

Continuity And Change In India's Middle-East Policy

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ABSTRACT

The Middle East has always remained a significant geo-political, geo-strategic hotspot in world politics. For the past three centuries, the region has remained the centre of all important confrontations and a battleground for superpowers because of various aspects. It equally remained a critically strategic region for India too because it has significant geo-political and geo-economic implications. Historically India shares with the region deep civilizational and cultural linkages, cultural exchanges, and historical ties. Both India and the Middle East share a common colonial legacy and a kind of similar battle for freedom from their colonial masters. Following independence, the foreign policy principles such as Non-alignment policy, Panchsheel, Anti-colonialism, Anti-racialism, Anti-Imperialism etc. garnered considerable support and strength from the region owing to the ongoing Cold War between the two superpowers that are, the USA and the USSR to avoid the harmful repercussions. Also the large Muslim population in India and managing Pakistan raising the Kashmir issue in various regional forums in the Middle-East guides India's policy toward it. This research work aims to provide a systematic explanation of India's foreign policy for the region from the past to the present. It mainly focuses on the continuity and changes in India's foreign policy owing to the changing dynamics of world politics in general and the changing nature of the geopolitics of the region. It is further argued in the present study that various national interests of India both locally and internationally actually shape India's stand on the Middle East. Thus the present work is been suggestive in nature which has wider implications for both foreign policy-making and the academic world.

Key Words: Middle-East, West Asia, Foreign Policy, New Great Game, Cold War.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

From the historical perspective, Middle East, particularly the West Asian countries remained significant for India. India shares historical cultural and civilisational linkages with the region

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since centuries. India and the Middle-Eastern state shares a similar history and a similar colonial past. The British ruled both parts of the continent in view of the resources they possessed for maintaining its sphere of influence. Since the time India remained, firm in its policies toward the region and want to see the region growing peacefully and significantly works with it. This is evident from the fact that Mahatama Gandhi took over the leadership of *Khilafat Movement* to maintain the political stability in region and curb the British interference in the religion of the region. Afterward, during the time of Israel-Palestinian conflict, Gandhi favour the region and the native people as against the wishes of the Jews people. Even in the post independence, period India continued its policy. India's foreign policy principles such as Non-Alignment and later the Panchsheel were accepted and appreciated by all the states of region.

After the famous liberalization, globalbalisation and privitisation (LPG) reforms India witnessed a paradigm shift in its foreign policy, which include a shift in the ideological bases of Gandhian and Nehruvian idealism. Despite the fall of Gandhian-Nehruvian moralism and increasing adaptation to the culture of power-centered realism in recent years, the language of non-alignment continues to affect the political culture of the Indian establishment's strategic thinking in the realm of foreign policy.¹ Gradualism and risk avoidance are firmly established elements of India's external ties, especially its connections with West Asia, dubbed India's "extended neighbourhood" recently.

1.1.India's Strategic Involvement in the Region in post-1990 Period

There are two major stages of Indian foreign policy engagement in West Asia: pre- and post-1991. Prior to 1991, India's engagement with the region was one of "political distance," with the exception of the heydays of Nasserism, due to the dynamics of Cold War politics and the fact that India purchased the majority of its hydrocarbons needs (15-25 percent) from Russia and had nothing substantial to offer the Arab world in the way of trade, goods, services, technology, or economic assistance. Because of its pro-Arab and pro-Palestine stance, India's relationship with Israel has been stifled.

India's involvement with the Middle East began to intensify and consolidate in the beginning of the decade of 1990s as a result of a number of circumstances, including the end of the Cold War, the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and India's increased desire for oil and natural gas as a result of its accelerated economic development and proclivity to gain great power status, fueled by assertive economic and political nationalism. This set of goals moved India closer to the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the Islamic Republic of Iran, and Israel – the same countries that now dominate Indian foreign policy in the region. These countries, along with the United States, have gradually become critical in

achieving India's great power ambitions, as indicated by the rising frequency of Indian visits to these countries.

Thus, Saudi Arabia not only compensated for the former Soviet Union's loss of hydrocarbon product supply, but also fulfilled the growing demand in the Indian market. Indeed, Saudi Arabia steadily emerged as India's leading crude oil supplier (20%) until 2015,ⁱⁱ when it was narrowly surpassed by Nigeria, as well as a major source of remittances (\$8 billion). Israel soon made inroads into the Indian defence sector, first as a provider of spare parts for largely Soviet-produced Indian defense-related items, and later as the third-largest armaments supplier to the Indian defence industry (after Russia and the United States).ⁱⁱⁱ Furthermore, within the Indian strategic community, Israel is increasingly seen as a "model of counter-terrorism" whose lessons must be learned.

Iran, too, plays a crucial role in India's strategic thinking, for a variety of reasons. First, Iran is a big crude oil supplier, accounting for 6% of India's oil imports in 2015.^{iv} Second, Iran borders the Strait of Hormuz, which transports one-fifth of the world's seaborne oil. Third, with the eventual construction of the ports of Chabahar and Bandar Abbas, as well as the International North-South Transport Corridor, Iran is poised to become India's "gateway" to Central Asia, Europe, and Russia (INSTC). Fourth, Iran is an important partner in Afghanistan's war against the Taliban. Finally, Iran is a rising regional force with broad influence in West Asia, which could help to maintain regional stability. For these reasons, India has worked hard to maintain its relationship with Iran in the face of pressure from the United States, Israel, and the GCC countries regarding Iran's nuclear programme.^v

However, in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, the GCC countries have come to occupy an increasingly crucial "political space" in Indian strategic thinking. Half of India's crude oil and 85 percent of its natural gas come from the Gulf Arab states. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries have emerged as India's most important trading partners. In 2016, bilateral trade with GCC countries was \$150 billion, with the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia accounting for \$60 billion and \$39 billion, respectively.^{vi} Furthermore, remittances from the GCC countries' 7-8 million Indian expatriate workers equal more than \$30 billion.^{vii}

Meanwhile, a confluence of events has prompted Gulf countries to look East, primarily to China and India, to improve their security, attract investment, and export hydrocarbon products: the post-9/11 "trust deficit" and Gulf governments' concerns about the safety of their investments in the West; the development of shale oil in the United States and the latter's steadily declining oil and gas imports from the Gulf; and the United States' declining oil and gas imports from the Gulf. As a result, India sees a great convergence of interests with the Gulf Arab countries. Given that GCC nations purchase 60% of their other food commodities from India and

80% of their rice, “food-energy security” is one of numerous more areas of convergence between India and GCC nations.

1.2 Indian Policy for West Asia

The protection of the sizable Indian expatriate community in the context of the ongoing conflict and violence in the region has emerged as the main priority of Indian foreign policy toward West Asia in recent years. This includes ensuring the peace and security of the Persian Gulf region. It is crucial to note that the early 1990s’ high oil prices, the cost of evacuating more than 100,000 Indian workers after Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, and the ensuing sharp decline in remittances were the three main causes of the country’s foreign reserves plummeting. As a result, the political leadership of India was forced to mortgage the nation’s gold, apply for loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and implement liberal economic reform.^{viii}

India has chosen to pursue two concurrent, though not necessarily antagonistic, paths in its relations with West Asia as a result of the region’s high degree of political unpredictability, deteriorating security environment, and growing likelihood that the United States will reduce or even withdraw from providing security in the area. The continuation of India’s long-standing diplomatic policy of “non-interference” in the internal affairs of its neighbours in the region, along with a “wait and watch” stance that is punctuated by denunciations of terrorism and sectarian violence, and appeals to regional stakeholders to pursue negotiated settlements of disputes, are the hallmarks of one path.

The other path is characterised by India’s strengthening security ties with its Arab partners in the Gulf, particularly in the area of counterterrorism, as well as by investigating the possibility of a different multilateral Asian security framework for the Gulf that includes significant players like China, Japan, and South Korea. With a focus on protecting sea lines of communication (SLOCs) in the Indian Ocean and preventing China from dominating the region, the Indian government has invested in foreign oil and natural gas fields, primarily in Sudan, Syria, Iran, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Russia. Additionally, India’s counterterrorism strategy has been strengthened under the present Modi administration in an effort to isolate and expose Pakistan’s global support for terrorism, notably in West Asia. The United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia have both granted the Indian government’s request for the extradition of suspected terrorists.^{ix}

1.3 Limitations in Indian Policy

How successful is India’s approach to West Asia? Have India’s relations with the other countries in the area changed as a result of expanding economic ties and security cooperation? Has there been any development of a strategic partnership between India and any of its Gulf rivals?

However, there has undoubtedly been an improvement in each of these relationships, most likely not. However, there are significant internal and foreign obstacles that prevent India and West Asia from advancing their relationship.

Domestically, the bureaucratic approach to managing Indian foreign policy, ongoing understaffing, and several centres of decision-making have frequently led to ineffective or shoddy execution of bilateral and international treaties and accords. There are several instances of these issues, such as the 2008 India-United States Civil Nuclear Agreement (123 Agreement), where cooperation in the civilian nuclear energy sector was blocked when the Indian government passed the Nuclear Suppliers Liability Law.

Second, despite its expanding influence in the Gulf, India has not been successful in luring sizable Arab investment. Between 2000 and 2014, the GCC countries' foreign direct investment (FDI) stayed flat at \$3.2 billion;^x the United Arab Emirates total FDI during that time was a pitiful \$8 billion.^{xi} Due to outdated banking laws, corruption, and a lack of transparency, Arab investors lack trust in achieving quick returns on their investments, which is partly responsible for the Indian government's hesitation to establish an Islamic Bank.

India faces three different types of difficulties from the outside. First, India's "geopolitical reach" to Central and West Asia was irrevocably cut off by the establishment of Pakistan. This geographical fact and India's "confidence gap" with Pakistan have prevented India from advancing its commercial interests, including the completion of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) and Iran-India-Pakistan (IPI) gas pipeline projects. In addition, Pakistan still enjoys a sizable political base throughout Muslim West Asia, which is bolstered by its Islamic identity, victimisation narrative, and military-security links, tipping the scales of political support in the area in Pakistan's favour relative to India. Delhi has little choice but to engage "constructively" with Pakistan in order to advance bilateral relations and assure a successful outreach to West and Central Asia since India lacks a viable media strategy to contradict Pakistan's narrative on the Partition of the subcontinent and Kashmir.

China poses a second external threat to India's foreign policy in West Asia. Even while China and multilateral Asian security cooperation in the Gulf sub-region are strongly supported by India, this is unlikely to happen for two reasons. First, Gulf Arab leaders do not seem to find the concept of a common security system particularly enticing. They are used to living under a U.S. hegemonic security system. Second, despite the convergence of interests, there is no effective cooperation in this area due to internal conflict and a lack of confidence among India, China, and Japan. India undoubtedly has a stronger "soft power" presence in the region than China does, and Gulf nations increasingly see India as a partner in security.

China has, nevertheless, greatly increased its global prestige and influence. In terms of hard currency and military might, China and India are vastly outmatched. Furthermore, China has already made significant progress in the Gulf by successfully penetrating Arab markets and acquiring equity positions in the region's upstream oil and natural gas industry. Finally, it may be argued that Gulf Arabs are more likely to seek Chinese protection than Indian protection if the circumstance calls for it due to India's inability to handle its own periphery, South Asia.

India's third difficulty originates from the area itself. Despite the fact that Indian democracy has so far protected Indian Muslims from the negative effects of Saudi-Wahhabi-centered global Islamic radicalism, including ISIL, the future is gloomy given Muslims' growing disenchantment with the Indian state system, especially in light of the rise of Hindu nationalism. Pakistan has been devastated by the rapid growth of Saudi Wahhabism, which India lacks the long-term vision to stop.

Second, the Arab Gulf economy have slowed due to falling oil and gas prices and the rising cost of "war circumstances," which has resulted in wage cuts, layoffs, tax increases, fewer job prospects, and nationalisation of workforces^{xii} at the expense of the expat population. The Indian government has not yet created a policy framework to address these potential unforeseen circumstances.

1.4 CONCLUSION

The uncertainty and fuzziness of Indian foreign policy, along with institutional constraints, has resulted in a paradoxical situation: increasing economic and defence links but no political-strategic depth between India and West Asia. This is a situation that, in the long run, does not bode well for India, which aspires to be a great power and whose future prosperity is becoming increasingly connected with Gulf security.

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^{iv} U.S. Energy Information Administration, *Country Analysis Brief: India*, 10.

^v India voted against Iran in 2005, 2006, 2009, and 2011 for failing to comply with its NPT obligations. It imported 21.20 million tons of crude oil from Iran in 2009-10, which was reduced to 18.50 million tons in 2010-11, 18.11 million tons in 2011-12 and 13.14 million tons in 2012-13.

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^{vii} Ibid.

^{viii} Dinshaw Mistry, "Domestic and international influence on India's energy policies," 1947-2008, in Ganguly Sumit, op. cit., 329.

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