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From Maritime Gateway to Strategic Corridor: Chabahar and the Emerging Geoeconomics of Eurasia

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Abstract
The transformation of Chabahar from a maritime infrastructure project into a prospective strategic corridor illustrates the changing relationship between geography, connectivity and economic power in contemporary Eurasia. Located on Iran's southeastern coast along the Gulf of Oman, Chabahar provides India with maritime access to Afghanistan and potentially to the wider markets of Central Asia and Russia while simultaneously linking into the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC), the Ashgabat Agreement and emerging regional transit arrangements. This article examines the evolution of Chabahar through the analytical lens of geoeconomics and argues that the strategic significance of the port cannot be understood solely through conventional maritime geopolitics or the India–China–Pakistan rivalry. Rather, Chabahar represents an emerging form of corridor power in which infrastructure, logistics, trade facilitation, investment, sanctions exposure, institutional coordination and political geography interact to reshape the distribution of connectivity across Eurasia. Drawing on a qualitative case-study methodology and an analysis of academic literature, official documents, policy material and recent developments, the article develops a conceptual framework linking maritime gateways to strategic corridors. It demonstrates that the value of Chabahar lies less in the physical port alone than in its capacity to connect maritime and continental networks and thereby alter the accessibility of landlocked and semi-landlocked markets. The study further argues that Chabahar's geoeconomic potential is simultaneously enabled and constrained by the same characteristics that make it strategically significant. Its location creates route diversification, but its dependence on Iranian territory exposes it to sanctions and geopolitical risk; its integration into the INSTC expands its Eurasian relevance, but the corridor remains institutionally fragmented; and its potential to facilitate Central Asian trade is considerable, yet commercial viability depends on infrastructure quality, customs harmonization, predictable financing and sustained political commitment. The article concludes that Chabahar should be conceptualized not as a substitute for other Eurasian corridors but as a networked strategic node within a plural and increasingly competitive Eurasian connectivity order.

Keywords: Chabahar Port; geoeconomics; Eurasia; International North–South Transport Corridor; India; Iran; Central Asia; connectivity; economic corridors; strategic infrastructure

1. Introduction

The geography of international power is undergoing a significant transformation. While military capabilities, territorial control and strategic alliances remain central to international

relations, economic connectivity has increasingly become an instrument through which states pursue geopolitical objectives. Ports, railways, highways, pipelines, logistics platforms, digital networks and financial infrastructures are no longer merely technical components of globalization. They have become embedded within wider strategies of national security, trade diversification, market access and international influence. The resulting interaction between economics and geopolitics has generated renewed scholarly interest in geoeconomics, understood broadly as the relationship between economic processes and geopolitical power. Luttwak's early formulation of the shift from geopolitics toward geo-economics identified the growing importance of commercial competition as a medium through which states pursue strategic objectives, while Blackwill and Harris subsequently conceptualized geoeconomics in terms of the use of economic instruments to advance foreign-policy interests (Luttwak, 1990; Blackwill & Harris, 2016). More recent scholarship has expanded the concept by examining sanctions, trade dependencies, infrastructure, finance and global networks as instruments and arenas of geopolitical competition.

This transformation is particularly visible across Eurasia. The continent is experiencing an overlapping proliferation of connectivity projects that seek to connect production centres, ports, markets and resource corridors across political boundaries. China's Belt and Road Initiative, the International North–South Transport Corridor, the Trans-Caspian or Middle Corridor, the Eurasian Land Bridge, the European Union's Global Gateway and a range of national connectivity initiatives have contributed to an increasingly complex infrastructure landscape. These projects do not constitute a single integrated system. Instead, they form a competitive and partially overlapping network in which states seek to diversify routes, reduce strategic dependence and acquire greater bargaining power. Economic corridors therefore need to be understood not simply as transport routes but as institutional and geopolitical arrangements through which accessibility is produced and redistributed.

Chabahar Port occupies a distinctive position within this emerging geography. Situated in Iran's Sistan and Baluchestan province on the Gulf of Oman, Chabahar is Iran's only major ocean-facing port outside the Persian Gulf and has long been viewed by India as a means of establishing an alternative route to Afghanistan and Central Asia. The idea predates the current phase of regional connectivity competition. India, Iran and Afghanistan discussed alternative access to Afghanistan through Chabahar as early as 2003, while the trilateral Chabahar Agreement was formally signed in 2016. India's involvement subsequently expanded from infrastructure investment to operational participation, with an Indian special-purpose vehicle beginning operations at Shahid Beheshti terminal in 2018. In May 2024, India Ports Global Limited and Iran's Ports and Maritime Organization signed a long-term contract for the development and operation of the Shahid Beheshti terminal, replacing earlier interim arrangements and providing a longer institutional horizon for Indian participation.

The evolution of Chabahar is important because the port is increasingly embedded in a broader corridor architecture. The port is connected conceptually and institutionally with the INSTC, which links India with Iran, the Caspian region, Russia and potentially European markets through multimodal maritime, road and rail routes. India's accession to the Ashgabat Agreement in 2018 also strengthened the possibility of connecting Chabahar with Central

Asian transit networks. Central Asian governments have expressed interest in utilizing Chabahar for trade with India and beyond, while the India–Central Asia Dialogue has increasingly identified the port as an instrument for expanding regional trade and transport connectivity. In this sense, Chabahar is moving from being understood as an individual maritime gateway toward becoming a node within a wider Eurasian corridor system.

The academic literature has recognized many dimensions of this transformation, but important gaps remain. Existing studies have examined Chabahar in the context of India–Iran relations, India's access to Afghanistan, competition with Gwadar, the INSTC, Central Asian connectivity and broader geoeconomic competition. Recent research has explicitly described the Chabahar Transit Project as a transition from geopolitics toward geoeconomics, while a 2025 systematic literature review demonstrated the growing academic attention to Chabahar and the INSTC and identified Sino-Indian competition, Indo-Iranian cooperation and Russia's post-2022 involvement as major themes. Yet a considerable part of the literature continues to treat Chabahar as either a bilateral India–Iran project or a geopolitical counterweight to Gwadar. Such approaches risk understating the wider transformation of Eurasian connectivity in which Chabahar is embedded.

This article therefore asks how and why Chabahar has evolved from a maritime gateway into an emerging strategic corridor, and what this transformation reveals about the geoeconomics of contemporary Eurasia. The central argument is that Chabahar's strategic significance derives not from port infrastructure alone but from its ability to connect maritime access with continental networks. The port becomes geoeconomically consequential when it reduces the spatial and political separation between South Asian markets and landlocked Eurasian economies. Its importance consequently depends on corridor integration, institutional coordination, commercial viability and geopolitical resilience rather than simply on cargo-handling capacity.

The article contributes to the literature in three ways. First, it reconceptualizes Chabahar as a network node rather than an isolated port. Second, it integrates geoeconomic theory with the economic-corridor literature to explain why connectivity infrastructure can produce geopolitical effects without being primarily military in character. Third, it develops a more nuanced assessment of Chabahar's strategic potential by identifying both its capacity to diversify Eurasian connectivity and the structural constraints generated by sanctions, political instability, infrastructure gaps and maritime-security risks. The article consequently moves beyond a binary interpretation of Chabahar as either an Indian strategic asset or a competitor to Gwadar and instead places it within the wider reconfiguration of Eurasian economic geography.

2. Conceptualizing Geoeconomics and Strategic Connectivity

The concept of geoeconomics has acquired renewed relevance as the relationship between economic interdependence and geopolitical competition has become increasingly visible. Luttwak's (1990) seminal argument suggested that the instruments and logic of economic competition increasingly perform functions previously associated with military competition. Blackwill and Harris (2016) subsequently defined geoeconomics as the use of economic instruments to advance geopolitical objectives. This formulation encompasses trade policy,

investment, finance, sanctions, energy and economic partnerships. Contemporary scholarship has expanded this understanding by emphasizing that geoeconomics is not restricted to coercive economic statecraft. It also encompasses the construction of networks, institutions and infrastructures through which states shape patterns of economic interdependence.

The distinction is analytically important for understanding Chabahar. If geoeconomics is defined only as economic coercion, sanctions or punitive trade policy, much of the strategic significance of the port remains outside the analytical frame. Chabahar represents a different form of geoeconomic activity: the construction of alternative connectivity. Infrastructure becomes a strategic resource because it affects the distribution of accessibility, transaction costs and dependence. A port that creates an alternative route for a landlocked state can alter bargaining relationships even if no coercive measure is employed. In this sense, infrastructure can generate power through the ability to create or redirect flows.

Recent scholarship on geoeconomics similarly emphasizes the interaction between economic networks and political power. Farrell and Newman's (2019) concept of "weaponized interdependence" demonstrates how states positioned at critical network nodes can exercise structural power over actors dependent on those networks. Their analysis focuses particularly on financial and informational systems, but its underlying insight is relevant to transportation infrastructure. Networks are not politically neutral when some nodes become disproportionately important for access. A strategically located port, railway junction or logistics platform can become a point through which economic flows are facilitated, redirected or constrained.

This perspective is reinforced by research on transport geography. Lin (2019) argues that geopolitics is not simply an external variable affecting transport but is incorporated into the production, organization and obstruction of transport geographies themselves. Connectivity therefore creates political effects through decisions regarding routes, standards, rules, financing and infrastructure. Flint and Zhu (2019) similarly demonstrate that connectivity initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative combine territorial and economic logics. Infrastructure simultaneously connects markets and reorganizes relationships among states and regions.

The concept of economic corridors provides an additional analytical bridge. Brunner (2013) emphasizes that economic corridors connect economic agents across a defined geography and generate network effects beyond individual infrastructure projects. The Asian Development Bank has subsequently stressed that corridor development involves more than physical transportation infrastructure; it requires coordination among logistics, trade facilitation, investment, institutions and economic activity. Corridors become economically transformative when infrastructure connectivity is combined with institutional and productive linkages.

This distinction between a transport route and an economic corridor is central to the present study. A route allows movement from one point to another. A corridor connects infrastructure with markets, institutions, production systems and services. The strategic transformation of Chabahar therefore depends upon whether the port can generate sustained connections beyond its immediate hinterland. A successful corridor must link maritime facilities with road and rail systems, customs arrangements, warehousing, financial services, border procedures and

commercial demand. It must also provide predictable transit conditions across multiple sovereign jurisdictions.

The geoeconomic interpretation of corridors consequently rests on three interconnected dimensions. The first is material connectivity, involving ports, roads, railways, terminals and logistics facilities. The second is institutional connectivity, involving customs rules, transit agreements, financial mechanisms, legal frameworks and intergovernmental coordination. The third is strategic connectivity, involving the ability of states to use infrastructure networks to diversify dependence and expand diplomatic and economic options. Chabahar becomes strategically significant when all three dimensions reinforce one another.

This framework also helps avoid an overly deterministic interpretation of infrastructure. The existence of a port does not automatically produce geopolitical influence. Economic corridors can remain underutilized because of weak infrastructure, high transaction costs, political instability, fragmented regulations or insufficient cargo demand. Vinokurov and Tsukarev (2017), for example, demonstrate that Eurasian land corridors are shaped by both physical infrastructure and institutional obstacles. UNESCAP has similarly identified missing links, inadequate infrastructure and non-harmonized cross-border procedures as major constraints on Eurasian transport connectivity. The geoeconomic value of Chabahar must therefore be assessed through actual network integration rather than announced strategic intentions.

3. Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative single-case-study methodology focused on Chabahar as an emerging strategic corridor. The case-study approach is appropriate because the research question concerns a complex contemporary process involving the interaction of infrastructure, state strategy, economic networks and geopolitical constraints. Rather than attempting to estimate a single causal effect, the study traces how Chabahar's strategic role has evolved through successive institutional and infrastructural developments.

The research draws upon three categories of material. The first consists of peer-reviewed academic literature addressing geoeconomics, infrastructure, economic corridors, Eurasian connectivity, the INSTC, Chabahar and maritime strategy. The second consists of official governmental and intergovernmental documents, including publications from the Government of India, the Ministry of External Affairs, the Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways, the United Nations and related institutions. The third consists of recent reporting used selectively to identify developments where official information is incomplete or where the timing of sanctions and operational arrangements is important.

The analysis is organized around process tracing. The historical development of Chabahar is examined from the early India–Iran–Afghanistan discussions through the 2016 trilateral agreement, the operationalization of the Shahid Beheshti terminal, the incorporation of Chabahar into wider Central Asian connectivity initiatives, the 2024 long-term operating contract and the changing sanctions environment after 2025. This historical sequence is then interpreted through the conceptual framework of geoeconomics and economic corridors.

The study does not claim that Chabahar has already become a fully operational Eurasian economic corridor. Such a conclusion would exceed the available evidence. Instead, the article treats Chabahar as an emerging strategic corridor whose geoeconomic potential is determined

by the degree to which maritime infrastructure is successfully integrated with continental transportation, commercial and institutional networks. This distinction is important because announced connectivity and realized connectivity are not identical.

4. Chabahar's Historical Evolution: From Port Project to Connectivity Platform

The contemporary significance of Chabahar can be traced to India's long-standing search for alternative routes toward Afghanistan and Central Asia. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, India increasingly regarded Central Asia as an important component of its extended neighbourhood, but geographical constraints limited direct economic engagement. Pakistan's geographic position and the absence of reliable overland access from India to Afghanistan created a structural obstacle. Chabahar offered an alternative because it allowed Indian maritime traffic to reach Iranian territory without passing through Pakistan.

The roots of this strategy extend to the early 2000s. India, Iran and Afghanistan discussed the development of alternative access routes to Afghanistan through Chabahar, including the Zaranj–Delaram road connection. The objective was not initially to create a comprehensive Eurasian corridor but to establish a reliable route to Afghanistan. This illustrates an important feature of corridor development: strategic corridors often emerge incrementally from smaller connectivity projects rather than being fully designed in their final form from the beginning.

The 2016 Chabahar Agreement represented a significant institutionalization of this process. India, Iran and Afghanistan formally established a framework for an international transport and transit corridor centered on Chabahar. The agreement explicitly recognized Afghanistan's landlocked status and the need for access to open seas through Chabahar. It also envisioned the use of road, rail, air and customs infrastructure associated with the port and its free-trade and industrial zone. The agreement thus transformed Chabahar from a bilateral infrastructure project into a trilateral transit framework.

India's participation subsequently moved beyond financing toward operational involvement. The Shahid Beheshti terminal became the principal focus of Indian participation, and an Indian-linked operating entity began handling cargo in 2018. This operational role is significant because ownership or financing of infrastructure and operational control represent different forms of geoeconomic engagement. By becoming involved in port management, India acquired greater capacity to influence the practical functioning of the maritime node rather than merely contributing to its construction.

The importance of Chabahar expanded further as India sought stronger relations with Central Asia. India's accession to the Ashgabat Agreement in 2018 provided another institutional route for connecting the port to Central Asian transportation networks. Central Asian states themselves have an interest in diversification because their landlocked geography creates structural dependence on external transit routes. Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and other regional economies have therefore increasingly pursued multiple connectivity options rather than relying exclusively on any single corridor.

This process illustrates a broader transformation in Eurasian geoeconomics. Landlocked states are not passive recipients of connectivity. They can use competing corridors to increase bargaining power and diversify external relationships. Recent scholarship on Central Asian connectivity emphasizes precisely this phenomenon, with states seeking relationships with

China, Russia, Iran, India, Türkiye, the Gulf states and other external actors through overlapping infrastructure networks. Chabahar therefore represents not merely India's route into Central Asia but one component of Central Asian strategies of connectivity diversification. The 2024 long-term contract between India Ports Global Limited and Iran's Ports and Maritime Organization marked another stage in this evolution. The contract provides for a ten-year period of development and operation of the Shahid Beheshti terminal. The Indian government has described the project as a flagship connectivity initiative intended to position Chabahar as a regional hub for Afghanistan and Central Asia. The contract is therefore important not simply because of its financial value but because it provides a longer time horizon for corridor planning and commercial integration.

Official Indian data also indicate that the port has experienced significant increases in cargo activity. The Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways reported that Chabahar handled more than 60,000 TEUs of container cargo and approximately 1.9 million metric tons of bulk and general cargo during 2023–24, while vessel traffic increased by 43 percent and container traffic by 34 percent. These figures suggest that Chabahar has progressed beyond purely symbolic infrastructure and has developed an operational commercial base. At the same time, cargo growth should not be equated automatically with the emergence of a mature Eurasian corridor because corridor performance depends on hinterland connectivity, cross-border transit and sustained cargo flows beyond the port.

5. Chabahar and the International North–South Transport Corridor

The relationship between Chabahar and the INSTC is central to understanding the port's emerging geoeconomic role. Established through an agreement signed by India, Iran and Russia in 2000, the INSTC was designed as a multimodal network connecting South Asia with Iran, the Caspian region, Russia and European markets. For many years, the corridor developed slowly because of infrastructure gaps, customs procedures, financing constraints and geopolitical disruptions. The deterioration of relations between Russia and Western states after 2022, however, significantly increased attention toward alternative trade routes linking Russia with Asian markets.

Chabahar is not synonymous with the INSTC. The INSTC includes multiple branches and routes, including Caspian maritime connections and land routes through Iran and Azerbaijan. Chabahar constitutes a southern maritime gateway within the broader connectivity architecture rather than the corridor in its entirety. This distinction matters because the strategic value of Chabahar derives partly from its ability to complement other routes rather than replace them.

Zakharov (2023) demonstrates that the development of the INSTC has been shaped by the need to overcome geographical distance, infrastructure weaknesses and geopolitical obstacles affecting India–Russia connectivity. The war in Ukraine has increased the importance of alternative routes because traditional European maritime and logistics networks have become more politically and commercially constrained. Similarly, recent studies of India–Caspian trade have used gravity modelling and GIS-based network analysis to demonstrate the potential relationship between port accessibility and trade flows.

The INSTC also illustrates why corridor performance depends on more than physical distance. Transport costs are influenced by transshipment requirements, customs procedures, border

delays, insurance costs, infrastructure quality and the reliability of logistics providers. A theoretically shorter route can be commercially inferior if it requires multiple inefficient transfers or operates under unpredictable regulatory conditions. Conversely, a corridor that is slightly longer can become attractive if institutional coordination reduces uncertainty.

The role of Chabahar within the INSTC is therefore best understood as an option-enhancing function. It offers an additional maritime gateway that can connect India with Iranian transport networks and, from there, with Central Asia and the Caspian region. Such redundancy can itself possess strategic value. When international trade becomes vulnerable to chokepoints, sanctions or geopolitical disruptions, access to multiple routes can reduce dependence on any single network.

This logic has become more important following the disruption of established Eurasian trade patterns. The Ukraine conflict has encouraged Russia to deepen economic connections with Asian partners, while European states have pursued alternative supply chains and connectivity arrangements. At the same time, disruptions in the Red Sea and around the Strait of Hormuz have demonstrated the vulnerability of maritime trade to geopolitical instability. The result is not the disappearance of globalization but a growing emphasis on resilient and diversified connectivity.

Chabahar's relationship with the INSTC consequently represents a form of networked geoeconomics. India does not need Chabahar to carry the entirety of its Eurasian trade for the port to possess strategic importance. The strategic value lies partly in creating an alternative node within a broader system of routes. This resembles the logic identified by Farrell and Newman (2019), in which network position can generate structural influence even when direct economic activity at a particular node is not dominant.

6. From Maritime Gateway to Strategic Corridor

The central conceptual proposition of this article is that a maritime gateway becomes a strategic corridor when the port generates sustained economic and institutional connections into the continental hinterland. This transformation is not automatic. It requires the integration of maritime infrastructure with railways, roads, customs systems, logistics providers, financial mechanisms and commercial demand.

Chabahar's geographical position provides the first condition. Unlike ports located deep inside the Persian Gulf, Chabahar offers direct access to the Indian Ocean through the Gulf of Oman. This gives it potential importance for countries seeking maritime access without routing trade through the Strait of Hormuz. For Afghanistan, the port provides an alternative to Pakistani ports. For Central Asian states, it potentially offers another southern outlet to the Indian Ocean. For India, it provides an entry point into Iranian and continental Eurasian networks.

The second condition is hinterland connectivity. The port's value depends on connections from Chabahar toward Afghanistan and onward toward Central Asia. The Zaranj–Delaram road and associated Afghan transportation infrastructure were important components of India's initial strategy. More recently, attention has shifted toward railway connectivity and integration with Iran's national rail system. Without effective rail and road connections, the port risks becoming a maritime terminal with limited corridor effects.

The third condition is institutional connectivity. The Chabahar Agreement, the Ashgabat Agreement, the INSTC and the India–Central Asia Dialogue create overlapping institutional frameworks, but institutional multiplicity can produce both opportunities and fragmentation. A corridor crossing several jurisdictions requires customs harmonization, standardized documentation, transit guarantees, insurance mechanisms and predictable border procedures. UNESCAP has repeatedly identified these institutional factors as critical obstacles to efficient Eurasian corridors.

The fourth condition is commercial demand. Strategic infrastructure cannot remain viable indefinitely through political commitment alone. Shipping lines, exporters, importers, freight forwarders and logistics companies must perceive the route as commercially attractive. This requires competitive costs, reliable transit times and adequate cargo volumes. The expansion of Chabahar's container traffic provides evidence of increasing commercial use, but the decisive question is whether traffic can be integrated into regular interregional supply chains.

The fifth condition is political resilience. Chabahar crosses one of the most politically sensitive regions of the world. Iran's relations with the United States, Israel, Gulf states and Western institutions directly affect the risk environment surrounding the port. India's own relationships with the United States, Iran, Russia and Central Asia therefore intersect at Chabahar. This makes the port a particularly clear example of geoeconomic interdependence.

The sixth condition is financial resilience. Transport infrastructure requires long-term capital, insurance and banking access. Iran's sanctions exposure complicates all three. The United States has repeatedly warned that sanctions remain applicable to economic activities involving Iran. In May 2024, shortly after India and Iran signed the ten-year Chabahar contract, the U.S. State Department reiterated that sanctions against Iran remained in place and warned entities considering business with Iran of potential sanctions risks. The subsequent temporary U.S. waiver for Chabahar illustrated the politically conditional character of the project's international operating environment.

The emergence of Chabahar as a strategic corridor therefore depends on the successful integration of these dimensions. The port can be physically functional while remaining institutionally weak; it can be strategically important while commercially underutilized; and it can have strong political support while facing financial constraints. Corridor power emerges only when these dimensions become mutually reinforcing.

7. Chabahar in the Geoeconomics of India–Iran Relations

India's involvement in Chabahar reflects a distinctive form of strategic autonomy. India maintains relationships with the United States, Russia, Iran, the Gulf monarchies, Israel and Central Asian states despite tensions among these actors. Chabahar provides a practical expression of this multi-alignment because the project serves India's connectivity objectives while requiring continued engagement with Iran.

The India–Iran relationship has historically combined economic, civilizational and strategic interests. Chabahar is one of the few major contemporary projects where these dimensions converge. India seeks access to Afghanistan and Central Asia; Iran seeks investment and regional transit revenues; Afghanistan requires diversified trade routes; and Central Asian

states seek access to external markets. The project therefore creates a degree of shared interest despite broader political differences.

The 2024 ten-year contract represented an effort to institutionalize this convergence. The Indian government described the agreement as strengthening Chabahar's role as a regional connectivity hub. The financial commitment associated with the project is modest compared with major Chinese infrastructure initiatives, but its strategic value is not reducible to its monetary size. A relatively limited investment can have substantial geoeconomic value if it occupies a strategically significant network position.

At the same time, the relationship exposes India to the geopolitical risks associated with Iran. This is perhaps the most important contradiction within the Chabahar strategy. India seeks to use Iran as a platform for connectivity diversification while also managing relations with countries that apply sanctions to Iran. Consequently, the project requires a continuous balancing strategy.

The sanctions question demonstrates how geoeconomic power can operate through financial networks rather than physical coercion. Farrell and Newman's (2019) framework is particularly relevant because global financial networks create asymmetric vulnerabilities. Even where a port project is physically viable, its commercial participants may avoid involvement because of sanctions exposure, banking restrictions or insurance risks. Thus, the geoeconomic environment surrounding Chabahar extends far beyond the port itself.

The temporary nature of sanctions exemptions further illustrates this vulnerability. India secured a U.S. conditional waiver for Chabahar that was reported in late 2025 as valid until April 26, 2026. By April 2026, reports indicated that India was considering interim arrangements as the waiver approached expiration. This episode demonstrates that the strategic value of Chabahar is shaped not only by India and Iran but also by third-party financial and sanctions regimes. Chabahar therefore constitutes a node within a larger global network of economic governance.

8. Chabahar and Central Asian Connectivity

Central Asia is arguably the most important region for evaluating whether Chabahar can transition from a maritime gateway into a strategic corridor. Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan face structural constraints associated with landlocked geography. Their access to global markets depends on transit arrangements with neighbouring states and the availability of reliable infrastructure.

The traditional Eurasian transport geography has given Russia, China and routes through the Caspian region considerable importance. China's infrastructure investments have expanded Central Asian connectivity with eastern markets, while Russia retains significant transport and economic linkages. The Trans-Caspian corridor has gained greater attention as European and Central Asian actors seek additional routes. Within this environment, Chabahar offers a southern connectivity option.

The attractiveness of the southern route lies partly in diversification. Central Asian states need not replace existing Chinese, Russian or Trans-Caspian routes in order to benefit from Chabahar. Rather, an additional route can reduce dependence on any individual corridor. This

is consistent with contemporary approaches to connectivity that emphasize network diversification rather than exclusive corridor control.

The India–Central Asia Dialogue has increasingly institutionalized this interest. At the fourth India–Central Asia Dialogue in 2025, ministers noted the interest of Central Asian countries in utilizing Shahid Beheshti terminal for facilitating trade with India and beyond and agreed to continue developing transit potential through streamlined procedures and greater use of the TIR system. Such statements are significant because they demonstrate movement from bilateral Indian investment toward multilateral corridor governance.

Uzbekistan has been particularly relevant to the evolution of the Chabahar concept. Its landlocked position and interest in diversified access to maritime markets make it a natural participant in southern connectivity projects. The emergence of an India–Iran–Afghanistan–Uzbekistan connectivity framework demonstrates how Chabahar can evolve beyond its original trilateral structure.

Nevertheless, Central Asian demand cannot be assumed. Trade corridors compete on cost, reliability and political risk. Central Asian firms will use Chabahar when it offers commercially competitive services rather than simply because governments endorse the project. This means that the future of Chabahar depends partly on whether India and Iran can convert diplomatic connectivity into commercially viable logistics.

The economic-corridor literature provides a useful caution. Brunner (2013) emphasizes that corridor effects emerge through network interactions rather than isolated infrastructure. Similarly, ADB research indicates that corridor development requires coordination between transport infrastructure, trade facilitation and economic activity. Chabahar's Central Asian future will therefore depend on the extent to which it becomes embedded in production and distribution networks rather than remaining primarily a diplomatic connectivity initiative.

9. Chabahar, Gwadar and the Politics of Alternative Connectivity

Chabahar is frequently interpreted through comparison with Gwadar, the Pakistani port developed with substantial Chinese involvement. The geographical proximity of the two ports and their association with India–Iran and China–Pakistan relationships make comparison unavoidable. However, treating Chabahar and Gwadar simply as rival ports risks reducing complex corridor systems to a bilateral strategic contest.

Gwadar is embedded in the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor and China's wider Belt and Road Initiative. Chabahar, by contrast, is linked to India's connectivity strategy, Iran's regional transit ambitions, the INSTC and Central Asian routes. Their institutional architectures therefore differ. One is closely associated with a large-scale China-led infrastructure ecosystem; the other is characterized by a more fragmented, multi-partner network.

The distinction is important for understanding the geoeconomics of Eurasia. Connectivity competition does not necessarily involve exclusive control of territory or infrastructure. States may pursue overlapping networks that create multiple pathways across the same region. A Central Asian state may simultaneously cooperate with China through the BRI, Russia through the EAEU or bilateral transport arrangements, Iran through southern routes and India through Chabahar. Such "multi-vector" connectivity is increasingly characteristic of Central Asian foreign economic policy.

The literature on the BRI also cautions against treating Chinese infrastructure projects as a single coherent strategic design. Jones and Zeng (2019) argue that the BRI is shaped by domestic institutional and economic interests as well as top-level strategic objectives. Ye (2019) similarly emphasizes the role of domestic fragmentation and mobilization in determining BRI implementation. These findings are relevant to Chabahar because they suggest that connectivity outcomes cannot be understood solely through grand strategic narratives.

Chabahar should therefore not be reduced to an "anti-Gwadar" project. Its geoeconomic role is broader. It provides India with alternative access to Eurasia, provides Iran with a mechanism for strengthening its transit position, provides Afghanistan with route diversification and provides Central Asian states with another maritime option. Competition with Gwadar is one dimension of this process, but not its entirety.

The broader implication is that Eurasian connectivity is becoming increasingly polycentric. Rather than one corridor dominating the continent, multiple corridors overlap and compete. Strategic power consequently depends on the ability to maintain access to several networks. In such a system, the value of Chabahar lies partly in its contribution to network pluralism.

10. Chabahar and the Changing Geoeconomics of Eurasia

The transformation of Eurasia after 2022 has increased the importance of alternative connectivity. Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent sanctions regime disrupted established trade relationships between Russia and Europe. This accelerated Moscow's interest in routes toward Asia and encouraged greater attention to the INSTC. The corridor's importance therefore increased not because its infrastructure suddenly became complete but because the geopolitical opportunity cost of existing routes changed.

Zakharov (2023) identifies this transformation in relation to India–Russia connectivity. The INSTC provides Russia with an alternative orientation toward India and the Indian Ocean, while India gains another route toward Russian and Eurasian markets. The significance of Chabahar within this broader system is that it provides a southern maritime entry point into Iran's transportation network.

The development also illustrates the concept of route resilience. Modern supply chains increasingly seek not merely minimum transport costs but resilience against disruption. The COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, Red Sea insecurity and tensions around the Strait of Hormuz have all demonstrated that apparently efficient global routes can become vulnerable to geopolitical shocks. Economic actors therefore increasingly value redundancy.

Chabahar's geoeconomic value can consequently be understood through the principle of strategic optionality. The port offers another pathway even when other routes remain available. This does not mean that Chabahar must become the dominant corridor to be strategically useful. Its existence can influence bargaining and planning by expanding the number of available alternatives.

However, the same geography that makes Chabahar attractive also creates vulnerability. The port is located in a region exposed to tensions involving Iran, the Gulf, the Strait of Hormuz and the wider Middle East. Maritime security conditions can affect shipping insurance, vessel availability, freight rates and the willingness of private firms to operate. In 2026, Indian

authorities issued repeated maritime-security advisories concerning the Persian Gulf, Strait of Hormuz and Iranian waters, demonstrating that regional security remains a direct operational factor for Indian maritime interests.

This creates a fundamental geoeconomic paradox. Chabahar is attractive because it diversifies routes, but its location places it within a high-risk geopolitical environment. Its value is therefore not simply a function of distance or infrastructure. It is a function of the balance between connectivity gains and geopolitical risk.

11. Sanctions, Financial Networks and the Limits of Corridor Power

Sanctions represent one of the most important constraints on Chabahar's evolution into a strategic corridor. Iran's integration into international economic networks is limited by extensive U.S. sanctions and, following the reapplication of earlier United Nations measures in September 2025, by a changed international legal environment concerning Iran's nuclear-related sanctions architecture.

The United Nations reported that, effective September 27, 2025, specified provisions of earlier Security Council resolutions concerning Iran were reapplied through the mechanism established under Resolution 2231. The subsequent re-establishment of the relevant sanctions architecture introduced another layer of uncertainty for economic actors considering Iranian connectivity projects. The legal and political interpretations of the process have been contested among major states, particularly Iran, Russia, China and the European parties to the JCPOA, but the practical consequence is that Iran remains a high-risk environment for international investment and financial activity.

For Chabahar, the significance of sanctions extends beyond direct restrictions on port operations. International banks, shipping companies, insurers and logistics providers may evaluate the project through the broader risk associated with Iran. Even where a particular activity receives a formal exemption, uncertainty regarding future policy can increase transaction costs.

The 2024 U.S. position illustrates this problem. Following the India–Iran agreement on Chabahar, the U.S. State Department stated that sanctions on Iran remained in place and warned entities contemplating business with Iran about potential sanctions risks. India subsequently secured a temporary waiver, but the waiver was time-limited. In October 2025, India obtained another six-month conditional exemption, reportedly valid until April 26, 2026. By April 2026, Indian policymakers were reportedly examining alternative arrangements as the exemption approached expiry.

This demonstrates the difference between legal permission and commercial certainty. A temporary waiver may permit a particular project to continue, but it does not necessarily create the stable expectations required for long-term private investment. Economic corridors require investment horizons measured in decades, while sanctions exemptions may operate over much shorter periods. This temporal mismatch can weaken corridor development.

Sanctions also demonstrate how geoeconomic power operates through network centrality. The United States does not need to control Chabahar physically to influence its commercial prospects. Its jurisdiction over financial institutions and the importance of the dollar-based

financial system can affect the incentives of firms considering participation. This is precisely the type of structural network power identified by Farrell and Newman (2019).

India's response has therefore involved institutional insulation and strategic balancing. The structure of India Ports Global Limited was designed partly with sanctions exposure in mind, and Indian government documents have previously described efforts to shield relevant domestic port entities from possible sanctions impacts. Nevertheless, complete insulation is difficult because shipping, insurance, banking and international trade remain globally interconnected.

The sanctions problem consequently places a ceiling on the geoeconomic potential of Chabahar. The port can create physical connectivity, but physical connectivity cannot by itself overcome financial fragmentation. For Chabahar to function as a durable Eurasian corridor, participants require mechanisms that reduce sanctions-related uncertainty while remaining consistent with applicable international law.

12. Infrastructure, Institutions and the Commercialization of Chabahar

The transition from gateway to corridor requires commercialization. A port becomes a strategic economic node when shipping companies, freight forwarders, exporters, importers and logistics providers routinely use it. Government-to-government agreements provide the foundation, but private-sector participation ultimately determines the scale and sustainability of commercial flows.

Chabahar has made measurable progress in this regard. Official Indian statistics indicate a substantial rise in container traffic in 2023–24. The port has also handled bulk and general cargo associated with humanitarian shipments, regional trade and commercial activity. These developments indicate that Chabahar is no longer simply an infrastructure promise.

Yet cargo growth should be interpreted carefully. A strategic corridor requires regularity, diversification and integration. A port may experience temporary increases because of specific commodity movements or government-supported shipments without generating a stable logistics ecosystem. Sustainable corridor development requires a broader base of cargo, including containerized trade, agricultural products, manufactured goods, minerals and other commodities.

This requires attention to logistics performance. The ADB literature on economic corridors emphasizes the importance of reducing transaction costs across the entire route rather than at isolated infrastructure nodes. The competitiveness of Chabahar must therefore be assessed against alternative routes not merely on port tariffs but on total door-to-door costs.

Customs procedures are especially important. A container can spend relatively little time at sea but experience substantial delays at borders. Documentation requirements, inspections, changes of transport mode and incompatible information systems can undermine the advantage of physical connectivity. The promotion of TIR procedures between India and Central Asia is therefore significant because standardized transit arrangements can reduce some of these institutional frictions.

Rail connectivity is another decisive variable. Chabahar's long-term corridor potential depends upon integration with Iran's rail system and connections toward Afghanistan and Central Asia. The absence of fully integrated rail connectivity limits the ability to develop high-volume

multimodal transport. This is a recurring problem across Eurasian corridors, where infrastructure frequently exists in segments but lacks interoperability.

The development of a corridor also requires logistics clusters around the port. Warehouses, distribution centres, customs facilities, repair services, container depots and financial services can transform a port into an economic platform. Without these complementary activities, much of the potential value of the corridor remains unrealized.

The broader lesson is that infrastructure-led geoeconomics requires institutional and commercial depth. Chabahar's future will therefore depend less on the symbolic importance attached to the port and more on whether governments and private firms can transform it into a predictable logistics environment.

13. The Emerging Strategic Geography of Eurasia

Chabahar should ultimately be understood within a Eurasian order characterized by overlapping connectivity rather than exclusive corridor dominance. The BRI, INSTC, Trans-Caspian corridor, Gulf connectivity projects, European initiatives and national infrastructure strategies are increasingly intersecting. This produces a geography of competitive interdependence.

The term "competitive interdependence" captures the central paradox of contemporary Eurasia. States compete for influence while simultaneously depending upon one another for transit, markets, energy and infrastructure. Iran requires external investment and transit flows; India requires access through Iranian territory; Central Asian states require external routes; Russia seeks connections to Asian markets; China seeks reliable continental and maritime networks; and European actors seek diversified supply chains.

Under these conditions, connectivity itself becomes a source of bargaining power. A state that provides an alternative route can acquire strategic relevance even without dominating the network. Iran's geographic position is particularly significant because it can potentially connect the Indian Ocean, Persian Gulf, Caucasus, Central Asia and Russia. Chabahar provides the southern maritime component of this larger geographic advantage.

For India, the strategic implication is that Eurasian engagement can no longer be separated into maritime and continental spheres. The traditional distinction between the Indian Ocean and Central Asia is increasingly artificial because maritime gateways create access to continental networks. Chabahar therefore represents a form of "maritime continentalism" in which maritime infrastructure becomes the foundation for continental economic engagement.

This concept also helps explain the changing role of ports in international strategy. Ports have historically been gateways for maritime commerce, but contemporary ports increasingly function as nodes in multimodal networks. Their strategic importance is determined by the hinterland they can access and the networks to which they are connected. Chabahar's potential therefore depends on its ability to extend beyond the coastline.

The Eurasian transformation also challenges conventional assumptions about the relationship between geography and power. Classical geopolitics often treats geography as a fixed constraint. Contemporary geoeconomics demonstrates that infrastructure can partially reorganize geography by reducing distance, creating new routes and changing accessibility.

Roads and railways do not eliminate geography, but they alter the economic significance of geographical barriers.

Chabahar illustrates this process. Pakistan's territory remains geographically positioned between India and Afghanistan, but Chabahar allows India to partially circumvent this constraint through maritime connectivity. Central Asia remains landlocked, but access to Chabahar can provide another path to the ocean. Russia remains geographically distant from India, but the INSTC can reduce the practical significance of that distance.

This does not mean that infrastructure can overcome all geopolitical constraints. Geography continues to matter through mountains, deserts, borders, seas and chokepoints. Infrastructure is effective only when political and institutional conditions allow it to operate. Nevertheless, the interaction between physical geography and infrastructure creates a dynamic geography of connectivity.

14. Discussion: From Infrastructure Competition to Networked Geoeconomics

The analysis demonstrates that the transformation of Chabahar should be interpreted as part of a broader transition from infrastructure competition toward networked geoeconomics. Traditional analyses of ports often emphasize ownership, investment volume or military proximity. These variables remain relevant, but they do not fully explain contemporary corridor power.

The first analytical implication is that geoeconomic power increasingly emerges from network position. Chabahar does not need to dominate maritime trade to matter strategically. Its importance lies in the connections it can facilitate between India, Iran, Afghanistan, Central Asia, the Caspian region and Russia. The port becomes more valuable as its number of meaningful network connections increases.

The second implication is that strategic corridors are institutional as much as physical. The Chabahar Agreement, INSTC, Ashgabat Agreement, TIR arrangements and India–Central Asia mechanisms create the institutional infrastructure necessary for physical connectivity to become economically meaningful. The quality of corridor governance therefore becomes a component of geoeconomic power.

The third implication is that corridor competition is not necessarily zero-sum. Chabahar and Gwadar can compete strategically while both remain economically connected to broader Eurasian networks. Similarly, Chabahar does not necessarily need to displace the BRI or the Trans-Caspian corridor. Its strategic function can be to add another option to the network.

The fourth implication is that resilience has become a central dimension of geoeconomic strategy. In an era of sanctions, wars, maritime disruptions and supply-chain shocks, redundancy possesses economic value. States seek alternative routes because they reduce exposure to disruptions elsewhere. Chabahar therefore derives part of its value from the possibility of route diversification.

The fifth implication concerns the role of sanctions. The Chabahar case demonstrates that infrastructure strategies cannot be evaluated solely through physical economics. Financial and legal networks can determine whether infrastructure is commercially usable. The port therefore illustrates the fusion of territorial infrastructure and global financial governance.

The sixth implication is that emerging corridor power is increasingly multi-actor. India and Iran are the central bilateral actors, but Afghanistan, Central Asian states, Russia, shipping companies, logistics providers, financial institutions and external powers all influence the corridor's trajectory. This makes Chabahar fundamentally different from a conventional bilateral infrastructure project.

The seventh implication concerns the limits of strategic narratives. Governments frequently describe connectivity projects in ambitious geopolitical terms. Academic analysis should distinguish between strategic intention and operational performance. The available evidence indicates that Chabahar has experienced significant growth in cargo activity and institutionalization, but it has not yet become a fully mature Eurasian corridor. Its transformation remains contingent upon infrastructure completion, commercial demand, sanctions conditions and regional stability.

This distinction is essential for understanding the concept of emerging geoeconomics. Geoeconomic power is not created simply when a state announces an infrastructure project. It emerges when infrastructure becomes embedded within durable networks of economic exchange and produces meaningful changes in the options available to states and firms.

15. Strategic Constraints and Future Trajectories

Chabahar's future will depend upon whether several structural constraints can be managed simultaneously. The first is the sanctions environment. The temporary U.S. waiver system demonstrates that external sanctions policy can directly affect India's ability to maintain operational involvement. The expiration of the reported April 2026 waiver and the subsequent uncertainty over alternative arrangements illustrate the vulnerability created by Iran's international financial position.

The second constraint is regional security. The Gulf of Oman, Strait of Hormuz and surrounding West Asian maritime environment remain strategically sensitive. Indian authorities issued multiple maritime-security advisories during 2026 concerning operations around Iranian waters and the Strait of Hormuz. Such risks can increase insurance premiums, disrupt shipping schedules and reduce private-sector willingness to invest.

The third constraint is infrastructure integration. A port cannot generate corridor-scale economic effects without reliable rail and road links. Chabahar therefore requires continued investment in hinterland connectivity, particularly toward Afghanistan and the Iranian rail network.

The fourth constraint is institutional fragmentation. Multiple corridor initiatives can generate overlapping rules and procedures. Coordination between the INSTC, Ashgabat Agreement, TIR system and bilateral transit arrangements will be necessary if Chabahar is to become a seamless component of Eurasian logistics.

The fifth constraint is demand uncertainty. Central Asian states have multiple connectivity options, including routes through China, Russia, the Caspian Sea, Türkiye and the Gulf. Chabahar will need to demonstrate commercial competitiveness rather than relying solely on geopolitical narratives.

The sixth constraint is Afghanistan. Chabahar's original strategic logic was strongly connected to Afghanistan, but Afghanistan's political transformation after 2021 has complicated

institutional and security conditions. Nevertheless, Afghanistan's landlocked geography continues to create demand for diversified transit routes. Chabahar may therefore retain relevance even as the political framework around Afghanistan evolves.

The seventh constraint is competition among external powers. China's role in Central Asia and Pakistan, Russia's interests in the INSTC, Gulf states' infrastructure ambitions and European interest in alternative corridors all shape the environment in which Chabahar operates. The project is consequently embedded in a wider competitive connectivity system.

Despite these constraints, Chabahar possesses several structural advantages. Its geographic position provides direct access to the Indian Ocean; India has demonstrated sustained political commitment; Iran has a strategic interest in becoming a transit hub; Central Asian states have incentives to diversify their routes; and the INSTC provides a broader network into which Chabahar can be integrated.

The most plausible trajectory is therefore not the emergence of Chabahar as a single dominant Eurasian corridor but its consolidation as one node within a diversified Eurasian connectivity architecture. This interpretation is consistent with the broader evolution of transport corridors, where multiple networks increasingly overlap rather than replace one another.

16. Conclusion

The evolution of Chabahar demonstrates how maritime infrastructure can acquire wider geopolitical significance when integrated into continental transportation networks. The port began primarily as a mechanism for providing India with alternative access to Afghanistan, but its strategic meaning has expanded through its relationship with Central Asia, the INSTC and the wider Eurasian connectivity system. Its transformation from maritime gateway toward strategic corridor is therefore best understood as a process of network integration rather than simply port development.

The article has argued that Chabahar's geoeconomic significance derives from five interconnected characteristics: its geographic position, its capacity to diversify routes, its integration with continental transport systems, its institutional connections with multiple corridor frameworks and its role in India's broader strategy of Eurasian engagement. These characteristics allow the port to influence economic geography beyond its immediate maritime location.

At the same time, Chabahar's strategic potential is constrained by sanctions, financial uncertainty, infrastructure gaps, institutional fragmentation and regional insecurity. The project therefore demonstrates an important paradox of contemporary geoeconomics: the infrastructure that creates strategic autonomy can itself become dependent upon international networks over which participating states have limited control. Chabahar provides India with route diversification while simultaneously exposing Indian actors to the financial and legal risks associated with Iran.

The analysis also suggests that the conventional comparison between Chabahar and Gwadar is insufficient. Both ports occupy important positions within competing connectivity systems, but their strategic functions extend beyond bilateral rivalry. Chabahar is connected to the INSTC, Central Asian transit arrangements and India's Eurasian strategy, while Gwadar is embedded

within CPEC and the wider BRI. The relevant unit of analysis is therefore not the individual port but the network in which the port operates.

The emergence of networked geoeconomics has also changed the meaning of strategic infrastructure. Power increasingly derives from the ability to create, maintain and diversify economic connections. States do not necessarily need to control an entire corridor to benefit from it. A strategically located node can produce influence by expanding choices, reducing dependency and connecting otherwise fragmented markets. Chabahar's strategic significance should consequently be measured through the network effects it generates rather than solely through cargo volumes or financial investment.

For India, Chabahar provides an important mechanism for connecting maritime strategy with continental Eurasian engagement. For Iran, it offers an opportunity to strengthen its position as a transit state linking South Asia, Central Asia, the Caucasus and Russia. For Central Asian states, it creates another potential route toward the Indian Ocean. For the broader Eurasian system, it contributes to a more plural and diversified connectivity geography.

The future of Chabahar will ultimately depend on whether its physical infrastructure can be matched by institutional integration and commercial viability. If rail, road, customs, logistics and financial arrangements develop coherently, Chabahar can become more than a port: it can function as a strategic corridor node connecting the Indian Ocean with continental Eurasia. If these institutional and commercial conditions remain fragmented, its strategic role may remain significant but its economic corridor potential will remain underdeveloped.

The broader theoretical lesson is that geoeconomics in contemporary Eurasia is increasingly expressed through the construction of alternatives. States seek alternative ports, alternative routes, alternative financial mechanisms and alternative markets not necessarily because existing networks disappear, but because dependence upon a single network creates strategic vulnerability. Chabahar is therefore significant precisely because it represents an attempt to construct an alternative pathway through an increasingly contested Eurasian geography.

Ultimately, Chabahar should be understood neither as a simple maritime gateway nor as an isolated instrument of Indian geopolitical competition. It is better conceptualized as an emerging strategic node in a multipolar connectivity system. Its importance lies in the possibility that infrastructure can reshape the geography of economic opportunity, and that connectivity itself can become an instrument of state strategy. In this sense, Chabahar captures the central dynamic of the emerging geoeconomics of Eurasia: the transformation of trade routes into strategic networks and of infrastructure into a medium through which states negotiate autonomy, dependence and influence.

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