

India's Strategic Interests in West Asian Region

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Abstract— With the emergence of political and economic powerhouse of India in south-Asia in 21st century it has been reaching out to the West Asian countries, with an attempt to increase its ties with the West Asian countries. There are many factors encompasses for India's increased interest in building relations with West Asian countries, which includes trade, investment, oil, Diaspora, counter-terrorism, littoral security, and the development and preservation of ocean resources. During the period of post-independence India its relations with West Asia centered on economic ties. Political relations were largely defined by Cold War allegiances and antagonism with Pakistan. India had avoided security issues with west Asian countries and was seen as a benign power that steers clear of security issues and focuses on exporting labor and importing oil. After the end of cold war India started to think strategically about the West Asia, with deepening security ties with Gulf States in sharing intelligence, creating security capacities, and joint strategies to combat threats. Indian navy has succeeded in forging close and friendly ties with maritime forces in the Gulf by assuming the role of a 'net security provider' in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and through regular joint and multilateral naval exercises with west Asian countries. The determinative factor for growing Indian interests in west Asia has been New Delhi's need to preserve its strategic stakes in the Indian Ocean and countering China's strategic inroads in West Asia. India's growing economic and security cooperation between India and the regional countries resulted in a transformation of political relations. These relations have evolved into a strategic alliance with some countries. India's persistent and tireless endeavors have has burnished New Delhi's credentials in the region as a reliable friend. Nevertheless, there are serious domestic and external limitations that constrain the further development of relations between India and West Asia.

Keywords— Strategic, West Asian Region.

I. BACKGROUND

INDIA'S relations with the West Asian countries are historical since the independence of India. India has interests in economic, political, security and strategic fields with the West Asian nations. In the post-colonial era both side work along the ideology of non-alignment. India's 'Look West Policy' indicates India's emerging economic and strategic relations with countries of West Asia in order to boost its energy security and a counterbalance to the strategic influence of other major powers in the region. During the Prime Minister Manmohan Singh period it has emphasized on a 'Look West Policy like India's famed "look East policy" but he failed to get much more. The new Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has started to reinforcement of 'Look West' or 'Link

West' policy since May 2014

Until the end of the Cold War India's relations with West Asia were primarily shaped by India's policy responses to evolving geopolitical ground realities internationally and in the region. When India became independent, the West exercised almost unchallengeable influence and control over West Asia. All independent West Asian countries then had strongly anti-Communist, pro-West regimes and had become a part of the American-led bloc in the context of the newly emerged Cold War. However, to the West's great disappointment, even anger, India adopted a unique approach — not being aligned with either camp.

II. REORIENTATIONS IN RELATIONS

India drew game-changing conclusions from this bitter denouement. India's first post-Cold War Prime Minister, P.V. Narasimha Rao, who assumed office in June 1991, swiftly wrought dramatic economic and foreign policy changes to adjust to the new global geopolitical realities. Ideology, a protectionist economy, and advocacy of Third World concerns were junked; national interest-oriented pragmatism became the overriding guiding principle. Dramatic economic reform and liberalization were initiated to enable India to join the global economic mainstream to achieve high economic growth rates on a sustained basis; this was made the highest priority objective of Indian foreign policy.

India ceased viewing West Asia through the prism of its issues with Pakistan, discontinued the use of strong rhetoric denouncing other countries' policies, and abandoned defensive, reactive policy approaches. India also started consciously courting the United States, now the lone global superpower. Importantly, India began to reach out to all West Asian countries without picking and choosing between them, and on the basis of mutual benefit. In particularly audacious moves in December 1991, India reversed its earlier vote in the United Nations that had equated Zionism with racism. After personally obtaining P.L.O. Chairman Arafat's full concurrence, Narasimha Rao established full diplomatic relations with Israel in January 1992, disregarding extremely strong domestic criticism. The relationship has flourished since then In December 1992, Rao, courageously risking a potential rebuff, reached out to Iran; his visit the next year turned out to be exceedingly satisfying. A great rapport was established between him and President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. A growing convergence of Indian and Iranian strategic interests in Afghanistan during the 1990s laid the

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foundation for a broad-based and mutually advantageous bilateral relationship in the future. The Indian economy began to grow impressively, even as Pakistan became increasingly enmeshed in Afghanistan and mired in internal political instability. The spreading Islamist extremist militancy and terrorism in Pakistan and West Asia — while the world's third largest Muslim community in India remained immune to this virus — presented a particularly strong and impressive contrast internationally.

Reversing decades of enormous pressure on India on nuclear-related issues, the signing of the framework agreement for the Indo-United States nuclear deal on July 18, 2005 capped by President George W. Bush's repeated declarations that the U.S. intended to help India become a great power, dramatically put the long estranged Indo-U.S. relationship on a hugely positive trajectory. Except for China, the other four permanent members endorsed India's quest for permanent membership of the United Nations Security Council. Taken together, these developments constituted public recognition that the world welcomed India's rise, in contrast with growing anxieties about China's rise. These same circumstances also persuaded Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies to look at India very differently. In response to Pakistan's adventurism in Kargil in 1999, West Asian countries and the West declined to support Pakistan — the first time such response in the long history of the India-Pakistan conflict.

III. WEST ASIA IMPORTANCE FOR INDIA

The West Asian region is one of the most instable and conflicted region in the contemporary world. Multifaceted factors, including regional and international powers' interest produced vast turmoil in the post-Arab spring era in the region. A range of Islamic terrorist groups, Civil wars and external intervention made the West Asia most horrible region. The whole West Asia is now in big socio-political, economical turmoil and boundaries are regularly fragmenting and integrating. The Islamic State and other terror groups are rapidly getting more ground in Iraq, Syria and Yemen and beyond. India too not far from these challenges, an ISIS document revealed in US found that the Islamic State is planning to attack India with the help of the Pakistani and Afghan Taliban. The West Asia region is also in the process of re-settlement and re-alignment of regional politics due to the recent entry of Iran in the international arena through the historic nuclear deal. India's growing relations with Iran may be a bridge in Saudi Arabia and Israel to Teheran. A trustful relation between regional powers only can bring peace and stability in the region. In the midst of these challenges, the West Asian nations and India should develop their relations in near future. India's economic rise requires an increased use of energy. For example, India is heavily reliant on oil and natural gas from the West Asia, with 58 percent of oil coming from the region, and an even higher 88 percent of liquified natural gas deriving from states in the West Asia. As India grows, there is more and more demand for oil and natural gas.

IV. A NEW ERA

With the advent of the new millennium, there has been an extraordinary turnaround in the relationship between the Gulf Cooperation Council (G.C.C.) countries and India. Collectively, the G.C.C. countries have become India's preeminent oil and gas supplier and leading trade partner. Indians are the largest expatriate group in each of the six G.C.C. countries. 3,050,000 Indians live and work in Saudi Arabia constituting the largest number of Indian passport holders abroad, followed by 2,800,000 in the U.A.E. The processes propelling this movement took place because of the high comfort level with Indians due to the millennia old people to people interaction and their reputation for being law abiding and hard-working

No major power has the kind of people-to-people socio-cultural compatibility and socio-economic interdependence with countries of the Gulf region, in particular with G.C.C. countries that India has. Except for continuing O.I.C. activism relating to Kashmir in particular, there are no bilaterally contentious political issues between India and the G.C.C. countries. India is very proud of being the world's largest democracy but India believes strongly that it is not the business of foreign countries to impose forms of government on other countries; in fact, India believes that monarchies in G.C.C. countries are a factor of stability, fully in keeping with the customs, ethos and traditions of the Arabian Peninsula. Saudi Arabia and the U.A.E. have provided excellent and expanding anti-terrorism cooperation by repatriating those India wanted for terrorist activity within India despite intensive efforts by Pakistan to prevent such repatriations even going to the extent of often claiming that those persons were Pakistani nationals. The cooperation extended is much more than what is in the public domain.

Already excellent relations with the U.A.E., Saudi Arabia, and Qatar have developed even further since Narendra Modi became India's Prime Minister in May 2014. There is a strong and growing multifaceted strategic partnership between India and these countries, as sketched out in the many agreements they have forged in a wide variety of fields, ranging from energy, trade, and investment to counterterrorism and defense cooperation.

V. STRATEGIC IMPERATIVES

The waterways of the Northern Indian Ocean are among the most important in the world, facilitating the export of large volumes of goods, oil and natural gas. India is a principal beneficiary of the trade and energy flows through the West Asian littorals. Importantly for India, the ongoing engagement with Arab navies has not been to the exclusion of a maritime relationship with Iran. Since 2015, whenever an Indian contingent has visited the West Asia, one warship has visited Iran. The Iranian Navy, in the grip of a 'siege' mind-set, has been experiencing a radical psychological transformation. With a rapid rise in naval combat capability, the naval leadership has gained the confidence to be a regional maritime

power. Iran has been on the lookout for new partners to support its naval agenda of establishing control over the Western approaches to the Arabian Gulf. India offers the most potential for such a partnership. Indian naval planners recognize the conflicts in which Iran and West Asia monarchies have been involved in Yemen and other parts of West Asia. The determinative factor for growing Indian naval forays in the West Asia, therefore, has been New Delhi's need to preserve its strategic stakes in the Indian Ocean. With China's continuing efforts to make strategic inroads in West Asia, India's geopolitical influence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has been slowly shrinking. New Chinese naval base in Djibouti, growing submarine visits, and a spurt in Beijing's maritime military activities in the Western Indian Ocean have created concern in India's security establishment. The nature of the PLA Navy's recent submarine forays suggests a Chinese aspiration for strategic presence in the IOR. For the Indian Navy, therefore, interaction with Gulf navies is a measure aimed at retaining Indian influence in the IOR, much as it has sought to assure its partners of the commitment to strengthening maritime security in the Northern Indian Ocean region.

VI. INDIAN STRATEGY TOWARDS WEST ASIA

Ensuring the stability and security of the Persian Gulf region, including the protection of the large Indian expatriate community in the context of persistent conflict and violence across the region, has emerged as the top priority of Indian foreign policy toward West Asia in recent years. The high degree of political unpredictability and deteriorating security environment in the region, along with the growing possibility of the reduction if not withdrawal of the American security role in the region, has led India to follow two simultaneous, though not necessarily contradictory, paths in conducting its relations with West Asia. One path is marked by the continuation of India's traditional diplomatic line of "non-interference" in the internal affairs of its counterparts in the region, coupled with a "wait and watch" posture that is punctuated by condemnations of terrorism and sectarian violence, and appeals to regional stakeholders to pursue negotiated settlements of disputes.

The other path is marked by the deepening of India's security ties with its Gulf Arab partners, including in the area of counterterrorism, along with exploring the possibility of an alternative multilateral Asian security framework for the Gulf involving important stakeholders such as China, Japan, and South Korea. This latter approach has led the Indian government to invest in overseas oil and gas fields (i.e., mainly in Sudan, Syria, Iran, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Russia), to undertake a massive modernization of the Indian navy, including development of a maritime doctrine with a view to protect sea lines of communication (SLOCs) in the Indian Ocean as well as to prevent China from dominating the Indian Ocean; to conduct joint naval exercises with the U.S., U.K., France, China, and Gulf countries; and to conclude a series of

bilateral defense and strategic agreements with all of the G.C.C. states. In addition, under the Modi government, India's counterterrorism policy has been expanded in an effort to isolate and expose Pakistan's policy of terrorism globally, including in West Asia. Saudi Arabia and the U.A.E. have responded positively to the Indian authorities' request for the extradition of suspected terrorists.

That India has managed to keep all of these diverse relationships on a positive track in spite of the political obstacles has not been easy. Neither has it been a matter of sheer luck. Since the turmoil in West Asia gathered force in 2011, India has hewed to a "hands-off" policy based on the principle that regime change through foreign intervention constitutes a violation of international norms and law. India has assiduously avoided taking sides in any of the region's rivalries or conflicts. At the same time, India has supported all efforts to defeat the barbarous Islamic State as well as U.N. diplomatic initiatives aimed at the negotiated settlement of conflicts.

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