Relevance of Chabahar Port to India

Why in news?

India and Iran are set to hold talks to establish "long-term cooperation framework" on Chabahar port.

Chabahar Port
• Chabahar is ***Iran's*** first deepwater port and sits at the mouth of the ***Gulf of Oman***. • It is Iran's only oceanic port situated in Sistan and Baluchistan Province, on the Makran coast. • It consists of 2 main ports - ***Shahid Kalantari*** and ***Shahid Beheshti***. • **Chabahar port project**- It was signed in 2003 between In***dia and Iran.*** • **Trilateral Transit and Trade Agreement**- It was signed in 2016 between ***India, Afghanistan and Iran.*** - India was granted a 10-year lease and access to the Chabahar free trade zone. - India got the opportunity to build the 628 km rail line from Chabahar to Zahedan, just across the border from Afghanistan. • India is restricted to the Shahid Beheshti port that is undertaken by India Ports Global Limited (IPGL) which is established for the development of ports overseas.

Why Chabahar port is crucial to India?

- **Geostrategic location**- Chabahar port has geographic proximity to countries such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India.
- **Access Afghanistan**- India can bypass Pakistan which does not allow India land access for trade with Afghanistan and Central Asia.
- **Infrastructure development**- The ***Zaranj-Delaram road*** constructed by India in 2009 can give access to Afghanistan's Garland Highway, setting up road access to four major cities in Afghanistan - *Herat, Kandahar, Kabul and Mazar-e-Sharif*.
- **Gateway to Central Asia**- It will boost India's access to Iran, the key gateway to the ***International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC)*** that has sea, rail and road routes between India, Russia, Iran, Europe and Central Asia.

  INSTC is a multi-modal transportation project linking the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf to the Caspian Sea via Iran, and onward to northern Europe via St Petersburg in Russia.

- **Counter China**- It will be beneficial to India in countering Chinese presence in the Arabian Sea which China is trying to ensure by helping Pakistan develop the ***Gwadar port***.

Gwadar port is located in Pakistan and is less than 400 km from Chabahar by road and 100 km by sea.

- **Defence ally**- The port being developed and operated by India, Iran also becomes a military ally to India.
- **Reduce import bill**- There will be a significant boost in the import of iron ore, sugar and rice to India.
    - The import cost of oil to India will also see a considerable decline.
- **Connectivity hub-** It will ensure in the establishment of a politically sustainable connectivity between India and Afghanistan leading to better economic ties between the two countries.
- **Diplomatic engagement**- The port could be used as a point from where humanitarian operations could be coordinated.

Why there is delay in the development of Chabahar port by India?

- **Geopolitical roadblocks**- The main obstacle has been the fluctuating relations between the US and Iran, which has affected the supply chain through US sanctions.
- **Uncertainty in Afghanistan-** The volatile and uncertain political situation due to rise of Taliban regime is also a cause of concern.
- **Red sea crisis-** The conflict between Israel and Hamas in Gaza has spilled over to the Red Sea, where Iran-backed Houthi rebels have attacked commercial ships, provoking responses from the US and the UK adding to the instability of the region.
- **Iran Pakistan strikes**- Both exchanged missile strikes against military groups on their borders on the common Baloch problem thus creating new challenges for the Chabahar project.

What lies ahead?

- Through active and visionary diplomacy and efficient implementation and operations of the project, Iran and India can overcome the delays in the development of Chabahar port.
- India should be able to maintain Chabahar project as a viable transit hub and link to serve as a reliable and competitive route for transportation among India, Afghanistan, Central Asia, and beyond.

Reference

Indian Express- History of Iran’s Chabahar port

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