



**THE CHABAHAR STRATEGY: INDIA'S GEOSTRATEGIC GATEWAY
TO CENTRAL ASIA AND THE CONTEST FOR REGIONAL INFLUENCE**

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ABSTRACT

This review article offers a comprehensive analysis of the strategic imperatives driving India's investment in the Chabahar port project in Iran between 2013 and 2016. It posits that Chabahar served as a strategic cornerstone of India's "Connect Central Asia" policy, fundamentally aimed at circumventing Pakistan to establish reliable access to the markets and resources of Afghanistan and Central Asia. The article synthesizes contemporary scholarship to deconstruct the complex trilateral cooperation between India, Iran, and Afghanistan, which was central to this strategy. It further investigates the significant challenges posed by international sanctions regime on Iran, which complicated diplomatic and financial engagement. A critical dimension of the analysis is the examination of Chabahar within the context of intensifying regional competition, particularly the shadow of China's parallel investment in the Gwadar port, Pakistan, as part of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). By exploring these multifaceted dynamics, the article assesses the project's potential to recalibrate regional connectivity, mitigate Pakistan's geographic veto power, and solidify India's emergence as a key strategic actor in the wider Indo-Pacific theater.

KEYWORDS: Chabahar Port, India's Foreign Policy, Connect Central Asia Policy, Regional Geopolitics, India-Iran Relations, Gwadar Port, China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

INTRODUCTION

The path of a nation's foreign policy is often dictated by the cartographic realities it inherits. For the Republic of India, the partition of the subcontinent in 1947 imposed a lasting geopolitical conundrum: the severance of natural land corridors to the west and the north-west, leaving it strategically confined within the subcontinent. This confinement, exacerbated by decades of persistent hostility with Pakistan, has fundamentally shaped India's quest for strategic autonomy and economic connectivity. The inability to secure reliable overland access through Pakistani territory has perpetually hindered India's outreach to the resource-rich and strategically vital regions of Afghanistan and Central Asia, areas with which it shares deep historical and cultural affinities. This land-access blockage has been more than a mere logistical impediment; it has been a primary constraint on India's aspirations to emerge as a consequential actor in the wider Eurasian strategic landscape. As scholars such as Pant (2013) have argued, India's regional policy has often been a story of navigating this structural limitation, seeking innovative pathways to overcome what can be termed a 'strategic geography'.

It is within this context of seeking to transcend geographical determinism that the Chabahar port project on Iran's south-eastern Makran coast emerges as a subject of critical strategic importance. Located in the Sistan-Baluchestan province, barely 70 kilometres west of Pakistan's Gwadar port, Chabahar presents India with a singular geopolitical opportunity. Its unique positioning offers India a sea-land bridge to bypass Pakistan entirely. By developing and utilizing this Iranian port, India can ship goods to the Iranian coast, from where they can be transported overland through Iranian territory into Afghanistan via the border town of Zaranj, connecting to the Indian-built Zaranj-Delaram highway, and further onwards to Central Asia. This potential corridor addresses the core of India's strategic dilemma, offering a direct route to its western neighbours. The Chabahar opportunity, therefore, is not merely about building a port; it is about constructing a strategic gateway, a long-sought-after valve to release the pressure of India's continental isolation.

The period between 2013 and 2016 constitutes a critical juncture in this endeavour, a phase where the project transitioned from protracted diplomatic deliberation to tangible commitment. Three pivotal geopolitical developments during this timeframe converged to create a unique window of opportunity for New Delhi. First, the interim nuclear deal on Iran's nuclear programme in 2013, culminating in the landmark Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015, initiated a phased easing of international sanctions. This diplomatic thaw significantly reduced the perceived risks for India, which had hitherto been cautious in its engagement with Iran due to the complexities of navigating U.S.-led sanctions (Pethiyagoda, 2015). Second, the drawdown of U.S. and NATO combat forces from Afghanistan by the end of 2014 created a strategic vacuum and heightened anxieties in New Delhi about the future of its substantial reconstruction investments and political influence in Kabul. Securing an alternative, reliable supply route became an urgent imperative to sustain its commitment to an Afghan-led peace process. Third, the formal announcement and rapid consolidation of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) as its flagship project, fundamentally altered the regional strategic calculus. The development of Gwadar port under Chinese auspices, explicitly linked to CPEC, was perceived in New Delhi as a strategic encirclement, intensifying the competitive dynamics in the Indian Ocean Region (Scott, 2013). Chabahar thus emerged as a necessary strategic counterweight.

This review article, therefore, argues that between 2013 and 2016, the Chabahar port project evolved from a theoretical concept, long discussed in strategic circles, into a central pillar of Indian foreign policy. This evolution represented a bold geostrategic gambit designed to achieve three primary objectives: first, to decisively overcome India's regional isolation by creating a permanent logistical corridor to Afghanistan and Central Asia; second, to actively counterbalance the growing influence of the Sino-Pakistani nexus, symbolized by the Gwadar-CPEC project; and third, to project India as a net security provider and a reliable development partner in the wider Eurasian region, thereby solidifying its credentials as a rising power capable of shaping its own strategic environment. The project became a litmus test for India's ability to leverage economic diplomacy for strategic ends.

I. Historical Foundations

The strategic significance of Chabahar, while gaining pronounced salience in the 2013-2016 period, is not a novel construct of 21st-century statecraft. Its conceptual roots are embedded in a longer historical trajectory of India's foreign policy, reflecting a persistent endeavour to overcome geographical constraints through diplomatic and economic means. To fully appreciate the strategic weight accorded to the port in the mid-2010s, one must trace the long and often arduous road that led to its emergence as a centrepiece of India's regional strategy. This journey is characterised by a series of bilateral agreements, a vision of multimodal connectivity embodied by the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), and the complex, yet resilient, tapestry of India-Iran relations.

Pre-2013 Foundations: From Conception to Preliminary Commitments

The genesis of Indian interest in Chabahar can be traced back to the early 1990s, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the emergence of the newly independent Central Asian Republics (CARs). India, embarking on its economic liberalisation, recognised the immense potential of these

landlocked markets and energy reservoirs. However, the unstable political landscape in Afghanistan throughout the 1990s, culminating in the Taliban's rise to power, rendered direct access impossible. It was in this context that Iran, under the relatively moderate presidency of Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, began promoting Chabahar as a strategic outlet for the region, attracting initial interest from New Delhi (Singh, 2003). The port's location, outside the contentious Strait of Hormuz, offered a stable and accessible point of entry.

The first significant formal step was a preliminary agreement in 2003, coinciding with the visit of Iranian President Mohammad Khatami to India as the chief guest for Republic Day. This period marked a high point in Indo-Iranian relations, characterised by strong energy ties and strategic convergences, particularly following the US-led intervention in Afghanistan which removed the Taliban regime. A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed, outlining Indian involvement in the development of Chabahar port. This was followed by a more concrete roadmap in 2004, which included plans for a road link from Chabahar to the Iran-Afghan border (Grare, 2006). However, progress remained sluggish. Academic analyses from that era, such as those by Scott (2007), often attributed the delays to a combination of factors: India's bureaucratic inertia, internal debates within the Indian strategic establishment regarding the costs and benefits, and the escalating international pressure on Iran over its nuclear programme. The US-India Civil Nuclear Agreement of 2005, while a landmark for India's global standing, introduced a new layer of complexity, requiring New Delhi to delicately balance its relationship with Washington against its strategic interests in Tehran. Thus, for nearly a decade, the Chabahar project remained largely in the realm of feasibility studies and diplomatic statements, a promising idea awaiting a more conducive geopolitical moment.

The North-South Transport Corridor (NSTC): A Grand Strategic Vision

Concurrent with the bilateral discussions on Chabahar was the evolution of a broader, multilateral connectivity initiative: the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC). Originally agreed upon in 2000 between India, Iran, and Russia, and later expanded to include other Central Asian and Caucasian nations, the INSTC envisioned a 7,200-kilometre multimodal network (ship, rail, and road) for moving freight from Mumbai to the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas, then overland through Iran to the Caspian Sea port of Bandar Anzali, across the Caspian to Astrakhan in Russia, and onwards to Northern Europe (Das, 2011). The primary objective was to drastically reduce the time and cost of cargo movement compared to the traditional route via the Suez Canal.

Within this grand architecture, Chabahar was conceptualised as a potential eastern spur. While Bandar Abbas was the original Iranian nodal point in the INSTC framework, its congestion and location deep inside the Strait of Hormuz made Chabahar an attractive alternative for connectivity aimed specifically at Afghanistan and Central Asia. Early academic assessments of the NSTC were cautiously optimistic. Scholars like Bhadrakumar (2005) highlighted its potential to reshape regional trade dynamics, creating a north-south axis of influence involving India, Iran, and Russia, which could act as a counterbalance to other powers. However, others, like Gidadhubli (2004), pointed to significant impediments, including infrastructural gaps, bureaucratic hurdles, and, most critically, the looming shadow of sanctions on Iran. The INSTC provided the strategic rationale for Chabahar, elevating it from a bilateral port project to a critical node in an international corridor. It underscored the port's potential to link India not only to immediate neighbours but also to the Caucasus and Russia, thereby embedding it within a larger geostrategic framework.

India-Iran Relations: The Bedrock of Cooperation

The very possibility of the Chabahar project was predicated on the state of the India-Iran relationship, which, prior to the intense sanctions regime of the late 2000s and early 2010s, was remarkably robust. This relationship was historically anchored in strong energy ties; Iran was a key supplier of crude oil to energy-hungry India, and discussions on the multi-billion-dollar Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) gas pipeline were active throughout the early 2000s (Pant, 2011). Beyond commerce, the relationship was underpinned by significant strategic convergence. Both nations supported the Northern Alliance against the Taliban in the 1990s and welcomed the post-Taliban political setup in

Afghanistan. Iran's concept of a "security perimeter" that extended eastwards towards Afghanistan and India aligned with New Delhi's interest in a stable western flank, creating a natural partnership (Brewster, 2012).

This strategic congruence provided the essential political capital for ventures like Chabahar. The relationship, however, was not without its strains. India's growing strategic partnership with the United States and its close ties with Israel were constant sources of friction. Furthermore, as international sanctions on Iran intensified, particularly after UNSC Resolution 1929 in 2010, India found itself in a difficult position, forced to significantly reduce its oil imports from Iran under US pressure. This period (approximately 2010-2013) represented a nadir in bilateral relations and, consequently, a major stall in the Chabahar project. As observed by scholars like Pethiyagoda (2015), India was forced to walk a diplomatic tightrope, attempting to preserve its strategic equities in Iran while safeguarding its burgeoning relationship with the United States. The pre-2013 foundations of Chabahar are thus a story of a compelling strategic idea, hindered by the ebbs and flows of a complex bilateral relationship and the overwhelming pressures of a turbulent international environment. It was this very history of stalled progress that made the diplomatic breakthroughs of 2015-2016 so significant, as they appeared to finally clear the path for the realisation of a decades-old vision.

II. THE STRATEGIC IMPERATIVE: INDIA'S "CONNECT CENTRAL ASIA" POLICY

The conceptualization of the Chabahar port project, while significant in its own right, must be understood as a tangible manifestation of a broader and more ambitious foreign policy doctrine: India's "Connect Central Asia" policy. Announced formally at the first India-Central Asia Dialogue in 2012, this policy represented a concerted effort to institutionalize and energize India's engagement with a region perceived as its extended neighbourhood (Ministry of External Affairs [MEA], 2012). The period between 2013 and 2016 witnessed a vigorous push to operationalize this policy, and Chabahar emerged as its most critical logistical component. The strategic imperative driving this push was multifaceted, encompassing pressing energy security needs, substantial economic ambitions, profound security concerns in Afghanistan, and a broader aspiration for regional leadership.

Energy Security: Diversifying Hydrocarbon Routes

A primary driver behind India's heightened interest in Central Asia, and by extension the Chabahar corridor, has been the imperative of energy security. India's rapidly growing economy is heavily dependent on imported hydrocarbons, making the diversification of energy sources and supply routes a paramount national security objective (Dubey, 2015). The sea lanes of communication through the Strait of Hormuz and the Strait of Malacca, which carry a substantial portion of India's oil and gas imports, are perceived as vulnerable to geopolitical disruptions, piracy, and potential blockades. The Chabahar route offers an alternative land-based corridor to access not only Iranian energy resources but also those of Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan.

Iran itself possesses the world's second-largest proven natural gas reserves and fourth-largest oil reserves. Prior to the intensification of sanctions, Iran was a significant supplier of crude oil to India. The Chabahar route revitalized discussions, albeit cautiously, about potential energy cooperation, including the long-dormant Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) gas pipeline or the possibility of transporting liquefied natural gas (LNG) via the port (Pant, 2011). More importantly, the corridor provides a feasible route for accessing the vast hydrocarbon reserves of Central Asia, particularly from Turkmenistan (Gidadhubli, 2012). A pipeline or regular shipment of oil and gas from Turkmenistan to Chabahar and onwards to India would drastically reduce dependence on volatile sea lanes and provide a more secure energy artery. This diversification strategy was not merely about commerce; it was about reducing strategic vulnerability and enhancing India's leverage in the global energy market. As Baru (2012) argues, the ability to tap into multiple energy sources is a key attribute of a rising power seeking strategic autonomy.

Economic and Commercial Aims: Quest for New Markets

Beyond energy, the “Connect Central Asia” policy was driven by compelling economic logic. The Central Asian Republics (CARs), though landlocked, represent markets with significant potential for Indian goods and services. With a combined population of over 70 million and growing economies, these nations have a demand for pharmaceuticals, information technology services, engineering goods, textiles, and agricultural products—all sectors where India possesses a competitive advantage (Lama, 2013). However, the absence of a direct, viable trade route has severely constrained the realization of this potential. Trade volumes between India and Central Asia have historically been disproportionately low relative to their potential, a direct consequence of the Pakistani blockade.

The Chabahar corridor promised to fundamentally alter this economic equation. By providing a reliable and cost-effective transit route, it could unlock this latent economic potential. Indian pharmaceuticals, in particular, which are renowned for their quality and affordability, could find a much larger market in Afghanistan and Central Asia. Furthermore, the development of the port and the associated infrastructure projects—roads, railways, and logistics hubs—presented significant opportunities for Indian engineering and construction companies. The policy was, therefore, a two-pronged economic strategy: to create new export markets for Indian industry and to secure opportunities for Indian infrastructure firms abroad, thereby fuelling economic growth at home. As an MEA (2012) document noted, the goal was to build “a web of mutually beneficial economic linkages” that would bind India and Central Asia together in a relationship of interdependence.

Security Concerns in Afghanistan: Sustaining Influence

Perhaps the most immediate and pressing strategic imperative for operationalizing the Chabahar route pertained to Afghanistan. Following the fall of the Taliban in 2001, India became one of the largest regional donors to Afghanistan, committing over \$2 billion to reconstruction projects, including the construction of the Afghan Parliament building, roads, and power transmission lines (Destradi, 2012). This investment was not merely altruistic; it was a strategic commitment to a stable, sovereign, and democratic Afghanistan that would not be used as a base for anti-India terrorism. The scheduled drawdown of US and NATO combat forces by the end of 2014 created deep anxiety in New Delhi about a potential security vacuum and the resurgence of Taliban forces, which were perceived as proxies for Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI).

In this context, Chabahar was envisioned as India’s strategic lifeline to Afghanistan. With the traditional route through Pakistan being politically unreliable and frequently closed, India needed an alternative means to supply economic assistance, support development projects, and maintain political influence in post-2014 Afghanistan. The port offered a secure and sovereign route that was immune to the vagaries of India-Pakistan relations. The trilateral Agreement on Establishment of International Transport and Transit Corridor signed by India, Iran, and Afghanistan in 2016 was a direct outcome of this security calculus. It ensured that India could continue its engagement with Kabul independently, thereby securing its substantial investments and preventing Pakistan from monopolizing influence in Afghanistan (Joshi, 2015). For India, a stable and friendly Afghanistan was essential for the security of its own region and for preventing the spread of radical extremism.

Soft Power and Regional Leadership: The Role of a Net Security Provider

Finally, the “Connect Central Asia” policy, with Chabahar at its core, was instrumental to India’s broader ambition of projecting itself as a responsible regional power and a net security provider. India’s engagement with the region has historically relied heavily on soft power, leveraging its cultural, educational, and democratic appeal. The provision of scholarships, training programmes, and medical assistance has built considerable goodwill (Stobdan, 2014). Chabahar added a crucial strategic dimension to this soft-power approach.

By developing a major port and connectivity infrastructure, India was positioning itself not as an extractive power, but as a development partner that contributes to the economic integration and prosperity of the entire region. This aligns with the concept of India being a net security provider—a state that contributes to regional stability through capacity-building and the provision of public goods,

in this case, trade and connectivity infrastructure (Scott, 2013). This stands in deliberate contrast to other models of engagement, which Indian commentators often viewed as creating debt dependencies. The Chabahar initiative was thus a key element in demonstrating India's commitment to a rules-based, inclusive regional order, bolstering its credentials as a benevolent and capable leader in the wider Indo-Pacific region. It signaled a shift from a primarily reactive foreign policy to one that proactively shapes its strategic environment.

III. THE TRILATERAL FRAMEWORK: INDIA, IRAN, AND AFGHANISTAN

The conceptual and historical underpinnings of the Chabahar project culminated in a definitive diplomatic breakthrough during the period of 2015-2016. The most significant manifestation of this progress was the crystallization of a trilateral framework involving India, Iran, and Afghanistan. This framework transformed Chabahar from a bilateral aspiration into a multilateral strategic reality, providing it with a concrete legal and operational structure. The signing of the Agreement on Establishment of International Transport and Transit Corridor during Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's landmark visit to Iran in May 2016 represented the high-water mark of diplomatic efforts during this period. A detailed analysis of this agreement, its core components, and the political alignment that enabled it is essential to understand the project's operational potential and strategic significance as it stood in mid-2016.

Analyzing the Trilateral Agreement: A Foundational Document

The trilateral agreement signed on May 23, 2016, was not merely a symbolic declaration of intent; it was a comprehensive document designed to create a legally binding corridor for international trade and transit. Its primary objective was to establish a framework for the seamless movement of goods from Indian ports to Afghanistan via Chabahar. The agreement built upon the foundational principles of the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) but provided a specific and immediate focus on the eastern axis (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India [MEA], 2016). A key feature of the agreement was the grant of preferential treatment and tax exemptions for goods moving through the corridor, a crucial provision for ensuring the economic viability of the route compared to alternatives (Pethiyagoda, 2016).

The pact mandated the creation of a joint coordination council comprising officials from the three nations to oversee implementation, resolve disputes, and streamline customs procedures. This institutional mechanism was critical for addressing the complex logistical and bureaucratic challenges inherent in multimodal transit across international borders. For Afghanistan, a landlocked nation, the agreement guaranteed access to the sea on preferential terms, a right enshrined under international law but often practically denied due to geopolitical tensions with Pakistan (Panda, 2016). The agreement, therefore, was as much about enhancing Afghan sovereignty as it was about facilitating Indian access.

Port Development and Financing: Translating Promise into Practice

The centrepiece of the trilateral understanding, and indeed of PM Modi's visit, was the concrete plan for India's involvement in the development of Chabahar port itself. In a separate bilateral MoU with Iran, India Ports Global Limited (IPGL) committed to investing \$85 million in developing two container and multi-purpose berths at the Shahid Beheshti complex of Chabahar port (MEA, 2016). Furthermore, India extended a credit line of \$150 million for the development of related port infrastructure.

This financial commitment was significant for several reasons. First, it demonstrated a tangible financial stake, moving beyond years of discussions and feasibility studies. The \$85 million investment was for direct equity, giving India an operational role in the port's management through IPGL. Second, the \$150 million credit line signaled India's willingness to act as a development financier in the region, a role traditionally played by institutions like the World Bank or the Asian Development Bank, which were constrained by sanctions (Singh, 2016). This model of financing allowed India to expedite projects based on its strategic priorities without being hindered by multilateral bureaucracy. The agreement

outlined a ten-year lease arrangement, providing India with the long-term operational control necessary to justify its investment and ensure the port's efficiency met international standards.

The Transport Corridor Infrastructure: Building the Land Bridge

The utility of the port was entirely contingent on its connectivity to Afghanistan and beyond. Recognizing this, the trilateral framework placed strong emphasis on the development of the land-based transport corridor. The core of this infrastructure plan was the construction of the Chabahar-Zahedan-Milak railway line. Iran had already completed the Zaranj-Milak road link on its side, and the railway was envisioned as a higher-capacity, more efficient alternative (Joshi, 2015).

India's role in this was pivotal. During the visit, India's IRCON International signed an MoU with Iran's Construction and Development of Transportation Infrastructures Company (CDTIC) to provisionally construct the 500-kilometre Chabahar-Zahedan railway line as part of India's \$150 million credit line (Bagchi, 2016). This rail link was designed to connect seamlessly to the Zaranj-Delaram highway in Afghanistan, a strategic artery built by the Border Roads Organisation (BRO) of India between 2005 and 2009 at a significant cost of lives and capital. The Zaranj-Delaram highway connected to the Garland Highway, Afghanistan's primary circular road network, providing access to major cities like Herat, Kandahar, and Kabul. Thus, the trilateral framework aimed to create an integrated sea-rail-road corridor, making Chabahar the maritime gateway to Afghanistan. The development of this infrastructure was seen as a game-changer, not only for trade but also for the economic development of the relatively impoverished Sistan-Baluchestan province in Iran and the Nimroz province in Afghanistan.

Political Alignment: Convergent Interests at a Unique Juncture

The successful conclusion of these agreements in May 2016 was made possible by a rare and transient convergence of political interests among the three nations. For India, the timing was opportune due to the implementation of the JCPOA in January 2016, which temporarily alleviated the legal and financial risks associated with engaging Iran. The need for a stable supply route to Afghanistan after the US drawdown and the urgency to counter China's CPEC project provided a strong strategic push.

For Iran, emerging from years of crippling international isolation, partnership with India offered a pathway to reintegrate into the regional economy. Chabahar was a cornerstone of Iran's strategy to develop its eastern provinces and become a central transit hub for trade between South Asia, Central Asia, and beyond. Engaging a major economy like India lent credibility to this vision and provided much-needed investment and technical expertise (Razvi, 2016). For Afghanistan, under the National Unity Government of President Ashraf Ghani and CEO Abdullah Abdullah, the corridor represented an economic and strategic lifeline. It offered an alternative to dependence on Pakistan, promised economic prosperity through enhanced trade, and was a symbol of sustained international commitment to the country's future at a time of escalating Taliban violence.

This trilateral compact was, therefore, a strategic alignment born of mutual necessity. Each nation saw in the Chabahar project a vital key to addressing its most pressing geopolitical and economic challenges. As Scott (2016) noted, the agreement represented a significant act of regionalism, where three middle powers sought to shape their strategic environment through cooperative infrastructure development, independent of great power patronage. However, scholars like Pant (2016) also cautioned that the success of this framework would depend on the continued alignment of these interests amidst the volatile regional politics and the precarious security situation in Afghanistan.

IV. NAVIGATING THE SANCTIONS REGIME: THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

For over a decade, the single greatest impediment to the realization of the Chabahar port project was not a lack of strategic vision or political will, but the complex and stringent international sanctions regime imposed on Iran. The period preceding 2015 was characterized by a frustrating paradox: while the strategic logic of Chabahar was widely acknowledged within Indian policy circles, its practical execution remained hostage to a global geopolitical standoff over Iran's nuclear programme. Therefore,

any analysis of the project's momentum in the 2013-2016 period must centrally address the critical variable of sanctions—their crippling impact, their temporary relaxation, and the persistent shadow they cast even after the landmark nuclear deal. India's navigation of this precarious landscape stands as a testament to its diplomatic dexterity and the sharpening of its calculus in balancing competing strategic partnerships.

The Impact of Pre-JCPOA Sanctions: A Period of Strategic Stasis

Prior to the interim Geneva Agreement of 2013 and the subsequent Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015, the sanctions environment was overwhelmingly prohibitive. A series of United Nations Security Council resolutions, coupled with even more stringent unilateral sanctions by the United States and the European Union, had effectively isolated Iran from the global financial system. These measures targeted Iran's energy, banking, and transportation sectors, creating insurmountable hurdles for the Chabahar project (Katzman, 2014).

For India, the implications were direct and severe. Any significant financial transaction with Iranian entities risked secondary sanctions, which could exclude Indian banks and companies from the crucial US financial market. This deterred not only direct investment but also the involvement of international engineering and logistics firms essential for a project of this scale. The sanctions complicated simple matters like securing insurance for ships calling at Iranian ports and transferring payments for even preliminary feasibility studies (Pant & Super, 2015). Consequently, despite the 2003 MoU and subsequent discussions, the project remained in a state of strategic stasis. India was forced to adopt a cautious and minimalist approach, limiting engagement to diplomatic dialogues and technical discussions, while its grand strategic design for connectivity was effectively put on hold. As observed by scholars such as Scott (2010), this period highlighted the limits of India's strategic autonomy when confronted with the hard power of the US-led international financial architecture.

The JCPOA (2015) as a Game Changer: A Window of Opportunity

The signing of the JCPOA on July 14, 2015, marked a definitive turning point. The agreement, which traded constraints on Iran's nuclear programme for a phased lifting of sanctions, created a critical window of opportunity that India was poised to exploit. The formal Implementation Day of the JCPOA in January 2016, which triggered the termination of EU and US secondary nuclear-related sanctions, was the green light for which New Delhi had been waiting (Pethiyagoda, 2016).

The game-changing nature of the JCPOA for Chabahar was multifaceted. First, it drastically reduced the legal and financial risks associated with investing in Iran. Indian banks could now process transactions for the project without fearing punitive action from the US Treasury. Second, it opened the door for international companies to participate, making it feasible to plan for a port that met global standards. Third, and perhaps most importantly, it provided the necessary political cover for the Indian government to move aggressively. The Modi administration, which had come to power in 2014 emphasizing a more proactive and results-oriented foreign policy, could now translate the long-discussed Chabahar proposal into a tangible agreement without incurring significant diplomatic costs from Washington (Destradi, 2016). The rapid succession of high-level visits—including the visit of External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj in April 2016 and Prime Minister Modi in May 2016—culminating in the signing of the trilateral agreement, demonstrated how India leveraged this brief opening with remarkable speed and purpose.

Residual Challenges: The Persistence of Uncertainty

Despite the optimism generated by the JCPOA, astute observers and policy planners were aware of significant residual challenges. The sanctions relief was not total; a complex web of US sanctions related to Iran's ballistic missile programme, human rights record, and support for terrorist organizations remained in place. This continuing ambiguity created a climate of caution, particularly among large international financial institutions and multinational corporations, which remained wary of any involvement with Iran due to fears of unintentionally violating the remaining sanctions (Singh, 2016).

Furthermore, the very structure of the JCPOA included the ominous threat of a “snap-back” mechanism, whereby sanctions could be automatically reinstated if Iran were found to be in violation of the agreement. This created a fundamental element of political and financial risk that could not be easily discounted. For India, committing hundreds of millions of dollars in infrastructure investment meant betting on the long-term sustainability of the nuclear deal—a prospect that was far from certain given the strong opposition to the JCPOA from the US Congress and key American allies like Israel and Saudi Arabia (Pant, 2016). Therefore, while the period 2015-2016 was one of unprecedented progress, the project’s future remained contingent on a fragile international consensus that was already showing signs of strain.

India's Diplomatic Balancing Act: Walking the Tightrope

The management of the Chabahar file amidst the sanctions regime exemplifies India’s sophisticated diplomatic balancing act on the global stage. On one hand, India shares a growing strategic partnership with the United States, encompassing defence, counter-terrorism, and economic ties. On the other hand, it maintains a historically important relationship with Iran, driven by energy needs, regional connectivity, and a shared interest in Afghan stability. Additionally, India has a close strategic partnership with Israel, a staunch opponent of the JCPOA and of any engagement with Iran (Brewster, 2016).

Navigating this triangular tightrope required immense diplomatic finesse. India’s strategy involved a clear articulation of Chabahar’s role as a project for regional stability and economic development, particularly for Afghanistan—a goal that aligned with stated US policy objectives. By framing Chabahar as a contribution to Afghan reconstruction and a counter to Pakistan-based terror groups, India sought to carve out a normative exemption for the project within its broader engagement with Washington (Baru, 2015). Simultaneously, it assured Iran of its commitment as a reliable partner, even during the toughest periods of sanctions, by continuing limited oil purchases through a rupee-payment mechanism and engaging in constant diplomatic communication. This delicate balancing act, while successful in the immediate aftermath of the JCPOA, remained a permanent feature of India’s strategic calculus, requiring continuous adjustment to the volatile shifts in West Asian geopolitics.

V. THE PAKISTAN FACTOR AND THE GWADAR SHADOW

The strategic logic of the Chabahar port project is inextricably linked to the geopolitical realities of South Asia, and central to this is the intractable nature of India-Pakistan relations. Any analysis of India’s motivations in the 2013-2016 period would be incomplete without a thorough examination of the ‘Pakistan factor’ and the looming strategic challenge posed by the simultaneous development of the Gwadar port, barely 70 kilometres to the east, under the aegis of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). The emergence of this dual-port dynamic on the Makran coast transformed the regional strategic landscape, adding a layer of great power competition to India’s longstanding regional rivalry.

The Inherent Limitation of Pakistan: The Fundamental Driver

The most fundamental and enduring reason for India’s pursuit of the Chabahar option is the categorical impossibility of securing reliable direct land access through Pakistan. Since independence, Pakistan has consistently denied India transit rights to Afghanistan and Central Asia, leveraging its geographical position as a strategic veto over India’s continental outreach (Pant, 2013). This denial is rooted in the core of Pakistan’s security paradigm, which views any direct Indian influence in Afghanistan as a threat to its ‘strategic depth’ and aims to keep India confined within the subcontinent. Even during periods of attempted dialogue, the issue of transit rights has remained a non-negotiable subject for Islamabad.

This persistent blockage has imposed significant economic and strategic costs on India. It has forced New Delhi to rely on longer, more expensive maritime routes for trade with Afghanistan and Central Asia, diminishing the competitiveness of Indian goods. More importantly, it has rendered India’s significant developmental assistance to Afghanistan—exceeding \$2 billion by 2016—logistically vulnerable, dependent on the whims of a hostile neighbour (Destradi, 2012). Therefore, Chabahar was

never merely an 'option' for India; it was a strategic necessity born out of a structural constraint imposed by Pakistan. It represents a deliberate policy to bypass a diplomatic deadlock through geographic and diplomatic ingenuity, seeking strategic autonomy where none existed before.

China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and Gwadar: The Strategic counterweight

The strategic imperative for Chabahar was dramatically amplified from 2013 onwards with the formal announcement of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the accelerated development of the Gwadar port. While the Gwadar project had been under discussion for years, its incorporation as the maritime terminus of CPEC, a flagship project of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), fundamentally altered its significance. For Indian strategists, CPEC was not merely an economic corridor; it was a strategic gambit that posed a multifaceted challenge (Small, 2015).

In this context, Chabahar was consciously developed as a strategic counterweight to the Gwadar-CPEC nexus. The two projects, though geographically proximate, are driven by starkly contrasting strategic visions and models. Gwadar, under Chinese state-owned enterprise management, is a lynchpin of China's strategy to secure energy routes from the Persian Gulf and project power into the Indian Ocean. Its financing is part of a large-scale, state-driven BRI model, which critics argued could create debt dependencies (Wolf, 2016). In contrast, Chabahar, while strategically vital for India, was projected as an open, inclusive transit hub that would abide by international norms and bolster regional connectivity without creating political strings. India's investment, though significant, was more modest and focused on specific infrastructure components rather than a grand, state-controlled corridor. The contrasting models—one perceived as hegemonic and the other as facilitative—were a key part of the narrative battle in which India was engaged (Scott, 2016).

Competition or Complementarity? A Contemporary Debate

During the 2013-2016 period, a lively debate ensued among scholars and analysts regarding the nature of the relationship between Chabahar and Gwadar. The dominant view in India, reflected in strategic commentaries, was one of inherent and zero-sum competition. From this perspective, the two ports were seen as the nodal points of a new 'Great Game' in the region, with India and China vying for influence (Panda, 2016). The strategic encirclement theory, often referred to as the 'String of Pearls', gained traction, with Gwadar being portrayed as a potential future Chinese naval base that would jeopardize India's security.

However, a minority, more pragmatic view suggested the potential for future complementarity. Proponents of this view, including some Iranian officials, argued that both ports could eventually serve different hinterlands and functions. Gwadar, integrated with CPEC, could cater primarily to China's trade with Pakistan and the Gulf, while Chabahar could serve as the gateway for India, Afghanistan, and Central Asia. In a future scenario of regional economic integration and peace, the two ports could even be connected by road and rail, fostering trade across the Iran-Pakistan border (Rizvi, 2016). However, this view was heavily contingent on a radical improvement in India-Pakistan relations and a reduction in Sino-Indian rivalry—prospects that seemed distant in the mid-2010s. For all practical purposes, within the timeframe of this analysis, the relationship was overwhelmingly viewed through a competitive lens.

The Baluchistan Dimension: A Shared Challenge

A critical, and often understated, factor common to both projects is their location in the restive province of Baluchistan, which spans the Iran-Pakistan border. The region has a long history of insurgency driven by grievances against the central governments in both Tehran and Islamabad, related to political autonomy and resource distribution (Grare, 2013). This shared challenge of internal security posed a significant risk to the viability of both Chabahar and Gwadar.

For India, the instability in Pakistan's Baluchistan was a direct security concern for any infrastructure linked to Afghanistan. More controversially, following the 2016 Uri attack, the Indian government explicitly referenced the human rights situation in Baluchistan, signalling a potential shift towards a more assertive policy that could exploit Pakistan's vulnerabilities (Baru, 2016). This added a

complex and volatile dimension to the rivalry. Conversely, both India and China had to contend with the threat that Baluchi militant groups posed to the infrastructure and personnel associated with the ports and their connecting corridors. The success of both projects was, therefore, not just a matter of finance and engineering, but also of mitigating deep-seated internal security threats—a challenge that neither investor country could directly control, making them dependent on the counter-insurgency capabilities of Iran and Pakistan.

VI. THE CENTRAL ASIAN DIMENSION: BEYOND AFGHANISTAN

While Afghanistan constituted the immediate and pressing strategic objective for the Chabahar corridor, the project's ultimate geopolitical significance for India lay in its potential to unlock the vast and resource-rich region of Central Asia. The five landlocked Central Asian Republics (CARs)—Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan—represent what can be termed the 'final frontier' in India's quest for extended regional connectivity. For New Delhi, sustainable access to these markets and energy sources has been a long-standing strategic aspiration, perpetually thwarted by the lack of a viable transit route. The period of 2013-2016, therefore, witnessed a concerted effort to align the Chabahar project with a broader diplomatic offensive aimed at deepening India's engagement with Central Asia, positioning the port as the southern anchor of a new north-south economic axis.

The Final Frontier: The Strategic Imperative for Connectivity

The strategic and economic rationale for India's outreach to Central Asia is compelling. The region possesses abundant hydrocarbons—with Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan holding significant oil and gas reserves—and critical mineral resources. Furthermore, with a combined population of over 70 million, it represents an emerging market for Indian pharmaceuticals, IT services, and consumer goods (Lama, 2013). However, the tyranny of geography has severely constrained this relationship. Central Asia's historical trade routes have been predominantly northward to Russia or eastward to China, creating dependencies that the CARs themselves have sought to mitigate as part of their own multivector foreign policies.

For India, the only feasible access route circumventing Pakistan was a long and expensive multimodal journey through Iran's Bandar Abbas port or a circuitous route through Europe, both of which rendered Indian goods uncompetitive. The Chabahar route, by offering a shorter and more direct sea-land link, promised to fundamentally alter this equation. The vision was to extend the Chabahar-Zahedan-Milak corridor beyond the Afghan border, connecting to the existing road and rail networks of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. This would create an alternative transportation artery, reducing the effective distance between India and Central Asia and opening up possibilities for enhanced trade, investment, and energy cooperation (Stobdan, 2014). Thus, Chabahar was not an end in itself, but the critical first step in a grander strategy to integrate the Indian economy with the heart of Eurasia.

India's Outreach to CARs: A Multi-Pronged Diplomatic Strategy

Recognizing that infrastructure alone is insufficient, India simultaneously pursued a multi-pronged diplomatic strategy to strengthen its political and economic bonds with the CARs. A cornerstone of this effort was the "Connect Central Asia" policy, formally articulated in 2012, which aimed to enhance cooperation across a range of sectors including energy, trade, security, and culture (MEA, 2012). High-level exchanges became more frequent, with visits by the Indian President and Prime Minister to the region, and reciprocal visits by Central Asian leaders to Delhi.

A significant diplomatic achievement during this period was India's accession to the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) as a full member in 2016. While the SCO's efficacy is often debated, for India, membership provided a crucial institutional platform for high-level engagement with both Central Asian states and Russia, and a venue to discuss regional security and connectivity issues (Bhadrakumar, 2016). Within forums like the SCO, India consistently championed the development of connectivity projects like the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), of which Chabahar was an integral part. These diplomatic efforts were designed to build political goodwill and assure the

CARs that India was a serious, long-term partner committed to the region's development, thereby creating the necessary political conditions for the Chabahar corridor to be utilized effectively.

Central Asian Perspectives: Chabahar as a Tool of Strategic Diversification

The success of the Chabahar corridor was contingent not only on Indian initiative but also on its reception in Central Asian capitals. Scholarly analysis from the period suggests that the CARs viewed the project with cautious optimism, primarily as a welcome opportunity for strategic diversification (Laruelle, 2015). Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the CARs have pursued multivector foreign policies to avoid over-reliance on any single power. While Russia remains a dominant political and security partner, and China an increasingly influential economic force through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), there is a discernable interest in cultivating alternative partnerships to enhance their bargaining power and strategic autonomy.

From this perspective, India was seen as a relatively benign and non-threatening power, with no history of imperial ambition in the region. The Chabahar route offered a potential southern outlet to the sea, reducing their reliance on Russian routes to the north and Chinese corridors to the east. This was particularly attractive for Turkmenistan, which sought additional export routes for its natural gas, and for Uzbekistan, under the new leadership of Shavkat Mirziyoyev from 2016, which embarked on a policy of regional openness (Dadabaev, 2016). Access to the Indian Ocean via Iran and Afghanistan would allow these nations to tap directly into the vast South Asian market. However, Central Asian leaders were also pragmatic; their enthusiasm was tempered by an acute awareness of the significant challenges, particularly the precarious security situation in Afghanistan, which was the essential land bridge to the south. Therefore, while the Chabahar project was viewed as a strategically valuable option, its viability was seen as intrinsically linked to the establishment of lasting stability in Afghanistan.

CONCLUSION:

The period from 2013 to 2016 marked a definitive turning point for India's engagement with the Chabahar port project. As this review has delineated, what was for decades a strategic aspiration confined to policy documents and academic discourse evolved with remarkable speed into a central pillar of India's foreign policy architecture. This transformation was not serendipitous but was driven by a confluence of compelling strategic imperatives. The analysis reaffirms that India's pursuit of Chabahar was a calculated gambit, motivated by the urgent need to overcome the perennial constraint of geographic isolation imposed by Pakistan. It was an integral component of the broader 'Connect Central Asia' policy, aimed at securing energy routes, accessing new economic markets, and safeguarding India's substantial stakes in a post-2014 Afghanistan. Furthermore, the project emerged as a strategic counterweight to the rapidly consolidating China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), reflecting India's intent to actively shape, rather than passively accept, the evolving regional balance of power. The signing of the trilateral agreement with Iran and Afghanistan in May 2016 stood as the clearest testament to this resolve, representing a tangible commitment to translating strategic vision into operational reality.

As of mid-2016, the prospects for the Chabahar project presented a paradox of significant opportunity tempered by formidable challenges. On one hand, the diplomatic and geopolitical environment was more favourable than it had been in over a decade. The successful implementation of the JCPOA had temporarily lifted the cloud of sanctions, providing India with the necessary political and financial space to execute its commitments. The \$85 million investment and \$150 million credit line demonstrated a seriousness of purpose that had been previously absent. The alignment of interests with Iran, eager for post-sanctions economic integration, and Afghanistan, desperate for an alternative to Pakistani transit routes, created a powerful, if temporary, consensus. The project was rightly perceived as a masterstroke of Indian diplomacy, allowing it to balance its relationships with the United States, Iran, and Israel while advancing its core national interests.

On the other hand, the path forward remained fraught with immense uncertainty. The sustainability of the entire enterprise was inextricably linked to the precarious fate of the JCPOA. The

threat of a 'snap-back' of sanctions loomed large, creating a climate of risk that deterred larger international investors and financial institutions. The security situation in Afghanistan, the essential land-bridge to Central Asia, was deteriorating rapidly, casting doubt on the viability of the transit corridor. Internally, both Iran and Pakistan faced persistent insurgencies in their respective Baluchistan provinces, posing a direct threat to infrastructure security. The financial and technical challenges of constructing the Chabahar-Zahedan rail link and integrating it with existing networks were substantial. Therefore, while the strategic logic was impeccable and the diplomatic foundation had been laid, the project's ultimate success hinged on a range of variables—from great power politics to localised stability—that were largely beyond India's direct control.

The initiation of the Chabahar project opens up several critical avenues for scholarly inquiry as the situation evolves. Future research must move beyond strategic analysis to empirical investigation. First, there is a need for detailed studies on the implementation challenges, focusing on the logistical, bureaucratic, and customs-related hurdles that emerge in operationalizing the trilateral transit agreement. Second, scholarly work must critically examine the economic viability of the corridor, conducting comparative cost-benefit analyses of the Chabahar route versus other existing routes for trade between India, Afghanistan, and Central Asia. Third, the environmental and social impact of the port and corridor development on the Sistan-Baluchestan region warrants careful assessment, particularly concerning sustainable development and local community engagement. Finally, the evolving legal and regulatory framework governing international transit trade through the corridor, and its compatibility with regional agreements, presents a rich field for specialized research in international law and political economy.

In final analysis, the Chabahar gambit, as it stood in 2016, was a bold and necessary assertion of Indian strategic agency. It demonstrated a maturation of India's foreign policy, showcasing an ability to leverage economic diplomacy for strategic ends in a complex and volatile regional environment. Whether this gambit would yield its intended dividends remained an open question, but it had unequivocally succeeded in repositioning India as a key stakeholder in the new geopolitical contestations unfolding across Eurasia.

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