

## India & Kabul play new round in Great Game: Chabahar

**The most important aspect of Iran's Chabahar port for Kabul is the confidence that the new axis provides Afghanistan in dealing with Pakistan, especially over transit trade.**



First consignment for Afghanistan left India via Chabahar on Sunday. (file photo)

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The much-awaited Chabahar route for Indo-Afghan trade, has finally taken off. The first shipment of wheat to Afghanistan has left Kandla port for Chabahar port in Iran, and then through the land route via Iran into Afghanistan. This will catapult the Indo-Afghan bilateral relationship into another level, besides strengthening the trilateral relationship between India, Afghanistan and Iran, and also increasing linkages between Kabul and Tehran.

Equally important are two further questions: How will the activation of Chabahar port and the Zahedan-Zaranj-Kabul highway help increase Afghanistan as a transit for Central Asian countries into the Arabian Sea? And would this reduce Kabul's dependence on Islamabad, thereby increasing the former's leverage over the latter, especially over the Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade agreement?

### **Chabahar and the India-Iran-Afghanistan Trilaterals**

The activation of Chabahar for Indian goods into Afghanistan means the following. First, it fulfills an Indian promise of an alternative route for Afghanistan. Though Indo-Afghan trade has been a historical phenomenon from the days of Sher Shah and the famed Grand Trunk Road, in recent years, Pakistan's refusal for transit facilities has made New Delhi and Kabul look for alternatives. That's when the idea of Chabahar was born.

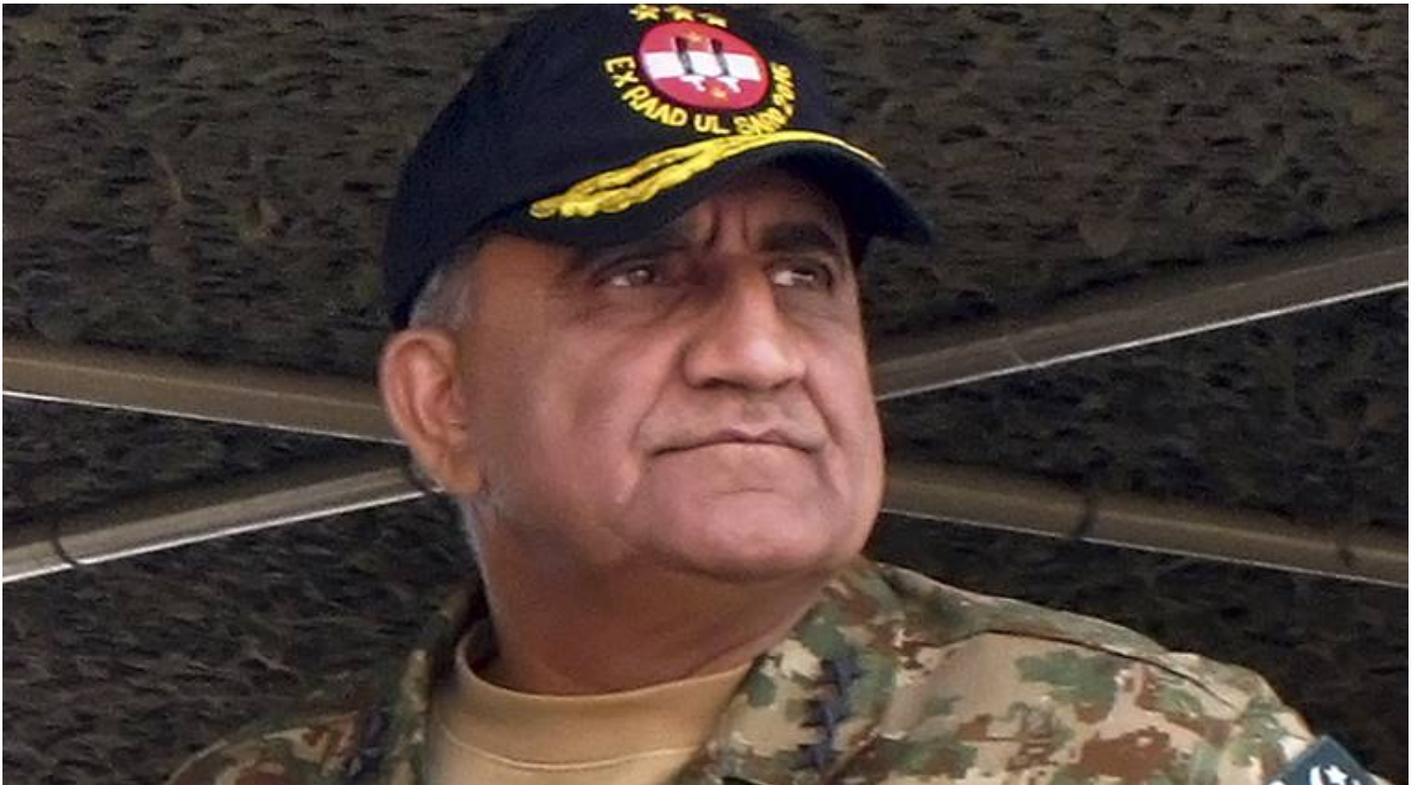
Second, the activation of Chabahar also fulfils another promise-to Tehran. India has been ridiculed for making promises and not following them up — Chabahar in the West and Sittwe in the east. The Chabahar opening should change that perception.

Third, Chabahar also speaks for India's commitment to improving Indo-Iran relations. There were apprehensions about India moving closer to the US, and Indo-Iran relations becoming hostage to it. It appears New Delhi has been able to withstand American pressure and move ahead with Iran.

Fourth, Chabahar port will also improve Afghan-Iran partnership and provide a crucial leverage for Kabul, as a transit between Central Asia and the Arabian Sea. It could further link Russia and provide another warm water outlet for Moscow. Perhaps, this is one of the major reasons for the Afghans being excited about the Chabahar. For the Afghans, Chabahar is not just about Indo-Afghan trade; it is an opening of a huge new world!

But, the most important aspect of Chabahar for Kabul is the confidence that the new axis provides in dealing with Pakistan, especially over transit trade.

### **Afghan – Pakistan Transit Trade Issues**



Pakistan army chief Gen Qamar Bajwa. (file photo)

When Pakistan army chief Gen Qamar Bajwa visited Kabul early this month, there was an expectation that Af-Pak relations would improve. Ashraf Ghani, even called it a "new season" with Pakistan. However, in late October, Afghanistan cancelled a scheduled meeting of the Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Coordination Authority. Pakistan responded vehemently, blaming India for scuttling Af-Pak bilateral trade.

In 2010, both countries had signed the Afghanistan Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA), replacing an earlier one signed in 1965. However, there were serious hurdles towards its implementation, as the expectations and objections were different. Afghanistan, from the beginning, was interested in signing a trilateral agreement which included India. Unfortunately, Pakistan has been negative to that idea; Islamabad does not want Afghanistan to look beyond Pakistan. Certainly, it does not want to link Kabul and New Delhi.

Despite not extending the transit trade to India, Kabul did sign the treaty with Pakistan. Perhaps, there was American pressure on Kabul. However, there have been serious hurdles within Pakistan, undermining Af-Pak transit trade, besides the Afghan demand to include India. First, the informal Afghan trade for Pakistan plays an important role in undermining formal trade. Smuggling is rampant across the Durand Line; despite militancy and border closures, the Af-Pak illegal trade has been thriving. Second, there are serious legal issues in implementing AFTTA—from banking to visa procedures for Afghan businessmen.

### **Will Chabahar provide leverage for Kabul and undercut Pakistan's pre-eminent position as transit for Afghanistan?**

Kabul would like to cross Wagah, reach not only New Delhi but also Kolkata and even Dhaka.

Afghanistan's maritime exit to the rest of the world has been through the port in Karachi. Goods from Afghanistan cross the Durand Line at two major points across a tough terrain-Torkham in the north and Chaman in the South. Karachi port was primary; by controlling Afghan goods through Karachi, Pakistan also controlled Afghanistan's larger international trade.

When Pakistan started building Gwadar port, there was also an expectation, that it would facilitate Af-Pak transit trade through Balochistan. From Gwadar, goods could reach Quetta and enter Afghanistan through Chaman. Though the first push on Gwadar during the last decade failed, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has renewed Islamabad's Gwadar expectations.

However, Gwadar cannot succeed for Pakistan, unless it feeds into non-CPEC transit as well. Afghanistan figures prominently in Pakistan's Gwadar calculation, and through Afghan territory, into Central Asia. If Kabul is not on Pakistan's side, Islamabad has to forget about a land route into Central Asia. Unless, China wants to bring Central Asian goods into Xinjiang, and then push it south on the CPEC to Gwadar, which does not make economic sense.

### **Chabahar and Pakistan's Grand Plans**



For Afghanistan, Chabahar provides an additional leverage in dealing with Pakistan. (file photo)

Chabahar threatens Pakistan's Gwadar and Afghan plans. Afghanistan will find Chabahar faster and easier, when compared to the tough terrain across the Durand Line.

More than losing Af-Pak transit trade, Pakistan will lose its influence over Kabul. Economically, this influence is important, if Pakistan wants to reach Central Asia, especially for the proposed gas and electricity corridor from Central Asia. Islamabad has invested sufficiently on the CASA-1000, an electricity

grid from Central Asia via Afghanistan. Despite India going slow on the TAPI (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India) pipeline, Pakistan believes even TAP, without India, is a workable idea.

Chabahar would undermine this. Perhaps, Afghanistan understands the Chabahar opportunity and wants to up the game on Af-Pak transit. Perhaps, this was also the reason for Ghani making a bold statement that Pakistani trucks would not be allowed inside Afghanistan. For the first time, perhaps Kabul has an upper hand in Af-Pak transit trade. For Pakistan, losing transit trade means losing the Gwadar plot and also its Central Asian plans.

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