

# India's Chabahar approach needs grander strategic revisit

Is India facing a new challenge over Chabahar, a port central to New Delhi's alternative outreach to Central Asia? If the recent statement by Iranian Foreign Minister Javed Zarif welcoming Pakistan and China to become partners for Chabahar port development has any strategic bearing, India needs to rethink about its future approach to Chabahar. India has largely followed a "singular" approach to the port, by collaborating bilaterally with Iran and trying to configure a trilateral understanding among India-Iran-Afghanistan to enrich an alternative and secured route to Central Asia through Chabahar. This approach requires an overhaul, particularly in the context of Iran's growing relationship with China and the evolution of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) as a greater Eurasian platform.

In inviting Pakistan and China to participate in Chabahar development, Zarif said Chabahar is not meant to "encircle" or "strangle" anyone in the region. Hitherto, Chabahar has been portrayed as a "success" channel in India-Iran relationship. India has nurtured Chabahar with Iran's cooperation through strong investment to enhance its new Connect Central Asia policy and to promote the Intercontinental North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC). India and Iran agreed recently to connect Chabahar within the INSTC framework and acknowledged the two countries' centrality in promoting multi-modal connectivity.

For long, Iran has tried to dispel the popular notion that strategically, Chabahar rivals Gwadar. In Iran's perspective, the two are "sister ports" and Iran has plans to export elec-

tricity and other resources to Gwadar. Situated in the Sistan-Balochistan province on the energy-rich Iran's southern coast, Chabahar is a strategic hub establishing a direct link for maritime commercial diplomacy between India's western coast and Iran-Afghanistan region.

A tri-lateral India-Iran-Afghanistan ministerial meeting further enhanced the idea of an integrated development of connectivity infrastructure that will boost road and rail networks, port development and offer impetus to regional market access and integration. Even though India sees Chabahar as competing with Gwadar for India's maritime and energy interests in the region, still India's approach to Chabahar is based on a framework of regional cooperation and coordination. India's maritime vision of SAGAR — Security and Growth for All in the Region — expounds this perspective. Keeping this in view, India needs to embrace a regional mode of understanding on not only how to nurture Chabahar but also how to establish it as a regional connecting hub. More than this, India needs to read the evolving relationship between China and Iran and the context of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), which would be discussing connectivity as one of the principal issues in coming times. The Qingdao SCO Summit scheduled for June this year in China might witness a beginning to this effect.

The China-Iran relationship is much stronger today than it was a decade earlier. Over the years, China has pursued a multi-pronged engagement with Iran: Connecting bilaterally, and by establishing a stable network of contacts regionally through SCO. It may be noted that Beijing

was instrumental in the 2015 Iranian nuclear deal amid Western pressure to curb Iran's nuclear programme. Iran, to date, remains a major oil supplier to Beijing. Iran joined SCO as an observer in June 2005 along with India and Pakistan, with China vigorously pushing Iran's case.

New Delhi's approach to Chabahar is based on a Central Asia-plus-South Asia concept, which constitutes the core of New Delhi's Connect Central Asia policy. The Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline that India promotes is a reference to that. India's approach of reactivating INSTC is another illustration of how India wants to connect with the region physically. Connectivity, energy exploration, sharing security concerns on terrorism, and establishing political presence are some of the factors that shape India's Central Asia policy. China's approach to SCO is equally based on a South Asia-plus-Central Asia construct. China sees SCO as an important Eurasian organisation and aims to induct Iran as a member at some point, and possibly Afghanistan also. China lobbied hard to bring Afghanistan as an observer during the 2011 Sanya SCO summit.

SCO bids fair to emerge as one of the most important bodies in the Eurasian region where China-Russia understanding will evolve further. Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin agreed in May 2015 to establish strategic convergence between China's Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and Russia's Eurasia Economic Union (EEU). This convergence is noticeable in areas like local-currency settlement in bilateral trade, financial cooperation through the Silk Road Fund (SRF) and under the Asia

Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). For India, the greater challenge is how to participate intently in a Sino-Russian regional design while advancing its own strategic interest. The bigger test for India is how to integrate and accept SCO's future undertaking where connectivity is one of the most important aspects. India has maintained strategic silence over SREB and has opposed the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which is planned through Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir (POK).

Can India realistically oppose SCO undertakings involving these connectivity issues where India and Pakistan have joined as SCO members? This calls for a serious policy deliberation on India's part since the coming Qingdao SCO Summit might discuss some of these issues. Qingdao will prepare a five-year plan to advance cooperative projects under the SCO framework, including Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects. India, therefore, needs to prepare how to pitch Chabahar as a port in the context of these evolving regional conditions.

India's massive requirement for energy resources is a defining aspect of New Delhi's Connect Central Asia policy. For energy resources, India would be facing stiff competition from China. SREB is an important aspect of China's outreach in Central Asia today. Through its Maritime Silk Route (MSR), China is attempting not only to make an inroad into the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) but also to connect Central Asia-South Asia economic corridors where both Gwadar and Chabahar are seen as two important strategic points in China's Indian Ocean strategy.

In terms of challenges for India

from SREB, the biggest challenge comes from CPEC, which is an integral part of SREB. The challenge is fourfold. First, the investment involved. CPEC is estimated to involve an initial grant of \$46 billion, now \$62 billion, to establish linkages between China and Pakistan. China has now announced that it will run the Karot hydropower project for the next 30 years, which is roughly estimated to cost \$1.65 billion, before handing it over to Pakistan. The Karot project is supposed to be in operation by 2020.

Second, CPEC is meant to connect Kashgar in China's Xinjiang province with Gwadar. India has always been concerned about the China-Pakistan understanding on Gwadar. The volume of financial backing that Gwadar receives from China is far superior to what India can match as regards Chabahar.

Third, the outlay on CPEC that intends to run through India's POK region is a challenge for India. It even portends that China may emerge as a silent third party in the Kashmir dispute in future. Even though China has maintained a somewhat neutral position on the Kashmir dispute in recent years after the Kargil conflict between India and Pakistan, terming it mostly as a "bilateral historical dispute", the Chinese pursuit of CPEC may impel China to revisit its position on Kashmir in future. CPEC will run through the strategic Gilgit-Baltistan, which is a region adjacent to India.

Fourth, as one of the local immediate powers in the region, China has managed to outmanoeuvre India on many energy-related deals. India's core aim in this region has been how to push TAPI and Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) pipelines. China has

lately shown an interest in IPI, while TAPI remains somnolent. Consensus over the routes, price of the gas, and securitising the pipelines remain stumbling-blocks to progress in the matter.

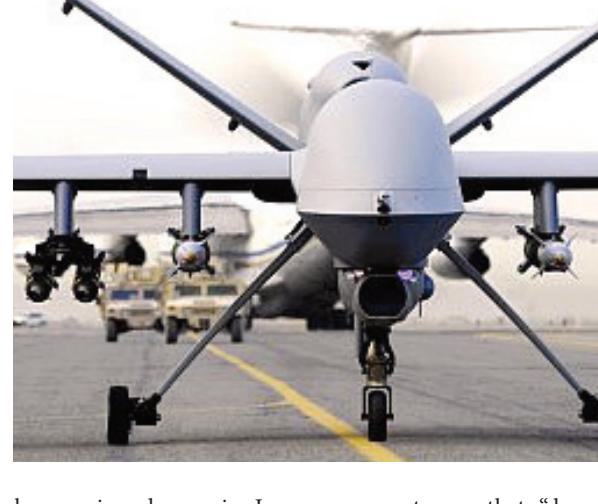
In brief, Gwadar is an important part of CPEC as well as SREB. China's control over Gwadar would mean Beijing challenging Indian energy and security interests in the immediate IOR. China will also be interested for a new strategic understanding with Pakistan, Iran, Afghanistan and Russia within the SCO mandate.

Given India's geographical distance from Central Asia, connectivity is an issue between India and the region. Land route connectivity through China, reviving the traditional Ladakh-Xinjiang route is an option, but may not be feasible given India's reservation about SREB. India did share traditionally a greater bonding with Eurasia through the silk and spice trade routes. The time seems to have arrived to reconsider enlivening these traditional modes of connectivity and try to identify if India can have a greater understanding with China with regard to Chabahar and Central Asia both within and outside SCO. In a regional condition where cooperation comes along with competition, New Delhi needs to adopt a more open and versatile approach towards Chabahar that will enhance multiple strategic opportunities and advances for India while preparing an inroad for an alternate passage to Central Asia.

(The writer is Research Fellow and Centre Coordinator at the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi)

## PERSPECTIVE

# Drones turning favourite future warfare arsenal



The emergence of drones can be regarded as a paradigm shift in the modern warfare. They have unleashed a new pattern of horror on the already devastating battles, particularly between nations and non-state actors. The continued support of power, status and money have emboldened America — which first started the extensive use of drones for targeted killings after terrorism became a global thing — to introduce them as one of the most sophisticated and lethal weapons of the 21st century.

Combined with precision weapons mounted on drones, the drone technology can be used for controlling territories or even human population and will be a big game changer in coming years. Hence, it is worth looking at drones: How it can change the futuristic wars? And of course, how drones could be regarded as an all new threat to civilians?

Earlier, used in the Balkans for surveillance, drones' root goes to the post-Taliban Afghanistan. It was here in this war-torn country that America orchestrated a completely new war strategy to kill two birds with one stone: to crush dread al Qaeda terrorists without collateral damage and to retain its superiority in the troubled greater West Asian region.

In fact, America had found the new killing machine, drones, to wipe out Osama bin Laden, who was then taking shelter in Afghanistan's Kandahar after the USSR walked out of the strife-torn country. But then Washington was in two minds about using drones to kill Osama as it involved collateral damage, including civilians' death.

However, the 9/11 terror attacks at the heart of the US changed American's strategies, forcing it to use any means to smoke out terrorists hiding in any parts of the world.

The American Administration and its security agencies took the help of drones to eliminate Islamic terrorists not only in Afghanistan but also in many other parts of the world.

After September 2001, the US responded heavily, by targeting both the al Qaeda and its protector, the Taliban regime, in Afghanistan. In fact, America's armed drone strike came that autumn to kill the elusive Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar. However, this time there was no cry for legality of using such lethal weapons.

Since then America has

been using drones in Iraq, Yemen, Syria, Somalia and in Pakistan to kill terrorists and non-state actors belonging to al Qaeda, ISIS and what it calls as 'associated forces'. Former director of the CIA Michael Hayden even said that using drones have become "part of the American way of war".

So far, drones have sparked debates across the world in public sphere, power corridors, and of course among the war strategists. The Left-leaning intellectuals have accused the US of using drones as a planned attempt to reassess its hegemonic role around the globe. Scholars like Mathew Burrows are concerned not only of the legal ramifications of domestic drones used by Government organisations, but the broad spectrum Americans could experience (2013). To him the Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) flying high in the sky can have a chilling effect on democracy that most Americans would consider intolerable.

Today, with an all powerful globalisation, all aspects of our daily lives are seriously disturbed, interrupted and rather our privacy aspect has been compromised to a great extent. It is "no drone era" that can particularly rob the freedom from the American natives, but it is the greatness and super accessibility of the information and communication technologies that are indeed giving us enough liberty on one side and taking away much more on the other hand.

However, many of the major targets of US drones do not hold good or rather failed to offer any serious scrutiny, while offering a comparison between already available war weapons and the UAVs for military purposes. The most common anti-drone

technology allows their operators to distinguish between civilians and combatants far more effectively than most other weapon systems.

Indeed, this is sending a

argument says that "drones kill more innocent civilians than enemies". It is a fact and the international community has witnessed the devastating impact of these UAVs over innocent people across Pakistan, Afghanistan, Libya, Yemen, etc.

If we draw a comparison between deaths occurred because of drone attacks and other weapons of war, then it can clearly be concluded that the rate of casualties of the former is not higher than the latter. To be fair, the common means of warfare cause more deaths than drones.

As such drones do not pose much more threat to humanity, it is not going to overturn the very strategy of war. Finally, drones are not presenting a whole lot of challenges to the Governments, civilians and to the combatants in the warring nations. But the way America is using these weapons portends grave consequences as well as their strategic efficacy.

Besides, modern drone technologies allow their operators to distinguish between civilians and combatants far more effectively than most other weapon systems.

However, if this is the

argument then the moot question is that the law enforcement agencies of the US would not violate such provisions in the law of protecting national interests?

Again what is the guarantee that the law enforcement agencies of the US would not violate such provisions in the law of protecting national interests?

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Besides, as of today, the major targets of US drones are none other than the greater parts of the West Asia, where in the country has been in command for long, though there have been some challenges to the superpower's authority at times.

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Beyond drones, America should evolve its war strategies so as to minimise the loss of the lives of common people while targeting terrorists and other combatants. What worries many is that the so-called legal narratives which are being employed to justify the use of US drone attacks jeopardise the core tenets of international law itself



MAKHAN SAIKIA

wrong message to some of the country's leadership and their civilians as they are now at the centre of America's global war on terrorism. What worries many is that the so-called legal narratives which are being employed to justify the use of US drone attacks jeopardise the core tenets of international law itself.

At last, what we all could gather is that advanced technologies are potentially helping the constitutional authorities to intrude more and more into the lives of private citizens. Drones are no exception to this. But then, with the coming of drones, all-powerful Governments are trying to overcome their regular constraints by employing such ultra-modern technologies.

Therefore, the UAVs in the form of drones must be treated very carefully and with skepticism by the Americans, their lawmakers and the world at large. Any nation would be encouraged to engage in more and more wars if they can use drones which will cost them lesser human resource.

There has been a great deal of debate concerning the current use of drones by the US as part of its global war on terrorism. Will the use of drones minimise or so to say eliminate the global jihadists entirely from the world?

It is highly unlikely and drones are just another stage of technological advancement of weapons that will simply be acquired by rich nations such as America to terrorise the world. Beyond drones, America should evolve its war strategies so as to minimise the loss of the lives of common people while targeting the terrorists and other combatants.

(The writer is an expert on international affairs)

## OUTLOOK

# Ambedkar Jayanti: Let's have White Paper on Dalit issues

As we remember the chief architect of our Constitution, Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, popularly known as Babasaheb, on his birth anniversary today, we are confronted with questions emerging from the fault lines of our society. What are the aspirations of the Dalit community today?

Though the preferential treatment in education and employment by the means of constitutionally mandated affirmative action has lifted many families from the scourge of exclusion, representation in key decision-making bodies in relevant sectors, social equality and dignity broadly form the essence of Dalit aspiration today.

Growing up in a lower-middle class Dalit family in the slow 90s of Patna, I was unusually surprised at the dismal presence of subaltern voices in the print and electronic media both at national and provincial levels.

Kenneth J Cooper from *Washington Post* first attracted the national attention around this issue in 1996 when he found that there was not a single Dalit journalist in India. This prompted another senior journalist BK Uniyal from *The Pioneer* to do a similar research.

Out of 700 accredited journalists not a single Dalit was to be found. To this day, it is impossible to locate a reasonable representation of subaltern voices in the newsrooms.

As a community one has to be vigilant if the situation is changing. I agree that a process of social churning has started that is redefining the ever-dynamic Dalit discourse today.

The nature of Dalit struggle and movement is constantly being shaped by evolving aspirations of the community. Accusations targeting a single political party or ideology for increase in the cases of atrocities is unambiguously misleading.

Debate on atrocities act is not new. Like adultery, dowry prohibition, domestic violence and sexual harassment at workplace, the Dalit act is also a highly misused one.

The question we must confront ourselves with is if there is an independent enquiry on the efficacy of these provisions like the conviction rates and the follow-up. There are cases where a Dalit is merely used as a pawn by upper castes in their disputes. Whether the act has actually served its purpose and is not disproportionately being misused is a ponderable point.

The Government on its part has already filed a comprehensive review petition in

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the apex court. We must remember that it was the same Government that actually strengthened this Act in 2015 by expanding the definition and nature of atrocities and making it more lethal.

Adding political tone and tenor to the Dalit debate is a great disservice to the discourse that we want today. It is much beyond politics.

Dalit *samaj* has been unimaginably oppressed. Rebel is an inherent characteristic of a Dalit. Although dissent is the essence of democracy, it must be manifested in a reasonable manner. Let us take a moment today while we remember Bharat Ratna Babasaheb Bhim Rao Ambedkar on his birth anniversary.

We must use this opportunity in a constructive manner. Maybe a debate around reservations can also be explored as an idea.

I advocate for a White Paper on Dalit issues that would encapsulate the scale, magnitude of atrocities, impact of welfare and punitive legislations and how distributive the policies of affirmative action have been for the deprived segment of our society.

As a second generation beneficiary of reservations, I have had greater opportunities compared to my father and grandfather and faced complexities of much different nature. Why should not the conversation around caste evolve?

(The writer is Senior Research Fellow at India Foundation, New Delhi)

