



# INDIA AND WEST ASIA A REALISTIC APPROACH OF ENGAGEMENT

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Major internal and external transformations are taking place in the West Asian region. The security situation in the region continues to remain volatile and precarious. Political instability, civil wars, sectarian rivalry, terrorism and religious extremism, secessionist movements and humanitarian crises have dragged on from the past and further worsened with very little hope of stability

and peace. As regional and global forces have cooperated to push back the radical forces it has intensified tensions for geopolitical influence. It has further threatened to generate zones of conflict and proxy wars among leading regional powers aided by external players with vested interest and strategic presence in the region. This has also led to new alliances and strategic groupings emerging in the region with

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U.S., Israel and the Gulf countries, especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE, coming closer to counter Iran's increasing influence in the region. In the milieu, the already fragile sectarian, ethnic and religious fault lines have further widened in West Asia.

India with its longstanding historical and cultural ties and more importantly, its growing strategic and economic stakes cannot but be affected by new developments in the region. The ongoing political transformations in the region as well as the realisation of India's rise in stature as an emerging power have necessitated a fresh look at this geo-strategically important destination. The region is part of India's extended neighbourhood. The stakes are too high for India, particularly in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. Almost 8 million Indians live and work in the GCC countries, remit home over \$35 billion annually, the largest from any part of the world. The Persian Gulf region alone accounts for more than 63 percent of India's total hydrocarbon imports and GCC countries are India's largest trade partner (UAE, third in ranking accounts for 7.73% share with \$49.7 billion in trade in 2015-16; and Saudi Arabia ranks fourth with \$26.7 billion trade in 2015-16). Given these stakes, India has followed a middle path in its policy towards this region to ensure its economic and strategic interests. Primary goals for India have been to ensure security and safety of its 8 million people living in the region; secure uninterrupted supply of oil and gas from the region; and mitigate the negative impact of extremist groups like Islamic State and Al-Qaeda. India's past relations with the Arab Gulf region were more utilitarian in nature during the Cold War and post-Cold War era.

In the post 9/11 phase, India's relations with West Asia have accelerated substantially. Further, there were noticeable changes in the foreign policy of the Gulf States as well. The GCC started looking at greater engagement with the Asian countries as part of its new 'Look East' policy. This was a policy aimed at diversifying its relations while maintaining

ties with the US and the EU. Thus, a combination of political and economic complementarities at the regional and international levels has enabled India and countries in West Asia to further consolidate their age-old ties.

In 2014, Modi Government's diplomatic initiatives were termed as "Strong, Proactive and Sensitive" by its External Affairs Minister, Sushma Swaraj. She noted that the primary focus of India's foreign policy has been its neighbourhood followed by the Look East policy. She termed the third focus area of the Modi government as the Arabian Gulf. However, the current security situation in the region and various long-term factors have led India to re-energise and shift focus towards West Asia. India's increasing diplomatic activism towards the region in the last two years is indicative of a shift in its effort to build stronger economic and security ties.

India is confronted with difficult choices given the existing regional complexities and rising expectations from West Asia. So far, New Delhi has been able to manage closer relations with Israel, Saudi Arabia and other GCC countries while maintaining its ties with Iran. Given its stakes in the Gulf States, New Delhi has adopted a balanced approach to engage with GCC countries and Iran. The Modi government's key 'mantra' has been to balance, cooperate, connect and built strong economic and security partnerships with the regional countries. Pursuing his diplomatic activism, he has visited UAE, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Qatar and Israel to boost India's strategic cooperation with the regional countries. In the present context, India's policy has moved from 'Look West' to 'Think West' and now to 'Link West'. In the light of heightened tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia and divided GCC, New Delhi faces a major challenge of fostering a relationship with resurgent Iran. It should be able to do this without adversely affecting its relations with the GCC countries led by Saudi Arabia under Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, who has taken a very hostile position against Iran.

## SPOTLIGHT

The question which merits attention is can India bridge the gap between Iran and Saudi Arabia? And what could be the realistic Indian approach to safeguard its strategic and economic interests in the region? In a situation of heightened Iran-Saudi rivalry, the space for bridging the gap between the two countries seems limited. Official statements coming from both Iran and Saudi Arabia are not very encouraging.



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However, in this pessimistic situation, some regional experts like Ebtessam Al-Ketbi, President of Emirates Policy Centre is of the opinion that India can play a role of mediator between Iran and the GCC countries. It is argued that given the two core interests: energy and its citizens in the region, complemented with the fact that India has the second largest

Muslim population, maintaining good relations both with Iran and GCC countries is critical for India. India's non-interventionist approach, good relations with Iran and the GCC and its positive image make a good case for India to play a greater role in the region. However, the regional complexities and India's own stakes would limit its direct role as a mediator between Iran and Saudi Arabia. This is because regional problems demand regional solutions with regional countries having direct involvement in settling their issues. Based on its strengths and limitations, New Delhi will have to craft an independent and realistic policy towards West Asia keeping in view the regional sensitivities. Making use of its strengths, it could initiate the following steps:

- Create a Regional Centre of Excellence for countering extremism and terrorism based in any city in India.
- Organise an annual West Asia Summit bringing experts, policy makers, officials and academic community from the region. This could be a platform for dialogue on strategic and economic issues.
- Build a West Asia University similar to the existing South Asia University.
- Water and food security are extremely significant issues in the West Asian region. To meet this challenge, India could constitute a working group on food and water security, to share India's experience with the regional countries.
- Initiate an annual regional energy dialogue which will bring all energy producing West Asian countries and India together.

The aforesaid initiatives will provide a platform for all regional countries for dialogue on both economic and strategic issues. This will also help India and the regional countries in co-management and co-development of a stable and secure region through economic diplomacy. There are major opportunities opening in the economic sector – agriculture, information technology, infrastructure, maritime security, health sector, tourism, service sector and education which are mutually beneficial for India and the countries of the West Asian side. In an era of globalisation and economic integration, zero-sum games will only push the region to greater instability and conflicts.

It has been very aptly argued by the Ambassador Seyed Hossein Mousavian in his recent article that "A zero-sum Iran-Saudi relationship will not only be detrimental to regional stability, it will diminish – not enhance – prospects for Saudi reform. Cooperation between these two major regional heavyweights remains the key element to shape a new peaceful Middle Eastern order...". India could only be a partner in bringing greater harmony in the region through its realistic economic diplomacy without getting sucked into regional conflicts.

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