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The International North-South Transport Corridor

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The International North-South Transport Corridor

Picture a container of Indian goods in Mumbai, bound for Moscow. The old way loops through the Suez Canal and around Europe, and takes weeks. The INSTC cuts a shortcut through Iran, and India was one of its three founders.

Four questions guide this page. What is the INSTC? How did it begin? Why does Chabahar matter? And is the corridor fully built?

> **7,200 km.** Length of the corridor
> **2000.** Founding agreement signed
> **13.** Members today
> **30%.** Estimated cost saving over Suez

Multi-modal: Using ship, rail and road together.

Corridor: A planned trade route linking many places.

Chabahar: Iranian port on the Gulf of Oman.

Sanctions waiver: Permission to work despite US sanctions.

1 What is the INSTC?

Think of a container of Indian goods in Mumbai. It must reach Moscow. The old way goes through the Suez Canal and around Europe. It takes weeks.

The INSTC offers a shortcut. The International North–South Transport Corridor is a 7,200-km network of ship, rail and road links. It joins India, Iran, Russia and Europe. (Source: ADB ARIC)

Goods go by sea from India to Iran. Then they cross Iran by road or rail to the Caspian Sea. From there they go by ship to Russia, and onward by rail into Europe.

Industry estimates say it can be about 30% cheaper and 40% shorter than the Suez route. (Source: Valdai Club)

> **Think it through:** Why does Iran sit in the middle of this route?
>
> Iran links the Indian Ocean on one side and the Caspian Sea on the other. No other land bridge does that.

- Length: **7,200 km**.
- Modes: **ship, rail, road**.
- Link: India to **Central Asia and Europe via Iran**.
- Claim: **30% cheaper, 40% shorter** than Suez.

> **Quick check 1.** The INSTC connects India to Europe via China. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

2 When and how did the INSTC begin?

India, Iran and Russia signed the founding agreement in St. Petersburg in 2000. They ratified it in 2002. All three are founding members. (Source: ADB ARIC)

Membership has grown a lot since then. Today there are 13 members: India, Iran, Russia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkey, Ukraine, Belarus, Oman and Syria. Bulgaria is an observer. (Source: Testbook)

In 2014, test shipments ran from Mumbai to Baku and from Mumbai to Astrakhan. They went through Bandar Abbas, Tehran and Bandar Anzali. The runs proved the idea could work.

The corridor has three route variants. A Trans-Caspian route goes by sea. A Western route uses Azerbaijan's rail. An Eastern route crosses Central Asia.

- Signed: **2000**, St. Petersburg.
- Ratified: **2002**.
- Founders: **India, Iran, Russia**.
- Members now: **13**, plus Bulgaria as observer.
- Test runs: **2014**.

> **Quick check 2.** India, Iran and Russia are the INSTC's founding members. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

3 Why does Chabahar matter?

Pakistan lies between India and Afghanistan. India cannot send trucks across it. So India built a door on the sea.

That door is Chabahar Port, on the Gulf of Oman in Iran. It gives India a route to Afghanistan and Central Asia that bypasses Pakistan. It anchors the southern leg of the INSTC.

The port now faces trouble. A US sanctions waiver for India's Chabahar work expired on 26 April 2026. India said it was talking to Tehran and Washington. It called the current conflict a complicating factor. (Source: Al Jazeera)

- Port: **Chabahar**, Gulf of Oman, Iran.
- Value: route to Afghanistan and Central Asia **without Pakistan**.
- Risk: US waiver **expired 26 April 2026**.

> **Quick check 3.** Chabahar lies on the Caspian Sea. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

4 Is the corridor fully built?

No. A corridor born in 2000 is still unfinished.

The missing piece is the Rasht–Astara rail link in Iran. It is about 160 km long, on the western branch. Russia and Iran have agreed to build it. Russia said work would begin in April 2026. (Source: TASS)

Other gaps remain too. Caspian terminal capacity is thin. And US sanctions on Iran and Russia make financing risky for any firm.

For India, the INSTC is also a homegrown answer to China's Belt and Road. It offers a cheaper path to Russia and Central Asia.

- Missing link: **Rasht–Astara rail**, ~160 km.
- Other limits: **thin Caspian terminals**, **sanctions**.
- Strategic role: an alternative to **BRI**.

> **Quick check 4.** The INSTC is still not fully operational. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

5 What are the exam traps?

- INSTC = India–**Iran**–Russia–Europe, not via China.
- Founders: **India, Iran, Russia**. Pakistan is not a member.
- Signed **2000**, ratified **2002**.
- Chabahar is on the **Gulf of Oman**, not the Persian Gulf proper.
- India builds Chabahar to **avoid depending on Pakistan**.

Practice MCQs

1. The International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) connects India to Central Asia and Europe via which country?

A. Sri Lanka

B. China

C. Iran

D. Bangladesh

See answer ↓

2. In which year did India, Iran, and Russia sign the founding agreement for the INSTC, making them its founding members?

A. 2000

B. 2010

C. 1995

D. 2015

See answer ↓

3. Which Iranian port anchors the INSTC's southern leg, giving India a route to Central Asia and Afghanistan that bypasses Pakistan?

A. Bandar-e-Anzali

B. Chabahar Port

C. Bandar Abbas

D. Bushehr Port

See answer ↓

4. Compared to the traditional Suez Canal route, the INSTC offers roughly what kind of time and cost advantage for India-Europe trade?

A. About 30% cheaper and 40% shorter

B. It is slower but cheaper

C. No meaningful difference

D. It is faster but far more expensive

See answer ↓

5. Besides India, Iran, and Russia, INSTC membership has since expanded to include which of the following?

A. Only Pakistan and Afghanistan

B. Only China and Japan

C. No other countries have joined since 2000

D. Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, among other Central Asian and regional states

See answer ↓

6. India is one of the founding members of the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), a multimodal transportation corridor, which will connect

A. India to Central Asia via China

B. India to Central Asia to Europe via Iran

C. India to Europe through Azerbaijan

D. India to South-East Asia through Bangladesh and Myanmar

See answer ↓

7. What is the importance of developing Chabahar Port by India?

A. India will not depend on Pakistan for access to Afghanistan and Central Asia.

B. India's trade with African countries will enormously increase.

C. Pakistan will facilitate and protect the installation of a gas pipeline between Iraq and India.

D. India's relations with oil-producing Arab countries will be strengthened.

See answer ↓

8. On which date in 2024 did IPGL sign its ten-year contract to operate the Shahid Beheshti terminal?

A. 6 May 2024

B. 23 May 2024

C. 29 September 2024

D. 13 May 2024

See answer ↓

9. Which three leaders were at the trilateral meeting in Tehran in May 2016?

A. Singh, Rouhani and Karzai

B. Vajpayee, Khatami and Karzai

C. Modi, Rouhani and Ghani

D. Modi, Khamenei and Ghani

See answer ↓

10. Which Chabahar terminal does India Ports Global Limited operate under the 2024 contract?

A. Shahid Beheshti

B. Shahid Rajaee

C. Shahid Kalantari

D. Shahid Bahonar

See answer ↓

11. On what date did the US withdrawal of the 2018 Chabahar sanctions exemption take effect?

A. 16 September 2025

B. 26 April 2026

C. 29 September 2025

D. 29 October 2025

See answer ↓

12. In which Iranian province does Chabahar lie?

A. Bushehr

B. Sistan-Baluchestan

C. Khuzestan

D. Hormozgan

See answer ↓

13. Which three countries signed the intergovernmental agreement of 12 September 2000 that started the INSTC?

A. Iran, Russia and Azerbaijan

B. India, Russia and Kazakhstan

C. India, Iran and Afghanistan

D. India, Iran and Russia

See answer ↓

14. Chabahar lies outside which narrow waterway, which makes sea access easier?

A. Strait of Malacca

B. Palk Strait

C. Strait of Hormuz

D. Bab-el-Mandeb

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **C.** The INSTC links India to Central Asia and Europe via Iran, through Iran's Chabahar Port and onward through the Caspian Sea to Russia.

   ↑ Q1

2. **A.** India, Iran, and Russia signed the founding INSTC agreement in St. Petersburg in 2000, ratifying it in 2002.

   ↑ Q2

3. **B.** Chabahar Port anchors the INSTC's southern terminus, giving India connectivity to Central Asia and Afghanistan without transiting Pakistan.

   ↑ Q3

4. **A.** Industry estimates put the INSTC at roughly 30% cheaper and 40% shorter than the traditional Suez Canal route between India and Europe.

   ↑ Q4

5. **D.** INSTC membership has expanded well beyond the three founders to include Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Armenia, Belarus, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Oman, Turkey, Ukraine, and Syria.

   ↑ Q5

6. **B.** The INSTC links India to Iran (via Chabahar Port), then across the Caspian Sea to Russia and onward into Europe, effectively connecting India to Central Asia and Europe via Iran. India, Iran, and Russia are its founding members, having signed the founding agreement in St. Petersburg in 2000.

   UPSC CSP 2025 GS Paper I, Q62.

   ↑ Q6

7. **A.** The correct option is the third one. Chabahar gives India a sea-and-land route to Afghanistan and Central Asia. That route runs through Iran and never crosses Pakistan. Pakistan does not let Indian goods cross its land to Afghanistan. The other options name goals that Chabahar does not serve. The official paper lists the options in a different order, with the same answer. ↑ Q7
8. **D.** IPGL signed the contract on 13 May 2024. Its partner was Iran's Ports and Maritime Organisation. The deal runs for ten years. India committed about $120 million for equipment. The 2015 MoU and the 2016 trilateral pact came earlier. ↑ Q8
9. **C.** Modi, Iran's President Rouhani and Afghan President Ghani were at the meeting that saw the pact signed on 23 May 2016. It set up a transit corridor using Chabahar as a sea hub. Vajpayee and Khatami are linked to the 2003 roadmap instead. ↑ Q9
10. **A.** IPGL operates the Shahid Beheshti terminal. The Shahid Kalantari terminal is the older one. ORF gives Beheshti a draft of 16.5 metres. Kalantari has a draft of 7 to 8 metres. The 2015 MoU also named Shahid Beheshti. ↑ Q10
11. **C.** The withdrawal took effect on 29 September 2025. The US State Department had announced it on 16 September. India then received a six-month waiver from 29 October 2025. That waiver ran until 26 April 2026. ↑ Q11
12. **B.** Chabahar lies in Sistan-Baluchestan province. It sits on Iran's south-eastern coast, on the Gulf of Oman. ORF contrasts Chabahar with the congested port of Bandar Abbas. ↑ Q12
13. **D.** India, Iran and Russia signed the agreement on 12 September 2000. Azerbaijan joined it in 2005. Thirteen countries have since ratified the agreement. ORF says Chabahar is not yet formally part of the INSTC. ↑ Q13
14. **C.** Chabahar lies outside the Strait of Hormuz. Ships do not have to pass that chokepoint to reach it. The port opens directly onto the Arabian Sea from the Gulf of Oman. ORF also notes that ships face no long waits there. ↑ Q14

Quick-check answers

1. **False.** ↑ 1
2. **True.** ↑ 2
3. **False.** ↑ 3
4. **True.** ↑ 4

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