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Chabahar and the INSTC: Guarding India's Connectivity Lifeline

 **INDIAN EXPRESS**

23 July 2026

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 Every fact web-verified against primary sources

THE LIFT LINE

A port is never only a port. **Chabahar**, on Iran's coast facing the **Gulf of Oman**, is India's bet that geography can be rewritten so that trade to Central Asia no longer has to ask Pakistan's permission. That bet is now clouded by **US sanctions** and a volatile West Asia, and how India navigates the next few years will decide whether the corridor becomes a lifeline or a stranded asset.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

Connectivity diplomacy sits at the intersection of two General Studies papers, and examiners love it precisely because it forces you to weigh strategy against economics. Chabahar is a live case study of how a rising power pursues its interests inside a web of great-power rivalry.

The port is also the cleanest illustration of **strategic autonomy** in action, where India works with Iran, Russia, the United States and the Central Asian republics at once, refusing to collapse its choices into any single camp.

GS Paper 2: India and its neighbourhood, **bilateral** and regional groupings, and the effect of policies of developed and developing countries on India's interests.

GS Paper 3: Infrastructure such as ports, and the economics of trade corridors and **energy security**.

For **Prelims**, hold the specifics: **Chabahar** lies in Iran on the **Gulf of Oman** and has two terminals, **Shahid Kalantari** and **Shahid Beheshti**; **India Ports Global Limited (IPGL)** operates the Shahid Beheshti terminal; the **International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC)** is a roughly **7,200 km multimodal** road, rail and sea route linking India to Russia and Europe through Iran; and Chabahar is India's gateway to **Afghanistan and Central Asia** that bypasses Pakistan.

For **Mains**, the analytical demand is to argue how a country protects long-horizon infrastructure interests when a third power's sanctions can freeze them overnight.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

India's interest in Chabahar is old and stubborn. Landlocked Afghanistan and the resource-rich Central Asian republics have always been beyond easy reach because Pakistan denies India overland transit. Chabahar solves the map problem: goods sail from western India to Iran's coast, then travel by road and rail northward toward Zaranj in Afghanistan and onward toward the Central Asian heartland.

In 2016 India, Iran and Afghanistan signed a trilateral transit agreement, and IPGL took charge of operating the Shahid Beheshti terminal. In 2024 a longer-term operating contract was concluded, signalling India's intent to stay for the long haul. The INSTC then extends this logic all the way to Russia and northern Europe, promising shorter transit times and lower costs than the traditional Suez route.

The complication is that Iran remains under heavy **US sanctions** whose extraterritorial reach can deter banks, insurers and shipping firms from touching Iran-linked projects. Renewed conflict in West Asia adds physical risk. Meanwhile China's **Belt and Road Initiative** and its stake in **Gwadar port**, barely 170 km from Chabahar, mean India is not the only power writing on this map.

THE CORE ARGUMENT / ISSUE

Geography is an asset only if it is usable

Chabahar's value is not automatic. A port bypassing Pakistan matters only if cargo actually moves, insurers actually cover it, and the rail and road links inland are actually built. The missing Chabahar-Zahedan rail line and patchy connectivity across Central Asia mean the corridor's promise still outruns its plumbing.

Sanctions are the real chokepoint

The threat to Chabahar is less military than financial. When global banks fear US secondary sanctions, they avoid Iran-linked transactions even where narrow exemptions exist. India has historically secured limited waivers on the ground that Chabahar aids Afghan reconstruction, but waivers are political and reversible.

A contest of corridors

FEATURE	CHABAHAR (INDIA)	GWADAR (CHINA)
Location	Iran, Gulf of Oman	Pakistan, Arabian Sea
Backer	India, with Iran	China, via CPEC
Strategic aim	Access to Afghanistan and Central Asia bypassing Pakistan	Link western China to the Arabian Sea
Feeder corridor	INSTC toward Russia and Europe	Belt and Road Initiative
Main constraint	US sanctions on Iran	Security and debt concerns

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (ANALYTICAL FRAME)

Read Chabahar through three lenses. First, **strategic autonomy**: India refuses to let Washington veto its Iran policy, yet it will not let Iran policy wreck the far larger India-US partnership. Second, **connectivity as security**: reliable access to Central Asian energy and markets is a hedge against a hostile western neighbourhood and against over-dependence on any one supplier. Third, **sequencing**: infrastructure of this kind pays off over decades, so the correct metric is not this year's tonnage but whether India keeps its operating rights, skills and options alive until the **geopolitics** turn favourable. The consistent thread reflects India's stand that it pursues its own legitimate development and security interests while respecting a rules-based order.

THE DIAGRAM IN WORDS

Western India -> sea -> Chabahar (Shahid Beheshti terminal, IPGL) -> road and rail -> Afghanistan and Central Asia -> INSTC -> Russia and Europe

WAY FORWARD

- 1 De-risk the finance.** Build rupee-rial and alternative payment channels, and pursue durable, written sanctions carve-outs so banks and insurers can participate without fear.
- 2 Finish the inland links.** Prioritise the Chabahar-Zahedan rail connection and coordinate with Central Asian states on customs, standards and last-mile roads so cargo actually flows.
- 3 Deepen the coalition.** Work the INSTC with Russia, Iran and the Central Asian republics as a shared project, spreading risk and building constituencies that raise the cost of disruption.

- 4 **Keep Washington informed.** Frame Chabahar consistently as a stabilising, connectivity and humanitarian project for Afghanistan and the region, preserving the goodwill that has underpinned past exemptions.

PYQ LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

The UPSC has repeatedly asked about India's connectivity and neighbourhood strategy, for example the 2018 question on the effectiveness of Project Mausam and the recurring theme of India managing relations amid great-power competition. Chabahar fits squarely into questions on infrastructure diplomacy and strategic autonomy.

Practice question: "Chabahar is less a port and more a test of India's strategic autonomy." Examine the strategic and economic significance of the [Chabahar port](#) and the INSTC for India, and the challenges posed by external sanctions. (15 marks, 250 words)

Sources: Indian Express, Chabahar and India's connectivity, Ministry of External Affairs, India-Iran relations

Source: Chabahar and the INSTC: Guarding India's Connectivity Lifeline — [Ujiyari.com](#) | Free UPSC & State PCS Editorial Analysis

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