Renewing the Chabahar Port

Why in news?

The Union government has geared up its interest in using Iran's Chabahar port to connect to Afghanistan and Central Asia for trade.

Where is Chabahar port located?

- Chabahar Port is a seaport in Sistan-Balochistan province of **Iran**, on the Gulf of Oman.
- It serves as Iran's only oceanic port, and consists of two separate ports named **Shahid Kalantari** and **Shahid Beheshti.**
- Its geographic proximity to Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) gives it the potential to develop into one of the most important commercial hubs.
- Chabahar is one of the few places in Iran that is exempt from U.S. sanctions.
- **India's Collaboration**- Chabahar is a gateway for Indian trade with Europe, Russia and CIS [Commonwealth of Independent States] countries.
- Indo-Iranian collaboration on Chabahar port dates back to 2003.
- In 2016, India announced that it would invest 500 million dollars into the development of Chabahar port.
- A major catalyst for their renewed cooperation stemmed from 2013 announcement that China would commence its massive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) infrastructure project.
- India, Iran and Afghanistan signed a trilateral agreement providing for transport of goods among the three countries through the port.

What is India's strategic vision for Chabahar?

- **Objectives during 2003**
  - To build India's first offshore port and to project Indian infrastructure prowess in the Gulf
  - To circumvent trade through Pakistan and build a long term, sustainable sea trade route
  - To find an alternative land route to Afghanistan
- Later, India constructed the **Zaranj -Delaram Highway** in Afghanistan's South, which would help connect the trade route from the border of Iran to the main trade routes to Herat and Kabul.
- **2016**- India signed an agreement to develop Chabahar port and a trilateral agreement for trade through Chabahar with Afghanistan.
- In the last few years, a fourth strategic objective for the Chabahar route has appeared.

- To provide Central Asia with an alternate route to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) through Iran for future trade

Why is the Chabahar dream taking so long to realise?

- **Geopolitical road-block**- The biggest issue over the development of the Shahid Beheshti terminal in Chabahar is Iran's relationship with western countries, especially the United States.
- In 2018, the U.S. administration walked out of the JCPOA and slapped new sanctions on dealing with Iran.
- **Strained India-Iran relations**- The fear of U.S. sanctions led to the Indian government "zeroing out" all its oil imports from Iran, causing a strain in ties.
- **Sourcing equipments**- It has been difficult to source equipment for the port construction from infrastructure companies that fear of secondary sanctions.
- **India-Afghanistan ties**- India also shut its ties with Afghanistan after the Taliban takeover in August 2021, which put an end to the humanitarian aid of wheat and pulses that was being sent to Kabul via Chabahar.
- When India restarted wheat aid to Afghanistan this year, it negotiated with Pakistan to use the land route instead.

What is the scope for re-strengthening the ties?

- Indian has reopened the Indian Embassy in Kabul and established ties with the Taliban government making it possible for employing the Chabahar route.
- The recent flurry of activity at the Iranian port terminal has pinned so many hopes for India.

References

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