

India and Iran approve Chabahar corridor, amid heightening tensions in South and Central Asia

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Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Iran for three days in late May, holding discussions with Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini and President Hassan Rouhani and signing several agreements, including the “Trilateral Agreement on Establishing Chabahar Transport and Transit Corridors.”

The Trilateral Agreement paves the way for the construction of the Chabahar port complex, which is intended to serve as the hub of a commercial-transportation corridor stretching into Afghanistan and across much of Central Asia, as well as to Europe via both Iran and Russia. The Chabahar corridor is widely viewed as a rival to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which will end at Gwadar, Pakistan, 72 kilometers (45 miles) east of Chabahar.

The Trilateral Agreement was signed by Modi, Rouhani, and Afghan President Ashaf Ghani following a trilateral summit May 23.

Modi’s visit to Iran was the first by an Indian prime minister in fifteen years. In addition to signing a dozen agreements aimed at promoting trade, developing transport infrastructure, and fostering cooperation in education and in cultural and scientific endeavors, Modi and Rouhani agreed to “enhance interaction on regional and maritime security,” including intelligence-sharing and cooperation in combating terrorism and cyberwar.

Under the terms of the Chabahar deal, India Ports Global has been contracted to build two container berths and three multi-cargo berths at Chabahar, valued at \$85 million. Meanwhile, India’s state-run engineering firm IRCON International will begin construction of a 300-mile railway line linking Chabahar to Zahedan, thereby connecting it to the rest of Iran’s rail network, and of a second rail line from Zahedan to Afghanistan. There are plans for Indian businesses to develop an array of industrial ventures along the Iranian part of the corridor, including aluminum smelting and urea production. Indian firms are also vying for rights to build a liquid natural gas plant alongside the Chabahar port complex.

If completed, the Chabahar corridor would enable India to rebuild commercial ties with Afghanistan, access to which has been denied India for nearly seventy years by its arch-rival, Pakistan. Exploiting its geographic position between the two countries, Pakistan has refused to allow land-based trade between India and Afghanistan.

Crucially, the Chabahar corridor would give India access to oil and gas reserves in Central Asia, control over which is central to India’s rapidly intensifying geo-political power struggle with China. The Chabahar corridor would also tie into Afghanistan’s road and rail network, enabling Indian firms to access Afghan resources and markets, funneling cargo via Chabahar to and from India’s west coast ports.

India first agreed in 2003 to take the lead in developing Chabahar as a modern port. But the project was repeatedly delayed, because the US

exerted intense and escalating pressure on India to curtail its dealings with Iran as part of its drive to coerce Tehran, if need be by war, to abandon any challenge to US hegemony over the Middle East. Similarly, Washington succeeded in scuttling the proposed Iran-Pakistan-India natural gas pipeline, a project that was touted as an important means of underpinning the ostensibly US supported India-Pakistan peace process.

However, with last year’s deal between the P-6 and the Islamic Republic to dismantle or freeze most of Iran’s civil nuclear program, the US-led campaign to wreck Iran’s economy has been suspended and there has been an easing of tensions between Tehran and Washington. This has cleared the way for India to renew efforts to realize the long-delayed Chabahar Port and corridor scheme.

India is only one among a large number of imperialist and Eurasian powers seeking to advance their economic and geopolitical interests by striking commercial deals with Tehran. Since the lifting of sanctions last January, a parade of European political leaders and businessmen have visited Tehran. In June, Iran agreed to buy more than a hundred commercial jets from the US transnational Boeing, a deal potentially worth \$25 billion or more.

After years of punishing economic sanctions, Tehran hopes to piggyback on India’s growing role in Asian economic networks, and is eager to take advantage of the \$500 million in initial funds New Delhi has offered in support of the Chabahar port and related infrastructural links to Afghanistan. Iranian President Rouhani called the signing of the Chabahar deal “an important and historical day of development of relations between the three countries,” praising the deal as “a defining partnership which has the potential of connecting the entire region.”

The India-Iran rapprochement, above all the corridor project, will inevitably intensify strategic rivalries in Central and South Asia. And it will do so under conditions where the US’s drive to strategically isolate and encircle China and its concomitant push to make India a frontline state in its confrontation with China have transformed the entire region into a geo-political tinderbox.

The Indo-Iranian rapprochement and the “encirclement” of Pakistan

Emboldened by the US’s promotion of New Delhi as its principal South Asian and Indian Ocean ally and offers of advanced weaponry, India is aggressively asserting its claim to be the regional hegemon. In particular it has intensified military-strategic pressure on Pakistan. This has included ordering the Indian military to assume a more aggressive posture at the border, making the resumption of the long-stalled India-Pakistan peace

dialogue conditional on Islamabad bowing to a long list of demands, and increasing its efforts to become a major military-strategic partner of Afghanistan.

Pakistan has reacted to the trilateral Chabahar agreement with alarm and for multiple reasons. It fears the Chabahar corridor could undercut the viability and profitability of the CPEC, a \$46 billion project that is pivotal to reviving Pakistan's flagging economy. The corridor would bolster India's influence in Afghanistan—long a major arena of strategic competition between New Delhi and Islamabad. Also, the Trilateral Agreement opens the door to renewed strategic cooperation between Tehran and New Delhi, who in the 1990s jointly backed the Northern Alliance against the Pakistani-backed Taliban regime in Kabul.

Further fueling Pakistan's apprehensions is that the renewal of Indo-Iranian ties has coincided with a ratcheting up of US pressure on Islamabad to bear more of the burden of the Afghan War and a sharp deterioration in relations between Kabul and Islamabad.

On May 21, the day Modi arrived in Iran, the US violated Pakistani "red lines" and carried out a drone strike in Balochistan in order to assassinate the political leader of the Taliban, Mullah Akhtar Mansour, and blow up Islamabad's attempts to entice the Taliban into peace talks.

Kabul and Islamabad have long been trading accusations that the other is secretly supporting anti-government Islamist insurgents in their respective countries. Kabul, which does not recognize the British colonial border that separates between Afghanistan-Pakistan, has vigorously protested against Islamabad's recent steps to fortify the border through the building of fences, ditches and border gates. In mid-June, fighting erupted between Pakistani and Afghan security forces at the Torkham border crossing.

The Chabahar deal has "ominous" implications" for Pakistan, two former Pakistan Defence Secretaries, Lt. General Asif Yasin Malik and Lt. General Nadeem Lodhi, told a Strategic Vision Institute workshop May 30. Malik warned "the alliance between India, Afghanistan, and Iran" threatens Pakistan with "an abyss of isolation, while Lodhi said Chabahar is designed to undermine the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). In an obvious reference to China, Lodhi said, "We need to break out of this encircling move with help from friends, ... diplomatic manoeuvres and by forging a strong deterrence."

Noting that Tehran was the most likely of the three to be open to Pakistani overtures, Lodhi called for Islamabad to take counter steps to prevent this "formidable bloc" from crystalizing." "Iran," the Pakistani general declared, "must not be further alienated and its interests in CPEC should be developed."

China's growing presence in Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan

China's response to the Chabahar project has been much more circumspect. While Beijing is angered and alarmed by the extent to which India under the two year-old premiership of Narendra Modi has integrated itself into the US's anti-China "Pivot to Asia," it still hopes it can forestall India's entry into a formal US-led alliance along with Japan and Australia. A precipitous confrontation with India, calculates Beijing, would only play into Washington's hands, enabling it to tighten its strategic harness on a frightened New Delhi.

Thus, the Chinese government-owned *Global Times* played down the strategic implications of the Chabahar corridor. It highlighted statements from Tehran that the project should be seen as complementary to the CPEC and the development of Gwadar, and inviting Chinese and Pakistani involvement in the Chabahar corridor.

That said, Beijing is not standing idly by as the US mounts its military-

strategic offensive to isolate and encircle China and positions itself to implement its Air-Sea Battle plan, which would combine an economic blockade of China with a devastating missile and bomb attack on its industrial centers and infrastructure.

The CPEC is itself a response to the burgeoning Indo-US strategic partnership, as well as to New Delhi's refusal to take up Beijing's offers for a major role in the Chinese-led One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative to strengthen transport links across Eurasia.

The CPEC exemplifies the extent to which the US's strategic embrace of India and consequent downgrading of its ties with Pakistan are pushing Beijing and Islamabad into an ever-closer partnership. For Beijing, the CPEC has major strategic implications. If the plans for pipeline, rail and road links between western China and Gwadar were to be realized, it would significantly undercut the US plans to blockade China in the event of a war or war crisis by seizing Indian Ocean and South China Sea choke-points.

While Washington has not, as of yet, publicly opposed the CPEC, New Delhi has, citing the fact that the corridor will pass through parts of Pakistan-held Kashmir that it claims are rightfully Indian. But this is merely a pretext. The real concern of the Indian elite is that the CPEC will give a desperately needed shot-in-the-arm to the economy of its arch-rival Pakistan.

Underscoring the deepening antagonism between the Indian bourgeoisie and both China and Pakistan, the Indian media was full of commentary in late May lauding Modi for pressing ahead with the Chabahar project and thereby delivering a strategic blow to both Beijing and Islamabad.

For his part, Indian Air Marshal Arup Ruha has repeatedly denounced Beijing, charging that its investments and infrastructure projects in the states neighbouring India are all "strategic moves to contain India."

The intertwining of the US-China and Indo-Pakistani conflicts adds a new, highly combustible charge to both of what are already explosive conflicts between nuclear powers.

China is also increasingly present in Iran and Afghanistan and competing for influence there with both the US and India.

Beijing has viewed the lifting of economic sanctions on Iran as an opportunity to deepen economic and strategic ties with Tehran, which were substantial even during the past decade of intensifying US-EU efforts to crash the Iranian economy.

Soon after sanctions were lifted, President Xi Jinping and other Chinese leaders rushed to Tehran with proposals for billions of dollars of additional investments. China is already already Iran's largest trade partner, with bilateral trade surpassing \$50 billion in 2014.

Beijing aims to transform Iran into a central node of its OBOR project, serving to connect China with the Middle East, Central Asia and Europe. The first train to connect China and Iran arrived in Tehran on February 15, spending just 14 days to complete the 9500-kilometer journey through Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, and carrying 32 containers of commercial products from eastern Zhejiang province.

China is also seeking to gain influence in Kabul, whose participation in the Chabahar corridor threatens the CPEC project and, by extension, could throw a wrench in China's broader OBOR initiative.

Press reports indicate elements within the US-sponsored Kabul regime would welcome the idea of integrating Afghanistan into the CPEC. Afghanistan's China envoy Janan Mosazai recently told Chinese media, "We would like to link up with [CPEC] and facilitate the linking of Central Asian countries with the corridor. We enjoy the importance and vitality of the Afghanistan-China relationship, which is irreplaceable."

Afghanistan also plans to deepen security collaboration with Beijing, including joint operations against the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM). The ETIM is among a group of Islamist and ethno-nationalist secessionist movements that feed on grievances with China's authoritarian, capitalist regime and that Washington views as potential

assets in sowing chaos in China's western provinces and disrupting China's increasingly important economic linkages with Central Asia.

China's growing influence in Afghanistan and Afghanistan's proximity to Russia, another state Washington views as constituting an intolerable threat to its hegemony over Eurasia, are chief among the reasons that the Pentagon is insistent that the US must continue its fifteen year-long Afghan War and retain Afghanistan as a strategic beachhead in Central Asia.

Washington and the Indo-Iranian rapprochement

Despite US imperialism's longstanding enmity toward Tehran, important sections of the US political and military-security establishment have given their tentative support to the Indo-Iranian rapprochement.

Those in American ruling circles who supported the P-6 Iran nuclear deal, seeing in it the possibility of tying a weakened Iran to US strategic objectives, are inclined to favor an enhanced Iran-India partnership. They calculate it will provide an economic boost to their "global strategic partner" and "Major Defence Partner", India, and strengthen Indian efforts to contest Chinese influence in both Iran and Central Asia.

US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia Nisha Desai Biswal told a May 24 US Congressional hearing that the Obama administration is "watching very closely" India's growing ties with Iran. When Senator Ben Cardin, a Democratic opponent of the Iran nuclear deal, expressed "concerns" that "India's economic relationship with Iran would further boost Tehran's alleged activities to support terrorist groups," Biswal responded by rationalizing the India-Iran partnership as an outgrowth of both countries' economic needs, and went on to defend India as being very sensitive to US concerns over the issue.

"India's burgeoning ties with Iran are driven by ever growing energy needs and using the Persian Gulf nation as a gateway into Afghanistan and Central Asia," Biswal said. "They [India] have been very responsive and receptive to our briefings. And we have to examine the details of the Chabahar announcement to see where it falls in that place."

The nuclear accord with Iran was bitterly contested in Washington. As Cardin's comments attest, a significant faction of the US elite remains adamantly opposed to anything that could conceivably strengthen the current regime in Tehran and wants the US to ratchet up sanctions and openly pursue regime change in Tehran.

The American ruling class as a whole views the Iran deal as a tactical gambit, subject to constant reappraisal from the standpoint of whether it is serving US global strategy. US imperialism has retained large portions of its sanctions regime against Iran, and is preparing to roll out a raft of new military interventions after the November elections, including escalations on both of Iran's flanks, in Iraq and Afghanistan, and against Tehran's strongest regional ally, the Bashar al Assad-led government in Damascus.

Even the partial execution of these war plans could well result in a rapid deterioration of US's relations with Iran, no matter whether the next president is a Republican or Democrat, and the sudden rescinding of Washington's tentative support for the Indo-Iranian rapprochement and the Chabahar corridor.

Whatever their ultimate fate, the Indo-Iranian rapprochement and the Chabahar corridor exemplify the extent to which South and Central Asia and the Middle East are riven with lethal geo-political rivalries and have been sucked into the maelstrom of imperialist and great power conflict.





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