Syllabus subtopic: Bilateral, regional and global groupings and agreements involving India and/or affecting India’s interests

Prelims and Mains focus: About the 19th India-Iran joint commission meeting; Chabahar port and its significance for India’s diplomacy

News: The External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar met with Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif for a meeting of the 19th Indial-Iran joint commission, including talks on the Chabahar port, during a visit that could see him dealing with concerns of Indian expatriates over the Citizenship (Amendment) Act as well.

Background

- The meeting of the two ministers was the first since last month, when Mr. Zarif had told a group of visiting Indian journalists that he was `disappointed` that India had allowed itself to be `bullied` by the United States and stopped all oil imports from Iran. Speaking in Delhi, Iran’s Ambassador Ali Chegeni had earlier suggested that India’s adherence to U.S. sanctions was also affecting Chabahar port development plans.
- In Washington last week, however, a senior U.S. official made it clear that it would continue its “narrow exemption” to India to develop the Chabahar port, recognising its role as `as a lifeline to Afghanistan in terms for India to be able to export humanitarian supplies and potentially helping Afghanistan diversify its export opportunities.`
- Subsequently, diplomats from India, Iran and Afghanistan met in Delhi on Friday and discussed several new initiatives for the trilateral project at Chabahar.

About Chabahar Port

The Chabahar Agreement was signed in June 2015 and approved by Iran’s Guardian Council in November 2016. Chabahar is being seen as a gateway for trade by India, Iran and Afghanistan with Central Asian countries.

Location: Iran’s Chabahar port is located on the Gulf of Oman and is the only
oceanic port of the country. The port gives access to the energy-rich Persian Gulf nations’ southern coast.

Significance for India

- The first and foremost significance of the Chabahar port is the fact that India can bypass Pakistan in transporting goods to Afghanistan. Chabahar port will boost India’s access to Iran, the key gateway to the International North-South Transport Corridor that has sea, rail and road routes between India, Russia, Iran, Europe and Central Asia.
- Chabahar port will be beneficial to India in countering Chinese presence in the Arabian Sea which China is trying to ensure by helping Pakistan develop the Gwadar port. Gwadar port is less than 400 km from Chabahar by road and 100 km by sea.
- With Chabahar port being developed and operated by India, Iran also becomes a military ally to India. Chabahar could be used in case China decides to flex its navy muscles by stationing ships in Gwadar port to reckon its upper hand in the Indian Ocean, Persian Gulf and Middle East.
- With Chabahar port becoming functional, there will be a significant boost in the import of iron ore, sugar and rice to India. The import cost of oil to India will also see a considerable decline. India has already increased its crude purchase from Iran since the West imposed ban on Iran was lifted.
- Chabahar port will ensure in the establishment of a politically sustainable connectivity between India and Afghanistan. This will in turn, lead to better economic ties between the two countries.
- From a diplomatic perspective, Chabahar port could be used as a point from where humanitarian operations could be coordinated.