Rasht-Astara railway to break shackles of sanctions on Iran, Russia, says Indian media

Economy Desk

A railroad project under construction in northwestern Iran, that is part of an international corridor, is a blow to Western leverage, a weekly Indian English-language news magazine wrote on Wednesday.

India Today said the €1.6-billion Rasht-Astara railway, being built under a 20-year Russia-Iran partnership, would reshape global trade routes by bypassing Western-controlled chokepoints.

The project is a clear message that "isolation is obsolete and the world is no longer unipolar," the publication added.

According to the media outlet, the railway – described as the missing link in the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) – could revolutionize trade and help Iran and Russia circumvent Western sanctions as US pressure intensifies.

The 7,200-kilometer corridor is designed to cut trade costs by 30% and reduce shipping time from 37 days to 19, almost half that of the Suez Canal route.

The report called the project "more than just steel and concrete," portraying it as a symbol of defiance by two of the world's most heavily sanctioned economies.

The venture, described by the Indian magazine as "confrontation by construction," is primarily financed by Moscow and built by Russian engineers under a 20-year Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty signed in January 2025.

Once complete, the corridor will handle up to 20 million tons of cargo annually — including oil, gas, steel, food, and machinery — through routes "completely untouched by Western naval power."

Unlike maritime chokepoints such as the Suez Canal or the Strait of Malacca, the report noted, "this land bridge cannot be blockaded by American fleets or frozen by European banks."

"Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative overlap perfectly with the INSTC, creating a seamless trade network from the South China Sea to the Baltic," the report added.

"Together with platforms like BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization," the report said, "this emerging bloc is quietly rejecting Western sanctions as illegitimate."

Even Afghanistan, freshly recognized by Moscow in 2024, could become a crucial junction, extending the corridor into Central and South Asia whilst bypassing Pakistan entirely, it said.

Meanwhile, India's rival corridor, IMEC, remains largely on the drawing board. The INSTC, by contrast, is already operational, with trains moving and contracts signed.

IRNA

Gov't spox calls FATF delisting process 'time-intensive'

Economy Desk

Iranian government spokeswoman Fatemeh Mohajerani said on Wednesday that the Islamic Republic had long known the process of removing Tehran from the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) blacklist would be gradual and not immediate, a week after the global watchdog decided to keep the country on the list, IRNA reported.

Her remarks came as the move sparked debate among policymakers and commentators inside the country.

Without referring to specific reactions, Mohajerani said the government recognizes Parliament's oversight role but stressed the need for caution regarding any actions that could, in her words, "cause public anxiety or disrupt the meaningful social cohesion of Iranians in line with their national identity."

"When we approved the exit from the CFT and Palermo conventions, we already knew that the process of leaving the blacklist would be time-intensive and would not occur quickly," she told reporters on the sidelines of a cabinet meeting in Tehran.

She said the Central Bank of Iran (CBI) had submitted a detailed report on the issue, adding that the economy minister was ready to provide a full explanation to the media.

Despite Iran's approval of the Palermo Convention in May and its official accession to the International Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism (CFT) on October 21, the country remained on the FATF blacklist, prompting reactions from economic and legal experts.

Hadi Khani, head of Iran's FATF delegation, said on Friday that the global watchdog had not shut the door on Iran. "The country's case with FATF is now on a proper technical and legal track and will be pursued vigorously until the expected results are achieved," he said.

"Approval of the Palermo and CFT conventions does not equate to leaving the blacklist," Khani added. "Rather, Iran's engagement to resolve long-standing FATF challenges has only just begun and is expanding day by day."

Iran attended the FATF's three-day plenary meeting in Paris last week for the first time in six years, as it seeks to be removed from the global financial blacklist.

The FATF continues to list Iran, alongside North Korea and Myanmar, as a "high-risk jurisdiction subject to a call for action," citing what it describes as "significant deficiencies" in Iran's anti-money laundering and counter-terrorist financing (AML/CFT) framework.

While the FATF acknowledged the country's re-engagement with it to address deficiencies in its AML/CFT regime, it claimed that the country has failed to address the majority of the action plan it laid out to counter such "illicit" activities since 2016.

The statement by the task force said, "Iran will remain on the FATF High Risk Jurisdictions Subject to a Call for Action statement until the full Action Plan has been completed. As the FATF previously stated, should Iran ratify and implement the Palermo and Terrorist Financing Conventions, in line with the FATF standards."

Iran's efforts to exit the FATF blacklist began roughly a year ago, after 14 of the past 18 years during which the country's economy and trade — even with allied nations — were affected by FATF restrictions.

Gold tops Iran's imports at $1.2b, non-oil exports up 3%

Economy Desk

IRNA

Gold bullion has become Iran's top import in the first seven months of the current Persian calendar year that began on March 21, with 20 tons valued at $1.2 billion entering the country, head of Iran's Customs Administration (IRICA) Faroud Asgari said.

Speaking on a televised program, Asgari said gold was the leading import item during the period, followed by 6.6 million tons of corn feed worth $1.9 billion, ISNA reported.

Imports of edible oil increased by 154%, strengthening the country's strategic reserves, while rice imports reached 970,000 tons — up 91% compared with the same period last year.

"A total of 2.1 million tons of barley for livestock and poultry was also imported, showing a 91% rise," he said.

On the export side, Asgari, who also serves as a deputy economy minister, noted that Iran's non-oil exports reached $32 billion in the seven-month period, up more than 3% by volume compared to last year.

The country exported around 92 million tons of goods, with key items including natural gas, liquefied propane and butane, iron ingots, iron concentrate, and petrochemical products.

Imports totaled over 22 million tons worth more than $34 billion, marking a 16.7% decline in value from the same period a year earlier, he added.

JCPOA remains alive ...

On the other hand, Iran, joined at times by Russia and China, maintains that once the resolution's timeframe expired, those UNSC-based mechanisms became void, making any attempt to revive them illegitimate or at least disputable.

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As a result, we now see three camps:

(a) Some participants still treat the JCPOA as a living technical and political framework, using it as a reference point in talks or practical arrangements.

(b) Others interpret the resolution's expiry as a weakening of its legal backbone, viewing the JCPOA as a deal under strain and constraint.

(c) A third group, including international organizations and neutral states, occupies a middle or ambiguous ground, guided largely by political calculus and national interests.

The JCPOA's "life status" is no longer an undisputed international fact. Some still hold on to it as a technical benchmark; others write it off as obsolete or enforce its demise through parallel measures, such as sanctions. This divergence itself has become the greatest obstacle to the deal's full and effective revival.

Can Iran's stance, that the JCPOA lives on despite the resolution's expiry, be read as a signal of diplomatic intent? How viable is this path?

Iran's statement should be understood both as a legal-political position and a diplomatic signal. Strategically, it conveys a dual message: on one hand, Tehran affirms a degree of continued commitment to the JCPOA's technical framework, showing it hasn't shut the door on negotiations; on the other, it reasserts sovereign rights, especially over enrichment, as a domestic and international bargaining chip.

This can indeed be interpreted as a willingness to keep the diplomatic track open. But its success depends on several external variables: First, the West's readiness to offer tangible economic benefits and credible guarantees. Second, the resolution, or at least management, of non-nuclear issues such as missiles and regional policies, which many Western states see as preconditions. Third, the level of mutual trust and the robustness of verification mechanisms Iran seeks. And fourth, domestic or geopolitical pressures that might stiffen or soften Iran's resolve.

Without real economic incentives and credible assurances, a mere legal or diplomatic declaration won't bring the JCPOA back to life in practice. But if the process is coupled with solid guarantees, economic packages, and verification tools, diplomacy could find a way back in, though success would neither be swift nor guaranteed, and would require complex, multi-party trade-offs.

Given the latest developments, can the JCPOA still serve as a framework for a renewed agreement, or does any future deal need to be drafted from scratch?

A realistic assessment requires a hybrid approach. The 2015 JCPOA offered a solid set of technical and institutional solutions, such as caps on nuclear activity, IAEA verification regimes, and joint decision-making mechanisms, that still provide a valuable "technical bank" for negotiators.

Reusing this framework as a starting point is often more efficient than reinventing the wheel, as it saves time and preserves measurable benchmarks. However, today's realities, including new political alignments, lessons from past breaches, and questions over sunset clauses and enforcement, demand serious structural updates.

Any revival effort must therefore include new annexes or modifications: stronger verification and access provisions, clearer definitions of what happens when resolutions expire, robust economic and banking guarantees to make sanctions relief effective, and, if necessary, coordinated arrangements addressing extra-JCPOA issues.

The pragmatic way forward is neither to resurrect the 2015 deal unchanged nor to tear it up and start anew. The best course is to retain the JCPOA's technical foundation while retrofitting it with structural reforms that patch its flaws. This approach combines a familiar, defensible baseline with the flexibility to adapt to current realities and may well be the only viable path that is both technically sound and politically negotiable.