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Strategic Infrastructure and Regional Influence: Institutional Interfaces at Chabahar Port

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Abstract: *Infrastructure is often described as strategically important. Yet substantiating strategic value and attributing regional influence require different evidence. The study examines Chabahar Port with an integrated framework drawing on strategic infrastructure, port regionalization, corridor governance, and relational power. Strategic value attribution, governance arrangements, functional developments, partner decisions, and influence attribution are kept distinct. The method is an exploratory mechanism-based case study of three bounded cooperation episodes, using episode-level reconstruction, within-case comparison, and claim-level evidence assessment. Episode B is the principal episode for bounded process reconstruction; Episodes A and C contribute complementary commitment records. The selected public records repeatedly attribute strategic purposes and distinguish authorizations, responsibilities, and commitments as governance objects. In Episode B, India Ports Global Limited explicitly invoked a reported temporary permission arrangement as the basis for its bidding-process decision. This bounded institutional link leaves the broader relationships from governance to focal partner acceptance and from Iranian action to regional influence unresolved. The contribution is an integrated framework and a case reconstruction that distinguishes documented institutional links from unresolved influence claims. Distinguishing institutional arrangements and functional observation from influence attribution specifies what evidence a conversion explanation requires. Incomplete attribution limits the claims supported by the available record; it does not establish the absence of influence.*

Keywords: *Strategic Infrastructure, Chabahar Port, Iran, Regional Influence, Corridor Governance, Port Regionalization*

1. Introduction

Governments assign strategic purposes to ports and transport routes. Strategic value and regional influence nevertheless require different kinds of evidence. Physical capacity and institutions organize access and territorial connections [1,2,3,4]. Governance analysis asks how allocations of authority, responsibilities, and resources enter partners' cooperation decisions alongside their own objectives and alternatives.

Strategic and commercial assessments of Chabahar consider its location in southeastern Iran and prospective links with India, Afghanistan, and Central Asia [5,6], within the wider transport context of the International North–South Transport Corridor [7]. These links involve distinct facilities, routes, and arrangements. The 13 May 2024 announcement records an agreement between India Ports Global Limited (IPGL) and Iran's Ports and Maritime Organization (PMO) concerning the Shahid Beheshti Port Terminal, along with regional expectations [8]. Iran is the actor whose influence is examined, with India a central partner and Afghanistan included where relevant.

Research examines port functions and economic networks [9,10], Chabahar's strategic significance [5,11], and the geopolitical and geoeconomic setting of Iran's corridor relationships [7,12,13]. The question is how to connect strategic purposes, institutional arrangements, functional developments, and partner decisions in an explanation of influence. Drawing on institutional and political analyses, the study applies a relational standard that specifies whose action affects which partner and issue [14,15].

The central question is: What do selected public records reveal about Chabahar's strategic value, candidate governance links, and the limits of attributing regional influence to Iran? SQ1 asks how the records attribute strategic value through location, state objectives, and transport network position. SQ2 asks which institutional or functional observations relate to connectivity, governance coordination, institutional alignment, and economic embedding, and which links to specific decisions are documented.

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SQ3 asks how the episodes differ in decision objects, documentary coverage, and supported process links, and what those differences permit in assessing influence. These are exploratory questions: the four mechanisms are candidate explanations, and agreement alone does not establish an Iranian contribution to a partner's choice.

The framework guides comparison of attributed strategic value, institutional arrangements, functional observations, and partner decisions, keeping influence attribution distinct.

Sections 2 and 3 develop the framework and research design; Section 4 reconstructs the episodes. The discussion and conclusion consider their implications.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Strategic Infrastructure

Material systems, rules, and overlapping authority shape how infrastructure organizes circulation, access, and political expectations [3,4]. They connect projects with state objectives and territorial and economic relationships [1,2]. Geoeconomic analysis asks how economic instruments are directed towards strategic objectives under particular geographical conditions [16,17,18]. Here, strategic infrastructure value means the usefulness a specified actor attributes to an asset in relation to an objective, its network position, and anticipated resource use. When effects are not observed, that alone does not identify a conversion difficulty: the resource itself may not suit the partner's requirements [14].

2.2 Port Regionalization

Port regionalization locates port functions within hinterland and logistics networks [9], while economic corridor research examines connections among agents and activities [10]. These perspectives distinguish infrastructure, functional services, and regional integration through wider economic relationships. Evidence of functional development retains its facility and period boundaries; it cannot by itself identify users' adoption reasons or Iran's influence on a partner's cooperation choice.

2.3 Corridor Governance and Relational Influence

Corridor governance asks how permissions, responsibilities, and practices connect services governed separately. It brings actor, institutional, and coordination perspectives together from infrastructure and corridor research [2,3,7,10], without treating these sources as a single established theory. Participants retain agency and may pursue different purposes within a shared connection; organizational roles are specified for each cooperation task. Relational power distinguishes resource possession from influence on a specified actor and issue [14,15]. Regional influence means an identifiable contribution of Iran's infrastructure-related actions to a specified partner's cooperation commitments, terms, or institutional arrangements. Frequent use alone cannot establish dependence without assessing alternatives and adjustment costs [19]. An operator's decision requires a traceable link to Iranian action before it can be attributed to Iran.

2.4 Integrated Analytical Framework

The framework links strategic value to regional influence through four candidate conversion mechanisms. Connectivity concerns the organization of physical interfaces and transport services into usable links. Governance coordination concerns the actions through which participants exchange information, allocate tasks, synchronize implementation, and address disputes. Institutional alignment concerns the adjustment and compatibility of authority, obligations, resources, and rules in relation to a specific task. Economic embedding concerns the ways port and corridor services enter sustained production, trade, and logistics relationships. Their interaction is an empirical question; they are not four mandatory stages.

Expectations and negotiations may enter decisions before operations begin [20,21], but their anticipatory role still needs evidence of action and response. Geopolitical conditions, external actors, and domestic institutions are considered through identifiable effects on tasks or options. Existing structures are distinguished from episode-specific adjustments. Sequences and combinations may differ, and strategic expectations may be revised.

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3. Research Design

The study uses an exploratory mechanism-based case study, reconstructing three cooperation episodes at Chabahar and comparing their decision objects, documentary coverage, and supported process links. Chabahar's attributed strategic purposes, transport connections, and publicly documented arrangements motivate the inquiry [5,6,7,8]. The empirical observation period is 2014–2024. It bounds the selected events, not source publication or collection dates: later accounts may document earlier events, and later scholarship may inform theory and context.

The unit of analysis is a specified cooperation decision, bounded by its actors, institutional object, facility, and period. The episodes concern the initial equipping and operating commitment in 2014–2016 (Episode A), interim operating responsibilities in 2018 (Episode B), and the long-term equipping and operating commitment in 2024 (Episode C). They offer identifiable decision objects, traceable public documents, and scope for comparing institutional arrangements and evidentiary reach; they are not an exhaustive event inventory. In Episode B, the focal decision is India's acceptance of interim responsibilities. IPGL's initiation of operator selection is a nested procedural decision, distinct from that acceptance. Handover and operating activity are associated observations; Episodes A and C provide complementary commitment records.

The reconstruction separates observed facts from proposed process links and attribution claims. Mechanism assessment considers service links, interactions over specific issues, arrangements for permission and responsibility, and continuing user relationships. Attributing influence requires a link between an Iranian action and a partner's choice [14,15]. An agreement's signature does not, by itself, explain its acceptance.

Sources include Indian government records published through the Press Information Bureau (PIB), the RFP hosted by the Indian Embassy in Tehran, and the listed academic and policy studies. The analysis distinguishes announcements, authorizations, commercial commitments, procedural documents, and operating reports. Claims are matched to what each record expressly supports, including the RFP clauses concerning the interim arrangement and operator selection. Issuer, timing, purpose, completeness, and claim relevance delimit interpretation. Records from the same issuing body may overlap informationally; their number is not treated as independent confirmation.

The cross-episode comparison examines decisions, actor roles, institutional objects, documented links, and evidentiary gaps. Prior Indian objectives, inherited arrangements, commercial considerations, external conditions, and operator autonomy remain possible alternative or complementary explanations. The records do not decisively distinguish their contributions. The comparison therefore assesses the reach of the evidence rather than ranking governance effectiveness or regional influence.

4. Case Analysis

4.1 Case Context and Evidence Scope

The three episodes share an infrastructure setting but concern different cooperation decisions. Episode B provides the principal process reconstruction; Episodes A and C supply complementary commitment records. Iran is the prospective influence actor and India the principal partner, with organizational roles specified for each task.

Earlier accounts describe Chabahar or its first phase. The 2018 joint statement names Shahid Beheshti Port–Phase 1, and the 2024 parliamentary reply specifies general cargo and container terminals [22,23,24]. The records use different facility descriptions; their technical equivalence has not been independently established. Authority boundaries also differ: commercial signature, governmental confirmation, and operating responsibility involve different actors. Indian official channels supply most evidence, giving fuller accounts of public purposes, institutional objects and commitments than of negotiations or acceptance reasons. The comparison follows bounded tasks within the 2014–2024 event observation period. Related agreements are not read as successive stages of influence.

4.2 Episode A: Initial Cooperation Commitment

Episode A examines India’s acceptance of an initial equipping and operating commitment. The October 2014 Cabinet announcement associates participation with access to Afghanistan through Iran and approves a framework for an intergovernmental memorandum and a joint venture or special purpose

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vehicle involving Jawaharlal Nehru Port Trust and Kandla Port Trust [22]. This is an authorization record. India's stated access objective precedes the commercial commitment, while Iran's task-specific purposes and proposals are less directly documented.

The prospective framework envisages leasing two fully constructed berths for ten years, equipping them through the venture, and transferring equipment ownership to PMO without payment at the period's end, with renewal requiring mutual agreement [22]. In February 2016, the Cabinet authorized US$150 million in EXIM credit and reported an Iranian request under the memorandum. It separately described US$85.21 million in planned equipment investment and allocated authority for final contract approval and implementation issues [25]. Credit authorization and planned investment are distinct financial objects; neither records disbursement. The Iranian request is a specific action lead, although its authorship, timing and consideration within Indian decision-making remain incompletely visible.

The July 2016 parliamentary answer records a commercial contract signed on 23 May between India Ports Global Private Limited (IPGPL) and Arya Banader, with the Indian government and PMO as confirming parties [26]. These roles distinguish corporate commitment from governmental authorization. The summaries also differ in their facility descriptions: two berths in the earlier accounts and two terminals comprising five berths in the parliamentary response. They give different precise dates for the May 2015 memorandum [25,26]. Without the instruments or equivalent specifications, these differences remain unresolved and cannot be interpreted as verified expansion or amendment.

The financing request directs attention to governance coordination. Proposed rights, resource allocations and responsibilities give institutional alignment identifiable objects, but their role in the accepted terms is untraced. Connectivity appears as an attributed access purpose, without an established change in services. Sustained adoption relevant to economic embedding is insufficiently documented. India's prior objectives, compatible purposes, routine authorization and commercial expectations remain possible complementary explanations. Research on Indian strategic objectives keeps partner agency in view [11]. Iran could shape participation terms without creating India's underlying interest. Episode A provides bounded records of purpose, authorization and commitment; the links to partner acceptance and an identifiable Iranian contribution remain unresolved.

4.3 Episode B: Interim Responsibilities and Bounded Institutional Link

Episode B examines acceptance of interim responsibilities for a bounded part of Shahid Beheshti Port. A January 2019 official account describes difficulties activating the earlier contract as the setting for a temporary arrangement [27]. That retrospective explanation leaves the underlying constraints and alternatives unspecified. The joint statement of 17 February 2018 lists an interim lease for Shahid Beheshti Port–Phase 1 between PMO and IPGL, welcomed by the leaders [23]. It identifies an institutional object and the named parties, without independently establishing all the arrangement's legal or operational terms. Earlier commitments provide an inherited context whose continued authority and responsibilities require verification.

IPGL's contemporaneous Request for Proposals, dated 3 April 2018, supplies the most specific process evidence. Section 1.1.3 reports that, following mutual discussions, the Sistan-Baluchestan Port Authority and the Authority executed a lease in New Delhi on 17 February, describing terminal-area leasing and operating rights. Section 1.1.4 expressly invokes that arrangement and its conditions as the basis for the Authority's decision to undertake operator selection; Appendix IV identifies IPGL as the Authority ([28] p. 4, §§1.1.3–1.1.4; p. 24, Appendix IV). The supported relationship is between the reported temporary permission arrangement and IPGL's bidding-process decision. This is the procedural decision-maker's stated institutional basis, not an independently established causal effect of the arrangement. The RFP is a procedural record, not the original lease, and its reference to the port authority does not resolve that authority's relationship to PMO. Section 1.1.5 describes India Ports Global Chabahar Free Zone (IPGCFZ) as still being incorporated and a downstream agreement as prospective, preserving the difference between an intended organizational configuration and an established implementation chain.[28]

The retrospective account reports a short-term contract signed on 6 May 2018 without identifying its signatories in that sentence. It also records partial operational takeover on 24 December, completion of physical handover by 29 December, and a first cargo-discharge task by IPGCFZ on 30 December [27]. These observations identify a bounded execution sequence, with the final date referring to the operating entity's first reported task. The legal relationship between the February and May instruments remains unverified; public chronology cannot establish a complete negotiation sequence. The records also

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distinguish IPGL's publicly identified lease role from IPGCFZ's operating role without supplying their full delegation relationship.

Institutional alignment therefore has one supported procedural relationship alongside broader unresolved questions about acceptance and execution. The retrospective account acknowledges support from PMO, both countries' embassies and several Indian governmental institutions [27], but does not identify a specific issue, coordinating action and consequential response. Governance coordination remains an investigative lead. The cargo task provides a functional observation within the transferred portion, without a service baseline establishing changed terminal capability, routine availability or a connected overland service. It also leaves sustained user adoption and its relevance to the acceptance decision insufficiently documented. Neither the arrangement's public description nor the activity account identifies the condition through which India accepted interim responsibility.

Inherited permissions, continuing Indian objectives, operating practices, commercial considerations and other resource or administrative conditions could contribute to participation or execution. These possibilities can coexist with governance contributions. They limit interpretation of IPGL's stated institutional basis as a necessary, sufficient, independent or state-level cause, without erasing the reported procedural relationship. No counterfactual establishes what IPGL would have done without the lease; nor does the document establish additional authority relative to the initial contract or resolution of a previous institutional mismatch. Episode B retains bounded institutional support for the bidding-process decision alone. The reasons for India's acceptance of the interim arrangement, the arrangement's application to year-end operations, and attribution of Iranian regional influence remain unresolved. The RFP also establishes neither an operator award nor a signed downstream agreement or subsequent performance.

4.4 Episode C: Long-term Commitment

Episode C focuses on acceptance of the long-term equipping and operating commitment signed on 13 May 2024. The May announcement names IPGL and PMO as parties and reports both the Indian minister's visit to witness signature and a bilateral ministerial meeting [8]. The July parliamentary reply specifies equipping and operating Shahid Beheshti's general cargo and container terminals for ten years from signature [24]. These accounts document the public commitment and its stated scope while offering little insight into formation.

The recorded responsibilities give institutional alignment an identifiable object; the meeting supplies an interaction relevant to governance coordination. Neither document, however, traces a specific permission change or the meeting's contribution to accepted conditions. Recurring organizations and related tasks make inherited arrangements relevant, but whether earlier provisions persisted and informed the decision remains unverified. A duration upgrade cannot be inferred from the 2024 commitment: the initial proposal also envisaged ten years [22,24]. The commitment's rights, facility coverage and relationship to earlier instruments still need separate specification.

The May release again assigns cooperation a regional gateway purpose [8]. July's reply adds reported increases in vessel and container activity under the label "2023–2024", without measurement endpoints, comparison bases or detailed facility coverage [24]. Those figures cannot show effects of the newly signed instrument or whether earlier services contributed to acceptance. Prior participation purposes, inherited conditions and commercial expectations could also have shaped the choice of terms; their respective contributions remain unresolved.

Episode C adds a supplementary decision record; it does not reconstruct the mechanism through which the commitment was formed. Both releases come from the same Indian ministry; independent accounts of the negotiations from partner and Iranian sources are unavailable in the record examined. Signature and scope are comparatively clear. The mechanism links and an identifiable Iranian contribution to acceptance remain insufficiently supported. The event window also provides inadequate observation of subsequent execution and continuing partner choices, leaving longer-term attribution open.

4.5 Cross-Episode Comparison

Table 1 compares the selected decisions and the reach of their evidence. Public records repeatedly assign cooperation access and regional gateway purposes [8,22,23]. This continuity concerns stated value; it establishes neither equivalent services nor a common contribution to each decision.

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Table 1: Cross-episode evidence and attribution limits.

Episode and decision	Direct records	Supported finding	Unresolved attribution
Episode A (2014–2016): initial commitment.	Cabinet authorizations, reported Iranian credit request, commercial signature [22,25,26].	Public purpose, authorization and commitment are documented; credit approval is not disbursement.	Acceptance reasons and Iran's contribution; differences in facility descriptions and memorandum dates.
Episode B (2018): interim acceptance; nested bidding decision.	Interim lease listing; RFP §§1.1.3–1.1.4, p. 4; handover/activity report [23,27,28].	IPGL cites the reported interim arrangement as the institutional basis for initiating operator selection.	Acceptance reasons, February–May linkage and Iranian influence; the RFP establishes neither award, downstream signature nor performance.
Episode C (2024): long-term commitment.	Official signature announcement and parliamentary reply [8,24].	Signature, parties, ten-year term and stated scope; no demonstrated duration upgrade.	Formation of accepted terms and Iran's contribution; the releases share an issuing ministry.

The records distinguish authorizations, commitments, permissions, and operating activity. A reported financing request, institutional acknowledgement, and ministerial meeting remain different coordination leads, each requiring evidence of its consequence. Episode B's operating task and Episode C's activity figures lack comparable service baselines and evidence connecting functional change or sustained adoption to acceptance. These differences cannot rank governance effectiveness.

Influence attribution requires an identifiable Iranian action and its contribution to a specified partner choice. Prior Indian purposes and inherited conditions can coexist with such a contribution; the records do not adequately separate their roles. The matrix identifies differences in what is documented, without treating unresolved attribution as an absence of influence.

5. Discussion

5.1 Strategic Value and Influence Attribution

For SQ1, public records attribute strategic value to access through Iran and prospective regional connections. Strategic infrastructure research locates organized uses and political expectations around material connections [3,4], while geoeconomic objectives specify an instrument's attributed relevance [17]. The records show how location and network position enter stated purposes; they do not independently establish those purposes' realization. Early Indian access objectives are more directly documented than Iran's task-specific intentions, limiting any claim of a shared valuation.

Influence attribution requires an identifiable contribution to a specified partner's choice [14,15]. A signed commitment identifies a decision without explaining acceptance; incomplete attribution establishes neither absence of influence nor a strategic value–influence discrepancy.

5.2 Institutional Interfaces and Functional Development

For SQ2, permissions and responsibilities give institutional alignment observable objects; requests, acknowledgements, and meetings provide leads for governance coordination. Corridor governance distinguishes interaction from institutional configuration [3,10]. Neither an arrangement's existence nor interaction alone establishes its contribution to a cooperation decision.

Episode B supplies the clearest local relationship: IPGL expressly invoked the reported temporary permission arrangement as the basis for initiating operator selection ([28] p. 4, §§1.1.3–1.1.4). This connects an institutional arrangement to a stated procedural response more specifically than chronology alone. Its empirical significance is that institutional alignment can be examined at the level of a particular decision. The RFP is neither the original lease nor an independent account of Iran's contribution; the link does not establish why India accepted interim responsibilities, how the arrangement governed later operations, or whether Iranian regional influence resulted.

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Connectivity and economic embedding require separate functional evidence. Port regionalization concerns wider logistics relationships [9]; the reported operating task in Episode B and activity figures associated with Episode C do not establish comparable service changes or sustained integration. Expectations may enter negotiation before operation [20], but their contribution also requires a traceable connection to partner choice. Thus, these observations identify questions for mechanism assessment rather than confirm a complete conversion process.

5.3 Implications for Strategic Infrastructure Research

For SQ3, Table 1 distinguishes initial authorization and commitment (Episode A), a nested procedural link (Episode B), and long-term commitment without reconstructed formation (Episode C). Documentary differences do not establish variation in governance effectiveness or Iranian influence.

Further explanation requires connecting arrangements and functional developments to partner decisions while distinguishing Iranian action from prior partner purposes, inherited conditions, and alternatives [19]. Episode B's local link leaves broader attribution and applicability beyond Chabahar open.

6. Conclusion

For SQ1, the selected 2014–2024 episodes document recurring strategic purposes associated with access through Iran and prospective regional connections. They establish public attributions of Chabahar's value, with Indian purposes more directly recorded than Iran's task-specific intentions. They do not establish that those purposes were realized or that agreement itself demonstrates Iranian regional influence.

For SQ2, institutional arrangements and coordination leads are identifiable, but the four candidate mechanisms are not causally confirmed. Episode B supplies one specific institutional–procedural link: IPGL cited the reported temporary arrangement as the basis for initiating operator selection. This stated basis goes beyond chronology while remaining separate from India's acceptance of interim responsibilities and later operations. Comparable service change, sustained economic embedding, and an identifiable Iranian contribution to partner choice remain insufficiently supported.

For SQ3, the episodes differ in decision objects, documentary coverage, and supported links; these differences do not rank governance effectiveness or influence. The predominance of Indian official records and limited evidence of deliberations restrict attribution. The observation period also limits assessment of subsequent execution and longer-term consequences. Further evidence would need to connect negotiated conditions and functional changes to partner choices. These limits leave influence unresolved rather than establish its absence.

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