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Ports Geopolitics and the India-Iran revived partnership

The 23rd of May Afghanistan, India and Iran signed a tripartite agreement in Teheran. The deal focuses on joint investments for the development of the Iranian port of Chabahar: India will finance the project aimed to transform Iran's Sistan Baluchistan port in a regional hub between Asia and the Gulf. If the agreement will be implemented, Afghanistan will be able to trade through a new commercial route which bypasses Pakistan (for instance, exporting directly raw materials as copper and iron).

After the 2015 nuclear deal, this event marks Teheran's public return to Asian geopolitics; and some regional powers are dissatisfied with such a strategic step. Pakistan remains excluded from a project that, on the contrary, empowers Afghanistan's regional projection; Islamabad's rival Gwadar port, situated in the adjoining Pakistani Baluchistan, will have to compete with Chabahar for shipping traffic. China has much invested in the development of Gwadar: in New Delhi's eyes, Chabahar would be the Indian "connectivity" response to Beijing's New Silk Road, in order to reach - among others - Central Asian markets. China and India aim to upgrade their maritime, commercial strategies towards Africa and the Middle East, seeking to consolidate energy import from the Gulf. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have been attempting to upgrade India-GCC interdependency, beyond traditional economic issues, in the domains of defence and nuclear energy. On the other hand, India looks for co-operative equidistance between the Gulf's two competing shores.

The brand new Iran-India-Afghanistan agreement emphasizes the probable future rivalry between Chabahar and Gwadar for shipping traffic. However, development projects on Chabahar risk to generate a crowded competition: does it make now sense to talk about geopolitics of ports in the Arabian-Indian

maritime node? Surely, Jebel Ali in Dubai (UAE) is already a giant container port, a terminal able to connect not only the Chinese-European trade, but also parts of Africa and the same India, so supporting the centrality of Dubai in the international trade market. In the GCC region, the Khorfakkan port (in the UAE, belonging to the Sharjah emirate even though near to Fujairah) and the Omanis Sohar, al-Duqm and Salalah hope to take advantage from the return of Iran in the international concert and the subsequent sanctions removal, to gain also access to Central Asian markets.

From this snapshot, the geopolitics of ports could likely become another chapter of the never-ending rivalry for Middle Eastern hegemony between Saudi Arabia and Iran. However, because of the impressive amount of trade exchanges in this geographical area, many hubs could coexist, carving out niches of specialisation and so paving the way for a positive, win-win competition among logistic facilities. Moreover, maritime infrastructural centres drive the creation of free trade zones, so multiplying opportunities of growth and economic diversification, as in the case of Jebel Ali.

The renewed partnership between Iran and India, which underpins the tripartite agreement just signed, demonstrates how much trade and energy are fundamental in alliance-making politics. Teheran's strategic planning is going to increasingly turn to Asian routes and markets in order to balance Middle Eastern instability.

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