



Former Iranian President Rouhani at Port Chabahar in 2017 (Photo by VOA News)

INDO-PACIFIC

# Taliban Endorses Chabahar Port

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Last Monday, a Taliban spokesman described Chabahar Port, located in southeastern Iran, as a "transformative opportunity" for Afghanistan. He stressed its potential value in improving Afghan trade, economic independence, economic diversification, and integration with other Central Asian nations. The announcement comes after an agreement was signed by Iran on May 13 handing India control of Chabahar Port for the next 10 years, providing Indian goods with a way to reach Afghanistan and the rest of Central Asia. Iran, India, and Afghanistan agreed in 2016 to develop the port for trade, which included roads and rail to Afghanistan. With India in control of the port and the Taliban ambitious to collaborate, Afghanistan could begin to receive more aid and supplies than it has since the American withdrawal of troops in 2021.



## A Vision of Change

Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid emphasized the goal of making Afghanistan a more competitive player in exports and trade, in the article posted to the Islamic Emirates of Afghanistan official website. According to Mujahid, the port, by allowing trade with the rest of Central Asia, would not only enable growth but also promote economic stability for a country whose economy is collapsed, according to the UN. Mujahid also mentioned "diplomatic initiatives" for the port, which included talks between regional powers. Mujahid also noted that the port is an alternative to Pakistan's Gwadar Port, which China utilizes and invests in and the Taliban currently relies on, which would reduce the Taliban's reliance on Karachi and a single trade corridor.

India's agreement with Iran, signed by Indian Ports Global Limited, is actually a longer-term renewal of a contract that has been kept annually since 2016. India has been using Chabahar Port to send humanitarian aid to Afghanistan (including, notably, twenty thousand tons of wheat last year). Despite not recognizing the Taliban regime in Kabul, Iran has maintained close trade and commercial ties with Afghanistan. The port has also been used to send goods to Iran.

Indian Prime Minister Modi claimed the agreement is in line with his International North South Transport Corridor project, which connects India via rail and road to Russia. The route, an alternative to the Suez Canal, notably bypasses Pakistan. The route currently runs through Azerbaijan, with links from Iran to Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. It offers connectivity for Iran, India, Russia, and perhaps now Afghanistan to resource-rich Central Asian countries. Reportedly, goods can be transported through it for 30 percent cheaper.

Operations at Chabahar Port have been suffering ever since former President Trump imposed heavy sanctions on Iran. India has avoided buying Iranian oil since those sanctions were put in place. Yet, when asked about the Chabahar Port deal, US State Department Spokesperson Vedant Patel mentioned US sanctions placed on Iran already, as well as potential sanctions placed on Iranian business partners. In response, Indian Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar said India would convey to the US the benefits of the deal.

## What's Next?

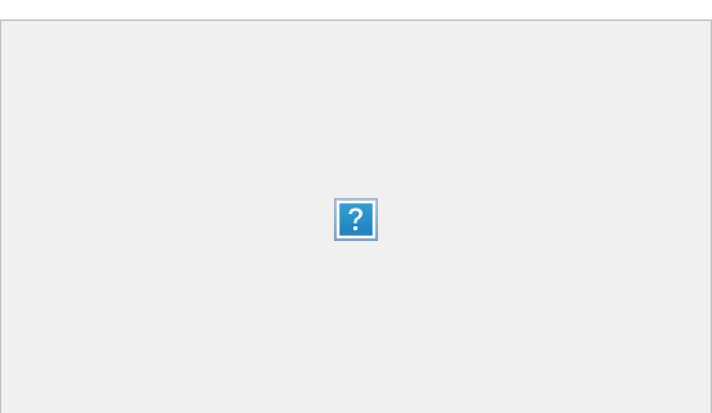
In the past week alone, recent floods have killed hundreds in northern Afghanistan. The country's economy and health system is suffering, yet Afghans have received little foreign aid. More than \$8 billion in cash from the United Nations has been sent to Afghanistan since the Taliban took over in 2021, some of which ended up in the Taliban-controlled central bank of Afghanistan, according to ProPublica. Afghanistan is facing one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world. The further development of the port, trade routes, and infrastructure surrounding it, could, at the very least, provide Afghanistan with access to more aid. It could also provide the Taliban with an opportunity to display diplomatic skills. On the other hand, an influx of trade and exportation does not directly signify sustainable growth or stability.

Meanwhile, the recent death of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi is unlikely to harm India's agreement to control Chabahar port. The two nations' relationship should remain consistent. The deal is a large economic opportunity for India—the nation can import oil via the port and avoid Hormuz, for example. The more India trades with Iran through the port, the greater their risk of incurring US sanctions. Nonetheless, the port is an alternative to Pakistani ports with heavy Chinese influence. If the US doesn't respond with sanctions to increased use of the port, they risk strengthening Iran and a Taliban-led Afghanistan, but they also provide a way to develop Central Asian nations without relying on China.

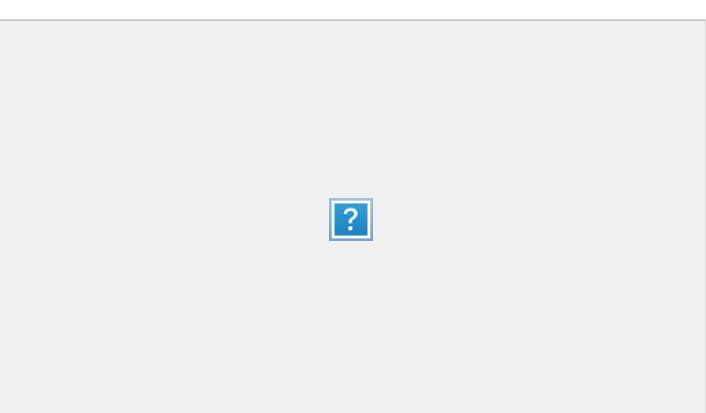
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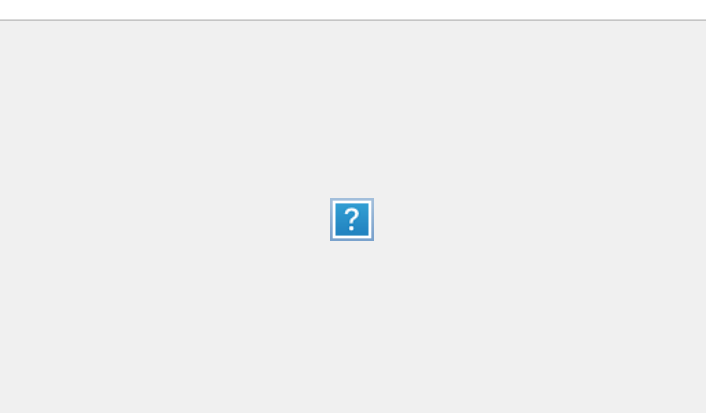
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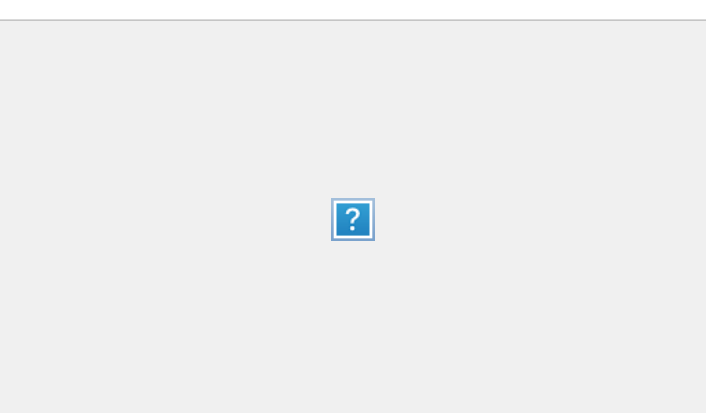
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