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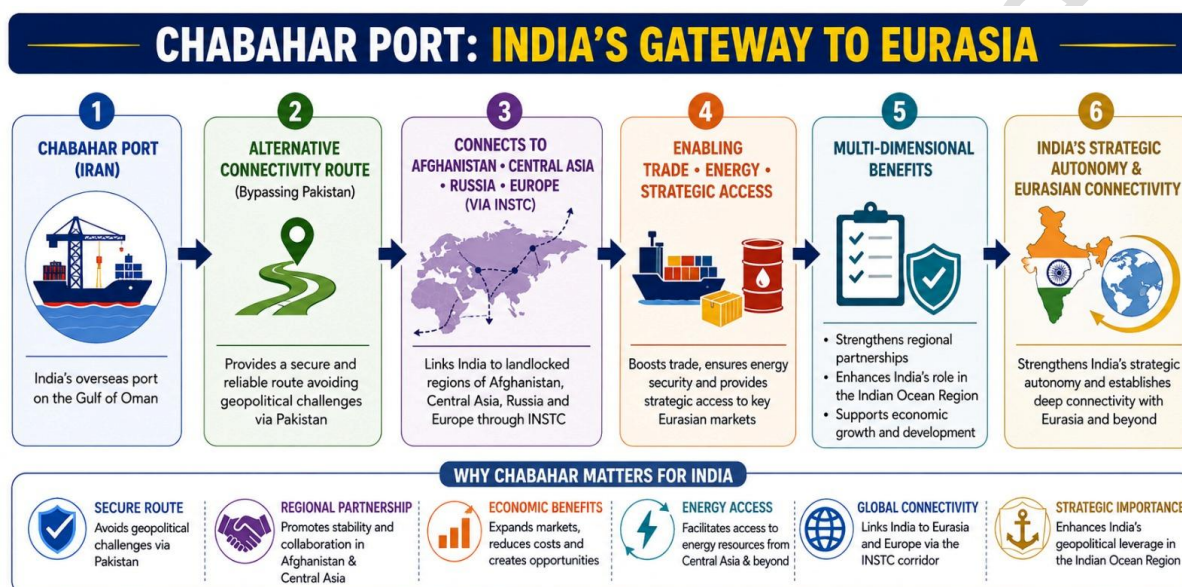
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GS Paper II: International Relations

1. Chabahar Port: Strategic Connectivity under Geopolitical Uncertainty

a. Introduction

India's long-term involvement in Iran's Chabahar Port has entered a period of uncertainty following the expiry of the United States sanctions waiver and renewed regional tensions involving Iran. These developments have raised concerns regarding India's connectivity strategy and its access to Afghanistan, Central Asia and the wider Eurasian region.



b. Background Context

The Chabahar Port, located in Iran's Sistan-Baluchistan Province on the Gulf of Oman, is Iran's principal oceanic port with direct access to the Indian Ocean. Unlike ports situated inside the Persian Gulf, it provides maritime access without requiring passage through the Strait of Hormuz.

India has invested in the development and operation of the port to establish an alternative trade corridor connecting it with Afghanistan, Central Asia, Russia and Europe while bypassing Pakistan.

Chabahar is also an important component of the International North-South Transport Corridor, a multimodal network designed to reduce transit time and transportation costs between South Asia and Eurasia.

Its importance therefore extends beyond port infrastructure to India's broader economic, diplomatic and strategic engagement with the region.

c. Strategic Importance of Chabahar Port

Importance for India

- **Access to Afghanistan and Central Asia:** Chabahar enables India to overcome the geographical constraint created by Pakistan's denial of overland transit.
- **Integration with the INSTC:** It can facilitate faster and more economical movement of goods between India, Iran, Central Asia, Russia and Europe.
- **Strategic Presence in West Asia:** The port strengthens India's regional footprint and complements its wider engagement with Iran and Central Asia.

- **Counterbalance to Gwadar:** Chabahar provides a strategic counterweight to China's involvement in Gwadar Port under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.
- **Support for Afghanistan:** It facilitates trade, humanitarian assistance and development cooperation with Afghanistan.
- **Energy and Supply-Chain Access:** Improved connectivity can support India's engagement with energy-rich Eurasian countries and diversify trade routes.

Importance for Iran

- Chabahar provides Iran with direct access to the open sea and supports the expansion of international trade.
- It contributes to the development of the relatively underdeveloped Sistan-Baluchistan Province through employment, industrial activity and infrastructure.
- It enhances Iran's role as a regional transit hub linking South Asia, Central Asia and Europe.

Thus, Chabahar represents a convergence of Indian connectivity interests and Iranian developmental priorities.

d. Significance

- **Regional Connectivity:** Chabahar provides India with a gateway to Afghanistan and Central Asia while reducing dependence on transit routes controlled by Pakistan.
- **Geopolitical Influence:** The port strengthens India's strategic presence in West Asia and Eurasia and supports a more balanced regional order.
- **Trade Diversification:** By linking with the INSTC, Chabahar can reduce logistics costs, shorten transit times and expand access to new markets.
- **Central Asian Engagement:** It complements the Connect Central Asia Policy by supporting trade, investment and strategic cooperation with resource-rich Central Asian countries.
- **Energy Security:** Improved access to Eurasia can strengthen India's engagement with energy-producing regions and contribute to diversified supply chains.
- **Strategic Autonomy:** Continued involvement in Chabahar demonstrates India's ability to pursue independent regional interests despite pressure arising from major-power rivalries.

However, the strategic value of the port can be realised only if persistent geopolitical and operational obstacles are addressed.

e. Challenges

- **Sanctions-Related Uncertainty:** The expiry of the United States sanctions waiver has created uncertainty regarding investment, financing and long-term project implementation.
- **Banking and Insurance Restrictions:** Financial sanctions, payment difficulties and insurance constraints continue to complicate commercial operations.
- **Regional Instability:** Recurring tensions involving Iran increase political and commercial risks and discourage private-sector participation.
- **Slow Corridor Integration:** Delays in connecting Chabahar effectively with the INSTC reduce its commercial viability and strategic impact.
- **Limited Private Investment:** Geopolitical uncertainty and unclear revenue prospects make it difficult to attract sustained private capital.
- **Strategic Competition:** Any slowdown in Chabahar's development could increase the relative importance of Gwadar Port, strengthening the regional influence of China and Pakistan.

These challenges illustrate how geopolitical uncertainty can undermine the economic potential of strategically important infrastructure.

f. Way Forward

- **Sustain Diplomatic Engagement:** India should continue engagement with Iran, the United States and other international partners to preserve Chabahar's status as a regionally beneficial connectivity project.
- **Accelerate the INSTC:** Greater coordination among participating countries is required to improve rail, road, customs and port connectivity along the corridor.
- **Strengthen Central Asian Partnerships:** India should expand economic, logistics and infrastructure cooperation with Central Asian countries to generate sustained commercial demand for the corridor.
- **Diversify Connectivity Options:** Alternative routes and complementary connectivity initiatives should be developed to reduce excessive dependence on a single corridor.
- **Encourage Multilateral Participation:** Greater participation by regional and international stakeholders can improve commercial viability, share risks and reduce geopolitical vulnerability.
- **Improve Operational Efficiency:** Customs procedures, digital documentation, cargo handling and multimodal logistics should be streamlined to make Chabahar more competitive.
- **Preserve Strategic Autonomy:** India should continue to balance relations with Iran, the United States, Gulf countries and Central Asian states while safeguarding its long-term interests.

Conclusion

Chabahar Port remains a cornerstone of India's strategy to strengthen connectivity with Afghanistan, Central Asia and the wider Eurasian region. Its importance extends beyond trade to include energy security, strategic influence and regional balancing. Although sanctions and instability create serious constraints, sustained diplomacy, faster integration with the INSTC, greater multilateral participation and diversified regional partnerships can help preserve Chabahar's long-term relevance to India's strategic and economic interests.

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- Prelims-style MCQs
- objective pattern analysis

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