

India's foreign policy in the Middle East

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Abstract—Economic pragmatism, along with success in the rapid advancement of development, has transformed India into one of the most dynamic countries in the global economy and, secondly, into an emerging centre of wealth and power in the world. On the one hand, the requirements of economic development, and on the other hand, the extensive transformations in the international system, have imposed a new direction on India's foreign policy in the Middle East.

This article focuses on the reasons behind the shift in India's Middle East policy from a policy defined in the light of the principle of non-alignment during the Cold War to one redefined based on the new necessities of India's national interests. Accordingly, the main question of the article is as follows: considering the options available to India, what changes have occurred in its foreign policy toward Middle East? The hypothesis of the article is that India's foreign policy in this domain has undergone significant transformation.

India's policy in the Middle East has shifted from an ideological, Third World oriented approach to a policy of multiple and multilateral commitments based on the necessity of access to energy resources such as oil and gas, markets, and military equipment.

This article is written using a descriptive-analytical and Theoretical Framework: Balance of Interests method and draws on online sources and specialized publications.

Keywords: India's foreign policy, Middle East policy, non-alignment, oil and gas, market access, military procurement, multilateral diplomacy, national interest

I. INTRODUCTION

In India's grand foreign policy strategy, the world is conceptualized as three concentric circles. The first circle encompasses India's immediate neighbours. Within this sphere, India seeks to attain a position of regional hegemony in order to counter the presence of other powers in its neighbourhood. The second circle includes a broader region surrounding India, covering Asia and the Indian Ocean littoral. In this sphere, India aims to establish a balance of power to prevent other powers from undermining its interests.

The third circle, which essentially encompasses the entire world, reflects India's effort to achieve the status of a major global power and to play a key role in international peace and security (Gupta, 2005). In line with this strategy, India while maintaining a non-aligned posture and leaning toward the Soviet Union during the Cold War shifted, after the collapse of the Eastern Bloc and the onset of a new phase of globalization, away from strict non-alignment toward a policy of pursuing a multipolar world and engaging in multiple commitments. Subsequently, it moved toward strategic cooperation and alignment with the United States as the dominant global power.

Sustained economic growth over the past three decades has transformed India into an emerging power with a growing demand for energy and a desire to expand its sphere of influence in its surrounding environment, particularly in the Middle East (Burton, 2019). Moreover, since the rise to power of the right-wing Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 2014,

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has paid special attention to foreign policy and, according to many observers, has injected new energy into India's external relations.

In his first interview on foreign policy, he stated:

“The purpose of foreign policy is not to change the mindset of others, but to find areas of common ground. India's interests require that we engage in dialogue with every country.” (Rezapour, 2023)

He further explained:

“India realized this situation somewhat late. Today's world is an interconnected world... we are now building continuous relationships within a world of interdependence among countries across the globe. With the same respect that I engage with Saudi Arabia, I interact equally with Iran; with the same respect, I speak with Russia as I do with the United States” (Gyan, 2023)

Such capacity and capability have led Indian policymakers in New Delhi to redefine their national interests. According to the Indian government, the country possesses the ability to project its power beyond its immediate borders and operate effectively at greater distances. An important point in this regard is that India, by advancing these ideas, claims to be in the process of transforming into a major global power.

One of the key indicators of enhancing a country's economic and security standing is the diversification and strategic utilization of different regions within its foreign policy priorities. In this context, the Middle East positioned within India's second concentric circle holds particular significance in India's foreign policy. (Ahmadi, 2025)

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Kumar, in a strategic report titled “*India and the Persian Gulf*,” argues that regional security in the Persian Gulf is vital for international oil and gas markets and maritime security in the western Indian Ocean, making it critically important for India. In addition, the region holds significance for India as an “extended neighbourhood,” particularly due to the large population of Indian migrants residing in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries.

For nearly three decades, India's policy toward the broader West Asian and Persian Gulf region has been characterized by bilateralism within a wider multilateral foreign policy framework. India avoids taking sides in regional conflicts, as doing so could harm its core interests in trade, commerce, economic cooperation, as well as security and defence collaboration. However, regional developments in the Indo-Pacific, the deterioration of relations in the western Indian Ocean, and the growing convergence between China and India's strategic environment along with China's alignment with the United States and European countries have compelled India to recalibrate its regional approach (Ashwarya, 2016).

Muraviev and colleagues, in their article “*India's Security Dilemma: Engagement with Major Powers While Preserving Strategic Autonomy*,” argue that India is currently facing a significant security dilemma. This is particularly due to the rise of China, the strategic convergence between Russia and China, and the ambiguous position of India's policy in the Indo-Pacific region.

Overcoming this dilemma, reflected in India's shift from non-alignment to strategic autonomy, raises a number of questions regarding the country's future strategic orientation. In particular: Will India enter into a formal alliance with the United States? Will it continue its engagement with China? Will it maintain its historically close relations with Russia? Or will it pursue its “Act East” policy more vigorously? (Muraviev, 2021)

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: BALANCE OF INTERESTS

Randall Schweller's balance of interest's theory builds upon Kenneth Waltz's theory of international politics. Waltz argues that states, driven primarily by the motivation of survival, are the key actors in the international system, and that the pressures of the anarchic structure of the system influence their behaviour more than any other factor. According to Waltz, within such a

system, the pressures of competition are far stronger than political or ideological preferences. However, Waltz's theory of international politics does not explain precisely how states respond to these pressures.

Schweller, on the other hand, believes that while Waltz's neorealist theory may explain the failures of a particular state's policies, it cannot adequately account for variations in state behaviour. In addition to structural pressures, Schweller emphasizes variables at the unit level that influence how states respond to external pressures. In other words, by incorporating both internal and external variables, Schweller employs the balance of interest's theory to better explain state behaviour in the international system. (Rezapour, 2023)

From this perspective, alongside the pressures of the international system, domestic factors also play a significant role in shaping state responses.

Domestic and institutional factors such as revolutionary values also influence state behaviour. Since these variables operate within the state, governments do not necessarily adopt purely defensive policies. Beyond this, Schweller argues that states differ in their nature and policies, and broadly distinguishes between two types of states: dissatisfied (revisionist) states and status quo states. Among revisionist states, a further distinction can be made between those with limited goals and those with unlimited goals (Jansiz A. A.-M., 2016).

Revisionist states with limited objectives seek to improve their position within the existing international order, whereas revisionist states with unlimited objectives aim to transform the prevailing norms of the system, challenge global dominance, and pursue ideological supremacy. According to Schweller, national-level variables play a significant role in shaping whether a state adopts a limited or unlimited revisionist strategy. When the internal factors that drive a state toward a particular revisionist strategy change, the state's overall strategy is also likely to change (Jansiz A. &.-M., 2016).

IV. INDIA'S MIDDLE EAST POLICY AFTER INDEPENDENCE

During the years following independence, India's Middle East policy has been a composite and multi-layered one, shaped by various factors, including the distinctive perspectives of its founding and charismatic leaders toward the region. A humane, fair, and justice-based approach toward the Palestinians has played a fundamental role in New Delhi's interactions with political entities in the region. (India seeks to maintain ties simultaneously with Iran, Israel, and the Arab world what is Modi's new strategy in the Middle East?, 2022)

Moreover, in order to gain the support of Islamic countries and to safeguard the interests and welfare of its citizens and migrant labour force in the region, New Delhi was able to effectively regulate its relations despite intense competition with Pakistan. Although India was inclined toward the East (the Soviet Union) and most countries in the region leaned toward the West (led by the United States), India managed to balance its relations successfully. In this context, securing affordable, accessible, and stable energy supplies has always been a key priority for New Delhi. At the same time, India has sought to take into account the specific concerns of Arab countries as well as the sentiments of Muslim public opinion both domestically and internationally in order to ensure its energy needs in an optimal manner (Jansiz A. A.-M., 2016).

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the first major transformation in India's regional policy after the Cold War was the adoption of the "Look East" policy, under which India initially focused on economic developments and regional cooperation with Southeast Asia. The second major shift in India's foreign policy can be described as the adoption of the "Look West" policy, particularly in relation to the Persian Gulf region. In this shift, Iran and the Gulf states occupy an important position, and in this context, India has also developed its ties with Israel. (Mohammad Taqizadeh Ansari, 2017)

The "Look West" policy was officially announced in 2005 by India's Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh. Influenced by the achievements of the "Look East" policy, Singh formulated and introduced the "Look West" policy. In fact, the starting point of this policy can be traced to Singh's meeting with India's Minister of Commerce in July 2005. During this meeting, Singh stated:

“The Persian Gulf region, like South Asia, is a natural extension of our economic sphere. We seek to expand our relations with our neighbours in West Asia. Just as India has successfully pursued the ‘Look East’ policy, we must adopt a similar approach toward our neighbours in West Asia” (Ansari, 1396: 11-12).

This shift was also driven by the fact that India, after the United States, China, and Japan, would become the fourth-largest consumer of energy in the world. Approximately 31 percent of its energy needs are met through oil, of which 68 percent is imported. Currently, nearly one-fourth and soon up to 90 percent of India’s oil imports are expected to come from the Persian Gulf. India must meet the needs of its 1.2 billion population, which is projected to become the largest in the world by 2030. Therefore, India has sought to expand its influence from the Iranian plateau to the Gulf of Thailand (a concept referred to as “extended regional reach”).

Trade between India and the Arab countries of the Persian Gulf, as well as with Iran where India has long maintained close economic and cultural ties, exemplified by its involvement in the Chabahar port has been steadily increasing. Approximately 4.3 million Indians are employed in six Arab Gulf countries, sending around 9.5 billion dollars in remittances annually to India.

On the other hand, the global balance of power is shifting toward the East, and India, aware of this trend, is prepared to expand its strategic connections with the Middle East. To advance this political trajectory, Narendra Modi has even coined the slogan “Link West,” further reinforcing this orientation. (Nezhad, 2023)

The Middle East is expected to assume a role in India’s foreign policy similar to that of Southeast Asia under the “Look East” strategy (East Asia Forum, 2019: 3). In this context, Narendra Modi has introduced a new and assertive approach in foreign policy. For example, despite the promotion of a Hindu-Muslim divide domestically by organizations associated with the Hindu nationalist network known as the *Sangh Parivar*, in practice Modi has expanded relations with Muslim-majority countries in the Persian Gulf, thereby successfully shaping an effective West Asia policy (Muraviev, 2021).

From a geoeconomic perspective, the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea remain highly significant not only for international trade but also for India’s economic and military rise. The geostrategic location of the Strait of Hormuz, which serves as a critical chokepoint for access to the Indian Ocean, is of vital importance, with Iran controlling much of this strategic passage. Similarly, the Bab ul-Mandeb Strait is another key strategic chokepoint adjacent to the Indian Ocean. However, India’s interests extend beyond its immediate maritime surroundings to the broader regions of the Middle East and Africa. This wider scope has contributed to the formulation of the “Look West” strategy in India’s foreign policy. Overall, this policy helps explain the structure of India’s external relations across the Middle East and Africa. (Rad, 2019-2020)

From the perspective of Indian policymakers, the benefits gained from the “Look West” approach are rooted in the strategic environment that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Over the past few decades, this strategy has involved three key balancing practices, each playing a significant role in shaping India’s Middle East policy:

1. Maintaining balance in relations with Riyadh and Tehran, despite their long-standing strategic and ideological rivalry, as continued tensions between them could undermine regional stability.
2. Balancing between Tehran and Washington in both Southeast Asia and West Asia, particularly in the context of Iran’s nuclear issue, which reflects India’s broader policy of multilateral engagement.
3. Balancing long-term support for the Palestinian cause with expanding relations with Israel. (Rezapour, 2023)

The ongoing war between Israel and Hamas, which began with Hamas’s attack on October 7, has brought India’s diplomatic balancing act between its “new” and “old” Middle East strategies into sharp focus. The “new” policy is defined by New Delhi’s growing alignment with the United States’ security ecosystem. India’s participation in emerging platforms of economic diplomacy such as the I2U2 group, comprising the United States, Israel, India, and the United Arab Emirates as well as the

India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEEC), announced on the sidelines of the G20 summit in September, are clear indicators of this shift. Much of this transformation stems from the deepening convergence between New Delhi and Washington in countering China. (India seeks to maintain ties simultaneously with Iran, Israel, and the Arab world what is Modi's new strategy in the Middle East?, 2022)

After decades of leaning toward the Arab world, India, under Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao, established full diplomatic relations with Israel in 1992. In fact, Israel had been quietly laying the groundwork for this partnership for years, even providing military assistance to India during two critical wars with Pakistan first in 1971, before normalization, and again in 1999, after full diplomatic ties were established.

This normalization compelled India to pursue a balancing strategy among the region's three major poles of power: the Arab world, Israel, and Iran. All three are vital to India's interests. The Arab world hosts more than 7 million Indian workers, who send billions of dollars in remittances back to India. Israel remains a key partner in technology and defence. Meanwhile, Iran's strategic location significantly supports India's interests in both Central Asia and Afghanistan. (Tahmoresi, 2020)

Today, India's foreign policy toward the region appears increasingly pragmatic. As India's economy continues to grow rapidly and aims to become the world's third-largest by 2030 its appetite for influence is also expanding. The Middle East, from a foreign policy perspective, is one of the primary arenas where this influence is being tested.

Today, through its networks and security engagements, India is becoming more than just an economic stakeholder in the Middle East. This evolution is not only the result of New Delhi's broader foreign policy framework but also reflects Modi's personal diplomacy.

In 2017, Modi became the first Indian prime minister to visit Israel. In 2018, he also travelled to Ramallah in the West Bank to maintain India's diplomatic balance. In 2019, at the height of the Jamal Khashoggi murder controversy when Saudi Arabia faced widespread diplomatic isolation Modi hosted Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. Finally, since taking office, Modi has visited the United Arab Emirates five times and is often seen referring to President Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan as a "brother."

However, India's diplomacy in the Persian Gulf also serves another purpose: strengthening its stance on Kashmir the core dispute between India and Pakistan and weakening Islamabad's position in institutions such as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). In February 2019, then External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj became the first Indian minister since 1969 to be invited to address the organization an event widely seen as a major diplomatic victory for India. Notably, Pakistan's representative did not attend the session during her speech.

Another major development has been New Delhi's growing ties with the United States. In Asia, the institutionalization of mechanisms such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) has brought Washington and New Delhi closer than ever, as both seek to cooperate in countering China.

The creation of I2U2 was a direct outcome of the Abraham Accords signed in 2021. Since then, Israel and the UAE have rapidly developed strong bilateral economic relations. These agreements have also made it easier for countries like India to expand their economic and political cooperation.

It is important to note that while I2U2 is presented as a platform for economic cooperation, all its member states have, in some form, participated in large-scale military exercises in the region including India, whose army, navy, and air force have all increased their engagement.

Beyond I2U2, the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEEC) is the latest sign of New Delhi's alignment with U.S. geoeconomic objectives. Positioned as a potential alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the project aims to connect India, the Middle East, and Europe through a trade corridor. (Raju, 2014)

These new economic corridors and shifting geopolitical dynamics are transforming India's foreign policy from a traditionally risk-averse approach into one that is more willing to take calculated risks. Today, India is closer to the United States than at any point in its post-independence history.

Given India's increasingly West-oriented defence and technology procurement and the ongoing India-U.S. "2+2" dialogues, it is not surprising to see India partnering with the United States in the Middle East.

On the other hand, arguments against deeper India-U.S. cooperation stem in part from the experience of the Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA). New Delhi supported efforts leading to the agreement, but after the U.S. withdrew in 2018, India aligned with Washington's position by nearly halting its oil imports from Iran thereby sacrificing its diplomatic capital with a country rich in oil and gas reserves and strategically located. This also contributed to the effectiveness of U.S. sanctions against Tehran, which aimed to push Iran toward negotiations with major powers. Experiences such as the Trump administration's withdrawal from the JCPOA have fuelled a strong undercurrent of distrust toward Washington in Indian policy circles. (India seeks to maintain ties simultaneously with Iran, Israel, and the Arab world what is Modi's new strategy in the Middle East?, 2022)

India's own position seeking to preserve strategic autonomy while leading the Global South may at times conflict with its role as a U.S. strategic partner in the Middle East. One of India's key successes in the region has been maintaining neutrality. The fact that I2U2 was quickly labelled by some observers as a "Middle East Quad" gave it the appearance of serving U.S. strategic interests, particularly the containment of China. Although India has never officially adopted such terminology, these comparisons in the media can undermine the neutrality that New Delhi seeks to maintain.

Ultimately, India's approach to the Middle East has moved beyond its traditional focus on energy and migration. Today, New Delhi aims to be a partner from the outset in the region's post-oil economic transformation. Indian diplomats in the region once primarily focused on migrant issues are now tasked with attracting foreign direct investment from large sovereign wealth funds in Arab countries. Modi's government, in power since 2015, is also appealing to Arab monarchies, as they can make swift decisions without navigating the complexities of India's coalition politics something they are less accustomed to. (irangard.com)

By joining I2U2 and IMEEC, India has turned its attention to the future architecture of security in one of the world's most volatile regions. This represents a bold and commendable stance for India's economy, which requires substantial global investment to achieve its ambitious goals. It is also beneficial for the Middle East to count India as a major energy market, enabling the region to diversify its export destinations and offset China's influence over critical commodities such as oil and gas. (safari.to)

V. CONCLUSION

Indian leaders considered the development of a "domestic military-industrial complex" as the best option for the country one that could help free India from the external constraints it faced prior to the Cold War. Over time, and particularly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, new opportunities emerged for India to maintain relations with the United States and its strategic partner Israel, while simultaneously preserving strong ties with other Middle Eastern countries and leveraging these relationships to gain advantages from various powers.

In this context, the presence of millions of both skilled and unskilled Indian workers in Middle Eastern countries who generate substantial foreign exchange earnings has been highly significant. Moreover, India imports more than 70 percent of its oil needs from this region, while also maintaining extensive trade relations with Muslim countries in the Middle East.

India's Middle East policy has undergone a significant transformation from an ideologically driven and cautious approach to a more pragmatic, multidimensional, and strategically assertive one. While historically rooted in balancing relations among the Arab world, Iran, and Israel, New Delhi has successfully maintained this delicate equilibrium to safeguard its core interests in energy security, economic growth, and regional influence.

Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, this balancing strategy has been recalibrated within a broader geoeconomic and geopolitical framework. India's increasing engagement in initiatives such as I2U2 and the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEEC), along with its deepening strategic partnership with the United States, reflects a clear shift toward a more proactive and opportunity-driven foreign policy. At the same time, India continues to leverage its ties with key regional actors including the Gulf states, Israel, and Iran while also using its diplomacy to strengthen its position on critical issues such as Kashmir and its rivalry with Pakistan.

However, this evolving approach is not without challenges. India must carefully navigate tensions between its commitment to strategic autonomy and its growing alignment with U.S. interests, particularly in light of past experiences such as the Iran nuclear deal. Moreover, maintaining neutrality in an increasingly polarized regional and global environment remains a complex task.

Ultimately, India's approach to the Middle East now extends beyond traditional concerns of energy and migration toward active participation in the region's economic transformation and emerging security architecture. By adopting calculated risks and expanding its diplomatic, economic, and security engagements, India is positioning itself as a key stakeholder in the future of the Middle East. This evolving strategy not only enhances India's global standing but also contributes to the region's diversification and stability in an era of shifting geopolitical dynamics.

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