

INDIA'S GROWING 'PORT' PRINT IN INDO-PACIFIC

by
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India's centrality in the Indo-Pacific region received a thrust with the recent signing of a ten-year- agreement between New Delhi and Tehran over the operation of Iran's Chabahar port. The development of the port and its associated infrastructure with an investment of \$370 million is being viewed as New Delhi's attempt to [counterbalance](#) China's encirclement policy through port facilities in India's neighborhood—particularly, Gwadar and Hambantota.

India's interest in Chabahar port can be viewed in the backdrop of India's emerging maritime governance architecture aimed at powering the maritime trade and projecting power across the Indo-Pacific. New Delhi is being prompted to assert its role as a regional leader and security guarantor. Embracing the “Mahanian” principles of [maritime strategy](#), and recognizing its geographically advantageous position, India initiated the 2015 “[Sagarmala project](#)”. [It was](#) aimed at bringing about a step change in India's logistics sector performance, by unlocking the full [potential](#) of India's coastline and waterways and the concept of “port-led development”. It worked towards port modernization, connectivity, industrialization, and coastal community development. This has yielded tangible results, with significant enhancements in cargo handling capacity, throughput, and operational efficiency across major Indian ports. India Ports Global Limited, which is a subsidiary of Sagarmala Development Company Limited, is wholly owned by the Ministry of Ports, Shipping, and Waterways, ensuring complete Indian control over the port's operations.

Gateway to Central Asia

With regards to the Chabahar port, India has already been operating the port under the existing limited scope agreement and has been [annually](#) renewing port operations contracts with Iranian officials since 2016. New Delhi has committed about \$500 million to the

project. India's interest in Chabahar started in 2002. It was seen as a gateway to landlocked Afghanistan and energy-rich Central Asia. In fact, in 2021, it was used to supply environment-friendly pesticides to Iran and India [sent](#) 20,000 tons of wheat as aid to Afghanistan the following year.

The project has moved slowly due to bureaucratic hurdles, political discourse, and U.S.-Iran rivalry that threatened sanctions on countries dealing with Iran. Indian policymakers have expressed interest in Chabahar becoming part of the conceptualized multi-modal transportation International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC). This corridor connects the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf to the Caspian Sea via Iran, then is connected to St. Petersburg and North Europe via the Russian Federation. According to [industry estimates](#), shipments through the INSTC route will take 15 days less compared to the Suez Canal route. Strategically, its closeness to the China-operated Gwadar port in Pakistan affords India a vantage point to monitor Chinese activities in the Persian Gulf. India's strategic calculus is complicated by China's expanding naval footprint in the region.

Chinese ‘[String of Pearls](#)’ strategy hypothesized by the Pentagon refers to the establishment of strategically located ports and naval bases across maritime routes. They serve as Chinese logistical hubs and potential bases and can challenge India's regional aspirations. Chinese investments in ports across the Indian Ocean Region, notably in Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and the Maldives, underscore Beijing's efforts to consolidate maritime influence and challenge established geopolitical norms. China's Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR)—colloquially known as the “Middle Corridor”—runs from China through Kazakhstan, across the Caspian Sea to Azerbaijan and Georgia, and then to Europe via Turkey or the Black Sea. India's INSTC therefore stands as a challenger to TITR. Another corridor announced during last year's G-20 summit comprising India, Middle East, Europe Economic Corridor ([IMEC](#)) along with Saudi Arabia, the European Union, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), France, Germany, Italy, and the United States further attempts



to challenge Chinese growing footprint in the region.

Expanding Maritime Cooperation

Against this backdrop, India's pursuit of a robust port infrastructure assumes paramount importance, not only as an economic imperative but also as a strategic imperative to counterbalance China's expanding influence. India on its part has also fostered regional cooperation through initiatives such as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation ([BIMSTEC Ports Conclave](#)), aimed at fostering maritime connectivity and trade facilitation. India has signed several Memorandums of Understanding that are telling of its interest and importance attached to maritime cooperation and connectivity. India recently acquired access to Myanmar's '[Sittwe' Port](#) with the aim of securing vital maritime nodes, and safeguarding energy security interests. The port is an integral part of the Kaladan Multimodal Transit Transport Project (KMTTP) aimed to unlock tremendous economic and energy security potential for the entire Bay of Bengal peninsula, allowing a bridge between South Asia and South East Asia.

In 2023, India and Indonesia completed a joint [feasibility study](#) on developing Sabang port. The port is 700 km from the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The development of this port will allow India easier access to the Malacca Straits. This has come amid [growing interest](#) in infrastructure development projects in Indonesia from Indian firms. Indian [companies](#) are also currently in talks to develop a port in Western Sumatra. In 2023, the Adani Group took control of the Haifa port in Israel expanding its footprint into the European port sector. The group is also developing a terminal at Colombo port in Sri Lanka which is also receiving half a billion-dollar worth of investment by the U.S.

Domestically, the Vizhinjam state-owned port in Kerala is expected to increase India's international maritime trade pie. Meanwhile, New Delhi is ramping up military infrastructure on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands chain, such as building up capacity at Port Blair and completing a high-capacity undersea internet cable with the intent to [strengthen](#) the island's infrastructure that will enhance the potential role of

the island chain as a forward operation base. The British Navy's offshore patrol vessel HMS Tamar sailed to the Andaman and Nicobar islands in January 2023 as part of its permanent deployment in the Indo-Pacific. It showed the UK's Indo-Pacific tilt in action and attempt to [bolster](#) the defense and security relationship with India. U.S. and UK warships traversing the Indo-Pacific region have been docking at India's Chennai Port for maintenance and repair. India also recently [inaugurated](#) a new naval base, the INS Jatayu, on Minicoy Island in its strategically critical union territory of Lakshadweep.

Building Strategic Partnerships

India has entered into various defense and strategic deals with countries in the region, including Vietnam, Japan, the Philippines, and Singapore. Under the Security and Growth of All in the Region (SAGAR) agenda, New Delhi has developed an Integrated Coastal Surveillance Network, connecting coastal radar and surveillance systems of partner states—Sri Lanka, Maldives, and Seychelles—to respond to sea-based [threats](#) in real-time. India considers the region as a 'Global Common Good' and is focused on not only security but also renewable energy, digitizing work processes, marking progress in 5G and AI, etc.

India is attempting to step up its strategic posture in the Indo-Pacific and is now eager to collaborate with like-minded countries to create a web of security partnerships. Its efforts to modernize and expand its port infrastructure reflect its proactive stance in navigating the complex geopolitical currents of the region. India has a natural geographical advantage and realizes its national power will be linked to the ocean. Even though closing the maritime capabilities gap with Beijing seems daunting, India's mutually beneficial partnerships with regional and extra-regional states show a convergence of interests and values to promote economic prosperity, freedom of navigation in the seas, and a rules-based international order.

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