

**THE STRATEGIC
IMPORTANCE
OF JASK PORT**

Yasir Rashid



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The Strategic Importance of Jask Port

Cask Limanının Stratejik Önemi

اهمیت استراتژیک بندر جاسک

Yasir Rashid

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CONTENTS

Introduction.	7
1. Jask Port	8
2. Importance of Jask Port in Iran's Energy Security	9
2.1. Goreh-Jask Pipeline	10
2.2. Neka-Jask Oil Pipeline	12
2.3. Sarakhs-Jask Natural Gas Pipeline	12
2.4. Iran - Oman Natural Gas Pipeline	12
2.5. Other Projects	12
3. Importance of Jask Port in China's Energy Security	14
4. Economic Importance of Jask Port.	15
5. Security-Military Importance of Jask Port	18
6. Jask Port and China's String of Pearls Strategy.	21
7. Consequences for Gulf Countries	22
8. Concerns About the Chinese Investments in Jask Port.	22
Conclusion.	23
References	24
Maps	
Map 1: Goreh-Jask Crude Oil Pipeline	11
Map 2: The String of Pearls Strategy and Strategic Maritime Chokepoints in the Indian Ocean.	14
Map 3: US Bases in the Gulf.	20
Tables	
Table 1: Characteristics of the Belt and Road Initiative	17
Graphics	
Graphic 1: Distribution of China's FDI in Iran by Sectors, 2005-2019.	9
Graphic 2: China's Crude Oil Imports From Iran Between 2018-2021 (Q1)	15

Abbreviations

BRI: Belt and Road Initiative

CMEC: China-Myanmar Economic Corridor

CPEC: China-Pakistan Economic Corridor

IISS: International Institute for Strategic Studies

INSTC: International North-South Transport Corridor

IPSA: Iraq Pipeline Through Saudi Arabia

JCPOA: Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action

KTAI: Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan-Afghanistan-Iran

LNG: Liquefied Natural Gas

NIGC: National Iranian Gas Company

NIOC: National Iranian Oil Company

PIG: Pipeline Inspection Gauge

PLA: People's Liberation Army

PMO: Port and Maritime Organization

SOEs: State-Owned Enterprises

SREB: Silk Road Economic Belt

TANAP: Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline Project



Summary

- Jask port, with its geopolitical location in the east of the Strait of Hormuz in the Oman Sea, is of strategic importance for Iran in terms of energy security, economy and military.
- Considering the strategic importance of the Jask port, Iran is planning to implement several projects to develop the port, one of which is the completion of the Goreh-Jask crude oil pipeline project.
- Studies show that China intends to invest in Jask port as part of the Iran-China 25-Year Comprehensive Cooperation Agreement, which indicates the importance of this port in China's long-term policies and strategies toward the region.
- Given China's growing need for energy imports from the Gulf region and its vulnerabilities in the chokepoint of the Strait of Hormoz, it is speculated that China will build its second overseas military base at the Jask port.
- The possible military presence of China in Jask port could lead to serious geopolitical developments in the region, one of the main consequences of which will be the escalation of tensions between Beijing and Washington in the Gulf region.

Keywords: Jask Port, Strait of Hormuz, The Gulf, Geopolitics, China-US Rivalry

Özet

- Umman Denizi'nde Hürmüz Boğazı'nın doğusundaki jeopolitik konumu ile Cask Limanı; ekonomi, enerji güvenliği ve askerî-güvenlik açısından İran için stratejik önem taşımaktadır.
- Cask Limanının stratejik önemini göz önünde bulunduran İran, limanı geliştirmek için Gore-Cask Ham Petrol Boru Hattı projesinin tamamlanması da dâhil olmak üzere çeşitli projeler hayata geçirmeyi planlamaktadır.
- Araştırmalar, Çin'in Pekin ile Tahran arasındaki 25 Yıllık Kapsamlı İş Birliği Anlaşması'nın bir parçası olarak Cask Limanına yatırım yapmayı planladığını göstermektedir.
- Basra Körfezi bölgesinden artan enerji ithalatı ihtiyacı ve Hürmüz Boğazı'nın düğüm noktasındaki (chokepoint) güvenlik açıkları göz önüne alındığında Çin'in, ikinci denizaşırı askerî üssünü Cask Limanına inşa edeceği tahmin edilmektedir.
- Çin'in Cask Limanında olası askerî varlığı, bölgede ciddi jeopolitik gelişmelere yol açabilir ve bunun temel sonuçlarından biri, Basra Körfezi bölgesinde Pekin ile Washington arasındaki gerilimin tırmanması olacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Cask Limanı, Hürmüz Boğazı, Basra Körfezi, Jeopolitik, Çin-ABD Rekabeti

خلاصه

- بندر جاسک با موقعیت ژئوپلیتیکی در شرق تنگه هرمز در دریای عمان از نظر امنیت انرژی، اقتصادی و نظامی دارای اهمیت استراتژیک برای ایران است.
- با توجه به اهمیت استراتژیک این بندر، ایران در حال برنامه ریزی برای اجرای پروژه های متعددی برای توسعه آن است که یکی از آنها، تکمیل پروژه خط لوله نفت خام گوره- جاسک است.
- بررسی ها نشان می دهد چین در چارچوب سند همکاری ۲۵ ساله با ایران، قصد سرمایه گذاری در بندر جاسک را دارد. این امر از اهمیت این بندر در سیاستها و استراتژی های بلندمدت چین در قبال منطقه حکایت دارد.
- با توجه به نیاز فزاینده چین به واردات انرژی از منطقه خلیج فارس و آسیب پذیری آن در تنگه هرمز، احتمال می رود که پکن دومین پایگاه نظامی خارج از کشور خود را در بندر جاسک تأسیس نماید.
- حضور احتمالی نظامی چین در بندر جاسک می تواند به تحولات جدی ژئوپلیتیکی در منطقه منجر شود که یکی از پیامدها، تشدید تنش بین پکن و واشنگتن در منطقه خلیج فارس خواهد بود.

کلیدواژه ها: بندر جاسک، تنگه هرمز، خلیج فارس، ژئوپلیتیک، رقابت چین و آمریکا



INTRODUCTION

Since the Industrial Revolution, the importance of ports has gradually increased regarding the development and economic growth of countries. Currently, with the high volume of free international trade, ports play a crucial role in the politics and economy of countries. According to recent statistics, about 80% of the world's trade by volume and over 70% of global trade by value are carried by sea and are handled by ports all over the world (UNCTAD, 2018). From this perspective, it can be said that the ports play a vital role in the development process of different countries.

Iran, which has a total of about 2,700 kilometres of maritime borders with the Gulf and Oman Sea to the south and the Caspian Sea to the north, has always tried to diversify its trade and export routes for oil and non-oil products by developing maritime transport and commercial ports. Iran's commercial ports have a significant share in the country's foreign trade, which are known as the country's main transportation gateways. According to the Iranian PMO, more than 85% of the country's foreign trade goods are transported through ports, which play a vital and irreplaceable role in Iran's national and regional economy as well as its foreign trade (PMO, 2019).

Among the Iranian ports, the Jask port on the Makran coast in the Oman Sea will be one of the key ports of Iran, which is of strategic importance for Iran in terms of economy, military and energy security. Due to this importance, Iran is planning to implement several projects to turn this port into an energy and a trade-economic hub. Moreover, considering the strategic importance of Jask port, reports indicate that China is going to invest in this port within the framework of the Iran-China 25-Year Comprehensive Cooperation Agreement. China's investment in the Jask port has importance economic, military, and security significance for Beijing. It can be considered part of its plans to achieve long-term goals under the BRI and String of Pearls strategies. Chinese investment in the Jask port will also lead to major geopolitical developments in the region, one of which is the intensification of competition between China and the US in the Gulf region.

It is noteworthy that due to many of the projects mentioned in this report in the framework of Jask port development have not yet been implemented, many points of this report have been analyzed in an analytical method and manner.

1. Jask Port

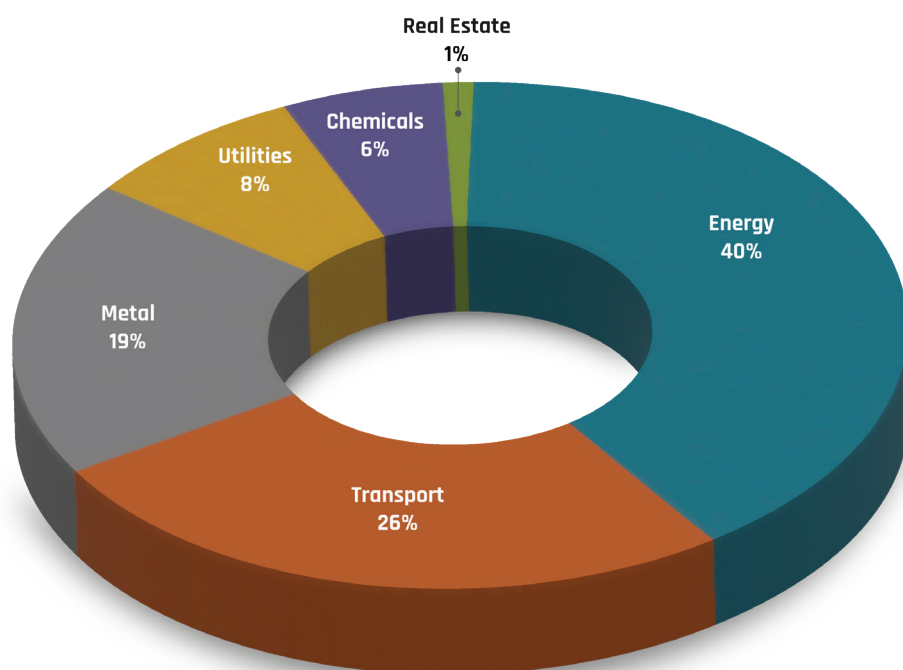
The Jask port will be one of the most important ports in Iran, which is located in the east of the Strait of Hormuz on the shores of Makran in the south of Iran. The location of this port outside the Strait of Hormuz and its access to the open waters of the Indian Ocean is one of its most important features. Apart from its strategic location, this port is of economic, energy-security and military-security importance to Iran. With such a strategic position, the Iranian government is trying to develop the port and turn it into one of its energy and commercial hubs by designing infrastructure projects. The Iranian government has put on

its agenda projects such as the Goreh-Jask oil pipeline (south to south), Neka-Jask oil pipeline (north to south), Sarakhs-Jask gas pipeline, Iran-Oman gas pipeline, construction of oil and gas terminal, construction of LNG refinery and petrochemical complex to turn the Jask port into an energy hub outside the Gulf (Bahonar Port, n.d.; Kiyani, 2017). Developing road and rail transportation such as Bandar Abbas-Jask-Chabahar Railway, Bandar Abbas - Chabahar - Jiroft Highway, and creating the Jask free trade zone, Iran is also trying to make the port its trade hub outside the Strait of Hormuz.

In addition to the Iranian government's major plans to turn the Jask port into an energy hub and trade hub, the establishment of an Iran-China Industrial Town is another long-term plan to be implemented in the Jask port city. In this regard, reports indicate that China will have proper access to the Jask port within the framework of the Iran-China 25-Year Comprehensive Cooperation Agreement (Cordesman, 2020).

The Iran-China 25-Year Comprehensive Cooperation Agreement, signed in March 2021, contains bilateral cooperation in various fields, of which investments in Iran's energy and infrastructure sectors are the most important part of this Agreement. According to Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, the Iranian Foreign Minister, this Agreement entered the implementation stage on January 14, 2022 (Al Jazeera, 2022). Suffering from sanctions pressure, Iran is trying to expand its infrastructure projects, such as the Jask port, by attracting Chinese investment. In this regard, according to reports, in the document of the Iran-China 25-Year Comprehensive Cooperation Agreement, China will take an active part in the construction and development of the Jask port, the creation of an industrial town, and long-term investment in oil refineries and petrochemical plants at the Jask port (BBC Persian, 2020). In this regard, according to the Petroleum Economists, China intends to invest \$280 billion in the oil and gas industry and

Graphic 1: Distribution of China's FDI in Iran by Sectors, 2005-2019



Source: Saidi, 2021, p. 66

\$120 billion in the transportation industry as part of an Iran-China 25-Year Comprehensive Cooperation Agreement (Watkins, 2019). It can be argued that if this agreement is implemented between Beijing and Tehran, most of China's \$400 billion investment in Iran will be spent on the development of the Jask port and associated infrastructure projects.

Chinese investments in the Jask port and other Iranian infrastructure projects will change the geoeconomic trend in the region (Avdaliani, 2021). In addition to its strategic importance to China, Jask is of particular importance for securing its oil flows through the Strait of Hormuz, ensuring the safety of merchant ships, and countering growing US threats.

2. Importance of Jask Port in Iran's Energy Security

As the fourth country with large oil reserves in the world, Iran faces serious vulnerabilities in energy security. One of Iran's major vulnerabilities in this area is its strong dependence on the Strait of Hormuz. The Strait of Hormuz is a strategic waterway between the Indian Ocean and the Gulf. Although Iran claims control over the Strait, it has fragile vulnerabilities in various security aspects in this strategic waterway. Since a significant percentage of Iran's oil exports pass through the Strait of Hormuz, serious financial and economic losses will be inflicted on this country if the strait is closed. It is noteworthy that the closure of the Strait of Hormuz will be detrimental not only to Iran

but also to many energy-producing and importing countries. According to Faisal Mirza, an expert on energy security, “The closure of the Strait of Hormuz will cause maximum damage to global oil-consuming countries rather than the Middle East’s oil-producing nations” (Hellenic Shipping News, 2018).

Given Iran’s vulnerabilities in energy exports, the development of the Jask port will make a significant contribution to ensuring the country’s energy security. From the energy security point of view, replacing the Strait of Hormuz and an alternative to the Kharg oil terminal in energy exports are the most significant importance of Jask port. In order to ensure energy security and achieve the goal of turning the Jask port into an energy hub, Iran has undertaken several projects. Construction of Goreh-Jask and Neka-Jask oil pipelines, Sarakhs-Jask and Iran-Oman gas pipelines, crude oil and gas storage tanks, construction of Jask terminal, LNG refinery, and petrochemical complex are among the most important projects.

2.1. Goreh-Jask Pipeline

One of the most important projects in the framework of the development of Jask port, the construction of which was recently completed, is the Goreh-Jask Crude Oil Pipeline project. The Goreh-Jask pipeline project, with a capacity of one million barrels of crude oil per day, involves the construction of 42-inch-diameter pipelines for a total distance of 1000 km, five pump houses, three pig launcher/receiver stations, as well as submarine pipelines, a stilling basin, 400 km of transmission lines, ten power stations, and other auxiliary facilities (NS Energy, n.d.). The project will also consist of two Pipeline Inspection Gauge (PIG) stations, one terminal, as well as 20 crude oil storage tanks with a capacity of 10 million barrels (IRNA, 2020).

The Goreh-Jask Crude Oil transmission project is the largest energy transmission project in the history of Iran, which has been fully implemented (Aslan, 2021). The project is funded by the NIOC and is being developed in two phases with an estimated investment of \$1.8 billion, including \$750 million for the construction of an oil export terminal on Jask port. The main objectives of this project are to reduce dependence on the Strait of Hormuz, reduce risks and ensure continued crude oil exports, decentralization, and prevention of the accumulation and polarization of oil terminals in one area (replacing Kharg Oil Terminal) (Ettelaat, 2020).

The most important component of this pipeline is replacing the Strait of Hormuz. Currently, most of Iran’s oil exports are carried out from the Kharg Oil Terminal in Bushehr, in the Gulf, and through the Strait of Hormuz. This Strait is the transit point for 90% of the oil exports of the Gulf countries. Concerns about the possible closure of the Strait have prompted Iran to consider diversifying its oil export terminals and to consider Jask as an alternative to the Strait of Hormuz for oil exports (Naftema, 2020). In other words, this pipeline will provide the ground for bypassing the Strait of Hormuz and will cause the decentralization of export terminals and the diversification of this process, as well as reduce the export risk from the Strait of Hormuz (ICANA, 2020; Aslan, 2021).

It is noteworthy to mention that concerns about the consequences of regional tensions in the Strait of Hormuz, which is one of the most serious concerns in the world’s oil chokepoints, have prompted the Gulf oil producers to seek solutions to transport their crude oil without the need for the Strait of Hormuz. Accordingly, the 1200-kilometre East-West Crude Oil Pipeline, also known as Abqaiq-Yanbu Oil Pipeline, done by Saudi Arabia, Habshan-Fujairah pipeline with a length of 380 km from Abu Dhabi to the port of Fujairah on the coast of Oman,

three pipelines in Iraq, Kirkuk–Ceyhan, Kirkuk–Baniyas and IPSA, are the alternatives to the Strait of Hormuz among the countries in the region (Rahborde Moaser, 2020). It can be said that the Goreh-Jask Crude Oil Pipeline project is an attempt by Iran not to lag behind its southern neighbors in this regard.

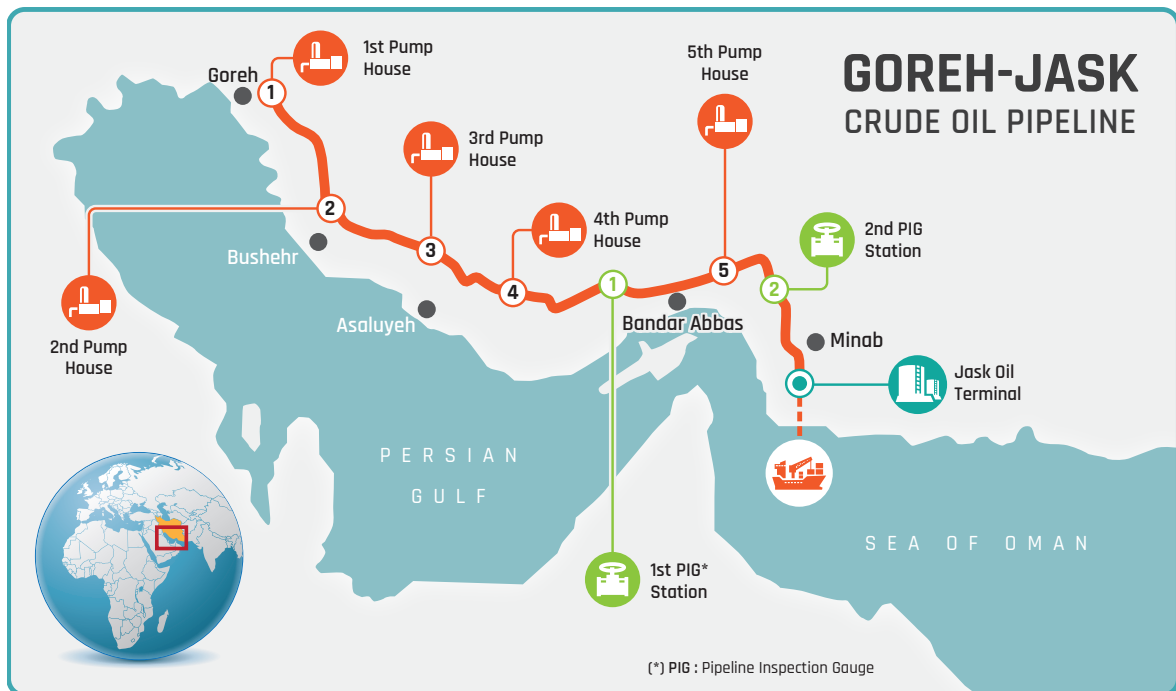
The former-Iranian President Hassan Rouhani said that Iran was the only country in the Gulf region without alternative oil export infrastructure. If the Strait of Hormuz was once closed for any reason (military, technological, environmental), its oil exports would be completely stopped. Goreh-Jask oil pipeline aims to solve the oil export interruption problem by offering alternative export routes from Bushehr and oil-rich Khuzestan province to the Sea of Oman. Iran declared that after the completion of the project, it would not depend on the Strait of Hormuz for its oil exports, mostly to

the Asian markets, and it would happen for the first time in Iran's history. Therefore, the then-Iranian President called the Goreh-Jask Crude Oil Pipeline strategic and very important for Iran's national security (Naftema, 2020).

In this regard, Kenan Aslan, an İRAM expert, argues that according to the Iranian official narratives, the project indicates the reliability of the country as an oil exporter during the military escalations in the Strait of Hormuz. Moreover, this argument strives to attract the trust of Asian oil customers. The Goreh-Jask Crude Oil Pipeline is a part of Iran's strategy to expand oil-gas export infrastructure out of the Gulf's high-risk resilience for unforeseeable circumstances.

On top of it, by finalizing this project, crude oil will be stored and exported through the new Jask terminal, which would make Jask one of Iran's most important oil and export ports.

Map 1: Goreh-Jask Crude Oil Pipeline



Source: IRNA, 2020

This project was scheduled to be completed by March 2021; however, in mid-May 2021, oil transportation began via this pipeline (Sputnik News, 2021). Finally, the first export oil was shipped from the Jask oil terminal on July 18, 2021 (POGC, 2021).

It is argued that due to the political and geopolitical importance of the Goreh-Jask pipeline project, this project is closely linked to the 25-year Iran-China strategic cooperation document. By launching such a project, Iran intends to minimize risks on sea routes in the Gulf and Strait of Hormuz. Given the potential for continued tensions in the Gulf region, Asian countries (especially China) are likely to prefer Iran to import their crude oil (Aslan, 2021).

2.2. Neka-Jask Oil Pipeline

The Neka-Jask pipeline is a proposed oil pipeline that, if be constructed, part of the oil produced by the Caspian littoral countries (Russia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan) will be transferred to Jask port in southern Iran and exported to the Indian Ocean. The Neka-Jask pipeline is designed to transport one million barrels of oil per day, the main source of which is the Kashagan field in Kazakhstan (Kiyani, 2017, p. 12). Due to sanctions and a lack of financial resources and foreign investment, this pipeline has not yet been implemented and remains a plan. Although the project currently is not on the implementation plan, but if Iran can convince China to invest in the project, it could be implemented in the future. But since the Caspian states have various access to multiple routes to export their energy, China is unlikely to be content to invest in such a project.

2.3. Sarakhs-Jask Natural Gas Pipeline

The Sarakhs-Jask gas pipeline is designed for the transit of gas from Central Asian countries to the Indian Ocean and its shipment

to the countries of Southeast Asia. Through the Sarakhs-Jask natural gas transit pipeline, Iran intends to transfer natural gas from Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to Jask and deliver it to other consumers of these countries in the Indian Ocean. In the studies performed on this project, it is predicted that the pipeline capacity will be between 30 and 50 million cubic meters, which is equivalent to 1/5 of the phases of Iran's South Pars (Kiyani, 2017, p. 25). This project is currently also not being implemented due to sanctions, lack of financial resources, and foreign investment.

2.4. Iran-Oman Natural Gas Pipeline

The Iran-Oman pipeline is proposed to be built from Rudan County to the port of Kuh-e Mobarak, Hormozgan province, and from there to the port of Sohar in Oman. This pipeline is supposed to transport Iranian gas to Oman in the form of LNG. According to reports, the pipeline will have a capacity of one billion cubic feet of gas per day, but its capacity may increase to 2 billion cubic feet due to increased demand (Tasnim News, 2016). In 2016, representatives from the NIGC, the Oman Ministry of Oil and Gas, and three international companies, Shell, Total, and the Korean Gas Company, met to discuss the construction of a gas pipeline from Iran to Oman. However, the talks stalled with the withdrawal of the United States from the JCPOA and the return of US sanctions against Iran in 2018 (BBC Persian, 2021). The port of Kuh-e Mobarak has located 65 km from Jask port; hence, the Iran-Oman pipeline could complement Iran's projects to turn Jask port into an energy hub.

2.5. Other Projects

Another effort of Iran to turn Jask into an energy hub is the creation of the Jask oil and gas terminal, which will become an alternative to the Khark oil terminal. Khark terminal

is Iran's first and largest energy export terminal in the Gulf, through which 9/10 of the country's oil exports are carried out. Khark terminal is of strategic importance for Iran in the country's oil exports with serious vulnerabilities. For example, the terminal was very vulnerable during the eight-year Iran-Iraq War and was attacked by Iraqi fighter jets more than 2,800 times (Mehr News, 2012). Since then, the decentralization of energy export terminals and their diversification have become one of Iran's most important goals (Khoda Parast Persarai, 2020). The Goreh-Jask Oil Pipeline is now on the agenda with the aim of transporting light and heavy crude oil and storing it in Jask, as well as exporting crude oil from this port. With the construction of this pipeline, along with the development of the petrochemical industry in Jask port, the goals of decentralizing the Khark oil terminal and surplus gas condensate South Pars could be achieved provided the construction of storage tanks required in the Jask export terminal (Khoda Parast Persarai, 2020; Kiyani, 2017, p. 25). The construction of the Jask oil and gas terminal will reduce Iran's vulnerability in Khark, as well as bypass the Strait of Hormuz.

The establishment of petrochemical industries in Jask is another project of Iran in order to create an energy hub in this port city. According to the development plans of the Iranian Ministry of Petroleum, the country should have four petrochemical poles on its southern coast. The first and second petrochemical poles have been established in Emam Port (Bandar-e Emam), Khuzestan province, and Assaluyeh port, Bushehr Province, respectively. The third and fourth poles are to be established in Chabahar and Jask ports, respectively. The Jask port is about a thousand kilometres closer to target markets, such as India and China, compared to the petrochemical areas of the port of Assaluyeh, which also reduces energy export costs (Kiyani, 2017, pp. 25-26).

The construction of an oil and gas refinery is another project for the development of the port of Jask, which should be implemented as part of the transformation of this port into an energy hub. Considering the potential of establishing an oil and gas refinery in this port and by transferring crude oil to Jask port and building a refinery, Iran hopes to be able to use this port as an industrial plant for the processing of crude oil, LNG, kerosene, gasoline, diesel fuel, heating oil, asphalt, bitumen, etc. (Kiyani, 2017, p. 26).

Furthermore, Iran is planning to export LNG from Jask port (Kiyani, 2017, p. 26). The LNG industry is the most important alternative to natural gas, with Russia and Qatar leading the industry. Iran is attempting to make the Jask port as the world's largest LNG export base, inspired by Russian and Qatari plans to export LNG. With about 16% of the world's natural gas reserves, Iran is the second country in the world in terms of natural gas reserves. However, due to sanctions and the lack of necessary investments, the country has not been able to make good use of its position in this field. Therefore, Iran is trying to create an energy hub to export LNG, not lagging behind the market of this industry.

In light of the numerous projects that are currently being implemented to turn Jask into an energy hub, with the implementation of all or part of these projects, the development of the Jask port will reduce Iran's vulnerability in the field of energy particularly in terms of ensuring energy security. In other words, the Khark terminal and the Strait of Hormuz are two important dilemmas in Iran's energy security that Iran seeks to reduce, bypass or eliminate these two dilemmas by developing the port of Jask.

Iran is also trying to turn Jask into an energy hub, seeking to reduce sanctions pressures on its oil industry, and is trying to diversify its export routes to sell and export its oil condensate.



By building an energy hub in Jask, Iran is trying to save its oil industry, which has been left out of the regional trading market due to US sanctions.

3. Importance of Jask Port in China's Energy Security

China is the world's largest energy importer and is increasingly dependent on these imports. It currently imports 70% of its energy needs, 40% of which come from the Gulf countries through the Strait of Hormuz (Cordesman, 2020). The Strait of Hormuz, as one of the strategic chokepoints in energy transportation, is one of the most vulnerable points in China's energy security. China, which is heavily

dependent on strategic chokepoints (Map 2) across the Indian Ocean for its energy supply, has sought to reduce these vulnerabilities by proposing various strategies. For example, China, in cooperation with Pakistan and Myanmar, has set up the CPEC pipeline and the China-Myanmar oil and gas pipelines to solve the Malacca dilemma, another strategic chokepoint in energy transportation for China.

Regarding China's Strait of Hormuz dilemma, the port of Jask, located outside the strait, allows Beijing to reduce its vulnerabilities in this strategic chokepoint. In other words, this port provides China with the opportunity to have the necessary access to the energy of the Gulf, especially the energy of Iran, bypassing

Map 2: The String of Pearls Strategy and Strategic Maritime Chokepoints in the Indian Ocean



the Strait of Hormuz. As one of the largest suppliers of crude oil to China, Iran has a special place in Beijing's energy security and constitutes a significant share of China's energy portfolio. Furthermore, given China's vulnerabilities in the Strait of Hormuz chokepoint and energy imported from the Gulf region, it is possible that China would build its second overseas military base in Jask with the primary purpose of providing its energy security. The establishment of a Chinese military base in Jask is a possibility, and so far, there is no official statement from the Chinese or Iranian side in this regard.

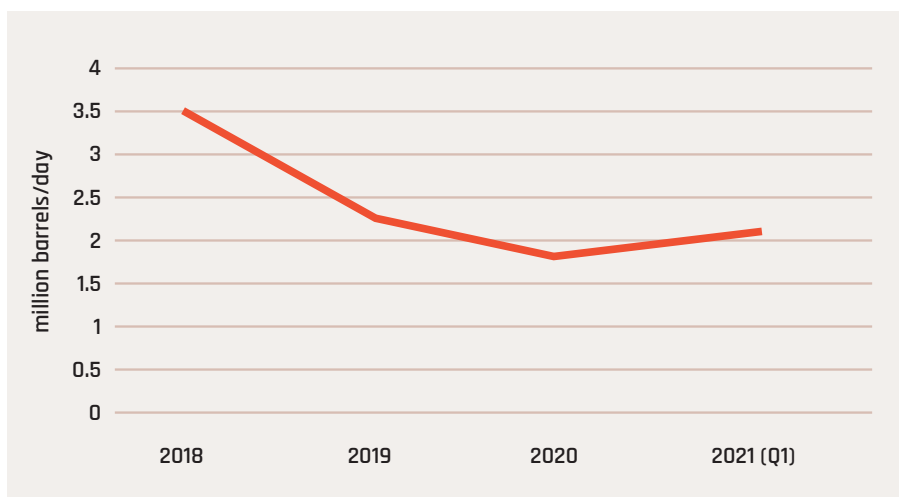
Therefore, it can be said that Jask port, in addition to being strategically important for Iran's energy sector, is also of particular importance for China's energy security. China has already invested in several other strategic ports in the Indian Ocean region, which are used as refueling stations from the South China Sea to the Suez Canal (Fassihi & Myers, 2021). Therefore, it can be said that China's possible investment in Jask port is also aimed at providing the country

with access to the Gulf oil. Given this, it can be argued that one of the main reasons why China is investing in the Jask port as part of a 25-year document on cooperation with Iran is to ensure its energy security in the region. China's need for energy imports and Iran's need for foreign investment are common features of Iran-China cooperation in the 25-year cooperation document between the two countries. Thus, the two countries, realizing the needs of each other, are trying to establish long-term cooperation within the framework of the document on strategic cooperation.

4. Economic Importance of Jask Port

In addition to the importance of Jask port in energy security, this port is also of great trade and transit significance in terms of the economic point of view. Having the shortest sea distance from Muscat (Oman) and being located on the route of Bandar Abbas-Chabahar-Jiroft Highway and Bandar

Graphic 2: China's Crude Oil Imports From Iran Between 2018-2021 (Q1)



Source: Bloomberg, 2021

Note: The numbers are based on firms concentrating on energy intelligence, and therefore, the numbers should be evaluated with caution.



Abbas-Jask-Chabahar Railway are the transit importance of this port. Apart from it, the establishment of the Iranian-Chinese industrial city in Jask and the creation of the Jask Free Trade Zone are other development projects that are being implemented with the aim of increasing the economic potential of this port (Bahonar Port, n.d.; PMO, 2017).

Iran is always trying to develop its infrastructure to become a transit route between the countries of East and West Asia, as well as South Asia and Eurasia. But sanctions have prevented Iran from using its position on transit routes as it should. Despite all the problems that sanctions and other challenges have created for Iran, the country hopes to develop the Jask port and connect it with domestic and international corridors, turning it into a trade and economic hub between the countries of the region. In this regard, Mohammad Rastad, CEO of Iran's PMO, said that, based on the goal set, "Jask port will be built in three phases with a capacity of 100 to 200 million tons, which will turn it into the largest commercial port in the country". He also said that with the development of this port outside the Strait of Hormuz, Iran will be one step closer to the world trade route from east to west (MRUD, 2021).

Due to the economic characteristics of Jask, this port is also of particular importance within China's BRI (Table 1). Investing in ports is one of China's top priorities under the BRI, which has strategic and geopolitical benefits for the country. For example, in addition to economic and commercial benefits, investing in strategic ports gives China more control over its main offshore lines and energy supply routes.

According to The Economist Intelligence Unit, by September 2017, China has invested in strategic ports in 34 countries (The Economist Intelligent, 2017). Among these, investments in the ports of Kyaukpyu (Myanmar), Hambantota (Sri Lanka), Port Colombo (Sri Lanka), Chittagong (Bangladesh), Gwadar

(Pakistan), Jeddah (Saudi Arabia), Khalifa Port (UAE), Industrial Zone of Duqm (Oman), Mombasa (Kenya), Bagamoyo (Tanzania), Port Djibouti (Djibouti), and Port Sudan (Sudan) include Chinese port investments under the BRI in the Indian Ocean region (SUN & Zoubir, 2017, pp. 41-42). On top of that, China has established port-based economic corridors as part of its long-term plans to access and strengthen its position in the Indian Ocean. For example, the CPEC and the CMEC are based on the ports of Gwadar in Pakistan and Kyaukpyu in Myanmar, respectively (The Economist Intelligent, 2017).

Iran, with its geopolitical and geoeconomic position, is one of the most strategic countries on the BRI route. The China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor of the SREB¹ begins in China and ends in the Middle East, passes through Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Iran (Lianlei, 2016, 30 cited from Amighini, 2017, p. 40). In addition to the corridor, Iran's southern ports have a good position in the BRI. Besides, the envisioned projects agreed between Iran and China under the 25-Year Comprehensive Cooperation Agreement are in line with China's strategic goals for expanding its economic influence and strategy under the BRI. Iran hopes that Jask port becomes a regional trade hub for BRI under a 25-year deal with China. In this regard, the establishment of the Iran-China Industrial town is a prelude to attracting more Chinese attention to this port. The roadmap, signed by Tehran and Beijing in March 2021, will also provide an opportunity for Iran to access the region's infrastructure under the BRI, including connectivity to ports and rail and highway networks. Connecting Iran to the network of rail and port services will maximize Iran's position on the BRI route.

¹ SREB is the belt portion of China's BRI network, which includes six main corridors connecting China with Europe and West Asia.

Table 1: Characteristics of the Belt and Road Initiative

BRI is a network of highways, railways, sea routes and ports, first introduced in 2013 in Kazakhstan and Indonesia by Chinese President Xi Jinping.	
Within BRI	65 countries affected 62% of the world's population will be connected 35% of global trade 31% of global GDP \$4-8 trillion estimated capital needed for the project
Two Main Portions	Silk Road Economic Belt (land portion) Maritime Silk Road of the 21st Century (sea portion)
Six Main Corridors	1. New Eurasia Land Bridge Economic Corridor 2. China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor 3. China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor 4. China-Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor 5. China-Pakistan Economic Corridor 6. Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor
Key Investors	1. Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) 2. Asian Development Bank (ADB) 3. China Development Bank 4. Bank of China 5. Other State-Owned Banks 6. Silk Road Fund 7. State-Owned Companies 8. World Bank

Source: Desjardins, 2018

Under the BRI, as well as within the Agreement between the two countries, Iran intends to provide China with investment opportunities in various parts of its infrastructure projects, including the development of its internal rail network, the development of the Makran coast in the Oman Sea, in particular the development of the Jask port (Farahat, 2020; Fassihi & Myers, 2021). Under the Agreement and BRI, China's investment in Iran will have significant benefits for the country, which is severely affected

by US sanctions. In particular, China's investment in Iran's infrastructure projects is an excellent opportunity for the country's economic development (Farahat, 2020).

Iran has established the KTAI corridor and the Iran-Afghanistan-Uzbekistan corridor to connect to the economic corridors of the SREB in Central Asia (Rashid, 2020). These transit projects in the region are significant for Iran because the highways between Iran and China are being built within the BRI through Central Asia.



Cooperation and strengthening ties with Central Asia will bring Iran closer to China and provide Iran with new opportunities to reduce the impact of sanctions (Delibaş, 2021). Iran's connection to the SREB corridors opens up the markets of Central Asia and Eurasia for Iran. Moreover, Iran-China cooperation within the BRI framework will help the two countries to become more integrated into BRI sub-projects in Eurasia (Avdaliani, 2021). In connecting Iran with the SREB corridors, it can be argued that the Jask port in Iran will play a central role. By attracting Chinese investment in the Jask port, Iran is trying to turn the port into a turning point in trade between the country and China and the rest of the Gulf countries and Central Asia.

Considering these advantages, with the possible investment of China in the Jask port, this port will be integrated into the regional BRI program, which ultimately will strengthen China's position in Western Asia. The country's investment in Jask port will also strengthen the BRI initiative in the region. As the new port represents a new market and new opportunities for China, the Jask port, with its strategic and geopolitical importance, will present significant opportunities for China in the future.

5. Security-Military Importance of Jask Port

Including its economic and energy security significance, Jask port has a specific military and security significance. Iran's two major naval bases in Jask, "Emamat Naval and Missile Base" and "Velayat Base" (Rahborde Moaser, 2020), have increased the security and military importance of the port. The proper geopolitical location, proximity to the Strait of Hormuz and the port of Fujairah in the UAE, and the proximity to the US Fifth Naval Base in Bahrain have led to Jask Naval Base being named as the "mother naval base" in Iran (YJC, 2017).

This base is owned by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and is used in various naval exercises by this Iranian security institution. For example, in January 2021, the launch of long-range ballistic missiles at simulated targets in the Indian Ocean was fired from this base (Army Technology, 2021). Iran's naval base in Jask is developing, and recently, the IISS reported the establishment of a new military base with ballistic missile capabilities near the Jask port in Hormozgan owned by the IRGC (Dempsey, 2021).

The establishment of a naval base in the Jask port has increased Iran's naval capability in the Strait of Hormuz. This base provides the Iranian navy with the opportunity to gain more control over the Strait of Hormuz and increase its sphere of influence even in the open waters of the Indian Ocean. The establishment of this military base has also increased the country's military power in the face of the region's Arab rivals in the Gulf. In other words, the location of the largest military base in this port city has led to an increase in Iran's navy-military potential in the face of growing threats from the United States and its allies in the Gulf.

Due to the strategic importance of the Jask port, it is expected that China and Iran will also cooperate on military security under the 25-year Agreement at the port. According to reports, military cooperation between Tehran and Beijing will include military training, joint military exercises, joint research and weapons development, counter-terrorism, drug and human trafficking, and even intelligence (Fassihi & Myers, 2021). In theory, the two countries' military cooperation will focus on the fight against terrorism, drugs, human trafficking and central crimes, in practice, however, military cooperation between Iran and China will undoubtedly increase Iran's military capability in dealing with Gulf countries as well as the United States in the region (Cordesman, 2020).

China's reliance on energy imports from the Indian Ocean region in general and the Gulf region, in particular, explains why the country has gradually increased its presence in the Indian Ocean region in order to protect its maritime trade routes and oil flow in the Ocean. China established its first overseas military base in Djibouti to reduce vulnerability and ensure the security of its trade merchant and oil ships. The establishment of the base, although ostensibly aimed at combating piracy in Somalia, but expanding its sphere of influence in the region is another important reason (Cordesman, 2020). As the China-Iranian military cooperation approaches, it is possible that China will establish its second overseas military base in Iran, in the port of Jask. Like Djibouti, Jask port is especially important in China's PLA Navy programs. In other words, Jask would possibly play a role in the Gulf that the Djibouti base is supposed to play on the Gulf of Aden. On top and over it, the two ports could work together as a support device. Undoubtedly, Jask will assist the PLA Navy with surveillance and technological espionage (Godbole & Singh, 2020).

Given the growing tensions between China-US, and the US-Iran, it is also feasible that military cooperation between Tehran and Beijing will expand to counter the US and its influence in the Gulf region. The Iranian navy in the Gulf and the Chinese navy in the South China Sea are in increasing confrontation with the US Navy (Mastro, 2020; Liebermann, 2021). The US warships regularly sail in the waters of the Gulf and attempt to challenge China's PLA Navy in the disputed South China Sea region (Fassihi & Myers, 2021). Therefore, it is likely that China and Iran, considering the strategic importance of the Jask port, will engage in numerous military cooperation in order to counter US hegemony in the region. The geopolitical location of the Jask port allows Tehran and Beijing to expand military and security

cooperation and challenge the US to counter its military and political influence in the region.

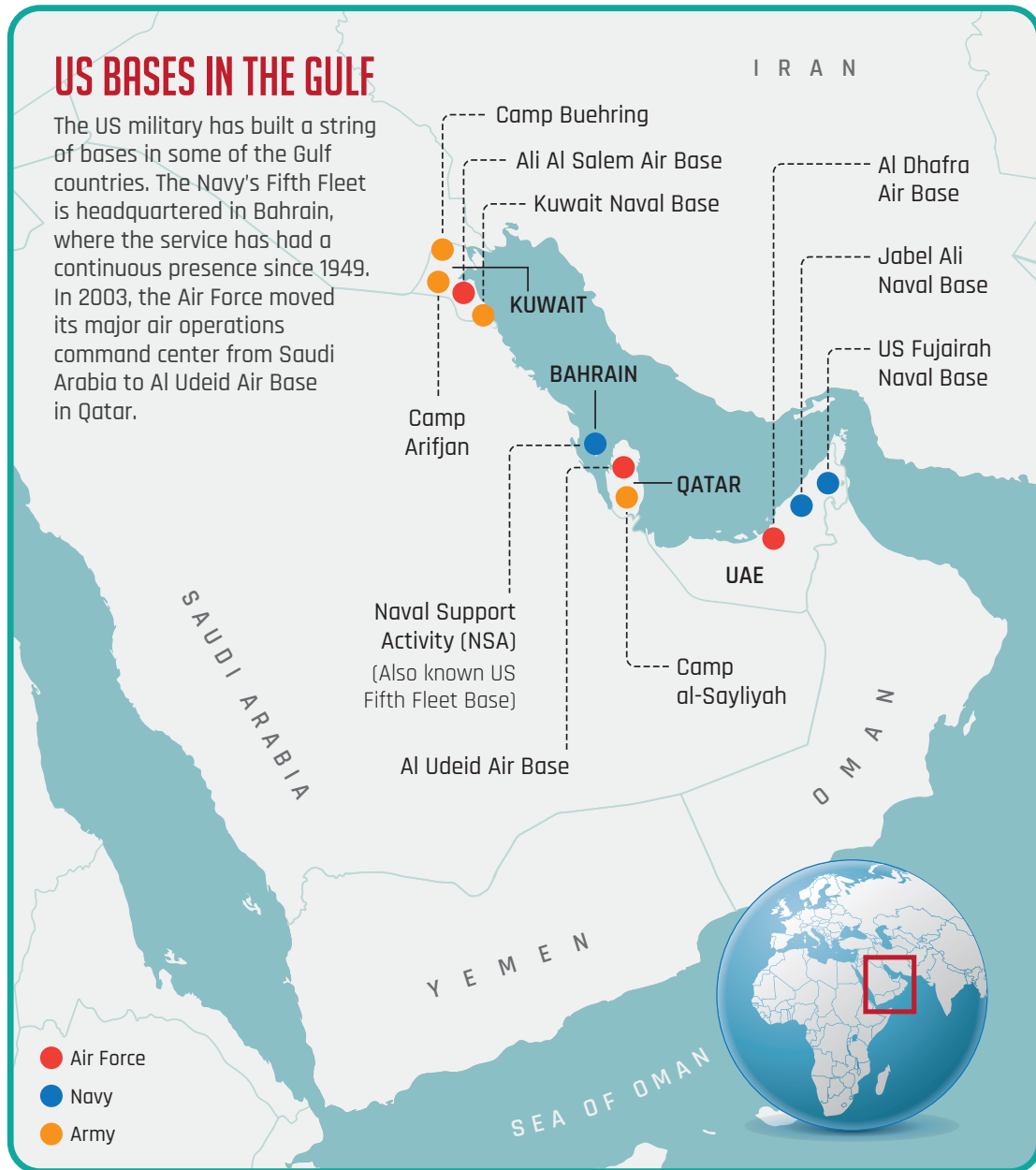
Moreover, the US National Security Strategy announced in 2017 identifies China, as well as Russia, as the main threats to the United States. The move has sparked widespread skepticism and exacerbated the political, military, and economic confrontation between Washington and Beijing. The Southeast Asia region is considered by many scholars to be the main venue for US-China rivalries. However, given China's energy needs in the Gulf and the large US military presence in the region, the Gulf region is also a critical area that has the potential to become a battlefield in the possible conflicts between the United States and China in the future.

Recognizing US influence in the Gulf countries (US military bases in the region), China is seeking to fill the security-military gap to counter the growing US threat in the region, especially in the Strait of Hormuz. The US bases in the Gulf pose a severe threat to China's economic and energy interests in the region. Since Iran's largest naval base is located at the Jask port, Chinese investment and possible deployment of Chinese troops at the port could make a balance between China and the United States in the region. Because Iran is the only Gulf country in which the United States has no political or security influence, then, it seems that the preconditions for the presence of China in the country already exist. In fact, it is China's way of securing access to the Gulf petrochemical exports in times of crisis or military conflict with Washington, and its presence in the Jask port could increase China's influence in the region of the Gulf. According to some experts and news outlets, there will be about 5000 Chinese troops providing security for the port. However, Iranian officials have denied reports/news that Chinese troops are present to protect the Jask port.

The Jask port is of particular geopolitical importance to the United States and China. The



Map 3: US Bases in the Gulf



Source: Hughes, 2016

port will provide the Chinese more control over the seas, energy security and the implementation of long-term economic strategies. For the United States, the port's proximity to the US Navy's Fifth Fleet headquarters in Bahrain and the possibility of China's presence in the port is

one of the country's most important strategic challenges (Fassihi & Myers, 2021).

Moreover, China's military presence in the port could upset the balance of power between the United States and China, even in the Indian Ocean. In other words, China's military

presence in the Jask port will counterbalance the US Indo-Pacific Command in the Indian Ocean region. By strengthening its navy, Beijing is working to curb widespread US influence in the Indian Ocean (Chatterji, 2020), and its presence at the Jask port will enable Beijing to achieve that goal. In other words, the possible Chinese military presence in the Jask port will strengthen China's military strategy in the Indian Ocean against the US presence in the Indian Ocean region, particularly the US Indo-Pacific Command. With a military presence in the Jask port, PLA Navy will be able to expand its sphere of influence and become a powerful naval power in the Indian Ocean in the face of US military power and influence.

China's presence in the Jask port will also affect tensions between the US and Iran and create a balance in the region against the US presence, which will indirectly benefit Iran. Iran will use China's presence to try to further challenge the US influence in the region.

6. Jask Port and China's String of Pearls Strategy

Since the 2000s, China has faced piracy and Malacca's dilemma over increased trade, energy imports, and dependence on sea routes. As a result, China decided to build and renovate numerous ports in the Indian Ocean to protect its shipping lanes. Some argue that China is trying to reduce its vulnerability in the Indian Ocean by building naval bases that will provide the PLA Navy access to logistical support facilities in the northern Indian Ocean or South Asia region (Khalid, Shaukat & Gul, 2017, pp. 28-29). The "String of Pearls" strategy has been coined to describe this China's strategy.

"String of Pearls" is originally an American geopolitical term, first used in 2005 by the US Department of Defense in its report "An Energy Future in Asia". The geopolitical term of "String of Pearls" refers to the possibility that China

could have hidden agreements with local governments to build dual-use ports (commercial and military use) along the Indian Ocean, which would later provide a basis for Beijing to create permanent naval bases (Mahadevan, 2014, p. 2; Chatterji, 2020).

This term is originally used for sea lanes that cross several important chokepoints, such as the Straits of Malacca, the Strait of Bab al-Mandab, the Strait of Hormuz, and the Strait of Lombok, as well as a network of strategic ports in Gwadar in Pakistan, Kyaukpyu in Myanmar, Djibouti port in Djibouti, Hambantota in Sri Lanka, and Feidhoo Finolhu in the Maldives located in the Indian Ocean, in which China is invested in high volume. Concerns about whether such ports serve a strategic rather than purely commercial purpose are heightened by the fact that the majority of Chinese port investments are made by SOEs (The Economist Intelligent, 2017). China's String of Pearls strategy gives the country access to strategic seaports in the Indian Ocean region that have military and economic advantages. For example, it is said that the Djibouti port is one of the ports where China has established a military base as part of its String of Pearls strategy. Besides, China relies on the signing of most agreements regulating these facilities, in line with its String of Pearls strategy. Some of the agreements have included infrastructure development in the ports, such as the Gwadar port in Pakistan on the Arabian Sea. The duration of Chinese concession contracts in these ports ranges from 10 to 99 years (Farahat, 2020).

Due to the extent of the String of Pearls strategy, the strategic Jask port outside the Strait of Hormuz also has the potential to become a strategic chain in the strategy. A possible presence in the Jask port will expand China's presence in the Indian Ocean and complement China's String of Pearls strategy, strengthening its position in the Strait of Hormuz and



reducing its vulnerabilities in the Strait. As mentioned above, the Strait of Hormuz is one of China's most important vulnerabilities in energy transportation in the Indian Ocean, which Beijing will be able to reduce by using its presence in the Jask port. In other words, China's presence in the Jask port will complete the northern ring of the String of Pearls strategy and expand China's sphere of influence in the Indian Ocean.

7. Consequences for Gulf Countries

China's investment in the Jask port in Iran will not change the country's overall strategy toward the Middle East. In other words, Chinese investments in Iran in general and its investments in the Jask port, in particular, will not lead to major changes in China's relations with the Gulf countries (Farahat, 2020). China is aware of the sensitivity of the Iranian issue among the Gulf states and has a "strategic partnership memorandum" with many Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait, Oman, and other countries. Given the importance of the Gulf countries in China's energy basket, it is unlikely that China will jeopardize its strategic interests and long-term partnerships with other countries due to its alignment with one side (Iran) (Delibaş, 2020). However, if China's military presence in the Jask port becomes permanent, in other words, leads to the formation of a PLA military base in the port, it will change the geopolitical equations in the region. It will intensify the confrontation between China-US, Iran-US, and Iran-Gulf countries in the region (Farahat, 2020). Certainly, a new page of tensions will begin between regional and trans-regional rivals in the Gulf.

8. Concerns About the Chinese Investments in Jask Port

The Iran-China 25-Year Comprehensive Cooperation Agreement, in general, faces significant public sensitivities. For example, Iranian opposition politicians of all stripes, from former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to Shah's exiled son Reza Pahlavi, have spoken out against various aspects of the Agreement, appealing to Iranian nationalism and the fears of international imperialism (Markey, 2020). Iran's exiled Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi described this Agreement as "disgraceful" and said that "the regime dominating our country is seeking to sign a despicable 25-year agreement with China to plunder Iran's natural resources and accepting a foreign army in our homeland" (Radio Farda, 2020). In this regard, Ali Afshari, a political activist, said that concluding such a comprehensive long-term strategic agreement, signed exclusively with any country, is a threat to Iran's independence and national interests (Euronews Farsi, 2020).

Considering the above issues, Chinese investment in Jask port will also be facing severe concerns. The most important concern is China's debt-trap diplomacy, which critics believe with China investing in the Jask port, Iran, like African countries and Sri Lanka, will fall into China's debt trap. In this regard, the experiences of countries such as Tanzania, Nigeria, Djibouti and Sri Lanka show that Chinese investments have had dire consequences for these countries. As far as many of these countries have sought to terminate their contracts with China. For instance, after the termination of the \$10 billion contracts with China, the president of Tanzania said that "only a drunk was willing to sign such a contract with China". According to the China-Tanzania agreement, Beijing was to take over one of Tanzania's ports for a full 99 years (Ardalan, 2020). Likewise, instead of China's \$8 billion investment in the Hambantota port, the Sri Lankan government was forced in 2016 to approve a 99-year lease

of the Hambantota port to China Merchants Ports Holdings Ltd in 2016 (Suri, 2017, pp. 75-76). Regarding these issues, critics believe that China's investment in Jask port could also turn Iran into a dependent country on China. In other words,

there are concerns that in the unbalanced Iran-China deal, Tehran will be caught in the trap of China and will be forced to comply with China's demands. However, China has repeatedly denied any kind of debt-trap diplomacy.

Conclusion

Iran is dreaming to turn the Jask port into an energy hub while the country has lagged behind its neighbors and regional competitors for years. For instance, Türkiye has turned into an energy hub between Europe and Asia, implementing projects such as TANAP, Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan, Baku-Tiflis-Erzurum, and the Kirkuk-Ceyhan pipelines; Saudi Arabia has the largest reservoir of crude oil, as well as the largest oil company in the world, Saudi Aramco; Qatar has become the world's largest exporter of LNG; Turkmenistan, along with other Central Asian countries, has established the Central Asia-China gas pipeline and exports its gas directly to China; Russia also supplies oil and gas products to its customers in Europe and Asia (China), establishing several energy corridors. Therefore, Iran's different projects to turn Jask into an energy hub can be considered in competition with energy transfer projects of other countries in the region.

Iran faces several challenges in the development of the Jask port. Sanctions and lacking foreign investments are Iran's biggest challenges in developing the port and turning it into an energy hub. With ongoing negotiations to revive the JCPOA and return the United States to the Deal, cautiously, Iran could hope that with the lifting of sanctions, the country will have more opportunities to develop the Jask port as well as the related projects. Likewise, in terms of foreign investment, Iran hopes that the 25-Year Comprehensive Cooperation Agreement with China could fill this gap in the development of infrastructure projects related to the Jask port.

China's investment and possible military presence in the Jask port will change geopolitical developments in the region. Although the development of Jask port has not been as politicized as the development of Chabahar port, what is clear is that the US will not tolerate China's potential presence near the Strait of Hormuz. The United States, which has the weapon of sanctions, by imposing sanctions, will try to prevent Chinese and Iranian companies operating in the Jask port from trading with other countries. An action that will, directly and indirectly, have a negative impact on the development of Jask port and will make the dream of turning this port into an economic and energy hub impossible.

It can be seen that Iran is trying to balance the two emerging Asian powers, India and China, in its two ports, on the Makran coast, through attracting Chinese investment in the Jask port and Indian investment in the Chabahar port. By attracting Indian investment in the Chabahar port, Iran has tried to make the port the main hub of the INSTC route. However, by attracting Chinese investment in the Jask port, Iran is trying to turn the port into a turning point in trade between the country and China and the rest of the countries in the region.

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Notes:



“Tanıtım nüshasıdır, para ile satılamaz.”

“Bandrol Uygulamasına İlişkin Usul ve Esaslar Hakkında Yönetmeliğin
5’inci maddesinin 2’nci fıkrası çerçevesinde bandrol taşıması zorunlu değildir.”

About İRAM

Due to its historical depth and material power, Iran is among the countries that have to be reckoned with in the domain of international relations. The deep-rooted historical relations between Iran and Türkiye, border-sharing and comprehensive business relations make it necessary for Türkiye to understand Iran in a multitude of ways. Based on this necessity, the Center for Iranian Studies in Ankara (İran Araştırmaları Merkezi, İRAM) was established as an independent think tank in Ankara with the purpose of informing the Turkish public and interested parties about Iran. With this in mind, not only does İRAM produce field research, reports, and analyses based on primary resources, it also provides language courses, internships/scholarship programs, support for projects and graduate theses, workshops, and expert seminars in order to meet the need for experts and researchers on Iran in various disciplines in Türkiye. Offering a platform where academicians can share their research on Iran, İRAM also provides digital and printed publications on a wide variety of topics ranging from economy to domestic politics, international policy to security, and Shi'ism to society and culture.



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