

Chabahar Port: The Golden Gate**Mamta**

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Abstract

This article argues that common interests among nations lead to cooperation. Recent example of this is the development of Chabahar port by India on Iran's Sistan-Baluchistan coast. This paper investigates port's geographical location; interests of Iran, India and Afghanistan involved in it, Trilateral Transport and Transit Corridor Agreement and strategic importance of port. Through all this, an attempt has been made to know Chabahar port in general and its strategic significance in particular with special reference to Indian Security.

Key Words: cooperation, interests, strategic significance, security

Introduction

Chabahar port is located in south-east Iran on the Makran coast of [Sistan-Baluchistan Province](#), being only oceanic port of country. It is next to Gulf of Oman & at mouth of Strait of Hormuz. It consists of two separate ports: Shahid Kalantari & Shahid Beheshti. Because this port is close to [Afghanistan](#) and the Central Asian countries of [Turkmenistan](#), [Uzbekistan](#), Tazikistan etc., it has been termed the "Golden Gate" to these land-locked countries.¹

Chabahar is 700 km (430 mi) away from [Zahedan](#), the capital of the Sistan-Baluchistan province, 950 km (590 mi) away from [Milak](#), the closest city to the Afghan border, and 1,827 km (1,135 mi) away from [Saraks](#) on the Turkmen border.²

The marine distance to [Dubai](#) is 353 nautical miles (406 miles), [Karachi](#) in Pakistan is 456 nmi (525 mi), and [Mumbai](#) in India is 843 nmi (970 mi). Pakistan's Chinese-funded [deep sea port at Gwadar](#) is also on the Makran coast, at a distance of mere 72 km (45 mi). Gwadar also claims to provide access to Central Asia, and comparisons between the two ports are frequently made by analysts.³

Around 2500 BC, there was a port named Tis in neighborhood of Chabahar. Albruni had mentioned that trade with India was through Tis.⁴ The Portuguese forces under [Afonso-de Albuquerque](#) gained control of Chabahar and Tis, staying there until 1621. The British in the 17th century entered this region.⁵ Last Shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Paharvi proposed development of modern Chabahar port in 1973, but due to Iranian revolution its development delayed and foreign companies left the project and Iranian public companies linked to the Ministry of [Jahad-e Sazandegi](#) (or jihad for construction) took them over. The first phase of the port was opened in 1983 during the —[IranIraq War](#) as Iran began shifting seaborne trade east towards the Pakistani border in order to decrease dependency on ports in the [Persian Gulf](#) which were vulnerable to attack by the [Iraqi Air Force](#).⁶

It was actually the [Iran-Iraq war](#)(1980–1988) which caused Chabahar to gain in logistical and strategic importance. War brought insecurity to the [Strait of Hormuz](#) and ships were unable to enter the Persian Gulf. Accordingly, Chabahar became a major port during the war.⁷

Indian Interests

Chabahr port is important for Indian in promoting both strategic as well as economic interests.

Strategic interests:

- It provides alternative route to Afghanistan and Central Asian countries which will be helpful for India to rule whole Asia in long-run & ultimately the world as mentioned in Mackinder's Heartland Theory ("Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland; who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island; who rules the World-Island commands the world.").
- It provides direct access to Fakhor air base in Tajikistan which is India's first air base outside Indian territory, helpful to counter Pakistan in its north.
- It provides counteraction stage for India from any possible threat from Gwader port in Pakistan, developed by China.

Economic Interests:

- Helpful in promoting [Hajigak](#) iron and steel mining project in central Afghanistan, as in 2011, seven Indian companies acquired rights to mine central Afghanistan's Hajigak region, which

contain Asia's largest deposit of iron ore.

- Easy access to Iran's & Central Asian Countries' Oil Resources in present world of Petro-Dollar Economy.

Iran's interests

- In Iran western part of country is more developed than its eastern part, in order to develop its eastern part Iran thought of developing Chabahar port.
- Western Asia has been more an area of conflicts than cooperation. Every country has been at friction with some another country of region. Same is with Iran. During Iran-Iraq war, Iran clearly visualized potential of Chabahar port. It helped Iran to shift its trade towards Chabahar so that its dependency could be decreased on Persian Gulf ports which were more vulnerable to Iraq's attack.
- Iran wanted to lower burden on Bandar Abbas port which at that time handled major part of its trade with Russia and Europe.
- The highly congested Bandar Abbas port is not a deep water port and cannot handle the 250,000 ton ocean-going [cargo ships](#). At present, such ships dock in the [United Arab Emirates](#) (UAE) and the cargo is transferred to smaller 100,000 ton ships for onward shipment to Iran. This makes Iran dependent on the UAE for shipments and represents a loss of revenue. Unlike Bandar Abbas, Chabahar has the ability to handle standard [cargo ships](#).
- Chabahar port provides easy access to central Asian countries like Tazikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekisatn, kirgistan, Kazakhastan, Afganistan etc.

Afghanistan's Interests

- Its reliance on transit road through Karachi ended.
- Afghanistan's coal resource in Hajigak accessible for use.
- Indian Ocean accessibility through Chabahar Port.
- Economic growth provided by alternative route for trade.
- Helpful in connecting Afghanistan through the 7,200-km International North-South

Transport Corridor to Russia.

- Alternative access to regional and global markets.

Trilateral Transport & Transit Corridor Agreement

In May 2016, India, Iran and Afghanistan had inked a pact which entailed establishment of Transit and Transport Corridor among the three countries using Chabahar Port as one of the regional hubs for sea transportation in Iran, besides multi-modal transport of goods and passengers across the three nations.

Earlier Bilateral agreement signed by India and Iran which provided India the right to develop and operate two terminals and five berths with multipurpose cargo handling capacities in Chabahar port for 10 years. India made investment in Shahid Baheshti part of Chabahar Port. The agreement was signed between India Ports Global Private Limited and Arya Banader of [Iran](#). The main contract on Chabahar port was supplemented by a contract between the Exim Bank of India and Iran's Ports and Maritime Organisation with a capital back-up of \$150 million for developing the port. After the bilateral, these were joined by Afghanistan, who sealed the agreement for Trilateral Transport and Transit Corridor connecting Chabahar with Afghan road and rail network.

Strategic importance of Chabahar port for India

Soon after 1947, Pakistan became an obstacle between India and Central Asia and that is why India tried repeatedly in the past to be friend Iran and open an alternative route to Central Asia. It tried to have warm ties with Iran but its attempts were not always successful. But the agreement on Chabahar finally convinced Pakistan that it cannot continue to play the role of an obstacle for India's plans for Central Asia.⁸

Chabahr is located in route to energy-rich Persian gulf which itself make it strategically important. It is an important milestone which would boost economic growth in the region. The agreement is a clearly visible sign of India-Iran cooperation helpful for India to draw benefits from the newly opened Iranian economy without getting drawn into the regional rivalries. It will reiterate India's continued support to reconstruction, capacity-building and socio-economic development of Afghanistan, including under the framework of the New Development Partnership.

Speaking at the event to launch the Trilateral Transport and Transit Corridor, Indian Prime Minister has said, "The arc of economic benefit from this agreement could extend to the depths of the Central Asian countries. When linked with the International North-South Transport Corridor, it would touch South Asia at one end and Europe at another."

Indian Foreign Minister has highlighted, "I believe that this is the starting point of our journey to realize the full spectrum of connectivity -- from culture to commerce, from traditions to technology, from investments to IT, from services to strategy and from people to politics," on October 29, 2017.

According to MEA, India, "The shipment of wheat is a landmark moment as it will pave the way for operationalisation of the Chabahar port as an alternative, reliable and robust connectivity for Afghanistan. It will open up new opportunities for trade and transit from and to Afghanistan and enhance trade and commerce between the three countries (India, Iran and Afghanistan) and the wider region." on October 29, 2017.

China has developed Gwader port in Pakistan under its One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative which might weaken Indian interests in Indian Ocean in general & energy-rich route in Arabian Sea in particular. This can be countered by Chabahar port as per the requirements of India.

Conclusion

Chabahar port is beginning of a new phase in regional cooperation & connectivity. It is relatively cheap (being a waterway), trustworthy and speedy in access to required destination. It can be seen as a "landmark" move to operationalise a new strategic transit route among the three countries bypassing Pakistan. Chabahar not only diminishes Pakistan's strategic stranglehold over Afghanistan but also ensures India's access to Afghanistan. Connecting Chabahar to the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) that aims to link up Russia, Central Asian Republics and Iran through rail, road and shipping networks will give India access to the much larger Eurasian market. Taken together, Chabahar plus INSTC could be India's answer to China's much talked Belt and Road Initiative of transnational connectivity. Now India can easily counter any possible threat from China and Pakistan in any sphere: economic, security, strategy etc. in north-western Indian Ocean.

The project on its way slowed down due to US sanctions on Iran during the George W Bush era. Things brightened up with the Iran nuclear deal in 2015 but it is India's diplomatic success to make realise the world in general and USA in particular that peace efforts in Afganistan will bear more fruits through Chabahr port. It is a valuable supporting system from Indians to Afghanistanis in making normal, peaceful, prosperous, secure and bright future for themselves. It can be considered as a new route to peace and prosperity in region in general and in world in particular. It not only filled critical gap in India's connectivity but also moved India ahead on its path of Vishav-Guru.

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