

The golden gateway

The agreement to lease a part of Iran's Chabahar port, signed during the visit of President Hassan Rouhani's visit to Delhi last week, marks an important advance in India's efforts to expand connectivity with the neighbourhood and beyond. That transport corridors through Chabahar will change the region's geography has never been in doubt. With Pakistan blocking India's overland access to landlocked Afghanistan and Central Asia, Iran was Delhi's natural alternative. But it has taken a while to realise an idea that was first mooted when President Mohammed Khatami came to Delhi as an honoured guest at India's [Republic Day](#) celebrations in January 2003.

As China rapidly developed Gwadar port, barely 70 km east of Chabahar on Pakistan's Makran coast, India struggled to develop cooperation on connectivity with Iran during the UPA years. Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#) and Union Minister for Transport and Shipping [Nitin Gadkari](#) get much credit for clearing the many bureaucratic obstacles in New Delhi and intensifying the political dialogue with Tehran to clinch the deal on Chabahar.

The economic and strategic potential of Chabahar came into view when Iran facilitated the shipment of wheat from India to Afghanistan through the port last December. As India prepares to ramp up operations at Chabahar, it has promised to fast track the effort to build a railway line to Zahedan where Iran's frontiers meet with those of Pakistan and Afghanistan. Rouhani has welcomed Indian commercial entities to invest in the Chabahar special economic zone that Iran has been developing for many years.

Tehran, Delhi and Kabul signed a trilateral transit agreement during Modi's visit to Iran in 2016. Delhi and Tehran hope to integrate Chabahar into the larger International North South Corridor (INSTC) that connects India to Central Asia, the Caucasus, Russia and Europe. No wonder Modi called Chabahar India's "golden gateway" to inner Asia. While Delhi celebrates the breakthrough on connectivity with Tehran, it is not unaware of the many difficulties looming over the horizon. The renewed tensions between the US and Iran under the Trump Administration and threat of expanding sanctions cast a shadow over India's plans for commercial cooperation with Iran. During the Rouhani visit, Delhi rightly supported the full implementation of the US-Iran nuclear deal that the Republican Congress and the Trump Administration are trying to undermine. Equally problematic are Tehran's multiple conflicts with its Sunni Arab neighbours and Israel that are now closer than ever before to India.

Even in Afghanistan, where Delhi and Tehran have a long tradition of collaboration, there are questions about Iran's support for the Taliban. The Middle East has never been an easy place to deal with. But like all other major powers, Delhi is beginning to learn the arts of realpolitik in the Middle East.

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