

# INDIA TO STUDY AIR CORRIDORS WITH CENTRAL ASIAN COUNTRIES

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Trade talks: Minister S. Jaishankar during the India Central Asia Business Forum in New Delhi on Thursday. PTI

Apart from developing trade via the Chabahar port in Iran, India would like to explore setting up “air corridors” between India and five Central Asian nations, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar said on Thursday. The air corridors — similar to what India established in 2018 with Afghanistan — would include regular cargo flights with special clearing and customs facilities to expedite the movement of goods, especially fresh fruit and other agricultural produce, and were currently being discussed by the External Affairs Ministry.

“While flying time from Delhi for most of the Central Asian destinations is two hours, it may take two months for containers sent overland from India to reach these places,” Mr. Jaishankar said at the inaugural of the “India Central Asia Business council” which brought together Indian businessmen and diplomats from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

“Availability of air corridors can boost trade in perishable goods, agricultural and food products,” he said. The Minister observed that it was a “matter of concern” that a lack of “overland connectivity” — a veiled reference to barriers to transit trade through Pakistan — had kept the total trade between India and Central Asia quite low at approximately \$2 billion a year. India, Mr. Jaishankar said, remains committed to the Chabahar port project in Iran.

## Chabahar route

“India proposes to overcome this challenge through the Chabahar route. India, Iran and Afghanistan believe that Chabahar will become the fulcrum of connectivity for Indian goods to reach Afghanistan and further north to Central Asian states, and for the landlocked Central Asia to find access to ocean through this port,” he said, referring to the Rs. 100-crore investment the recent Budget has proposed to develop the Iranian port.

Businessmen and diplomats present however remained sceptical of the viability of Chabahar without considerable progress on infrastructure. At present, most of the trade between Central Asia goes via Bandar Abbas in Iran, northern Europe or China. In recent years, the government has been seeking to develop more direct routes from Chabahar, a trilateral arrangement with Iran and Afghanistan, the International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and becoming a part the Ashgabat Agreement. However, the rail-link between Chabahar and the crossover into Afghanistan is yet to be developed. At present, \$1.5 billion of the \$2 billion trade with Central Asia is with Kazakhstan, and more than \$1 billion of that comes from crude oil exports to India.

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