



Relations with the West Asia

Nilova Roy Chaudhury

West Asia occupies a pivotal position in international relations, because of its geographical location and close proximity to South and Central Asia, Europe, and Africa. India has followed a policy of nurturing bilateral ties with all the countries in the region best serving and enhancing its national interests.

India is inextricably bound to West Asia, its closest western neighbour across the Arabian Sea as valued trading partners exchanging goods and disseminating ideas, date back many millennia.

Coming to the present, India's engagement with the countries of West Asia and the Gulf have been among the most intense and diverse of our foreign policy initiatives and, perhaps, the most fulfilling. The intensified engagement, now transformed into a 'Link and Act West Policy', has seen defence and security cooperation emerging as a key pillar of the policy. It is towards countering terrorism and radicalisation, ensuring maritime and cyber security, investing in defence manufacturing,

promoting greater interaction between armed forces, including joint exercises, military training and capacity building, with a strong ballast of economic and infrastructure development.

For India, Iran is the gateway to Afghanistan and Central Asia and beyond through the strategic Chabahar port, the Arab states and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries are integral to India's energy security and counter-terrorism efforts, as is Israel, while maintaining good ties is crucial for the safety and welfare of the huge Indian diaspora in the region.

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Asia, Europe, and Africa, its vital position along major sea trading routes, its enormous energy resources—accounting for 34% of world crude oil production, 45% of crude oil exports and 48% of proven crude oil reserves. It is also where Abrahamic religions; Islam, Christianity and Judaism; originated. There has been chronic instability in the region, giving rise to terrorism and conflict, largely due to involvement of external forces and some internal schisms, between followers of Sunni and Shia Islam. For India, with the world's second largest Islamic population, the region holds enormous security implication.

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The author is a senior journalist who has worked with newspapers like the Washington Post, International Herald Tribune, Hindustan Times and the Statesman. Email: nilovarc@gmail.com



The Abraham agreement, signed on August 13, 2020, between the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Israel, to establish full diplomatic relations and “normalise” their bilateral relations provides India, a close partner of both Israel and UAE, a chance to become an important player in West Asia, possibly even influencing a peaceful resolution of the bitterness that has beset Arab-Israeli ties for over seven decades.

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India completed that de-hyphenation process in July 2017 when the Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Israel, the first visit ever by an Indian prime minister to that country. These close bilateral relations are increasingly vital, all-encompassing and strategic in nature and, despite maintaining solidarity with the cause of a separate Palestinian state, there is little attempt to balance the nature of relations between Palestine and Israel, though India voted at the UN against the United States resolution to move the Israeli capital from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

The recently-forged deal provides India with new opportunities to play a much larger role in regional security and stability in the Gulf as it not only enjoys very close ties with



Israel, but has burgeoning ties of an increasingly strategic nature with the Gulf monarchies, particularly the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Rapidly improving relations with the Gulf countries, an area India considers its neighbourhood and strategic backyard, has been an important success story for the present government, paying it rich dividends, in crucial security and economic areas.

India has unequivocally welcomed the Agreement between its two strategic partners and hoped it

would be a harbinger for peace in the region. New Delhi also reiterated its traditional support for the Palestinian cause and hoped for early direct negotiations for an acceptable two-state solution.

In his Independence Day address this year, the Prime Minister specifically mentioned India’s deepening ties with the Gulf countries and said they were crucial to meet India’s energy and other security requirements. He thanked countries like the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Qatar for letting Indians extend

their stay in those countries during the Covid-19 pandemic.

In a much appreciated gesture, India has proactively reached out to all these countries in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic; sending doctors, medical teams, medicines and vital PPEs and other life-saving equipments to afflicted nations, including Iran, and sharing best practices.

Other than leveraging its economy for a bigger opening in this region, which will bolster the Indian economy's own revival efforts, ramping up security ties with the Gulf countries, with armaments sales, defence drills, intelligence sharing and anti-terrorism exercises among others will help further strengthen Indian security.

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That India's engagement with West Asia has become more intense and wide-ranging in scope and dimension is apparent from the number of top level visits exchanged between their leaders in recent years. A balanced relationship was formulated to cement relations with countries of the region, converting the "Look West" policy to "Link and Act West."

Prime Minister Narendra Modi was the first Indian prime minister to visit UAE (Abu Dhabi), in 2015, after



Indian Diplomacy at its best: PM Modi strengthens relations with West Asian countries

34 years, followed by visits to Qatar and Saudi Arabia and Iran during his first two years in office, and Israel in 2017, to celebrate the 25th anniversary of diplomatic relations. In 2018, after a brief stopover in Jordan, he became the first ever Indian PM to visit Palestine, where he was conferred the Grand Collar of the state of Palestine, the country's highest honour, by President Mahmoud Abbas. This was followed by visits to UAE (Dubai) and Oman,

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not only enhancing the political and economic aspects of the relationships, but also the cultural, including the foundation stone-laying ceremony of the first Hindu temple in UAE, while ensuring energy and security cooperation and raised defence and counter-terrorism collaboration. A major highlight of that visit was the formalisation of base facilities to the Indian Navy by Oman at its port in Duqm. India secured access to Duqm port for military use and logistical support to bolster its maritime strategy to secure sea lanes, prevent piracy and counter Chinese influence and activities in the western Indian Ocean region.

In 2019, the Prime Minister visited UAE, for the third time, and received the country's top award, Order of Zayed, and Bahrain. UAE alone has over 5000 Indian companies in their special economic zones and has emerged as a major entrepôt to Indian products and exports to the region and rest of the world. He became the first Indian PM to visit Bahrain, a conservative Sheikdom, where over 3000 Indian business ventures are located, and even launched the renovation of the Sreenathji temple in capital Manama.

On his second visit to Riyadh, in October 2019, the PM briefed King Salman about New Delhi's thinking for the future development



of J&K and attracted development funds for Kashmir. The visit also saw formalisation of the bilateral Strategic Partnership Council, headed by the Saudi Crown Prince and the Indian PM.

The two Sunni bastions, Saudi Arabia and UAE, along with Kuwait and Qatar, are at the core of 'Link and Act West' diplomacy with West Asia. India realises the role these countries play in its energy security and in the well-being of the over nine million Indians living in the region, annual remittances from whom top US\$60 billion.

The prime ministerial visits have seen a flurry of investments into India. In 2018, the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company and the Saudi giant Aramco agreed to take a 50% stake in the \$44 billion refinery India was building in Maharashtra. Both are interested in investing in India's natural gas sector and in building the Indian strategic crude oil reserve, with investments of tens of billions of dollars. The UAE is also the first partner of India's National Investment and Infrastructure Fund and invested US\$1 billion as the anchor investor.

India has hosted several top leaders from the region in India—Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu, UAE Crown Prince Mohamed bin Zayed al Nahyan, who was the chief guest for the 2017 Republic Day celebrations, Iranian President Hasan Rowhani, Palestinian Authority President Abbas and Jordan's King Abdullah in 2018, and Saudi Crown Prince Mohamed bin Salman in 2019.

All these visits and agreements have fostered the exceptionally close, historic and civilisational ties with West Asia and built upon the tremendous goodwill for India and the Indians in the

India's participation in the Intra-Afghan negotiations

The External Affairs Minister (EAM) participated in the inaugural session of the Intra-Afghan negotiations held in Doha on 12 September 2020 via VTC. EAM's participation was in response to an invitation extended to him by the Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of the State of Qatar, H.E. Mohammad bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim Al Thani.

In his address, EAM referred to the millennia old relationship between India and Afghanistan, which he said had withstood the test of time. EAM highlighted India's role as a major development partner of Afghanistan with over 400 projects completed in all the 34 provinces of Afghanistan.

EAM conveyed that India's policy on Afghanistan had been consistent. India believes any peace process must be Afghan-led, Afghan-owned and Afghan-controlled, has to respect the national sovereignty and territorial integrity of Afghanistan and preserve the progress made in the establishment of a democratic Islamic Republic in Afghanistan. The interests of minorities, women and vulnerable sections of society must be preserved and the issue of violence across the country and its neighbourhood has to be effectively addressed.

EAM wished for the success of the Intra-Afghan negotiations in delivering to the people of Afghanistan what they have longed for - a peaceful and prosperous future in an independent and sovereign nation. A senior official delegation led by J P Singh, Joint Secretary (PAI) in the Ministry of External Affairs participated in the inaugural ceremony in Doha.

Source: mea.gov.in

region. Over 9 million Indians live in the region and, in most countries, constitute the largest expatriate communities there. The Indian diaspora has emerged as major contributors to the well-being and development of their host economies and countries where Indians are the preferred workforce, largely due to their discipline, sincerity and ethos of hard work.

India's 'soft power' is also clearly visible in the region; with the cultural connect of language, food, music, yoga and, of course, Bollywood movies. India's democratic character, its neutrality and non-interference in internal affairs of others and goodwill towards all have allowed the prime minister to rely on soft power diplomacy as his key foreign policy instrument. Medical and health diplomacy has also gained traction in these countries, with many preferring the Indian option over more expensive western medical facilities.

The Indian diaspora in these countries remit vast amounts of foreign exchange, adding to our vital foreign exchange reserves. They are India's strategic assets and goodwill ambassadors who have contributed to boosting India's image and have emerged as the major trading and investment collaborators. The region supplies over two-thirds of India's oil and 80% of its gas requirements and, given that the Gulf countries offer tremendous potential for cooperation in trade, investment, energy, manpower and infrastructure development, India has a crucial stake in ensuring peace, stability and economic well-being of the region, which is beset with several inter-state rivalries and tensions.

The International Solar Alliance initiative, launched jointly by India and France, has become another major area of convergence and cooperation between India and West Asia, each looking to ensure energy security and secure renewable energy resources, moving away from fossil fuels which pollute and degrade the environment.

The way Pakistan has been distanced by the Arab nations like UAE and Saudi Arabia, in forums like the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, has been another major gain for India. Exceptionally close intelligence, de-radicalisation and counter-terrorism collaboration with all these countries has been a hallmark of recent agreements. With Pakistan thus unable to use J&K as a bargaining chip against India, New Delhi gets an opportunity to substantially raise its influence among the overwhelmingly Muslim West Asian countries.

India has followed a policy of nurturing bilateral ties with all the countries in the region, without getting entangled in their ideological or sectarian fault lines, best serving and enhancing its national interests. Thus, even the Syrians are looking to India to play an enhanced political role, as honest broker, in the region. India's blooming relations with the Arab countries and with Iran could also be leveraged by New Delhi to offer a way ahead for those countries competing for primacy in the Islamic world, to cooperate and arrive at a workable relationship. □

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