

## India's Relations with West Asia: Bonding Based On Geopolitical Landscape

**DR. MUKESH KUMAR**

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science  
Govt. College Kharkhara (Rewari), Haryana, India  
Email : mukeshyadavps@gmail.com

**Abstract:** *The old concept of Non-Alignment continues to shape the political culture and strategy of the Indian thinking in the field of foreign policy and relations with other nations. The Gandhian-Nehruvian moralism has not having more impact on Indian foreign ties and increasing adaptation to the culture of power-centred realism in recent years and it has deeply affected India's conduct of external relations, including its relations with West Asia. In the past, India has managed successful balancing relations with all the countries of Middle East (West Asia). Now, the restructuring of West Asia's geopolitical landscape has allowed India to engage with West Asian states with even less political maneuvering. Today, India's policy is motivated by its active pursuit of economic opportunities in West Asia, whether it is energy security matter or greater connectivity and trade through the development of Chabahar Port in the Iranian case. In a time when global powers are shifting inwards, India has taken up an important role as one of the few nations willing to stand behind the promise of globalisation. Despite acknowledging their comprehensive partnership with the United States that has only grown under PM Narendra Modi's vision, Indian foreign policymakers have stuck to their traditional stance on strategic autonomy. Such an assertion of strategic autonomy reflects India's current foreign policy towards West Asia. India's policy is motivated by its active pursuit of economic opportunities in West Asia.*

**Keywords:** *Crude Oil, Gulf War, Iran, Non-Aligned Movement, Un Security Council Resolution, West Asia Policy.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION:

West Asia, Like the Middle East is an arbitrary term which includes Egypt, the Arabian Peninsula, Turkey and Iran in a narrow sense but it includes the area from the Eastern coast of Iran across North Africa to the Atlantic sea Board in a wider sense. In the context of the Arab Israeli conflict, the North African states of Algeria, Libya and Morocco are as much a part of the Middle-East just like Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. According to a geographical sense the Govt. of India defines this area or the region as 'West Asia and North Africa' (WANA). India's political, Economic and cultural ties with the states in this region may be tracked back in the history but direct contacts between India and West Asia was seen during the period of European colonial domination. No doubt popular Indian Images of West Asia have been shaped in the history by the stories of Egyptian Pharaohs and Pyramids, of glittering Cairo resplendent with night clubs and belly dancers, and by the stories of Arabian Nights. During the interwar years both India and Arab world served to forge closer links due to the rise of Nationalism in both India and in the Arab countries. But the relations were not such fruitful after the independence of India and the West Asian states by the end of the 1940s. After India's Independence Indian non alignment policy became the obstacle in the development of good understanding between India and West Asian countries. On the contrary India was known as the land of Hindus due to the communal violence between India and Pakistan. But later on the development of secular state hood improved the relations between both areas.<sup>1</sup>

After more than a half century of false starts and unrealized potential, India is now emerging as the swing state in the global balance of power. In the coming years, it will have an opportunity to shape outcomes on the most critical issues of the twenty-first century: the construction of Asian stability, the political modernization of the greater Middle East, and the management of globalization. In the twenty first century, India is growing as world's leading power. The growth of India's power and standing and of its active diplomacy can be seen in its renewed focus on the Middle East (West Asia). Acknowledging that India's "footprint" in the region has been "relatively autonomous of strategic calculation, Indian policymakers recognize the need to develop a holistic engagement strategy, one that seeks both to strengthen economic ties and to institutionalize long-term security cooperation with West Asian countries. Against the

backdrop of these developments, this mini research examine the geopolitical dimensions, economic ties, trans-national networks, and other aspects of India's links with the Middle East (West Asia) -a region that plays a vital role in India's economy and its future.

## **2. THE HISTORICAL FRAMEWORK OF INDIA'S WEST ASIAN POLICY:**

In the past, India has managed a successful balancing act in a tri-polar West Asia. Now, the restructuring of West Asia's geopolitical landscape has allowed India to engage with West Asian states with even less political maneuvering. India's vision to establish itself as a powerful and prosperous state in Asia has led it down various paths in terms of its foreign policy towards West Asia. Over the years, New Delhi has adapted its foreign policy to suit the evolving needs and conditions of global politics from the ideologically-driven Non-Aligned Movement to a policy based on greater pragmatism and realism with the clear specs of its national interests. Today, the increasing multipolarity of the global order has enabled India to pursue its policy of strategic autonomy when it comes to international relations and trade.

To understand this transformation, we must first consider the ideological foundations of Indian foreign policy. During the Cold War years of global bipolarity, India's foreign policy followed the principles of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) which PM Jawaharlal Nehru founded and formulated. After decades of international sidelining and subjugation, NAM aimed to use Afro-Asian solidarity to shape international relations from offices beyond Washington and Moscow. Thus, the non-aligned values of sovereignty, territorial integrity and non-interference in domestic politics, were a crucial component of Indian's foreign policy foundations. In the West Asian context, this was reflected in the Nehru-Nasser alliance, through which India supported the Arabs against Western interference, particularly in the case of Palestine and the 1956 Suez Crisis.<sup>2</sup>

After decades of international sidelining and subjugation, Non-Aligned Movement aimed to use Afro-Asian solidarity to shape international relations from offices beyond Washington and Moscow. By the end 1991, the Cold War formally ended with the disintegration of the USSR. Half a decade before the dissolution, neo-liberalism emerged as the final evolutionary form of global governance. Such uni-polarity presented India with significantly less flexibility of options in setting its West Asian policy. One example of this was the Gulf Crisis. On 2 August 1990, the V.P. Singh coalition government faced a threat to its geopolitical interests. Iraq, invaded Kuwait, an oil-producing country. As the international community began to rally against Iraqi hostility, New Delhi failed to publicly align itself with either side. Iraq, a non-aligned secular state, was India's natural ally for ideological reasons. Iraq was also one of the few Middle Eastern countries that supported India's claims on Kashmir at that time. Hence, upon Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, India was faced with a serious policy dilemma - would it stick to its traditional stance as a non-aligned power and take a stand against Western intervention in the conflict? Or, would it stand by the Gulf States and adhere to the policies of the US, considering new economic opportunities and a changing world order? The Singh government eventually chose a third option: ambiguity. India failed to formally condemn Iraq for the invasion due to their strong relationship and it encouraged "the soonest possible withdrawal of Iraqi forces." Despite this, they maintained their strong opposition to any intervention outside of the UN framework. Indian Foreign Minister I.K.Gujral gave warnings for what he saw as great power politics eating away at the true multilateral foundations of the United Nations.

Further, India supported the UN Security Council Resolution in November 1990- which authorised the use of force against the Iraqi army if they refused to withdraw before 15 January 1991. India did not contribute its military forces in the coalition against the Iraqi army, however, New Delhi found it self pressured into supporting the US led coalition against the Iraqi army through intelligence and assistance. In January 1991, India allowed American military planes to refuel at Indian facilities, which was met with great opposition from the side of West Asian Nations. On 2 March 1991, the UN adopted Resolution 686 after an 11-1-3 vote, India and China being two of the three abstainers. The resolution largely dealt with settling the boundary dispute, rebuilding the affected areas of Kuwait, and Iraqi liability for damage. However, Indian representatives disagreed with the continuation of the 'authorisation of force' clause of Resolution 678.

Therefore, as one of the first political crises of the post-Cold War world, the Gulf War acted as the US' public announcement that a new world order had arrived. While the fear of a Washington-centric system gripped Indian leaders, the crisis also called into question the ideological burdens and relevance of non-alignment. India was forced to face the realities of a liberalised world in which economic benefits came with political costs. Increased multi-polarity has enhanced India's ability to truly pursue its national interests internationally, without involving itself in any political alliances or ideological factions.

## **3. NEW WORLD SCENARIO AND INDIA-WEST ASIA RELATIONS:**

As the world has faced the end of the second decade of the 21st century, American hegemony is being challenged economically, militarily, diplomatically and culturally. Multi-polarity is growing with the rise of regional powers such as Russia, China, Saudi Arabia, Iran and India. Without an overt need to appease Washington, India can conduct its foreign policy with a significant amount of independence. Increased multi-polarity has enhanced India's ability to truly pursue its national interests internationally, without involving itself in messy political alliances or ideological factions. This freedom is synonymous with the idea of 'strategic autonomy.'

In the past, India has managed a successful balancing act in a tri-polar West Asia. Now, the restructuring of West Asia's geopolitical landscape has allowed India to engage with West Asian states with even less political diplomacy. Through a strictly business attitude, India has pursued its most favourable economic opportunities without the burden of managing political ramifications. One such act of political diplomacy is India's response to the simmering crisis in the Persian Gulf, which continues to be a region of unsurpassable importance. In terms of energy security, trade and people-to-people ties, stability in the Gulf is a major priority in India's foreign policy calculations. The crisis began on 8 May 2018, when President Donald Trump withdrew the United States from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). This decision reinstated sanctions against Iran due to unverified claims of non-compliance.

With Iranian crude oil comprising 10% of India's energy imports, India needed a concise strategy to eliminate tensions and reduce market instability. India's most obvious concern was energy security. With Iranian crude oil comprising 10% of India's energy imports, India needed a concise strategy to eliminate tensions and reduce market instability. In the meantime, the Trump administration granted waivers to eight heavy consumers of Iranian oil, including India and gave them warning until 2 May 2019, to either completely end oil imports from Iran or face sanctions from the United States. By 24 May 2019, Indian Ambassador to the United States, Harsh Vardhan Shringla, announced that India had ended oil imports from Iran, in keeping with American requests. However, in a Parliament session during early July, Minister of State for External Affairs, V. Muraleedharan, made it clear that India's "bilateral relations with Iran stand on their own and are not influenced by India's relations with any third country." While oil imports had significantly decreased, this was expressed as a short term measure. Furthermore, the Indian government had no intention of suspending trade or infrastructure development in Iran.<sup>3</sup>

Despite acknowledging their comprehensive partnership with the United States that has only grown under PM Narendra Modi's vision, Indian foreign policymakers have stuck to their traditional stance on strategic autonomy. The Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar's meeting with US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in late June 2019 reflected this strength. Jaishankar clarified that as a nation that imports 85% of its oil primarily through the Gulf, India will push for a diplomatic resolution of the matter to secure its interests. Moreover, he maintained that India will use its own metrics to assess its foreign policy, not the United States'. During PM Modi's meeting with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani on 26 September at the UN General Assembly, he confirmed that in order to maintain peace and stability in the region, India will continue to prioritise diplomacy and dialogue over isolation.

Such an assertion of strategic autonomy reflects India's current foreign policy towards West Asia. India's policy is motivated by its active pursuit of economic opportunities in West Asia, whether it is energy security or greater connectivity and trade through the development of Chabahar Port in the Iranian case. In a time when global powers are shifting inwards, India has taken up an important role as one of the few nations willing to stand behind the promise of globalisation.<sup>4</sup>

#### **4. DIMENSIONS OF INDIA'S ENGAGEMENT WITH WEST ASIAN NATIONS:**

Today, India is improving its diplomatic engagements with West Asia. India has improved its diplomatic ties and has reached out to Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman and Iran. There are some main aspects to India's engagements with the West Asian countries.

First of all, India's growing proximity to the Arab countries is a determining factor for India-West Asia relations. Since the past few years India has grown closer to the Arab countries. Although India had cordial relations with the Arab countries for decades, in recent times, India has sought to redefine these relations. Oil trade and remittances from Indian Diaspora in Arab countries, especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE, formed the base of Indian engagement with the Arab world. However India's relations with the Arab countries are much more diversified with India strengthening defence cooperation with Saudi Arabia and the UAE by entering into strategic partnerships with both. Besides, India's closeness to the Arab countries has also caused the latter to distance itself from Pakistan. India's diplomacy with the Arab world has been successful to a great extent with lack of international support to Pakistan from the Arab countries.<sup>5</sup> India has also been assertive in its diplomacy with the Muslim world in general. It is evident from the fact that in the rivalry between the Arab countries and Turkey, India has sided with the Arab countries while Turkey has supported Pakistan against India, especially on the issue of Jammu and Kashmir. India's close relations with the Arab countries should be viewed from the point of view

of India's relations with the US and Israel. In the past two decades India's relations with the US and Israel are growing strong. Both the countries are major defence partners of India. For a long time India had to balance its relations with Israel and the Arab world. But now the Arab countries establishing diplomatic relations (the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco in this year) with Israel, India could expect to tread a more seamless path in West Asia.<sup>6</sup>

On economic front, India is a preferred destination for investments for the Arab countries. Saudi Arabia is India's fourth-largest trade partner and has pledged an investment of \$100 billion in India in various sectors such as petrochemicals, infrastructure, manufacturing, refining and mining. Recently UAE has announced an investment of \$7 billion in food corridor in India.

Secondly, India's relations with Iran are relevant and contemporary for world politics and mainly for United States of America. While Iran is also an important country for India strategically and economically, the relations between both the countries have witnessed ups and downs in the past few years. Although India is involved in development of Chabahar Port in Iran which would have dual use of connecting to Central Asia and Eurasia as well as a deterrent to Pakistan's Gwadar Port, the United States' relations with Iran have had an impact on India's policies. With the United States imposing sanctions on Iran, India had stopped oil purchase from Iran. In the recent times US, Arab countries and Israel have developed strict policies against Iran, India's engagements have reduced. Recently, India held trilateral discussions with Iran and Uzbekistan on joint use of Chabahar Port, the pace of India's engagements with Iran is slow as compared to that with the Arab countries.

From the US side, Donald Trump's entire term was marked by strong opposition to Iran. Under his presidency, the US withdraws the Iran Nuclear Deal. It is now expected that under Joe Biden, the United States' relations with Iran would see some improvement. India should hope for some acceleration in its relations with Iran.

Third, Afghanistan remains an area of concern in India's outreach to Central Asia and beyond. With the Afghan peace process still going on and Pakistan's increasing influence either directly or through the Taliban creates a challenge for India. The security in Afghanistan also remains the biggest impediment in India's connectivity projects. The United States is set to reduce its defence forces stationed in Afghanistan although in a phased manner. But this development would further make uncertain to the security situation in Afghanistan.<sup>7</sup>

Although, opportunities are high for India in Iran, Afghanistan and Central Asia, at the moment India has focused on the Arab countries. For India, the Arab countries are an important source of investments, especially in the post-COVID economic recovery period. For the Arab countries, India offers an opportunity to diversify their economy thereby reducing dependence on oil trade. As far as outreach to Central Asia and Eurasia is concerned, India could focus on alternate routes through International North South Transit Corridor (INSTC) or the Ashgabat Agreement which implies a route through Iran and Turkmenistan instead of Iran and Afghanistan.<sup>8</sup>

## **5. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE OF INDIA-WEST ASIA TIES:**

After more than a half century of false starts and unrealized potential, India is now emerging as the swing state in the global balance of power. In the coming years, it will have an opportunity to shape outcomes on the most critical issues of the twenty-first century: the construction of Asian stability, the political modernization of the greater Middle East, and the management of globalization.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, Indian foreign policy has yet to break decisively from its old and irrelevant parameters and concepts. Yet, India's accomplishments in the economic and military spheres are nonetheless impressive. Indian diplomacy under the Modi government arguably has been pragmatic, proactive and self-confident also<sup>10</sup>. The growth of India's power and standing and of its active diplomacy can be seen in its renewed focus on the Middle East (West Asia). Acknowledging that India's footprint in the region has been relatively autonomous of strategic calculation. Indian policymakers recognize the need to develop a holistic engagement strategy, one that seeks both to strengthen economic ties and to institutionalize long-term security cooperation. Against the backdrop of these developments, it is examined that the geopolitical dimensions, economic ties, transnational networks, and other aspects of India's links with the Middle East (West Asia) - a region that plays a vital role in India's economy and its future. The existing geopolitical and more importantly economic circumstances have led India to pursue an energetic diplomatic outreach to the Arab countries (West Asia) more than the physical connectivity.

## **REFERENCES:**

1. Banerji, A.K. (1988). India and West Asia: Changing Images Reflects Shift in Regional Balance of Power, Butterworth & co.(Publishers) Pvt. Ltd. pp-26-38
2. Wadhawan, Meher. The Evolution of India's West Asian Policy, Young Voices, October 31, 2019, Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi.
3. "The Times of India & The Tribune", New Delhi, 25 May, 2019.

4. Ibid, Meher Wadhawan.
5. Press Information Bureau, Government of India, Prime Minister's Office, "PM to Heads of Indian Missions," February 5, 2015, accessed January 8, 2016, <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=115241>.
6. Ibid, Prime Minister's Office
7. Marjani, Niranjana. "The Times of India", New Delhi, editorial Page, December 28, 2020
8. Ibid, Marjani, Niranjana.
9. Mohan, C. Rajan. (July & August 2006): India and the Balance of Power," Foreign Affairs. 14 (1) 26-30.
10. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of India, "IISS Fullerton Lecture by Dr. S. Jaishankar, Foreign Secretary in Singapore," July 20, 2015, accessed January 8, 2016, [http://mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/25493/IISS\\_Fullerton\\_Lect](http://mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/25493/IISS_Fullerton_Lect).