



## PEACE, PRAGMATISM, AND POWER: INDIA'S RESPONSE TO MIDDLE EASTERN CONFLICTS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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### Abstract

*This paper explores India's evolving strategic approach to conflict zones in the Middle East in the 21st century, focusing on how peace, pragmatism, and power define its foreign policy. As regional instability from the Iran-Israel rivalry to the Yemen war and broader Gulf tensions. India has opted for a balanced engagement rooted in strategic autonomy. The core objective of the study is to examine how India navigates competing interests in the Middle East while safeguarding its energy security, diaspora concerns, and global standing. The key argument of this paper is that India's Middle East policy is marked not by ideological alignment but by interest-based pragmatism, which allows it to engage diplomatically with rival nations (Iran and Israel) while maintaining neutrality. India emphasizes economic diplomacy, cultural outreach, and soft power rather than direct intervention or alignment in regional disputes. Findings suggest that this approach has enhanced India's credibility as a peace-seeking power, helped preserve regional partnerships, and positioned it as a non-disruptive yet influential player. The paper concludes that India's Middle East policy reflects a maturing global posture guided by realpolitik, regional balance, and an ambition to act as a stabilizing force in a multipolar world.*

**Keywords:** GCC, IMEC, Strategic Autonomy, De-hyphenation, Delicate Bilateralism, Digital India, Make in India

### Introduction

The 21<sup>st</sup> century has seen the Middle East transform into one of the most volatile geopolitical theatres, marked by the aftermath of the Arab Spring, the Syrian and Yemeni civil wars, the rise and decline of ISIS, and intensifying rivalries between Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Israel. These developments have not only redrawn regional power alignments but also attracted major external powers, including the United States, China, and Russia, vying for influence in this critical region.<sup>1</sup> Amidst these complex shifts, India has pursued a calibrated approach toward the region—one that balances its strategic, economic, and diplomatic interests. West Asia accounts for over 60% of India's crude oil imports and hosts more than 7 million Indian expatriates whose remittances are vital for India's economy. Politically, India maintains a careful balance between traditional support for the Palestinian cause and growing strategic ties with Israel. Economically, projects like the Chabahar Port and the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) reflect India's effort to secure alternative trade and energy routes. Strategically, India has expanded defence and maritime cooperation with key Gulf states while staying neutral in sectarian and regional conflicts.<sup>2</sup>

### Early 21<sup>st</sup> Century Peace-oriented Diplomacy (2000 to 2010):

India's foreign policy towards West Asia underwent a significant transformation, moving from its earlier ideologically-driven positions to a peace-oriented, pragmatic, and multi-aligned diplomacy. This shift was

necessitated by a complex and unstable regional landscape, marked by the aftermath of 9/11 and subsequent U.S. interventions in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003), which led to widespread political, societal, and economic turmoil and intensified sectarian conflicts. The Iran nuclear issue also emerged as a significant crisis, contributing to a general waning of secular ethos and a rise in sectarian strife across the region. Amidst this evolving multi-polar environment, India's response was guided by its national interests, primarily focusing on energy security, extensive trade, and the welfare of its vast diaspora.<sup>3</sup> India pursued a strategy of "**Strategic autonomy**," allowing it to cultivate strong bilateral relationships across traditional regional divides. For Israel and Palestine, India maintained its traditional strong support for an independent, sovereign, and viable State of Palestine with East Jerusalem as its capital, advocating for a two-state solution in line with UN resolutions. Concurrently, India dramatically deepened its engagement with Israel, particularly in defence purchases, becoming Israel's top arms partner and its second-largest defence partner, with arms trade reaching a billion dollars annually in the first decade. This relationship also expanded into IT, medical devices, and industrial fabrication, alongside institutionalized security. Cooperation, including a national security dialogue from 1999 and a Joint Working Group in 2000. India's approach, sometimes termed "" aimed to treat its ties **De-hyphenation** with Israel and Palestine separately.

Towards Iran, India pursued strategic cooperation, notably on the Chabahar Port development for connectivity to Central Asia and Eurasia, and in the oil and gas sectors, with the Tehran Declaration (2001) and Delhi Declaration (2003) forming the basis for this partnership. India adhered to UN sanctions but opposed unilateral U.S. sanctions on Iran. Relations with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries were also significantly upgraded, with the Saudi King's visit in 2006 leading to the Delhi Declaration (2006) and a broad strategic vision. Economic ties were central, with the GCC becoming India's largest trading regional block, and the safety and remittances (approximately \$40 billion annually by 2013-14) from over seven million Indian expatriates being a consistent priority, leading to costly evacuations during crises. India also sought to attract investments from Gulf states into its industrialization initiatives. In conflicts like Iraq and Syria, India supported their unity, opposed military solutions, contributed humanitarian aid, and focused on the safety of its diaspora, generally abstaining from direct military intervention in the Levant. Furthermore, India actively sought to strengthen counter-terrorism cooperation with West Asian powers, including intelligence sharing and extradition treaties with countries like the UAE and Saudi Arabia. This comprehensive approach allowed India to effectively navigate the complex regional dynamics by prioritizing its core interests while maintaining a non-prescriptive and non-judgmental stance on internal regional affairs.<sup>4</sup>

### **Strategic Pragmatism & Multi-alignment (2011 to 2018):**

India's foreign policy towards West Asia evolved into a phase of strategic pragmatism and multi-alignment, significantly shaped by the profound impact of the Arab Spring and its tumultuous aftermath. The Arab Spring, which began in Tunisia in January 2011, brought widespread anti-government demonstrations and led to political instability and regime changes in countries like Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, while Syria plunged into a bloody civil war. This period saw the initial hopes for democracy largely misplaced, leading to exacerbated regional fault lines and intensified sectarian polarization between Shiites and Sunnis, with Iran and Saudi Arabia backing opposing factions across the region. The instability also facilitated the significant rise and spread of radical groups like ISIS (Islamic State) across Iraq and Syria, threatening regional and global security. Economically, countries experiencing revolutions faced declines in economic activity, tourism, trade, and foreign investment, and increased freight and shipping costs due to disruptions in vital trade routes like the Red Sea and Strait of Hormuz. This era also witnessed a diminished U.S. influence as it recalibrated its focus, creating a void that other powers such as China and Russia sought to fill, further increasing their geopolitical presence and strategic ties in the region. Amidst these new crises, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict became less central to the primary interests of regional actors. India navigated this complex landscape by prioritizing its core national interests, groups like ISIS (Islamic State) across Iraq and Syria, threatening regional and global security. Economically, countries experiencing revolutions faced declines in economic activity, tourism, trade, and foreign investment, and increased freight and shipping costs due to disruptions in vital trade routes like

the Red Sea and Strait of Hormuz. This era also witnessed a diminished U.S. influence as it recalibrated its focus, creating a void that other powers such as China and Russia sought to fill, further increasing their geopolitical presence and strategic ties in the region. Amidst these new crises, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict became less central to the primary interests of regional actors.<sup>5</sup>

Maintaining a non-prescriptive and non-judgmental stance on internal regional affairs, and adapting its diplomatic approach. Energy security remained critical, with West Asia supplying over 60% of India's oil and gas requirements, driving India to seek stable supply lines, diversify imports, and build strategic reserves. Trade and investment ties expanded significantly, with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) becoming India's largest trading regional bloc, and India actively seeking investments from Gulf sovereign wealth funds into its industrialization initiatives like "**Make in India**" and "**Digital India**". The welfare of the Indian diaspora, comprising over 7 million expatriates in the GCC whose remittances were substantial (approx. US\$35-40 billion annually), was paramount, leading to large-scale evacuations during crises [Yemen in 2014 and 2015] and the strengthening of bilateral mechanisms to protect emigrants. India's engagement with key regional players reflected this pragmatic approach: with Israel, India dramatically deepened ties, becoming its top arms partner and Israel becoming India's second-largest defence partner with annual arms trade reaching US\$1 billion; cooperation expanded into technology sectors, and<sup>6</sup> Prime Minister Narendra Modi made a landmark first visit to Israel by a sitting Indian Prime Minister in 2017. Simultaneously, India maintained its "**De-hyphenation**" policy, continuing strong support for an independent, sovereign, and viable State of Palestine with East Jerusalem as its capital, advocating a two-state solution, providing assistance, and Modi visiting Ramallah in 2018, even while showing nuance in its UN voting patterns on resolutions against Israel. Despite international pressure, India pursued strategic cooperation with Iran, notably the development of Chabahar Port for connectivity to Central Asia and Eurasia, and maintained engagement in the oil and gas sectors, asserting that its bilateral ties were independent of third-country influence, though reducing oil imports due to US sanctions by 2019. Relations with Saudi Arabia and GCC Countries were significantly upgraded and diversified, with strategic partnership agreements (India-UAE Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2017), expanded security and defence cooperation, including an Extradition Treaty and MoU for financial intelligence cooperation to combat money laundering and terrorism financing.<sup>7</sup> The mediation efforts by Saudi Arabia and the UAE during the India-Pakistan Pulwama crisis in 2019, and Saudi Arabia granting overflight rights to Air India for flights to Israel in 2018, indicated a shift towards pragmatic geopolitical considerations over purely religious solidarity. Towards Iraq and Syria, India adopted a cautious approach, supporting their unity and territorial integrity, focusing on humanitarian aid and diaspora safety, and largely abstaining from direct military intervention. India also actively sought to strengthen counter-terrorism cooperation, including intelligence sharing and extradition treaties with countries like the UAE and Saudi Arabia, reflecting a shared interest in fighting terrorism.

However, India's pragmatic and multi-aligned approach faced several challenges, including the lack of a strong regional institutional framework in West Asia (unlike ASEAN), which necessitated a focus on vigorous bilateralism and leadership-level rapport. Domestic political and religious divisions in India also historically complicated its foreign policy towards the Middle East. Furthermore, the intensifying US-China strategic rivalry and the U.S.'s shift towards the Indo-Pacific exerted pressure on India's balancing act, with China's massive economic engagement and strategic presence in the region (Belt and Road Initiative and 25-year strategic partnership with Iran) presenting both competition and a need for India to increase its own influence. The limits of multi-alignment became apparent as India's ties with Iran could not progress much due to US sanctions, highlighting the difficulty of maintaining balance amid intensifying.

### **Policy Gaps in India's Middle East Engagement:**

Despite India's expanding engagement with the Middle East, several key policy gaps persist that limit the effectiveness of its regional strategy. India lacks a coherent grand strategy to unify its diplomatic, economic, and security efforts across the region. Its balancing act between rivals like Iran, Israel, and Saudi Arabia remains ad hoc, lacking a clear framework during crises. Although home to over 7 million Indian expatriates, India's diaspora diplomacy remains under-institutionalized, with limited crisis

response mechanisms. Furthermore, India's posture is largely reactive- centered on evacuations and neutral statements-rather than forward-looking or leadership-driven. While, it espouses non-interventionist peace norms, India has not championed multilateral peace-building or conflict resolution initiatives. Additionally, strategic underinvestment in defence diplomacy and maritime presence leaves it lagging behind powers like China and the United States in shaping regional security architectures. These gaps highlight the need for a more integrated, proactive, and visionary Middle East policy framework.<sup>8</sup>

### **India's De-Hyphenated Policy in West Asia: Oversight on Peace, Power, and Pragmatism**

#### **De-Hyphenation and the Illusion of Strategic Balance:**

India's de-hyphenation strategy is rooted in its effort to delink its bilateral relationships with Israel and Palestine. While it has deepened defence and technological ties with Israel, it continues to affirm its traditional support for Palestinian statehood in principle. However, critics argue that this strategy has not entirely broken free from the legacy of linkage politics. The two relationships remain subtly interdependent, driven by regional sensitivities and domestic political calculations. This strategic posture often results in contradictory messaging. For instance, while Prime Minister Narendra Modi became the first Indian leader to visit both Israel and Palestine, India's conspicuous silence on controversial issues such as Israeli settlement expansion and alleged human rights violations reflects the tension between strategic realism and normative consistency. Moreover, India's balancing act across Israel, Iran, and the Gulf Arab states is increasingly seen as fragile and unsustainable. This approach of **Delicate Bilateralism** is particularly vulnerable to the pressures of intensifying regional rivalries and zero-sum geopolitical shifts. Analysts argue that such a model, though flexible, is susceptible to external influence and internal contradictions that challenge India's capacity to maintain an autonomous and coherent regional policy.<sup>9</sup>

#### **India's Strategic Turn in West Asia: Peace, Pragmatism, and Power**

##### **Peace: From Moral Idealism to Strategic Balance:**

India's traditional moral commitment to Palestinian self-determination has now evolved into a strategically calibrated balancing act. While India continues to support a two-state solution, it no longer ties its relations with Israel to Palestinian outcomes. This shift allows New Delhi to engage Israel and Arab states independently, reflecting a realist recalibration of India's peace diplomacy.

- India's 2018 Visit to Palestine: PM Narendra Modi became the first Indian Prime Minister to visit Ramallah, signaling continued support for the Palestinian cause while avoiding any criticism of Israel, showcasing a **Balanced Engagement** strategy.<sup>10</sup>
- Response to the 2021 Gaza Conflict: India called for restraint and dialogue during the Israel-Palestine flare-up but abstained from voting against Israel on human rights violations at the UNHRC. This marked a departure from India's earlier vocal criticisms.<sup>11</sup>
- Welcoming the Abraham Accords (2020): India officially welcomed normalization agreements between Israel and Arab countries while reaffirming its support for a negotiated Palestinian solution.<sup>12</sup>

##### **Pragmatism: Strategic Autonomy and Economic Stakes**

India's policy is increasingly driven by pragmatic interests particularly energy security, trade, and the welfare of the Indian diaspora. It is actively building economic and strategic relationships across competing blocs in West Asia while retaining strategic autonomy.

- UAE-India CEPA (2022): The signing of the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement with the UAE has boosted bilateral trade and shows deepening economic pragmatism.
- India's Evacuation from Sudan (2023): Operation Kaveri showcased India's responsiveness in protecting its diaspora.
- Reduced Iranian Oil Imports Post-2019: India complied with US sanctions while continuing the Chabahar Port project.<sup>13</sup>

- India-UAE-Green Hydrogen Collaboration (2023): A joint task force was launched to explore sustainable energy corridors.
- Digital Public Infrastructure Exports: India is exporting systems like UPI to Gulf nations, enhancing digital interoperability.<sup>14</sup>

### **Power: Strategic Projection and Regional Influence**

India increasingly sees West Asia as a crucial frontier for strategic projection and geopolitical influence. This is marked by a vision of India as a security provider, tech partner, and balancing power in an increasingly multipolar regional order.

- India's Access to Duqm Port in Oman (2018): Enhanced maritime logistics and power projection in the western Indian Ocean.
- I2U2 Initiative (2022): India's role in this Mini lateral group focuses on cooperation in food security, energy, and infrastructure.
- Participation in Combined Maritime Forces (2022): Strengthened regional maritime security and cooperation.
- India-Saudi Arabia Strategic Council (2023): Expanded cooperation in defence, cybersecurity, and space.
- Counterterrorism Cooperation with Israel: High-level intelligence sharing and joint counter-terror operations.<sup>15</sup>

### **Navigating Complexity: India's Evolving Strategic Dynamics West Asia**

#### **The Efficacy and Evolution of Bilateralism:**

Research is needed to assess the effectiveness and long-term sustainability of Mini lateral forums like I2U2 in fostering regional stability, economic integration, and addressing shared security challenges, especially as flexible, functional, and voluntary frameworks. How will these flexible partnerships reshape the geopolitical and geo-economic landscape of West Asia, and how do they balance against traditional multilateral bodies.

#### **Impact of De-hyphenation and Strategic Autonomy:**

Further study is required to understand the long-term implications of India's de-hyphenated policy on its standing among Arab states, the Palestinian Authority, and the broader Muslim world, particularly in the context of the Abraham Accords and India's "malleable position on the status of Eastern Jerusalem". Research on how India successfully operationalizes and maintains its "**Strategic autonomy**" amidst increasing great power competition and complex regional rivalries is also crucial.<sup>16</sup>

#### **Geopolitical Implications of Connectivity Projects:**

Research into the success and broader geopolitical impact of initiatives like INSTC, Chabahar Port, and IMEC is crucial. How will these corridors alter regional trade patterns, influence geopolitical competition, particularly with China's BRI, and contribute to India's strategic depth beyond traditional routes.<sup>17</sup>

#### **Evolution of Security and Counter-Terrorism Cooperation:**

Investigating the development of India's security and counter-terrorism partnerships with West Asian countries (like Israel, UAE, Saudi Arabia), especially in light of differing perspectives on political Islam and cross-border terrorism, offers a key area of research. This includes exploring the **Convergence of norms, values, and practices** as drivers for cooperation beyond traditional threats.

#### **The Role of Non-Traditional Security Issues:**

How issues like climate change, energy security, food security, and cyber security are increasingly driving new forms of cooperation and regional integration, and how India can leverage its capabilities in these

areas, warrants deeper exploration. This includes assessing the **Strategic Fit** and **Complementary Strengths** of partners in these areas.

#### **Leveraging Soft Power and Diaspora Engagement:**

Understanding the full potential of India's large diaspora (over 8 million Indians in GCC) and cultural ties in enhancing diplomatic and economic influence in the region, beyond remittances and labour exports, remains an important research avenue.

#### **India's Response to Internal Conflicts and Humanitarian Crises:**

Research on how India balances its non-interventionist stance with its humanitarian and security interests in conflict-ridden areas (Yemen, Syria, Libya, Iraq) and its capacity for crisis response, such as large-scale evacuations like Operation Rahat, is vital.<sup>18</sup>

#### **Impact of Domestic Politics on Foreign Policy:**

Investigating how India's internal dynamics and the perspectives of its large Muslim population influence and are influenced by its West Asia policy, especially in the context of balancing regional relationships with domestic harmony, is a critical area.

### **Conclusion**

This study clearly demonstrates that India's West Asia policy in the 21st century is anchored on three pillars: peace, pragmatism, and power. India has moved beyond its traditional ideological stance, embracing strategic autonomy and multi-alignment, which has enabled it to maintain balanced relations with Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf countries by prioritizing energy security, the safety of its diaspora, economic and technological cooperation, as well as maritime and defence partnerships. India has established itself as a credible, non-disruptive, yet influential partner in the region. The study also shows that India's **De-hyphenation** approach, its economic diplomacy, and the use of soft power have strengthened its position amidst regional rivalries. Moreover, its neutral stance during crises and emphasis on humanitarian assistance have reinforced India's image as a stabilizing force in West Asia.

Overall, this policy reflects India's mature global outlook, its commitment to regional balance, and its capacity to act as an active and balancing power in an increasingly multipolar world order.

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