



64/2026

23/09/2026

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The Importance of Land Corridors (VI): International North-South Transport Corridor

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Abstract:

The International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) is a transport route that has been extensively used throughout history. It has played a pivotal role in many of the global and regional conflicts occurring around the world. Along its land route, it forms a transport corridor connecting St. Petersburg's port, on the shores of the Baltic Sea, with the port of Chah Bahar, on the coast of the Indian Ocean. A huge part of the corridor's route pass through countries such as Russia and Iran, both of which have a deep interest in keeping this land route open. Furthermore, it serves as an access route to the southern part of China's Belt and Road Initiative, whilst also facilitating sea connections with India. Conversely, the United States, as a major maritime power, is disadvantaged by the existence of this transport route, which helps to explain, from a global perspective, conflicts such as those in Ukraine and the Persian Gulf.

Keywords:

INSTC, CPEC, CMEC, Tehran, Iran, Russia.

How to cite this document:

CASTRO TORRES, José Ignacio. *The Importance of Land Corridors (VI): International North-South Transport Corridor*. IEEE Analysis Paper 64/2026.

***NOTE:** The views expressed in the *Analysis Papers* are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the IEEE or the Ministry of Defence.

Introduction

Ever since the invention of the railway, Russia has strived to reach the open waters of the Indian Ocean. This is, in a sense, logical, as the heart of the vast Eurasian continent is virtually cut off from the open seas.

St. Petersburg is delimited to the west by the Danish straits of the Baltic Sea; Murmansk and Arkhangelsk, by the frozen waters of the Arctic or by the GIUK Passage (¹); and Vladivostok, by the outlets of the Sea of Japan.

The geographical reality of the imperial, Soviet and, subsequently, federal territories has meant that, over time, in this struggle for access to the sea, a series of alliances and rivalries have arisen in which the territories of ancient Persia have played a pivotal role.

At present, there is the possibility of establishing a land transport route linking St. Petersburg with the Iranian ports on the Persian Gulf, and even the Indian Ocean. This possibility revitalises Russia's role as a global power and Iran's as a regional power, whilst demonstrating that geography insists that certain events recur in certain places.

It should be borne in mind that this corridor is linked to other transport routes within Eurasia, meaning that all the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), together with Afghanistan, can use sections of this corridor for their own transport needs. Furthermore, China has the opportunity to join this initiative for land transport routes.

Finally, Iranian port terminals are of significant strategic importance, as they are not only located in the Persian Gulf, where the narrowness of the Strait of Hormuz is a source of recurring geostrategic problems. Furthermore, the Iranian coast of the Indian Ocean can offer interesting alternatives, as it can connect with major ports in southern Pakistan and on the west coast of India.

¹ The acronym GIUK refers to the Greenland–Iceland–United Kingdom line. Since the days of the Cold War, this sea lane has been patrolled by NATO forces to hinder the Soviet fleet – and, in particular, its submarines – from reaching the open sea.

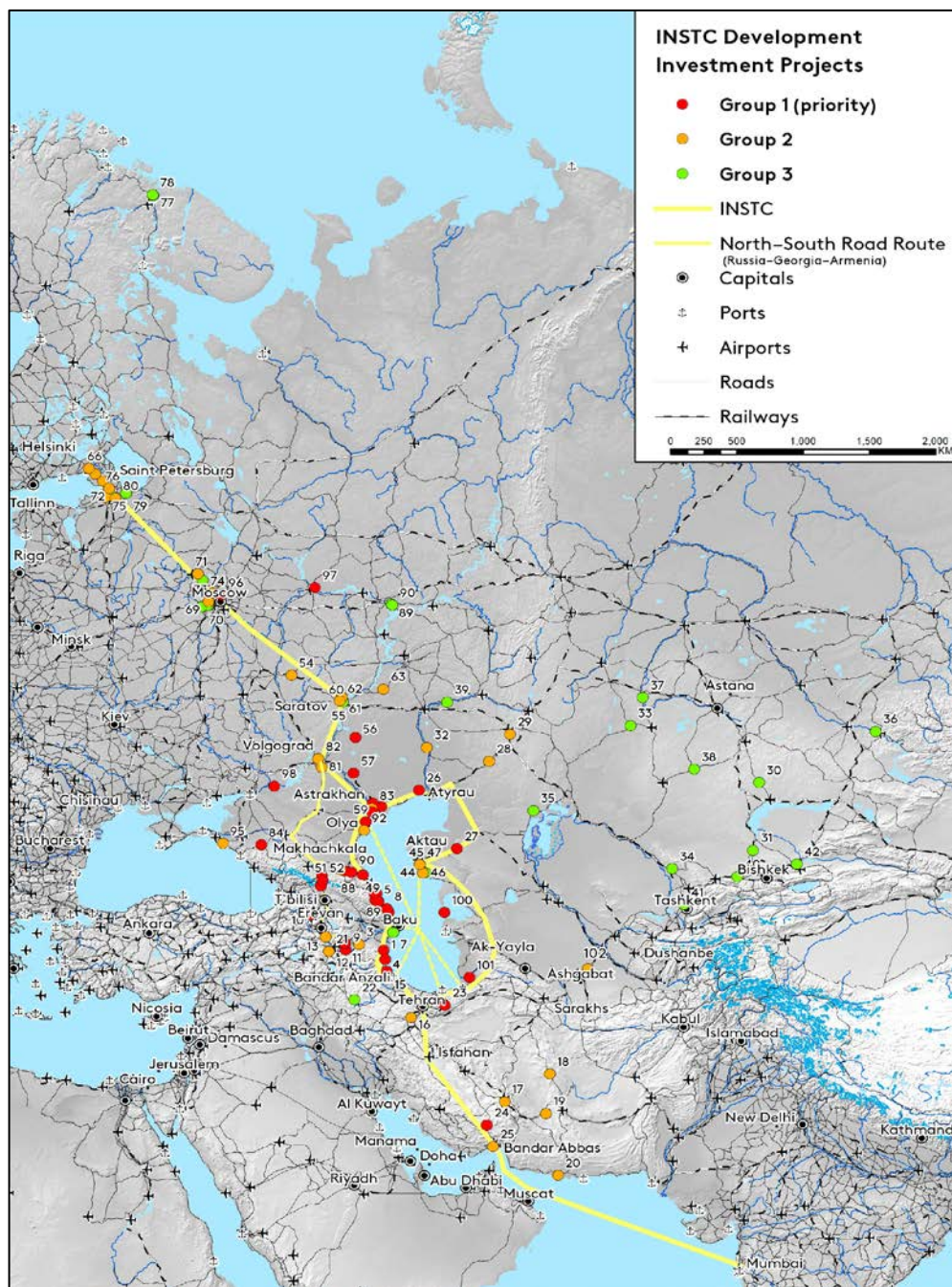


Figure 1. Complete route of the INSTC corridor. Source: VINOKUROV, Evgeny *et al.* International North-South Transport Corridor. Reports and Working Papers 22/2. Eurasian Development Bank. Almaty, Moscow, 2022, p. 36.

Currently, the corridor is subject to the vicissitudes of several interrelated conflicts affecting this transport route. The conflict in Ukraine has drastically reduced Russian influence along its axis of geopolitical projection towards the West, largely involving the European Union and the United States.

In this context, Russia has expanded its other spheres of influence. One of these is oriented towards the east and, if over-emphasised, would entail a high degree of dependence on China.

Russia is therefore left with the option of turning to a traditional route of communication heading south, which has already been used on several occasions throughout history. This route passes through the countries of the Caucasus, Iran and, finally, India, a country which maintains a special relationship with Russia.

The 2026 Persian Gulf conflict, which primarily involves the US and Israel against Iran, can be analysed from different perspectives. From the standpoint of land-based transport, it presents an opportunity for the Western bloc, through which it could undermine President Putin's position of strength on the global stage. Similarly, it could prove harmful to several of the transport options promoted by China.

A historical perspective. Similar events in different times

At the beginning of the 19th century, the Persian Qajar dynasty likewise began to face pressure from the land power of Russia and the maritime power of Britain, within the context of a global rivalry that would culminate in the 'Great Game'² – a struggle between tellurocracies and thalassocracies that, to a certain extent, continues to this day.

At that time, the British sought to dominate the seas to secure their communications with India, whilst the Russians wanted to gain access to the open waters of the Indian Ocean via Persia.

The result was that, following two disastrous wars against Russia, Persia was forced to sign the humiliating Treaties of Gulistan (1813) and Turkmenchay (1828), under which it lost its territories in the Caucasus and was compelled to allow Russian activities on its territory³.

² The 'Great Game' was a term coined by the then Colonel Arthur Wellesley and popularised by the writer Rudyard Kipling. It referred to the struggle for power between the British and the Russians on the Eurasian continent throughout the 19th century.

³ AVERY, Peter W. *et al.* *The Cambridge History of Iran*. Cambridge University Press, 1991, pp. 334–338.

For their part, the British landed at Bushehr, forcing the Qajars to renounce their rights in Afghanistan under the Treaty of Paris of 1857⁴.

All subsequent attempts by Persia to align itself with one power or another led to the same regrettable outcomes, which resulted in the country being divided into spheres of influence amongst the empires. This series of humiliations, coupled with the dire situation in which the country found itself, aroused a feeling of animosity towards the foreign imperial powers amongst its inhabitants.

Although Persia attempted to remain neutral during the First World War (FWW), German intelligence sought to incite a revolt amongst some of the tribes in the territory, which prompted British intervention. Nevertheless, Persia maintained a pro-German and pro-Ottoman stance until the end of the conflict, in an attempt to distance itself from the Russians and the British⁵.

The similarity with the events of early 2026 must be highlighted, when a social revolution took place in Iran which, although it was quashed and suppressed by the Ayatollahs' regime, was described by the latter as a plot instigated by the US and Israel⁶.

Following the Pahlavis' rise to power, they promoted the secularisation and westernisation of Iran, despite opposition from the religious clergy⁷.

At the start of the Second World War (WWII), the Iranians once again attempted to remain neutral, but the German invasion of the Soviet Union was served upon for the British and Soviets to occupy the country in 1941. The intention of both was to gain control of Iran's oil resources and to use Iran's transport routes to penetrate the heart of Eurasia, transporting the supplies the Soviets urgently needed to halt German expansion into the Caucasus⁸.

These routes are, in fact, linked to regional and global disputes that define the end of the first quarter of the 21st century.

⁴ WARD, Steven R. **Immortal: A military history of Iran and its armed forces**. Georgetown University Press, 2009, pp. 79–81.

⁵ ATAÖV, Türkaya. 'Turkey and Iran towards the First World War', **The Turkish Yearbook of International Relations**, no. 25. 1995, pp. 160–163.

⁶ KADIVAR, Mohammad Ali. 'Rethinking Political Change in Iran: From Protest to War', *Middle East Research and Information Project*. 3 June 2026. <https://www.merip.org/2026/06/rethinking-political-change-in-iran-from-protest-to-war/>

Note: All hyperlinks in this article are active as of 19 August 2026.

⁷ In 1935, King Reza Shah Pahlavi changed the name of Persia to Iran.

⁸ CASTILLO CÁCERES, Fernando. 'The Cold War in Iran', *Information Bulletin*, no. 215. 1989, p. 85.

Iranian territory was divided between the Soviets in the north and the British in the south, whilst military forces from both countries remained in Tehran; they were joined by American forces in 1942.

Finally, Iran was compelled to join the Allied side, declared war on Germany and hosted the Tehran Conference in 1943, attended by Churchill, Stalin and Roosevelt⁹.

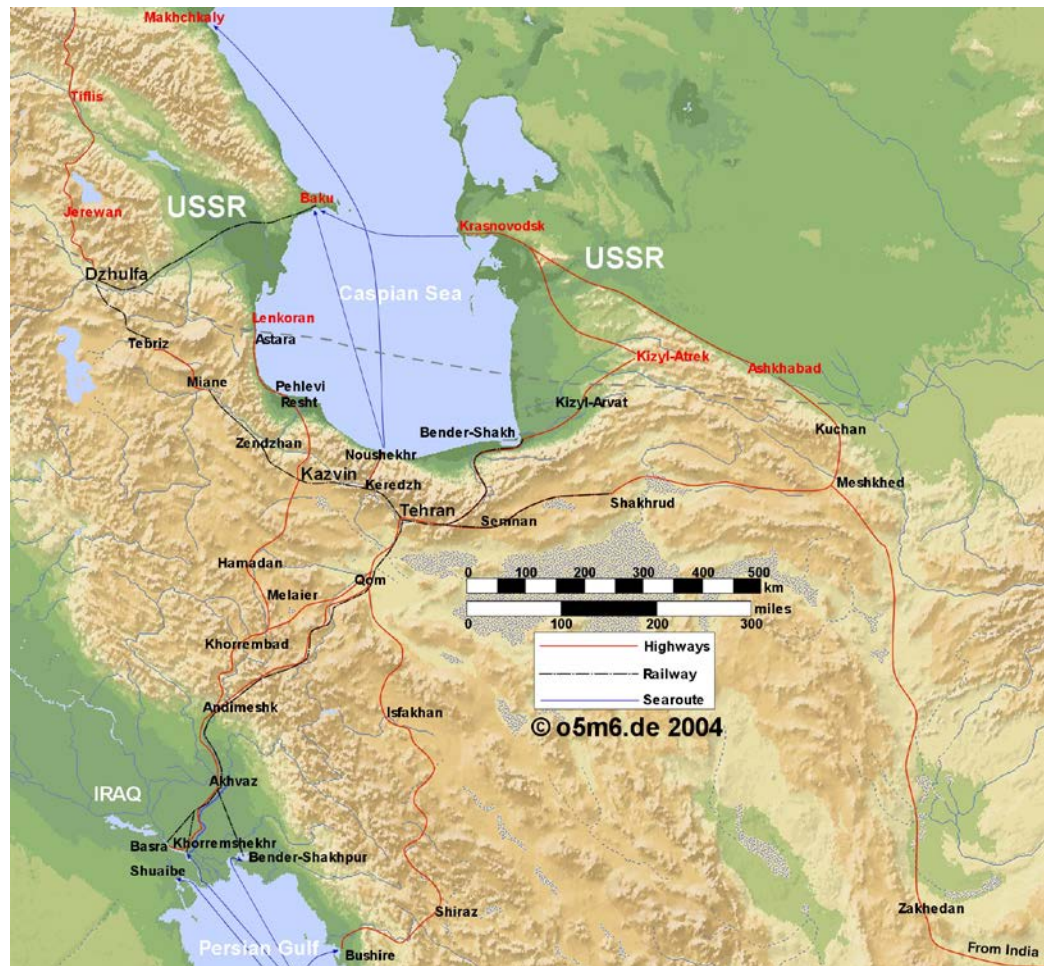


Illustration 2. The Persian Corridor or Victory Bridge during the Second World War. Source: Engines of the Red Army. Foreign Aid: The Persian Route <https://www.o5m6.de/redarmy/persian.php>

The end of the war saw the emergence of the US as a new maritime power, and Iran aligned itself even more closely with the Americans following the British decolonisation of the Suez Canal and the island of Bahrain¹⁰.

⁹ DANIEL, Elton. *The History of Iran*, Greenwood Histories of the Modern Nations. Greenwood Press, 2001, pp. 144–145.

¹⁰ KEDDIE, Nikki R. and RICHARD, Yann. *Roots of Revolution: An Interpretive History of Modern Iran*. New Haven & London, Yale University Press, 2003, p. 163.

The USSR was forced to withdraw its support for the separatist Azerbaijani republic in northern Iran in exchange for a promise – which was never fulfilled – by Prime Minister Qavam to grant oil concessions to the Soviets¹¹.

As the division between the blocs of the so-called Cold War began, under the regime of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the British oil company Anglo-Iranian Oil Company was established, later joined by the American Standard Oil. Roosevelt himself declared that Iran was vital to US interests¹².

Fast-forwarding in time, and setting aside the differences between the two figures, President Trump declared in August 2026 that the Strait of Hormuz would soon be under US control¹³.

In the early 1950s, Prime Minister Mohamed Mossadegh attempted to nationalise Iran's oil resources, prompting a reaction from the British and Americans in the form of a blockade and a plot. This culminated in the overthrow of Mossadegh in 1953 and the installation of the Shah as an autocratic ruler, following the execution of *Operation Ajax*.

This effectively closed off the route of communication that the Soviets might have used to establish ties in the southern part of the vast Eurasian landmass^{14,15}.

This situation persisted until the Islamic Revolution of 1979, in which Ayatollah Khomeini ultimately triumphed over other, more secular options.

The new regime's stance advocated the destruction of the State of Israel and was entirely opposed to US influence in the region. However, it did not view the Soviets favourably either, as the Islamic Revolution cracked down on the atheist communists of the *Tudeh* Party and condemned the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

The USSR's support for Saddam Hussein's regime during the Iran–Iraq War in the 1980s confirmed Khomeini's animosity towards the Soviet bloc¹⁶.

¹¹ HUDSON, William R. *From Confrontation to Coexistence: The Evolution of Soviet Foreign Policy*. California State University, Sacramento, 1977, p. 33. <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/ADA045380.pdf>

¹² CASTILLO CÁCERES, Fernando. 'The Cold War in Iran', *Information Bulletin*, 1989, no. 215, p. 87.

¹³ AL JAZEERA. 'Trump says he will declare the Strait of Hormuz a US "territory" amid the war with Iran'. 14 August 2026. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/8/14/trump-says-he-will-declare-strait-of-hormuz-a-us-territory>

¹⁴ MARSH, Steve. 'The United States, Iran and Operation "Ajax": inverting interpretative orthodoxy', *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 39, no. 3. 2003, pp. 25–26.

¹⁵ Although Mosadegh was not a communist, before he was overthrown he relied on the pro-Soviet Tudeh Party. This served as justification for MI6 and the CIA to launch Operation Ajax.

¹⁶ ASINOVSKIY, Dmitry. 'Rostislav Ulianovskii, the Tudeh Party of Iran and Soviet attempts to set Iran on a non-capitalist path of development (1979–83)', *Cold War History*, vol. 24, no. 1, 2024, pp. 58–61.

The collapse of the USSR led the Russians and Iranians to adopt a pragmatic approach to their relations. Both nations ended the century by supporting Armenia in the Caucasus and reaching agreements on military and nuclear matters, which led to the resumption of construction of the Bushehr nuclear power station in 1995¹⁷.

The Americans responded to the Moscow–Tehran axis by imposing sanctions on Iran and promoting an alternative energy corridor via the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan pipeline, which has been operational since 2006¹⁸.

A similar initiative was attempted in 2025, when the US president announced the establishment of the Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity (TRIPP). However, opposition from Moscow and Tehran, coupled with Turkey's ambivalence, means that this project is shrouded in considerable uncertainty¹⁹.

Following Vladimir Putin's rise to power and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's election victory in 2005, Iran adopted a '*Look East*' policy in which relations with Russia were prioritised. This vision was consistent with the theories of *Eurasianism*, which have dominated Russian schools of thought throughout this century²⁰.

Furthermore, in the Middle East, Russian interests in the Mediterranean coincided in Syria with those of the Iranian '*Axis of Resistance*' and its allies in the region²¹.

During Hassan Rouhani's presidency, which coincided with Obama's term in office, the P5+1 group succeeded in securing the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on nuclear matters in 2015. Although it was not the best possible agreement, it mitigated the risk of nuclear proliferation and sought to integrate Iran into the international system²².

¹⁷ ÖZCAN, Nihat Ali and ÖZDAMAR, Özgür. 'Iran's nuclear programme and the future of US–Iranian relations', **Middle East Policy**, vol. 16, no. 1, 2009, pp. 122–123.

¹⁸ CORNELL, Svante E., TSERETELI, Mamuka and SOCOR, Vladimir. 'Geostrategic implications of the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan pipeline', **The Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan Pipeline: Oil Window to the West**, vol. 1, 2005, pp. 17–19.

¹⁹ NEW EURASIAN STRATEGIES CENTRE. 'The South Caucasus after the Washington meeting: What has really changed, and how Russia is responding'. 19 February 2026. <https://nestcentre.org/the-south-caucasus-after-the-washington-meeting/?print=print>

²⁰ SAGHAFI-AMERI, Nasser. 'Iran and the "Look to the East Policy"', *Centre for Strategic Research*. 2008, pp. 4–5.

²¹ For a more detailed study of the concept of the Axis of Resistance, we recommend reading the paper by CASTRO TORRES, José Ignacio. 'The Fall of the Axis of Resistance. The Loss of Iranian Influence in the Middle East', in *Geopolitical Panorama of Conflicts*. 2025, pp. 78–79.

https://www.defensa.gob.es/documents/2073105/3087758/PGC2025_Capitulo03.pdf/682c6e20-dff9-4803-d348-3473be822d37?t=1765797375350

²² For a more detailed account of the process leading to the establishment of the PAIC and its subsequent development, we recommend reading the following document: CASTRO TORRES, José Ignacio. *Negotiations with Iran after 4 November: New cards for an old game*. IEEE Analysis Paper 36/2018.

Meanwhile, relations with Russia were cemented on an economic level, with the establishment of a free trade area with the Eurasian Economic Union being promoted in 2019²³. Subsequently, nuclear relations with Russia were strengthened after President Trump, during his first term, withdrew from the JCPOA²⁴.

In 2022, during Joe Biden's presidency, the conflict in Ukraine flared up again and a series of changes took place in the land connections across the vast Eurasian landmass, which gave Iran's position as a geopolitical pivot even greater significance.

Consequently, the Iranians found themselves at a reinforced global crossroads, connecting China and Central Asia with Europe, whilst also linking Russia with India.

At that time, President Ebrahim Raisi had decoupled the JCPOA from his foreign economic policy and was opting to strengthen economic diplomacy with the Eastern powers, promoting connectivity through transport links.

The end of Biden's administration and Trump's second term maintained a consistent line regarding the Ukrainian conflict, despite the different ways in which this was expressed. However, Trump's return worsened relations with Iran, particularly following the major terrorist attack carried out by Hamas in 2023 from the Gaza Strip.

The events that unfolded subsequently, culminating in hostilities by the US and Israel against Iran in 2025 and 2026, pushed Iran even further into the Russian side²⁵.

For its part, China stepped up its support for Iran in the field of military technology, which has bolstered Iran's resilience²⁶.

https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2018/DIEEEA36-2018_Negociar_con_Iran_despues_del_04NOV_JICT.pdf

²³ Eurasian Economic Union. 'The Eurasian Economic Union and Iran are moving towards preferential trade conditions'. 28 October 2019. <https://eec.eaeunion.org/news/28-10-2019-1/>

²⁴ DJUYANDI, Yusa *et al.* 'The collapse of global governance: when the US leaves the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)', *Society*, vol. 9, no. 2. 2021, pp. 509–511.

²⁵ JOJA, Iulia-Sabina. 'Russia's Wartime Support for Iran', *Middle East Institute*. 3 June 2026. <https://mei.edu/policymemo/russias-wartime-support-for-iran/>

²⁶ FATTAH, Adham *et al.* 'Iran Update Special Report, 29 July 2026', *ISW*.

<https://understandingwar.org/research/middle-east/iran-update-special-report-july-29-2026/>

The revival of a communications concept through the INSTC

In 2000, an agreement was reached between Russia, Iran and India to relaunch a trade corridor which, throughout its history, has suffered numerous setbacks that have prevented its full development.

This transport route should not be viewed as a one-dimensional transport corridor, but rather as an intermodal network comprising the railways and roads that run through Russia, Kazakhstan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkmenistan and Iran. The maritime terminals on the Caspian and Arabian Seas should also be included.

India's interests must be taken into account to ensure that this corridor remains operational, as its western ports can be linked to it by sea.

In a different way, the corridor may also benefit China, as the establishment of a route that does not depend on maritime *chokepoints* controlled by rival powers could provide it with a link to the land-based component of its One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative.



Figure 3. The three main routes in the INSTC terminal area. Source: ZAKHAROV, Aleksei. The International North-South Transport Corridor: prospects and challenges for transport connectivity between Russia and India. Bulletin of MGIMO University, 2023, vol. 16, no. 2, p. 225.

Essentially, the INSTC comprises three main routes (see Figure 3).

Western Route

The Western Route passes through the border crossings of Samur in Russia; Yamala in Azerbaijan; and Astara on the Azerbaijan–Iran border, where it connects with the Iranian railway network. The importance of this route has grown over time after the construction of the bridge linking Azerbaijan with Iran and the completion of the Tehran–Qazvin–Rasht railway line.

However, from this point onwards, transport to Astara must be by road, which requires the establishment of intermodal road-rail connection points. This increases transport costs to the extent that this route is not considered viable under current conditions²⁷.

Iran's inability to complete the Astara–Anzali–Rasht section is due to the rugged terrain, but also to the need to expropriate land along the Iranian coast of the Caspian Sea.

Another rectifiable problem, in which Spain has considerable experience, is the difference in track gauge between the former Soviet states and Iran. However, the main obstacle at present stems from the sanctions imposed on both Russia and Iran due to the conflicts in Ukraine and the Gulf²⁸.

Furthermore, in 2026 Anzali's port and communications facilities were attacked by US and Israeli forces, which will further delay the project^{29,30}.

Eastern Route

The **Eastern Route** appears to be the most viable. It runs from Russia through Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Iran and, although there are still connectivity issues arising from the change in track gauge, it offers the best conditions in terms of transport infrastructure.

²⁷ VINOKUROV, Evgeny *et al.* 'International North–South Transport Corridor: Investments and Soft Infrastructure', *Reports and Working Papers 22/2*. Eurasian Development Bank, Almaty, Moscow, 2022.

²⁸ ЗАХАРОВ, Алексей/ZAKHAROV, Aleksei. 'The International North–South Transport Corridor: Challenges and Opportunities for Developing Transport Connectivity between Russia and India', *Bulletin of MGIMO University*, vol. 16, no. 2. 2023, p. 223.

²⁹ GOBLE, Paul. 'Israeli Attack on Iranian Port Brings Gulf War to the Caspian', *The Saratoga Foundation*. 24 March 2026. <https://www.saratoga-foundation.org/p/israeli-attack-on-iranian-port-brings>

³⁰ Report by Informasiya Agentliyi. 'Iran has postponed the start of construction of the Rasht–Astara railway until the end of 2026'. 20 April 2026. <https://report.az/ru/v-regione/iran-otlozhil-nachalo-stroitelstva-zh-d-resht-astara-na-konec-2026-goda>

The Sarajs transport hub, on the Turkmen side of the border with Iran, is in very good condition. So much so that, since 2022, a container transport service between Russia and India has been operating via this route.

Despite the Gulf conflict, in the summer of 2026, Kazakhstan's Minister of National Economy, Serik Zhumangarin, and Iran's Minister for Roads and Urban Development, Farzaneh Sadegh, met in Astana and agreed to expand cooperation in the field of transport³¹.

Shortly afterwards, this route was damaged when US forces attacked the Aq Tekeh Khan bridge, on the railway line between Aqqala and Incheh Borun³².

A further factor is the decline of numerous petrochemical industries in the Gulf region and the closure of the Strait of Hormuz in 2026. This route offers the opportunity to transport goods from the heart of Eurasia that the Gulf states are unable to produce or export as normal due to the conflict surrounding the strait. In this way, resources such as hydrocarbons and fertilisers could reach the open waters of the Indian Ocean³³.

Trans-Caspian Route

The third option is the Trans-Caspian Route. This one links the Russian ports of Olya (Astrakhan) and Makhachkala (Dagestan), in the north of the Caspian Sea, with the Iranian coastal cities of Anzali, Nowshahr and Amirabad³⁴.

As this route provides a direct link between Russia and Iran, it has been used as a safety valve for the Iranians during the 2026 crisis and may also be serving as a source of supply for components needed by the Iranian military industry.

Furthermore, the Caspian ports are being used to transport Russian raw materials, notably cereals. Against this backdrop, in March 2026 Israel attacked the Iranian naval

³¹ BITABAR, Assel G. 'Can Kazakhstan and Iran Sustain Momentum on Transport Corridor Development?', *The Diplomat*. 24 June 2026. <https://thediplomat.com/2026/06/can-kazakhstan-and-iran-sustain-momentum-on-transport-corridor-development/>

³² IRAN WIRE. 'American Missile Strike Damages Key Iran-Russia Railway Bridge'. 9 July 2026. <https://iranwire.com/en/news/154714-missile-strike-damages-key-iran-russia-railway-bridge/>

³³ ZAKHAROV, Aleksei. The 'North-South' International Transport Corridor: Challenges and Opportunities for the Development of Transport Connectivity between Russia and India. *Op. cit.*, p. 224.

³⁴ Sagadi, *et al.* / SAGHADI *et al.* Ports of the Caspian Sea. *Journal of Geography and Development* / 'Measuring the Development of Caspian Sea Ports', Sanjash Mizan Tosaq-e Yafta / *Journal of Geography and Development*, vol. 23, no. 80. 2025, p. 23.

base at Anzali, shattering ‘the illusion that the Caspian Sea was a secure, closed corridor through which Moscow and Tehran could circumvent the blockades in the Persian Gulf’.

In response, Russia and Iran have further intensified their military cooperation in this sea³⁵

Iran as the keystone linking the INSTC and the OBOR

Despite the various alternatives offered by the corridor’s three routes, they must ultimately pass through Iran. The Iranian terrain is particularly rugged due to the country’s mountainous nature, meaning that transport routes are scarce, mandatory crossing points are critical and the potential for disruption is very high.

Although the backbone of the system for transporting large volumes of goods is the railway, it is supplemented by roads and motorways, forming a network of transport links across the country. The INSTC envisages a series of improvements within Iran itself to establish this transport corridor³⁶.

The crises that, over time, have pitted Iran against the US and Israel have led to a breakdown in relations in 2026, during which attacks have been carried out on Iran’s critical infrastructure. These include certain transport routes that can be directly linked to the INSTC project.

Apart from the facilities and routes already mentioned, situated near border crossings or the ports on the Caspian Sea, at least three main transport routes run through the interior of Iran, which can be linked to this corridor for the transport of large volumes of goods (see Figure 4).

³⁵ NANDA, Prakash. ‘Russia Pierces U.S. Naval Blockade of Iran: Moscow — Not Beijing — Keeps Tehran Alive via the Caspian Loophole’, *The Eurasian Times*. 18 May 2026. <https://www.eurasiantimes.com/russia-pierces-u-s-naval-blockade-of-iran/>

³⁶ Specifically, for the Islamic Republic of Iran, the INSTC envisages the implementation of the following projects: construction of the missing Rasht–Astara railway section; construction of the Qazvin–Qom railway section; modernisation of the Qom–Bafq, Bafq–Kerman and Kerman–Zahedan railway sections; construction and modernisation of the Zahedan–Birjand railway section; construction of the Chabahar–Faraj–Bam railway section; construction of the new port of Chabahar; construction of the Tabriz–Marand–Bazargan motorway; construction of the Bazargan–Port of Bandar-e Imam Khomeini motorway; modernisation of the Garmsar–Incheh Borun railway; construction of the Sirjan–Bandar Abbas road; a new bulk cargo terminal at the Port of Shahid Rajaei. For a detailed overview of each of these projects, we recommend reading the following publication: VINOKUROV, Evgeny *et al.* ‘International North–South Transport Corridor: Investments and Soft Infrastructure’, *Reports and Working Papers* 22/2. Eurasian Development Bank, Almaty–Moscow, 2022.

These transport routes share common characteristics, including the simultaneous integration of the Tehran–Qom and Tehran–Mashhad transport axes— these cities are of great political, economic and spiritual significance to the country and are very well connected to one another.

It is worth highlighting the importance of the Mashhad–Tehran section as a key transport hub, as it serves not only the INSTC but also the Southern Corridor of the (OBOR) initiative, which runs east–west across the vast Eurasian continent³⁷.



Figure 4. Main Iranian railway lines. Created by the author based on Chernopyatova, S. 'Private companies, import substitution and "North-South". What do we know about Iran's railways?', *ПОСОЛЬСКАЯ ЖИЗНЬ/Vida diplomática*. 18 March 2023. <https://embassylife.ru/en/2023/03/18/24044/>

As can be seen from Figure 4, it is possible to reach the port of Bandar-e Imam Khomeini, near the Abadan refinery, via Tehran and Qom from the border crossings in northern Iran. This area has been targeted during the recent hostilities involving the US and Israel— although the damage has not been particularly severe, perhaps due to fears of a stronger

³⁷ As it is not the subject of this analysis, the southern corridor of the Belt and Road Initiative will not be discussed in further detail here. However, we recommend reading the article by USMAN, Muhammad, WAFULA, Marie Sangona and AZAM, Shafiq: 'Sanctions and Strategic Autonomy: How BRI Helps Iran Bypass Western Isolation', *International Journal for Social Sciences*, Volume 4, Issue 4, 2025.

Iranian response against oil facilities in the Gulf. Nevertheless, damage and destruction have been reported to several bridges along the transport routes leading to the city³⁸.

Similarly, the Tehran–Qom corridor provides a transport route to the major port of Bandar Abbas, near the Strait of Hormuz. During the months of 2026 when open hostilities took place, several road and rail bridges linking Bandar Abbas with the north and north-west of the country were damaged³⁹.

The fact that the main US attacks have targeted the transport links providing access to this port gives an idea of its crucial importance⁴⁰.

A third possibility, linked to the previous ones, is to head south from Mashhad, either turning off towards Bandar Abbas or continuing through the heart of Iran via Kerman until reaching the transport hub of Zahedan, near Afghanistan.

From this Iranian city, strenuous efforts have been made to establish a transport route that can reach the port of Chahbahar, the construction of which is nearing completion. Although this port is situated some distance from the Persian Gulf, its military facilities have been damaged by the Americans, whilst the civilian facilities do not appear to have suffered significant damage⁴¹.

Chahbahar serves as a maritime gateway for the former Soviet states, Afghanistan and China, and has the potential to establish a link between the ports of the Indian Ocean and the overland routes leading into Eurasia.

The nearest ports are in Pakistan, specifically Karachi and Gwadar, although the west coast of India is also well positioned⁴².

³⁸ TASS. 'Seven killed in US attack on Iran's Bandar-e Imam Khomeyni', *Fars*. 17 July 2026.

<https://tass.com/world/2161353>

³⁹ IRANINTL. 'US strikes cut roads and bridges in southern Iran as talk of a ground assault grows'. 18 July 2026.

<https://www.iranintl.com/en/202607185204>

⁴⁰ MAGEE, Caolán. 'Why is the US attacking southern Iran's civilian infrastructure?', *Al Jazeera*. 17 July 2026.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/7/17/why-is-the-us-attacking-southern-irans-civilian-infrastructure>

⁴¹ US CENTRAL COMMAND. 'US forces successfully destroyed the Chah Bahar Shahid Kalantari Port surveillance tower', X. 16 July 2026. <https://x.com/CENTCOM/status/2078125131847594149>

⁴² UL MUNIR, Fakhr *et al.* 'Strategic and Economic Importance of Chabahar Port', *Global Economics Review*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2021, pp. 71–73.

⁴³It is worth noting that Gwadar is part of the 'String of Pearls' within China's One Belt One Road initiative and serves as the terminus of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Further afield lies the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC,⁴⁴).

The damage that may have been caused to the three Iranian transport routes appears to have been directed primarily against military targets, as these routes serve as supply and communication lines for Iranian military contingents.

In response to Iran's accusations, the Americans maintain that their intention was not to destroy critical civilian infrastructure⁴⁵ .

If this were the case, the reconstruction of certain facilities associated with the INSTC would be easier, as the destruction would have been concentrated exclusively on targets linked to Iran's nuclear programme and military deployment.

In any case, the prioritisation of infrastructure repair works has helped to mitigate the damage⁴⁶ .

Conclusions

The INSTC is a transport route capable of connecting locations as far apart as St. Petersburg, on the shores of the Baltic Sea, with the Iranian ports on the Indian Ocean —Chahbahar being an open-water port. This overland transport route, more than 5,500 kilometres long, passes through many of the main hubs of Russia's southern transport corridor to reach the Caucasus, before crossing Iran from one end to the other.

The export of Russia's vast output, derived from its colossal natural resources and industrial capabilities, can find a suitable route southwards via the Iranian transport corridor. In the near future, this could open up a significant market for Russia, of which India, with a population of almost 1,500 million, is the prime example.

⁴³ For a study of the CPEC corridor from a geographical perspective, we recommend reading the paper by RASHID, Azhar and SHIRAZI, Safdar Ali. 'Gwadar Port-Pakistan as an axis for regional connectivity under CPEC: A geographer's perspective', *Journal of Politics and International Studies*, vol. 9, no. 01, 2023, pp. 105–120.

⁴⁴ ABB, P. et al. 'Road through a broken place: the BRI in post-coup Myanmar', *The Pacific Review*, 38(4), 2025, pp. 611–612.

⁴⁵ MANN, Toby, HABIBIAZAD, Ghoncheh and PENGELLY, Emma. 'US denies Iranian claims it hit civilian infrastructure in latest strikes', *BBC*. 17 July 2026. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c151gdjwd10o>

⁴⁶ OFFICIAL WEBSITE OF THE PRESIDENT OF THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN. "President Pezeshkian orders legal action over war damage to Iran's transport infrastructure". 26 July 2026. <https://president.ir/en/165178>

This route not only brings together the various products, goods and services that characterise the interconnectedness of a globalised world, but also links two of the most worrying ongoing conflicts of our time. The link between the ongoing hostilities in Ukraine and the Middle East is a reality due to the ties between Iran and Russia, reinforced by the fact that both are confronting, directly or indirectly, the Western powers.

Meanwhile, this situation benefits China in the Indo-Pacific region, which helps to explain the support it is providing to the Iranians.

In China's case, the INSTC could constitute an interesting branch of the Southern Corridor of the Belt and Road Initiative, which, from Iran, could link up with western China, in the Xinjiang region. This possibility would provide China not only with a supply route to its western territories, but also an attractive alternative should there be a disruption to communications at any of the maritime *chokepoints* that underpin its trade routes.

In the specific case of the branches linking the ports of the Indian Ocean with the land-based section of the Belt and Road, the INSTC is one of the most important transport routes, alongside the aforementioned CPEC, followed by other initiatives such as the CMEC.

The existence of these transport routes crossing the Chinese Belt and Road fosters relations across the vast Eurasian landmass. In a global environment of competition between maritime powers, land powers and powers with mixed characteristics, it is understandable that conflicts should arise along these transport routes, and even more so along the INSTC, as it serves both Russia, as a predominantly land-based power, and China, in its capacity as a maritime-land power.

The task of containment as a maritime power currently falls to the US. However, this series of interventions could lead it into a situation of strategic overextension that accelerates its decline.

Within this complex web of global and regional interests, Iran stands out as a historic power, as its geographical position—as described above—grants it the privilege of spanning the entire final stretch of the INSTC, whilst also allowing this very route to be used as a connecting branch of the OBOR.

To this must be added the fact that Iran holds the key to the Strait of Hormuz and possesses sufficient resilience to destabilise the entire Middle East region, disrupt the

supply of hydrocarbons and damage the critical infrastructure of neighbouring countries.

All of this shows, once again, the geopolitical importance of Iranian territory, regardless of the geostrategic circumstances of any given era.

At the time of writing, the conflict pitting the United States and Israel against Iran and its allies remains ongoing. This confrontation is testing the capabilities of what is arguably the world's most powerful actor, the US, against what is likely the most resilient: Iran.

The impact of the conflict has completely destabilised global supply chains, whilst simultaneously shattering the false sense of security enjoyed by many of the Gulf states. Regardless of the final outcome of the hostilities, this conflict will bring about a further shift in the world order.

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