

Linking Afghanistan to the World

by Tanu Maitra

March 20—Afghanistan borders south Asia, the Middle East, and central Asia, and yet it is one of the most isolated countries in the world. Decades of foreign invasion, destruction, and internal chaos have intensified its isolation. It has, for example no national rail system. Indeed, it has almost no railroads at all.

The International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) will link Afghanistan to the world—to south Asia, southeast Asia, east Asia and China by land and sea. The INSTC multimodal transportation system runs from India, through Iran, to Russia and northern Europe (*EIR*, March 18). Its eastern leg will run from the Iranian city of Chabahar on the Gulf of Oman, through Zahedan (in Iran, where Iran meets Pakistan and Afghanistan), to Herat (Afghanistan), a route of more than 1,400 kilometers.

“India has shown a willingness to establish a railway route linking Chabahar and Herat, and this is a milestone toward connecting Afghanistan to Chabahar port,” reported Afghanistan’s *Tolo News*, quoting Mahdi Rohani, a spokesman for Iran’s Ministry of Public Works on March 13. At present, Afghanistan has only two short rail links—a 75 km link in the north between Mazar-e-Sharif and Hairatan on the Uzbekistan border, and a just-built short link that connects Herat in Afghanistan with Khaf, Iran, a length of 140 km.

The development of Chabahar port in Iran and the rail line to Herat, Afghanistan, is immediately on the agenda. India’s proposed plan to develop the port is seemingly ready after months of delay. The agreement for the first phase will be signed at the Maritime

India Summit 2016, April 14-16, in Mumbai. Iran’s Port and Maritime Authority has awarded a ten-year port development project to Iranian firm Arya Bandar, which will in turn sign an agreement with Indian Ports Global Pvt Ltd, the Indian news daily *The Hindu* reported on March 15.

The plan for the port will make it more than a node point for the INSTC. It will contribute to developing



The eastern leg of the International North-South Transport Corridor will include a container terminal at Chabahar; Iran, on the Gulf of Oman and a rail line from Chabahar through Zahedan to Herat, Afghanistan. Iran and India are also ready to sign an agreement for an undersea natural gas pipeline from Chabahar to the coast of Gujarat State in India. The gas will come from Turkmenistan.



U.S. Embassy, Kabul/S.K. Vemmer

Herat, Afghanistan, in 2011. Its population was 10,795 in 2006, at the time of the last census.

Chabahar as a manufacturing and trading center. At the last census in 2006, Chabahar's population was 71,000. Reports indicate that India is ready to invest \$31 billion in this project over a period of years. The first phase, expected to be launched next month, will include construction and operation of two berths, a container terminal of 640 meters' length and a multi-purpose cargo terminal of 600 meters.

The second phase will include building the railroad to Herat and development of a special economic zone as part of the Chabahar port complex. The zone is planned by a number of India's private and public sector investors, such as the Jindal Infrastructures, the petroleum refiner Essar, and the Indian state-run steel manufacturer SAIL. Iran has agreed to allocate to India the required land for the zone.

Undersea Gas Pipeline to India

There is also a plan for an undersea gas pipeline from Chabahar port to India. India's *Tribune News* reported March 17, citing an unnamed "top official" of India's Modi government, that India is set to sign a deal with Iran for a direct undersea gas pipeline from Chabahar port to the coast of Gujarat state in India. The \$4.5 billion, 1,400 km undersea gas pipeline will bring 31.5 million standard cubic meters of gas per day from Iran to India's west coast. The gas, which originates in gas-rich Turkmenistan, will be piped across Iran to Chabahar port.

Iran is in a hurry to develop the INSTC eastern leg and is pushing India to speed up its investments. The project is of great economic importance to India as well, since New Delhi is keen to broaden its economic relations with Iran and expand its trade into central Asia.

The Afghan View, and China

Afghanistan's Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah traveled to Chabahar port last January, during his three-day visit to Iran, and surveyed the project's capabilities and capacities.

The presence of a cargo terminal in Chabahar port will provide Afghanistan with a new outlet to the sea in addition to the port of Gwadar, Pakistan, and promises a significant boost to its role in regional and global markets. Expressing the importance of the project, Abdullah Abdullah also made a commitment that, when developed, Afghanistan will use the port to trade with the Asian countries. Afghanistan's high cost of trade via Pakistan is a concern. The customs tariffs levied on goods imported into Afghanistan through Pakistan are also high.

Iran has also sought to interest China in the project. China faces a problem with pirates in the Mediterranean and the Gulf of Aden, which appears to have a significant influence on its foreign trade. The development of Chabahar port and its linkage to the INSTC will improve China's access to parts of central Asia, particularly west of the Caspian Sea, and to Afghanistan. At present, Chinese goods are shipped to the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas and Chabahar through the port of Dubai, about 800 km further west. More direct access to INSTC through Chabahar port would help China.

Iran has already invited Chinese investments in its southeastern province of Sistan-Balochistan and has urged Chinese enterprises to participate in a series of projects in Chabahar, including the development of a rail network as well as key petrochemical and steel projects.