

First phase of Chabahar port opened

It is also seen as a feeder port to the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) to Russia as well as land route to Central Asia. It is also seen as a rival to the Chinese-built Gwadar port off Pakistan, about 80 km away, which is a critical link in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.

Speaking at the event, President Rouhani, however, said regional rivalries should give way for "more engagement and unity" in the region. "We should go after positive competition ... We welcome other ports in the region, we welcome Gwadar's development," he told the gathering of foreign dignitaries from 17 countries, including Pakistan.

Alongside the ceremony, Indian, Afghan and Iranian officials held a trilateral meeting to discuss implementing the trade and transit agreement announced in May 2016. Minister of State for Shipping Pon. Radhakrishnan represented India, while Iran was represented by its Transport Minister, Abbas Akhoundi, and Afghanistan by its Trade and Commerce Minister, Humayoon Rasaw.

"The three sides reviewed and positively assessed the progress in the development of the Chabahar Port and reiterated their commitment to completing and operationalising the port at the earliest that would contribute to bilateral and regional trade and economic development and also provide alternative access to landlocked Afghanistan to regional and global markets," said the joint statement released here by the External Affairs Ministry.

India has committed \$500 million to building two berths at Chabahar to process trade and develop an economic zone around them, as well as \$1.6 billion for a 650-km rail link from Chabahar to Zahedan and into Afghanistan. The project is one of the rare projects in Iran, countenanced by the U.S., which has otherwise tightened restrictions on entities connected to Iran's Revolutionary Guard (IRGC). The IRGC-affiliated Khatam al-Anbia company is completing the current construction at Chabahar at a cost of \$340 million. The extension includes five new piers, two of them for containers allowing cargo vessels of up to 100,000-tonne capacity to dock.

"The Ministers discussed the next steps for full implementation of the agreement and moving towards its operationalisation. Towards this endeavour, it was decided to finalise protocols related to transport and transit, ports, customs procedures and consular affairs. It was also decided to convene an expert-level meeting of senior officials of the three countries at the earliest," the joint statement said.

The inauguration came a day after External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj stopped in Tehran for what was described by officials as a "scheduled, technical halt" on her return from Sochi where she attended a regional conference. During a luncheon hosted by Iranian Foreign Minister Javid Zarif, Ms. Swaraj is understood to have discussed bilateral issues, including the future progress of Chabahar, as well as India's bid for the Farzad-B oil and gas fields.

(With agency inputs from Chabahar)

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