

Indian rise in Caucasus

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OPINION
EXCLUSIVE

After the Soviet Union fell in 1989, the Caucasus region was left with a power vacuum. Due to religious and racial affinities between Armenia and both Europe and Russia, and on the other hand, Islamic and cultural links between Iran and Azerbaijan, two fronts were formed in the region. However, the relations between domestic and foreign countries were highly volatile, which eventually changed the structure of relations. For example, the emergence of Putin in Russia and his keen interest in playing a key role in political affairs shook up the scene. Although Iran had been a major player in the region throughout history, the prolongation of that war opened up an opportunity for world powers to step in. Turkey, Iran's old rival, which has been building bridges with Azerbaijan through its cultural and religious ties, can now step into the Caucasus. On the other hand, Azerbaijan's secular policies drove a wedge between itself and Iran, bringing it closer to Israel, Iran's old adversary. Under the control of the pro-Western Pashinyan, Armenia increasingly distanced itself from Russia and turned to NATO, France, and the United States. With Turkey's entry into regional affairs, Pakistan also jumped into the fray. Now, India is seizing the opportunity to enter the Caucasus. From arms trade to building transport infrastructure, India has set missions for itself in the region.

The Indian newspaper New Indian Express announced on November 12 that India has shipped the first batch of the Akash air defense missile system to Armenia. The Akash system is an advanced surface-to-air missile developed by the Indian Defense Research and Development Organization and is capable of targeting fighter planes, cruise missiles, drones, etc. up to a distance of 25 km. On the other hand, India is keen to play an active and strategic role in the global corridors that pass through the Caucasus. It has even invested in Iran's Chabahar to get its desired corridor. The monthly magazine The Diplomatist points out in this regard that the 10-year Chabahar port contract — signed with Iran in May this year — allows India to bypass maritime choke



Azerbaijan's President Ilham Aliyev sits in the cockpit of the Pakistani JF-17 Block III aircraft presented to him at Heydar Aliyev International Airport, Azerbaijan, on September 25, 2024.
● PRESIDENT.AZ

points by moving goods through Iran to the South Caucasus, Central Asia, and the wider Eurasia. One of the immediate

beneficiaries of India's involvement in the Caucasus is Armenia, a small landlocked country, faces similar challenges

in its trade, and its neighbors Turkey and Azerbaijan have maintained a border closure since the First Karabakh War in the

early 1990s. However, Armenia has retained access to maritime trade through Georgia and Iran and established close diplomatic, economic, and security ties, opening up a route for Indian goods. The Persian-language Hamshahri newspaper also wrote in this context: In recent days, pictures of Iranian road construction in Armenia have been published. Considering that the war between Israel and Hamas in West Asia has jeopardized the future of the proposed Indo-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) has gained more importance. This has another aspect: Iran is trying to create new transit routes to strike a balance in the region. A path that can be created

with India's help. The Indo-Iran-Armenia Corridor is as important to India as it is to Armenia as a major security player in the Caucasus. A tripartite meeting regarding the creation of the transportation corridor is going to be held with the presence of India, Iran, and Armenia. India does not want to miss this opportunity to compete with Pakistan. Although many experts in the region consider this corridor too expensive, it seems that India has made up its mind. It should be noted that the presence of global players in the Caucasus region can be seen both as an opportunity for the development of the region and a threat to its future. The fact is that the Caucasus region is still volatile, and there are still territorial claims (albeit small)

between countries. On the other hand, the expansion of relations between Azerbaijan and Israel has upset the balance of power in the Caucasus region to the detriment of Iran, which is seen as a problem for Iran. Meanwhile, Armenia has become a host to NATO, which is another problem for Iran. So, it seems that the presence of troops outside the region will complicate the situation further. Of course, another important point is the inclination of foreign countries to participate in regional relations. For example, India's first target is Armenia, and Pakistan's first target is Azerbaijan. The sale of Pakistani fighter jets to Azerbaijan is a sign of Pakistan's serious will to actively participate in the Caucasus equations.



Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan (R) and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi shake hands on the sidelines of the Summit of the Future at UN Headquarters in New York on September 24, 2024.
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OPINION

Iran's Jask, Pakistan's Gwadar: China's ports of power

Iran recently began exporting oil from its new terminal at Jask port on the Gulf of Oman, a move that allows it to bypass the Strait of Hormuz. This new route could benefit China, which may now rely on the Iranian port to secure steady oil supplies amid any potential closure of the strait due to the Iran-Israel conflict. In addition, Pakistan's Gwadar Port serves as another strategic asset for China in sustaining its oil imports from the Middle East.



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The Strait of Hormuz, a critical transit point for global oil shipments, has gained attention amid the escalating Iran-Israel tensions. About 20% to 25% of the world's oil supply passes through this narrow strait, which connects the Gulf of Oman and the Persian Gulf. Any disruption here would have widespread implications, particularly for China, the world's largest oil importer. Iran's Jask Port, located just east of the Strait of Hormuz, hosts an oil terminal

established three years ago as a safeguard for Iran's oil exports. A full-blown conflict between Iran and Israel could force a closure of the Strait, a scenario that would significantly impact China, which sources 60% of its oil from the Middle East. In 2021, Tehran and Beijing formalized a comprehensive strategic partnership involving China's \$400 billion investment in Iran in exchange for long-term oil supply at a discounted price. A key element of this deal is China's access to Jask Port, en-

abling it to receive oil imports from Iran and other Middle Eastern countries even if the Strait of Hormuz is blocked. China also operates the port of Gwadar in Pakistan's Balochistan Province. Located at the mouth of the Persian Gulf and near the Strait of Hormuz, Gwadar is a crucial component of the \$62 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), a key element of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The CPEC project aims to create an energy corridor connecting Gwa-

dar with China's Xinjiang region through highways, railways, and pipelines, thus offering an alternative to the risky Malacca Strait for Middle Eastern oil shipments. However, to achieve this goal, Gwadar Port needs further development. Currently, with a depth of 14.5 meters, it cannot accommodate large crude oil tankers, and plans to construct an oil refinery and an oil pipeline to Xinjiang's Kashgar remain unfulfilled, largely due to security issues. Baloch insurgent groups have resist-

ed Chinese presence, viewing Beijing as complicit in exploiting local resources. Despite these challenges, China's strategic presence at Gwadar allows it to monitor the region and respond swiftly to changes around the Strait of Hormuz. Furthermore, Iranian oil could be transported overland from Iran to Balochistan, then onward to China via the Karakoram Highway. China has long anticipated the need for alternative oil supply routes, signing a strategic partnership with Iran in 2021 and assuming

operational control of Gwadar in 2013. With Jask and Gwadar ports, Beijing is well-positioned to secure stable oil imports from the Middle East. These investments could also yield long-term strategic gains. In the future, China's military presence at both ports could provide its navy with a strategic advantage in the Indian Ocean, enabling it to monitor US naval operations, including those of the US 5th Fleet based in Bahrain. Ultimately, Jask and Gwadar, situated outside current

conflict zones, have the potential to reshape Asia's trade landscape. Beyond their geopolitical significance, these ports should be developed as alternative shipping routes that benefit the entire Asian region. With a focus on regional trade, both ports could foster commercial growth across Asia under an open trade agenda, rather than serving merely as assets in the geopolitical maneuvers of global powers.

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