan in the Caucasus and further to Europe, and from Kazakhstan to Pakistan’s warm-water ports of Karachi, Gwadar, and beyond (CAREC 2024). CAREC has expanded its membership over time, adding new countries as they have become eligible to join. The most recent addition to CAREC was Georgia in 2020 (Fig. 5). The fig no. 4 was created in 2009 and did not include Iran. The fig no 5, created in 2017, includes a corridor passing through Iran. The difference between the two maps is that the 2017 map includes a new corridor that passes through Iran. This corridor is called the CAREC Corridor 5. CAREC Corridor 5 is still in the planning stages, but it has the potential to significantly improve connectivity between CAREC member countries and the wider Eurasian region. The corridor would provide a new trade route for goods and services, and it would also boost tourism and investment in the region. The inclusion of Iran in CAREC is a major step forward for the

organization. It will help to promote regional cooperation and integration, and it will also create new opportunities for economic growth and development. In fact, CAREC Corridor 5 is a proposed new trade and transport corridor that would connect CAREC member countries to Iran and the wider Middle East. The corridor would start in Uzbekistan and run through Turkmenistan, Iran, and Turkey. It would then connect to Europe via the Black Sea and the Mediterranean Sea.

There is no denying the importance of China’s involvement in its western provinces. These huge regions, which stretch from the Tibetan Plateau to Xinjiang, have historically been strategically and economically significant to the country of China. In early 2011, Shahid Javed Burki, an eminent Pakistani economist and former Vice President of the World Bank, wrote a piece in Dawn English daily newspaper claiming that during early 1990s Zhu Rongji, then mayor of Shanghai who later became the Premier of China, invited him to his office where a huge Chinese map

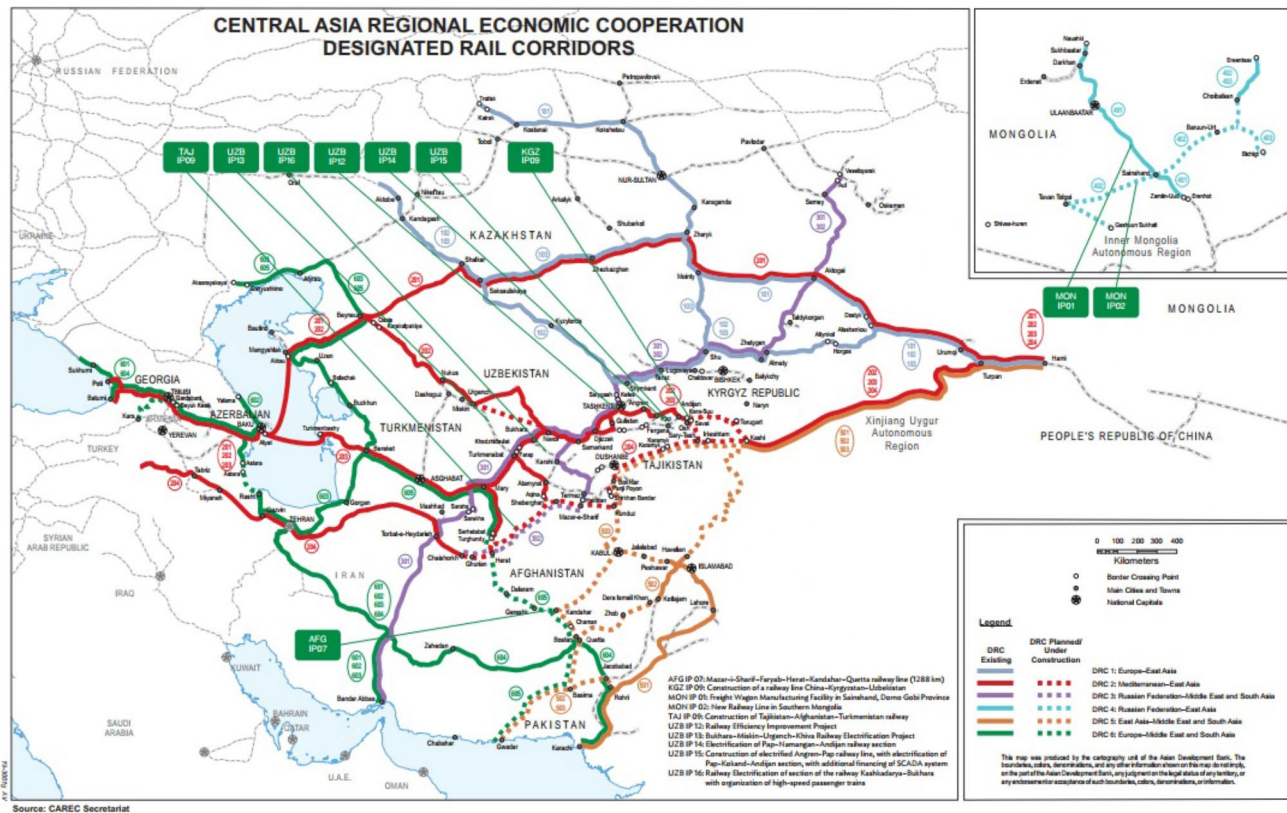


Fig. 5 Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) Designated Rail Corridors, Including Parts of Iran. (adapted from: <https://www.carecprogram.org>)

was hanged on the wall. During the discussion Zhu said to Burki that:

“I am showing you this map to underscore one thing... China is a landlocked on three sides. We are the only large country...compare us with other large landmass countries such as the United States, Canada, India, Russia, South Africa and you will see that we have access to the sea only on one side, the east. We want to open our western landlocked provinces to the Arabian Sea...and the Persian Gulf. Pakistan could help us to do that.” (Shukla 2013: 222).

In the frontiers of southeast Iran, several complex communities arose in the late fourth and early third millennia BCE. These cultures benefited from their access to water resources and their strategic location along overland and sea long-distance trade routes connecting South and West Asia. Settlements like Shahr-i-Sokhta in Sistan, Tepe Bampur in Baluchestan, and Tepe Yahya in Kerman are examples of these societies (Mortazavi 2005). The historical links between China and Iran extend back to the Parthian period (224 BCE- 226 AD). The Parthians, known for their maritime prowess, established trade routes that connected the Persian Gulf to the Indian subcontinent, including the island of Ceylon (present-day Sri Lanka). As the Silk Road flourished and China gained knowledge of the western regions,

trade between the two civilizations intensified. Ports like Canton and Siraf flourished during this period, and the Parthians sought to control the economic flow of goods by mediating between China and Rome (Mortazavi 2009: 68). Trade between East African and West Asian communities, particularly those in the Persian Gulf, was greatly aided by the monsoon system in the western Indian Ocean. Because of these periodic winds, merchants were able to efficiently carry products across the enormous expanse of the ocean (Horton 2009). The Sassanid era (226–623), which is evidenced by archaeological finds such as Persian Gulf ceramics found in East Africa, indicates that economic links existed between these locations (Smith and Wright 1988). However, extensive maritime trade communication in the Persian Gulf is believed to have commenced in the mid-8th century AD (Whitehouse 2001; Horton and Middleton 2000). Siraf, an island and inland port in the Persian Gulf, exemplifies this flourishing trade activity. While Iran’s initial exclusion from CAREC was due to sanctions, its strategic location and potential economic contributions make its inclusion a significant consideration for the organization’s future success. Iran’s significance in regional connectivity is deeply rooted in history. Its strategic location and historical role

as a bridge between diverse civilizations underscore the importance of its inclusion in CAREC.

Lapis-Lazuli route (Fig. 6)

A regional road that links Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey is called the Lapis Lazuli Corridor. The idea behind this effort is the conviction that the three landlocked countries—Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and Afghanistan—have substantial commercial potential that might support long-term economic progress. Although these nations have some obstacles that prevent them from realising their full economic potential, regional integration offers a viable way to unlock this potential.

Afghanistan, a landlocked country, is actively looking for more accessible, profitable, and alternative trade routes to link to the European Union and other global markets. Oil exports propelled periods of strong economic expansion in Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan; nevertheless, the 2014 oil market slump had a major negative influence on both countries' economy. Because of this, both nations have made diversifying their economies a top priority in an effort to reduce the risks involved in depending too heavily on a single export good.

Georgia may benefit even more from its location through transit, trade, and regional integration because of its strategic location with major seaports on the Black Sea. However, Turkey is seeking to have more political and economic clout in Central Asia and the South Caucasus (Rahim 2019: 67).

The Lapis Lazuli Corridor has enormous potential to promote regional collaboration and economic connection, but obstacles including disagreements and resistance from important players have prevented it from moving forward. The growth of the corridor has been hampered by Iran's exclusion, a strategically important nation with a long history of trading along the lapis lazuli route. Based on archaeological evidence, Badakhshan, the centre of lapis lazuli mines in Afghanistan, was traditionally connected

to other regions via the Persian Gulf and the southern and southeast regions of Iran. Iran's exclusion from the project carries a danger of upsetting this long-standing trade pattern and adding to the region's already difficult geopolitical environment.

The unresolved border disputes in the Caspian Sea and the ongoing conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh have also hindered the progress of the Lapis Lazuli Corridor. These unresolved issues underscore the necessity of a coordinated effort to address regional tensions and promote constructive dialogue among all stakeholders. By overcoming these obstacles and embracing a spirit of cooperation, the Lapis Lazuli Corridor could unlock its transformative potential for the region as a whole as well as for the participating countries. By aligning with historical trade routes and incorporating all relevant nations, the corridor can act as a catalyst for economic development, regional integration, and sustainable growth.

During the Jemdet Nasr period of Mesopotamia in the early third millennium BC, lapis lazuli, a valuable gemstone from Badakhshan, was imported into Shahr-i-Sokhta, in southeast Iran, where local craftsmen began preliminary processing to meet the growing demand for this valuable material (Lamberg-Karlovsky and Tosi 1973: 27). The ancient overland trade route that traverses southeast Iran, connecting east and west as well as north and south, underwent a significant shift in the latter half of the third millennium BC. This overland trade was gradually replaced by maritime trade that flourished along the Makoran coast, extending towards the Umm a Nar culture of southeastern Arabia and Dilmun. This suggests that Badakhshan, as a centre of lapis lazuli production, may have played a crucial role in connecting southeast Iran to the Indus Valley during this period through the Makoran Sea (Jansen 2002: 121). There is strong evidence of the connections between the Persian Gulf region and the Indus Valley from a number of artefacts found there. These include two Persian Gulf seals from Bahrain that show Harappan influences, an etched

Fig. 6 Modern Lapis Lazuli trade route. (adapted from: <https://blacksea-caspia.eu/en/lapis-lazuli-route>)



carnelian bead found at Sar El-Jisr, an etched carnelian bead found at Umm a Nar, a sherd with Harappan symbols found at Ras al-Junayz, etched carnelian beads recovered from Hailli, and a fragment of a round seal with three Indus pictograms excavated at Failaka (Lahiri 1992: 129). The presence of Mature Harappan seals, beads, and ceramics in Mesopotamia further substantiates the links between these regions (Possehl 2002b: 37).

These links were greatly aided by the maritime peoples of Meluhha, which may have been the Akkadian term for the Harappan civilization (Parpola et al. 1977: 129). These mariners journeyed along the eastern coast of Saudi Arabia, reaching the mouth of the Red Sea. They brought African millets back to the Indus Valley, where they were absorbed into the Mature Harappan food system as summer crops (Possehl 2002b: 37). A network of trade united diverse cultures from the Mediterranean to the Indus Valley, with Mesopotamia playing a key role (Fuller and Boivin 2002: 174). With the possible exception of Shortugai in Badakhshan, Jansen claims that there are no Mature Harappan sites in the Baluchestan highlands and that this site governed the lapis lazuli mines. The Indus Valley population at this location corresponds with the transition from land-based to sea-based trade routes. Following this shift, lapis lazuli seems to have been shipped to the Indus Valley, the Arabian Peninsula, and possibly Egypt, where it was eventually used (Jansen 2002: 121).

As previously, stated, archaeological data strongly implies that the Persian Gulf and Makoran Sea waterways offer Central Asian and Afghan nations the most cost-effective and strategically favourable means of international trade. Renowned Russian Tsar Peter the Great expressed this opinion (Gordon 2017), stressing the strategic value of reaching the wide oceans of the south. When compared to the difficulties and costs involved in connecting to other regions via the Black Sea, he thought that these maritime channels were the safest and most economical means of communication. Peter the Great recognised the strategic and economic benefits of Russia expanding southward, which led him to envision this course of action.

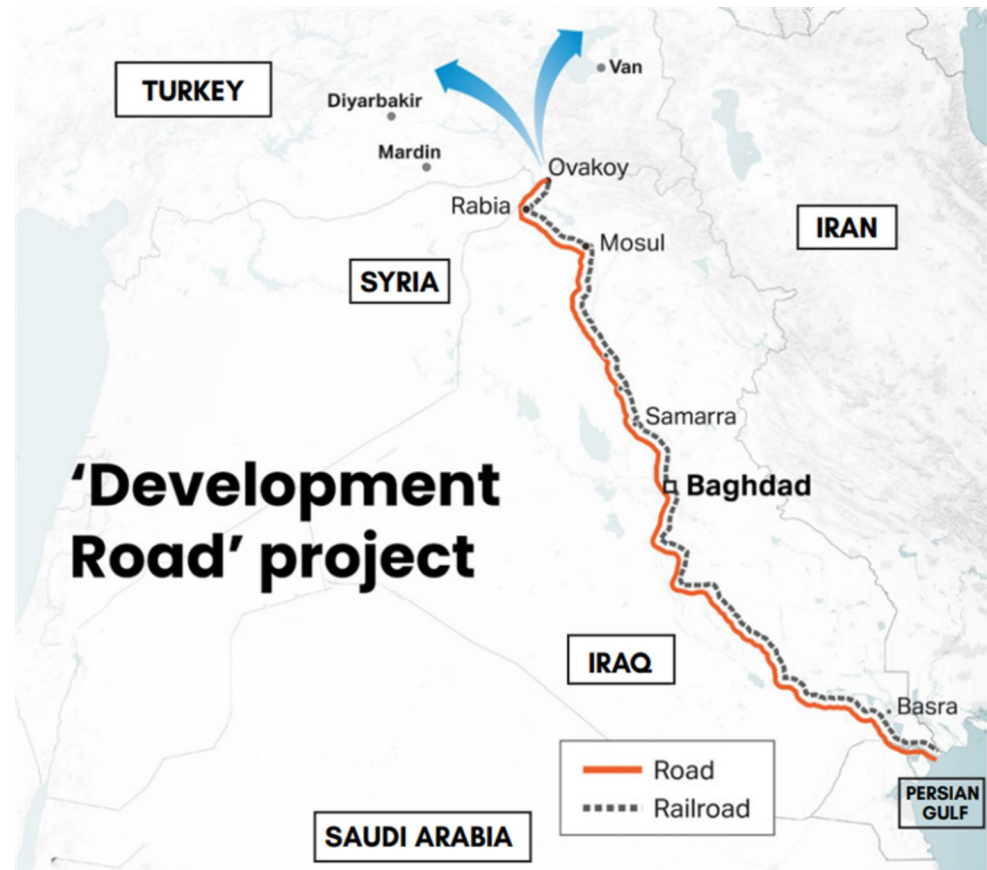
He understood that controlling the maritime routes along the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf would provide Russia with access to lucrative trade markets and strengthen its influence in the region. While the Black Sea offered a connection to European markets, it presented several drawbacks. The route through the Black Sea was subject to the political and military control of other powers, particularly the Ottoman Empire, which often hindered Russian trade and expansionist ambitions. Additionally, the Black Sea ports were often icebound during the winter months, further limiting Russia's access to the wider world. In contrast, the waterways in the Makoran Sea and the Persian Gulf

offered a more direct and secure route to the Indian Ocean and beyond. These routes were less susceptible to political interference and were open year-round. Furthermore, the Persian Gulf region was rich in resources, including precious metals and spices, which could be traded with Russia and other European countries. Peter the Great's pursuit of access to the open waters of the south was driven by his strategic vision for Russia's development and expansion. He recognized the economic and geopolitical benefits that would accrue from controlling the maritime routes in this region. While the Black Sea served as a gateway to Europe, it lacked the security, accessibility, and economic advantages of the Persian Gulf and Makoran Sea. Historical precedence underscores this disparity: control of the Baltic influenced Europe, the Black Sea affected Asia, but the Persian Gulf held sway globally. This historical emphasis on the Persian Gulf's strategic importance highlights the waterways' continued role in facilitating trade, cultural exchange, and regional power dynamics.

The development road project (Fig. 7)

In Iraq, the Development Road initiative came about amid a time of social and political unrest. The idea was conceived in response to public outrage about the way the government was handling the economy. The objective was twofold: to diversify Iraq's economy away from its reliance on oil and gas and to allay public unrest by showcasing the government's commitment to large-scale infrastructure projects. However, the project does not seek to fundamentally alter Iraq's power structures or governance system (Hasan 2024). As reported by Hayes (2024), the \$17 billion Development Road project, which is intended to improve connection between Turkey and Iraq, was announced by the foreign minister of Turkey. The project mainly involves these two nations and covers 1,200 km (745 miles), with Turkey providing about 10% of the infrastructure. A network of highways and trains is envisioned for this important connection between Asia and Europe. It will eventually stretch towards Europe, joining the Grand Faw Port in southern Iraq to the Turkish border. Fidan, Turkey's foreign minister emphasized the project's broad scope, highlighting the construction of a major port in al-Faw. This strategic Persian Gulf port is envisioned to become a critical hub for regional logistics (Hayes 2024). Additionally, the project encompasses the development of roadways, railways, natural gas and oil pipelines, as well as the potential integration of fiber optics. "We believe that regional development projects hold immense importance," Fidan stated. "Such joint ventures are essential for enhancing regional prospects, improving quality of life, and fostering deeper cooperation" (Hayes 2024). The Development Road project comprises a

Fig. 7 Map Showing the Development Road project linking the Persian Gulf to Europe through Iraq and Turkey (After: Hayes 2024)

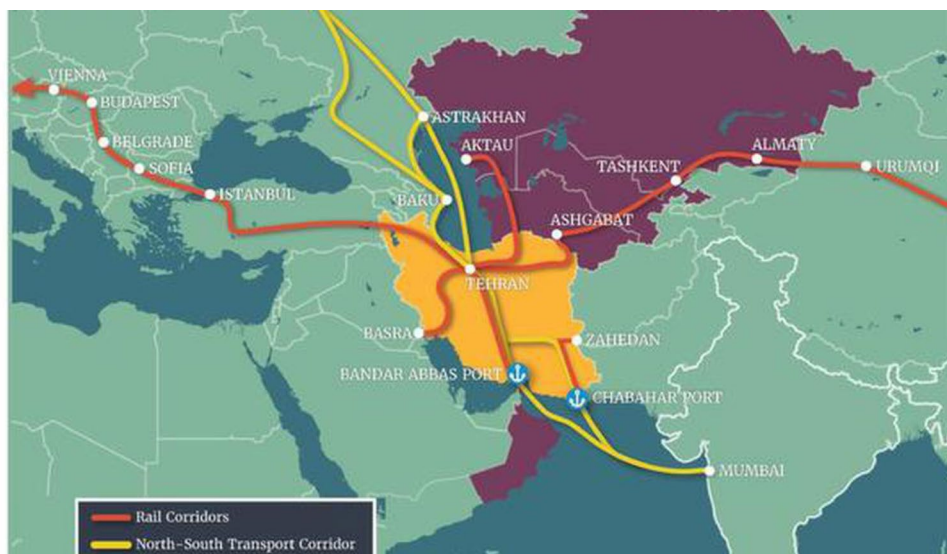


1,120-kilometer (745-mile) highway for cargo trucks and a dual rail line for passenger and freight trains. Beginning at the Faw port and traversing ten Iraqi governorates, it concludes at Faysh Khabur on the Iraq-Turkey border, where it connects to Turkish transportation networks. By 2028, the freight train's capacity is projected to reach 3.5 million containers and 22 million tons of bulk cargo annually. This capacity is anticipated to double by 2038 and reach 40 million tons by 2050. The initial high-speed passenger train service is expected to accommodate 13.8 million passengers per year (Hasan 2024). As mentioned, this route stretches through Iraq, connecting the Makoran Sea and the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean and ultimately Europe via Turkey. The Turkish government aspires to act as a bridge between Asia and Europe through both the Development Road project and the Lapis Lazuli route. The Mesopotamian people (ancient Iraq) connected not only north to south but also east to west. These connections benefitted them greatly, as the Fertile Crescent extended eastward into Iran. Modern Iraq can learn from this history and consider the potential of its eastern connections.

Discussion

Landlocked countries face unique challenges when it comes to trade and transit routes. Studies have revealed that the transportation of goods is significantly impacted by distance (Moneta 1959). This pattern is consistent with more recent research suggesting that a country's location plays a significant role in determining its trade costs (Hummels 1998). Iran has always served as a vital intermediary, acting as a link between sea routes and landlocked neighbours. It has served as a hub for trade and transportation for aeons, facilitating the movement of goods and people between the East and the West. Iran has been a centre of international trade since the Silk Road's inception, and it still is thanks to the development of Bandar Abbas and Chabahar Port. Owing to its favourable location at the confluence of Asia and Europe, it is a crucial element of regional connectivity (Fig. 8). The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and Pakistan face serious geopolitical and economic obstacles as a result of India's access to Chabahar Port. The recent deal between India and Oman about Duqm Port heightened these worries even more (Solangi 2019: 48). Iran's southeastern coast holds strategic significance for international maritime trade. Its unique geography facilitates the expansion of transit routes linking the northern Indian Ocean with Central

Fig. 8 Iran's Rail and Road Networks as a Bridge between Asia and Europe, Highlighting Chabahar and Bandar Abbas Ports (After: Haidar 2019)



Asia. Chabahar, situated in the northwest Makoran region and boasting direct access to the Indian Ocean, stands out as the most important area. Recognizing its potential, the Iranian government has designated Chabahar a free trade and industrial zone. However, with a growing population and expanding maritime infrastructure, understanding coastal vulnerability and potential environmental risks at Chabahar becomes increasingly crucial.

In recent years, Iran has made significant strides towards developing its infrastructure and expanding its position as a transit hub. The construction of Chabahar Port has opened up new commercial and economic prospects due to its direct access to the Arabian and Makoran Seas. Iran is also investing heavily in modernising its road, rail, and aviation transportation networks in order to improve its connectivity with its neighbours. As a result, Iran has the potential to evolve into a major regional transit hub that would connect landlocked countries to maritime routes and encourage economic expansion throughout the area. By reducing transportation costs and expediting supply times, Iran can play a major role in empowering landlocked countries and advancing regional integration. Despite technological developments in the transportation industry, landlocked developing nations still face obstacles to entering global markets, which causes them to lag behind their marine neighbours in terms of external commerce and overall growth (Faye et al. 2004; Martelau et al., 2007). These nations are especially susceptible to exorbitant freight expenses and erratic delivery schedules.

Excluding Iran from key regional cooperation programs like the CAREC Programme, Lapis Lazuli Corridor, Development Road Project, and China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) could be detrimental to all participating nations. Iran's strategic location and well-developed infrastructure offer an economical and efficient transit route. Bypassing

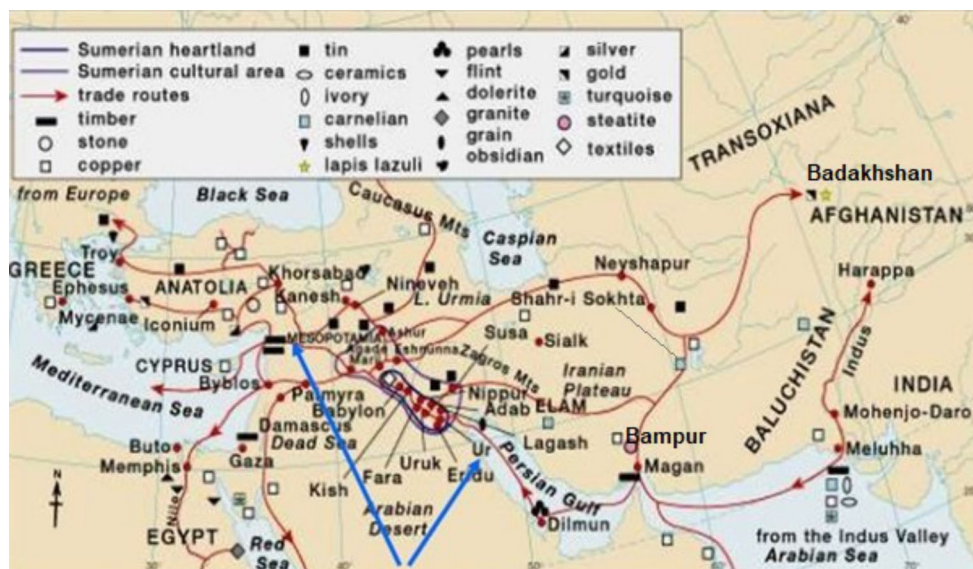
Iran necessitates longer routes, leading to increased transportation costs and extended delivery times for participating countries. This can negatively affect the overall financial viability of these projects and hinder regional integration efforts.

Promoting inclusive development through collaboration with Iran presents a more sustainable and advantageous path for regional connectivity. Historical evidence supports this notion. As Mortazavi (2005) highlights, long-distance trade during the third millennium BCE thrived due to a complex network connecting various regions. Badakhshan served as the production center, Iranian cities (particularly in the southeast) acted as intermediaries and local markets, while southern Mesopotamia and western Iran facilitated trade further west. Excluding any region would have hindered the formation of this intricate network, as illustrated in Fig. 9. Learning from this historical precedent, it becomes evident that separate networks in the modern era would impede sustainable development. The historical connection between the Indus Valley and Egypt during the third millennium BC, which endured for over 700 years, exemplifies the benefits of long-term regional cooperation (Fig. 9).

Conclusion

Finally, Iran's beneficial geographic location is unavoidably complemented by its dominion over important waterways, such as the Persian Gulf, the Makoran Sea and the Sea of Oman. The Persian Gulf is one of the most important maritime trade routes in the world, with millions of barrels of oil and other commercial goods passing through it every day. A crucial component of East-West trade is the Sea of Oman's connection to the Indian Ocean. Because it controls these rivers, Iran has a clear advantage in this sector.

Fig. 9 Regional and Extra-Regional Trade Networks of the Third Millennium BC: Fostering Sustainable Development



Without Iran's assistance, many countries throughout the world would find it difficult and costly to use these maritime routes.

Gaining access to warm southern waters is crucial for any nation looking to develop power and influence in the region, as the renowned Russian Emperor Peter the Great advised in his will to his successors. This strategic advantage belongs to Iran, which controls both the Makoran Sea and the Persian Gulf. Considering the previously listed aspects, it is clear that it would not be in the best interests of any of the participating countries to keep Iran out of regional initiatives like CAREC, Lapis Lazuli, and CPEC. Any plan for regional connection must take into account Iran's strategic location, advanced infrastructure, and control over important waterways. Sustainable and peaceful development in the region would be made possible by cooperation with Iran and the utilisation of its potential. Countries may work together with Iran to promote inclusive growth so that everyone has a more prosperous and secure future.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The author declares no competing interests.

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