

Beyond the Oceans: Applying Alfred Thayer Mahan's Sea Power Theory to India's Central Asia Strategy under Modi (2014–2024)

Dr. Mohit Kalra¹, Mamta Mahar²

Department of Political Science, Kumaun University
Research Scholar, Department of Political Science, M.B. P.G. College, Haldwani

Abstract: *Alfred Thayer Mahan's sea power theory highlights the importance of maritime strength, key strategic points, and control of trade routes as the basis of national power. While this theory was originally meant for naval contexts, its core idea of controlling access points to extend national influence—still offers a useful way to analyze strategy. India's distance from Central Asia, along with difficult relations with Pakistan, has restricted its efforts to connect with the region. Many studies on India's Central Asia policy do not address the theoretical side of its infrastructure diplomacy.*

This paper argues that India's approach to the Chabahar Port and the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) under the Modi government (2014–2024) is a clear example of using Mahan's ideas, with maritime gateways serving as tools for reaching into the continent. The study uses a qualitative, interpretive method, relying on policy documents, diplomatic agreements, trade data, and existing research. It applies a Neo-Mahanian framework to look at how India builds connections with other countries, both one-on-one and in groups.

Neo-Mahanian statecraft replaces battle fleets and coaling stations with port agreements and transport corridors, offering a way to understand how India's geostrategy is changing. The basic logic of sea power still matters, even though the tools have changed.

Keywords: *Sea Power Theory; India's Foreign Policy; Central Asia Policy; INSTC; Connectivity Diplomacy; Neo-Mahanian Statecraft*

I. Introduction

Alfred Thayer Mahan's 1890 doctrine of sea power argues that maritime supremacy is key to a nation's rise, and it still shapes strategy today (Mahan 1890). Yet, in recent years, Mahan's ideas have been adapted in unexpected ways. This is especially clear in how India has engaged with Central Asia during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's time in office (2014–2024).

India has become a major player in the Indo-Pacific, which is a key change in today's global politics. Under Modi, India's foreign policy has moved from Nehru's non-alignment to what experts call 'multi-alignment,' building ties with several major powers without formally siding with any one of them (Pant and Super 2015). A central part of this strategy is India's outreach to Central Asia, a region far from the sea and separated from India by the Himalayas and often-hostile Pakistan. Because of these barriers, India has turned to its maritime strengths to connect with Central Asia.

This paper argues that India's investment in Iran's Chabahar Port and its role in the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) are examples of Neo-Mahanian Statecraft. This means India is using maritime gateways on purpose to gain a strategic foothold on land. By looking at India's Chabahar-INSTC strategy through Mahan's ideas, the study shows that the main principles of sea power theory like controlling key points, securing trade routes, and using logistics hubs to project influence still matter today, especially in the context of modern infrastructure diplomacy.

II. Literature Review

2.1 Mahan's Sea Power Theory

Alfred Thayer Mahan's *The Influence of Sea Power upon History*, written while he taught at the U.S. Naval War College, changed how people thought about strategy by arguing that maritime strength is key to national power (Mahan, 1890). Mahan did not see naval strength as separate from other factors. Instead, he saw it as shaped by things like geography, territory, population, national character, and political institutions. He also pointed to three main pillars: productive capacity, commercial shipping, and overseas strategic reach, all of which are needed to maintain maritime dominance (Tangredi, 2017). At the heart of his theory is the idea of "command of the sea," which means controlling important sea routes, ports, and choke points to project power over time. These ideas still matter today, as seen in the naval strategies of rising powers like India and China (Maurer, 2021).

However, many have debated how well Mahan's ideas apply today. Some critics point out that his model was designed for countries focused on the sea, so it does not always fit places like India, which is partly

continental. Still, this challenge allows for new interpretations. If we look at his ideas more broadly, Mahan's focus on controlling key locations and access points can be used to understand modern geopolitics, including land routes and mixed strategic settings. In this way, his framework is still useful, not as a strict formula, but as a flexible way to see how countries turn their geography and infrastructure into strategic power.

2.2 India's Foreign Policy Transformation

India's foreign policy has evolved significantly, shifting from non-alignment during the Cold War to strategic autonomy in the post-Cold War era, and more recently to a model of multi-alignment under Prime Minister Narendra Modi. This approach enables India to engage simultaneously with major powers such as Russia, China, and the United States without adhering to rigid alliance structures (CIDOB, 2025). Under Modi's leadership, India has sought to strengthen its role as a regional leader through initiatives such as the Neighbourhood First and Act East policies, which emphasize cooperative engagement and pragmatic diplomacy (Duran & Toprak, 2022). The SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) doctrine further articulates the maritime dimension of India's strategic vision, focusing on regional connectivity and inclusive growth while positioning itself as an alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative (John, 2024). Collectively, these developments reflect a shift toward a more flexible and interest-driven foreign policy.

2.3 India's Central Asia Engagement

Most academic discussions about India's involvement in Central Asia focus on energy security, limited connections, and competition with China (Singh & Singh, 2019). India has increased its economic ties with the region, as shown by the growth in trade from about USD 490 million in 2010 to USD 1.7 billion in 2023. Still, Central Asia makes up only about 0.1% of India's total imports. Meanwhile, China's role has grown much faster, especially through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which has invested over USD 18 billion in Central Asian infrastructure. India's investment, at around USD 439 million, highlights this difference (Manish & Behera, 2024).

This imbalance has influenced how experts talk about India's strategy, often describing it as reactive instead of proactive. However, not much attention has been given to the deeper strategic thinking behind India's actions. For example, how classical geopolitical ideas like sea power theory might apply to land-based regions is still not well studied. This study aims to fill that gap by looking at India's Central Asia policy from a wider theoretical perspective.

III. Methodology

This study takes a qualitative and interpretive approach to explore India's strategy in Central Asia. Rather than focusing only on numbers, the analysis looks at patterns and strategic behavior. The main method is theory-guided case analysis. Here, Mahan's idea of sea power is adapted to highlight practical actions like gaining access to important locations, securing trade routes, and expanding influence through infrastructure and connectivity. The study uses India's Chabahar Port and the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) as examples.

The study uses both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include key agreements such as the 2016 Trilateral Transit Agreement, the 2022 Delhi Declaration, and the 2024 India–Iran cooperation agreement. These are backed by official data from government sources like the Ministry of Ports and the Press Information Bureau. Reports from organizations such as the Eurasian Development Bank and think tanks like the Observer Research Foundation, RSIS, and CIDOB also support the analysis.

This research uses a deductive approach, starting with the idea that Mahan's concept of controlling strategic access points can apply to modern infrastructure networks as well as the sea. To test this, the study examines India's Central Asia policy from 2014 to 2024. It also looks at other possible explanations, including balancing behavior, economic cooperation, and responses to China's Belt and Road Initiative, to provide a more balanced and complete analysis.

IV. Results

4.1 Chabahar Port: Operationalising Maritime Access

Located approximately 550 nautical miles from Gujarat's Kandla Port, Chabahar is Iran's only oceanic port with direct access to the Indian Ocean, offering a maritime route that entirely bypasses Pakistani territory. India's involvement progressed through several distinct phases. The 2016 Trilateral Agreement among India, Iran, and Afghanistan established the International Transport and Transit Corridor. By 2018, India Ports Global Limited (IPGL) had assumed operational control of the Shahid Beheshti terminal, marking the first instance of India managing port infrastructure on foreign soil. In May 2024, India and Iran signed a ten-year bilateral agreement, with IPGL committing approximately USD 120 million to terminal development (Gaur 2024).

The operational outcomes have been substantial. Container traffic at Chabahar increased from 225 TEUs in FY2019 to 64,245 TEUs in FY2024, representing a 600% year-on-year increase, while bulk cargo volumes reached 2.12 million tonnes. In 2023–24, the port recorded a 43% increase in vessel traffic and a 34% rise in container throughput (PIB 2024). Since 2018, India has facilitated the movement of over 90,000 TEUs and 8 million tonnes of cargo through Chabahar. The port has also served as India's primary humanitarian corridor to Afghanistan, underscoring its role as a commercial gateway, diplomatic tool, and logistical platform.

4.2 The INSTC: Strategic Infrastructure at Scale

The International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) is a 7,200 km multimodal network comprising maritime, rail, and road routes that connects India, Iran, Azerbaijan, Russia, and the Central Asian republics. Its primary objective is to enhance trade connectivity among major cities such as Mumbai, Moscow, Tehran, and Baku. Established in September 2000 by India, Iran, and Russia, the corridor has since expanded to thirteen member states, including Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. The INSTC provides a 30% reduction in costs and a 40% reduction in distance compared to the traditional Suez Canal route, reducing transit times to approximately 23 days instead of 45–60 days via Suez. The total potential freight traffic across all INSTC routes is projected to reach 15–25 million tonnes by 2030 (Abramov et al. 2022).

The most critical missing link, the 162 km Rasht-Astara railway in northern Iran, is currently under construction following a USD 1.6 billion agreement between Russia and Iran signed in May 2023. Upon completion, this railway will close the final gap in the western segment of the INSTC. In 2023–24, the INSTC Eastern Corridor transported approximately 1.8 to 2 million tonnes of goods, nearly tripling the volume from the previous year. Additionally, Russia, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan have established a joint venture that offers transit tariff discounts of up to 40% (ORF 2025).

4.3 Diplomatic Framework: The India–Iran–Central Asia Triangle

The 2022 India–Central Asia Summit resulted in a significant multilateral advancement. The Delhi Declaration, signed by the presidents of all five Central Asian republics, formally endorsed the integration of Chabahar into the INSTC framework and welcomed Central Asian countries' interest in utilizing the Shahid Beheshti Terminal for external trade. In April 2023, the inaugural meeting of the India–Central Asia Joint Working Group on Chabahar convened in Mumbai, translating diplomatic commitments into operational mechanisms. India also announced a USD 1 billion Line of Credit for developmental projects in the region, encompassing connectivity, energy, information technology, and healthcare.

V. Discussion

5.1 Neo-Mahanian Statecraft: The Theoretical Contribution

The findings show a clear strategic pattern: India is following the logic of sea power by controlling access points and trade routes to expand its influence, mainly through infrastructure instead of naval strength. This strategy covers both land and sea. The idea of Neo-Mahanian Statecraft helps explain this shift. While Mahan focused on battle fleets and coaling stations, India uses port concessions and multimodal corridors. Even though the tools have changed, the basic logic is the same.

Mahan's original framework listed three key parts of sea power: production, shipping, and overseas presence. India's neo-Mahanian approach updates each of these. Production now means India's industrial and pharmaceutical exports to Central Asia, which grew by 10.6% each year from 2010 to 2023 (Eurasian Development Bank 2025). Shipping is seen in India's multimodal logistics, like the INSTC corridors, the Chabahar terminal, and Caspian Sea links. Overseas presence is shown by India's port concession model, such as the ten-year deal at Chabahar's Shahid Beheshti terminal, and planned ports at Sabang in Indonesia and Duqm in Oman.

5.2 Competitive Context: India vs China

The Neo-Mahanian approach shifts the focus of India-China competition in Central Asia from current trade numbers to how new connectivity projects will shape future regional involvement. In 2024, China's trade with Central Asia reached \$94.82 billion, with Kazakhstan alone making up \$43.82 billion. In comparison, India's total trade with the region is much lower, at about \$1.7 to \$2.0 billion. The gap in investment is also significant. India is not trying to match the scale of China's Belt and Road Initiative, but wants to make sure it remains part of the Eurasian connectivity network. Central Asian countries are looking to reduce their reliance on China and Russia, and they see Indian involvement as a way to increase their own bargaining power by encouraging competition among outside powers.

5.3 Limitations of the Neo-Mahanian Framework

Three main limitations of the neo-Mahanian analogy. Mahan's framework, first, assumes that control over strategic points allows a country to exclude its rivals, but India's commercial port diplomacy does not exclude. Chabahar is an open port and would not block Chinese or Pakistani access to Central Asia as a naval blockade would. Secondly, the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) is still incomplete. The gap of the Rasht-Astara railway, the risk of US sanctions and the instability in Afghanistan all delay its progress. Third, India's exit from direct Chabahar operations in early 2026, because of the US sanctions pressure, shows how geopolitics can disrupt infrastructure diplomacy (Mishra 2026). This type of vulnerability was less of a problem for classical naval power at its peak

These limitations help define when Neo-Mahanian Statecraft applies, but they do not make it invalid. India's strategy does not fully match Mahanian goals; it focuses on gaining presence and access, not on excluding or dominating others. In a world with many powerful countries, only the strongest can achieve total dominance. For a rising power like India, aiming for partial success may be a realistic and suitable goal when facing competition and limited resources.

VI. Conclusion

This study examines whether Alfred Thayer Mahan's sea power theory, when considered through its broader strategic logic rather than solely its naval origins, remains applicable to contemporary state behavior. The findings indicate that the theory retains utility, though certain modifications are necessary.

Mahan's idea of "access power" is still relevant today. He argued that national strength depends on controlling important routes, nodes, and chokepoints, and this idea now applies beyond the sea to other strategic areas. India's approach to Central Asia under the Modi government (2014–2024) shows this change. Because of clear geographical and political limits, especially the Himalayan barrier and limited access through Pakistan, India has used alternative routes like the Chabahar Port and the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) to gain a foothold in the region.

This analysis leads to three main conclusions. First, the Chabahar–INSTC framework is more than just an infrastructure project. It is a planned effort to expand India's influence from the sea to the continent. Second, while India is smaller in scale than China, especially compared to the Belt and Road Initiative, this does not necessarily weaken its position. For a country with limited resources, focusing on strategic positioning instead of economic dominance may be more practical and effective. Third, the strategy is still developing. Trade between India and Central Asia is still low, mainly because of incomplete infrastructure, geopolitical risks like sanctions, and the lack of direct, fully working connections.

Looking forward, there is room to build on this research. Future studies could look at whether this Neo-Mahanian framework also explains the strategies of other rising powers, especially China's BRI. It could also be helpful to see how access power applies to new areas like digital networks and space infrastructure, where controlling key points is becoming more important. The completion of projects like the Chabahar–Zahedan railway, expected around 2026, will be important in showing whether India's current strategy can lead to long-term economic and strategic influence.

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