**Headline:** Iran Loathes Pompeo’s Chabahar Gift

By M.K. Bhadrakumar

**Author Bio:** M.K. Bhadrakumar is a former diplomat who served for more than 29 years as an Indian Foreign Service officer with postings including India’s ambassador to Turkey and Uzbekistan.

**Source:** Independent Media Institute

**Credit Line:** *This article was produced in partnership by* [*Indian Punchline*](https://indianpunchline.com/) *and* [*Globetrotter*](https://independentmediainstitute.org/globetrotter/)*, a project of the Independent Media Institute.*

**Tags:** Time-Sensitive, Middle East/Iran, Asia/India

**[Article Body:]**

Sometimes a crisis is needed to judge the efficacy of a country’s regional policies. The U.S.-Iran confrontation is one such moment for India.

In retrospect, the India-U.S. meeting of foreign and defense ministers in the [2+2 format](https://www.state.gov/highlights-of-2019-u-s-india-22-ministerial-dialogue/) in Washington on December 18 stands out as an embarrassment. A fortnight after that event, President Donald Trump ordered the assassination of someone Delhi [regards](https://mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/32251/Killing_of_a_senior_Iranian_leader_by_the_US) as “a senior Iranian leader.”

External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar visited Iran’s capital of Tehran on December 22, soon after the 2+2 event to co-chair the joint commission meeting and hold wide-ranging discussions with the Iranian leadership. Before traveling to Tehran, Jaishankar had taken permission from Washington to kickstart the Chabahar Port project, located in southeastern Iran on the Gulf of Oman, so that he could convey the happy news to the Iranian leaders.

Chabahar has a centrality in India’s regional strategies. It is not only a gateway to Central Asia and beyond to the Eurasian landmass proper, but is also Delhi’s counter to China’s Belt and Road Initiative, which is spreading its tentacles all around India in its region.

Jaishankar himself [stated](https://twitter.com/DrSJaishankar/status/1208758267113037825) while in Tehran that he had a “very good conversation on the regional and global picture. India and Iran will work together closely on their shared interests.”

However, the murder of the “senior Iranian leader” in cold blood took place 10 days after Jaishankar’s Tehran visit and the Trump administration didn’t take India’s minister into confidence on what it was up to in India’s [“extended neighborhood.”](https://www.ndtv.com/opinion/on-china-modi-won-unexpected-support-from-trump-1717914)

As tensions with Iran cascaded, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo frantically called important world capitals that matter to America’s regional policies in the Persian Gulf region, soliciting support or understanding.

Pompeo even reached out to Pakistani army chief General Qamar Bajwa. But Jaishankar was ignored, someone who is peerless in the international diplomatic circuit today as one of America’s closest and most trusted friends of yesteryears.

Nor did Trump call India’s Prime Minister Narendra Modi—although Modi too is a unique world leader, who [canvassed](https://www.asiatimes.com/2019/09/article/modis-visit-with-trump-in-texas-a-win-win/) publicly with American citizens to choose the great man for yet another term so that he can “make America great again.”

Now, it isn’t just a matter of the ego of these two top Indian leaders. India’s Gulf diplomacy is skating on thin ice—bandwagoning with Israel and Saudi Arabia.

What if war breaks out, God forbid, in the Persian Gulf, and American warships and planes seek access to Indian bases under the provisions of the [logistics agreement](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-india-usa-military-idUSKCN114241)?

Hopefully, the designated liaison officer at the U.S. Central Command in Doha, Qatar, hasn’t yet set sail. And I don’t want to even think about the fate of 9 million hapless Indians living in that region (or their families in India).

Putting all this together, what emerges is that the so-called U.S.-India strategic partnership is complete nonsense. India can never aspire for an equal relationship with the U.S. based on trust and mutual respect. This relationship is transactional and there should be no illusions.

Furthermore, following up on Pompeo’s phone call to Bajwa, the state department has announced the resumption of the U.S.-Pakistan military-to-military cooperation.

Evidently, Pompeo prioritized Bajwa since Pentagon estimates high risks to American troops deployed in Afghanistan. Pompeo’s agenda is threefold: expeditiously conclude the U.S.-Taliban peace accord that enables an orderly troop drawdown in Afghanistan; appease the Taliban (which has friendly links with Iran) so that it doesn’t link up with the “Axis of Resistance”; and, most important, make Bajwa commit to a new working relationship with the Pentagon and CIA.

Indeed, Bajwa was instrumental in putting Pakistani-Iranian relations on an upward swing in the most recent years. He was even received by the IRGC chief General Hossein Salami during his last visit to Tehran in November.

What Pompeo might have offered to “incentivize” Bajwa we do not know, but that phone call has had a magical effect on the general. The Pakistani military spokesman has since proclaimed Islamabad’s neutrality in the U.S.-Iran tensions, which of course works in Washington’s favor.

These U.S. shenanigans are a throwback in history. Old habits die hard. Evidently, Modi’s peregrinations—seven visits to Washington in the past five years—made no difference.

Meanwhile, India has spoiled the trust and mutual confidence in its relationship with Iran by kowtowing so abjectly to the U.S. It was a disgraceful sight that Jaishankar [openly expressed gratitude to Pompeo](https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/32224/Transcript+of+Press+Statements+at+India++US+2432+Ministerial+Dialogue++Washington+DC+on+18+December+2019) for allowing India to resume stalled work in Chabahar.

Couldn’t the Iranians, who are practitioners of international diplomacy for centuries, have figured out that it is Pompeo who decides for Jaishankar?

A January 5 op-ed (“[Joint Message of Iran, Russia and China to the World](https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/443774/Joint-message-of-Iran-Russia-and-China-to-the-world)”) in the Tehran Times, a paper that reflects Iranian establishment thinking, devotes a pithy passage to Chabahar under the sub-heading “Chabahar port is stable against sanctions pressure”:

“One of the issues that should be noted in scrutinizing this maneuver is the situation of Chabahar Port as the host of the maneuver. From a geopolitical point of view, Chabahar port is very important and India has invested heavily in it. For Central Asian countries the port is going to serve as a gateway to high seas. If this is accomplished, Iran’s geopolitical weight will rise meaningfully.

“The sensitivity toward Chabahar port and its cold rivalry with Pakistan’s Gwadar Port are so great that in the former six-month sanctions exemptions by Donald Trump the port was given waivers! Now, Tehran, with its joint maneuver with China and Russia, has revealed that the geopolitical importance of the port is highly noticed by great powers, and that China spreads red carpet for the development and security of Chabahar.”

Delhi shouldn’t have messed around with Iran. The Tehran Times signals that India is not the only show in town in Chabahar—and it flaunts China’s desire to bring Chabahar into the Belt and Road Initiative matrix. For Delhi, this carries a candid message on national honor and self-respect and strategic autonomy.

Tehran loathes Pompeo’s Chabahar gift sent via Jaishankar. India can keep it or return it to Pompeo.