
India's Inroads into the Middle East: Implications for Pakistan



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Abstract

India is a strategic player in global politics; more like an octopus, with its arms stretched towards other regional players, either for cooperation or competition. Thus, its inclination toward the Middle East is driven by a similar intent. Its preference in the gulf has been mostly navigated by two things, i.e., exporting labour and importing oil. The huge Indian diaspora in the region is a living proof of that which has resultantly become a major driver behind India's growing economy. Consequently, India's long-term investments and strong economic relations in the Middle East can be explained given its expat population. It is noteworthy that Indian interest in the region is driven by the vision of amplifying its economic might rather than exercising it. To achieve that, it withholds the focus of its foreign policy vis a vis three key players—Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Israel. However, the strategic tilt towards the Middle East has not alienated India's historical rival rather its inroads into the Middle East appear to be a multi-dimensional approach inclusive of Pakistan. The basic aim of India's strategy is to strengthen its relations in the Gulf region and engage in counter-narrative diplomatic engagements that would complicate Pakistan's foreign policy. This paper thus looks into major Indian investments in three key players as aforementioned and unfolds the complex relationship between India, the GCC, and Pakistan.

Keywords: India, GCC, Pakistan, strategic partnership, economic interests, global politics, investments

Introduction

Since its independence, India's economic relations with the Middle East have been based on its urge for development and prosperity. Whereas, the course of its political relations has mostly

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been determined in the light of its post-cold war allegiances and subsequent formation of the Non-aligned Movement (NAM). Considering India's relationship with the Middle Eastern countries, New Delhi's preference has mostly been quite simple and focused, i.e., to export labour and to import oil. While these preferences have been practised and projected for most part of history, there has been a noticeable shift in Indian policy towards the Middle East in past few years.

India holds exceptional ties with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, i.e., Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). These ties range from cooperation in fields of economy, military, investment and trade.¹ It is noteworthy that this significant interdependence is not the result of some vacuum but can rather be traced back to India's historical geographical proximity² with the Middle East as its extended strategic neighbour.³

It is imperative to discern the underlying causes behind growing Indian interest in the Middle East. In addition to a history of cordial relations, economic ties, energy trade, and migrant labour, the Persian Gulf is a source of two-thirds of oil and gas for India.⁴ Additionally, the estimates of Indians living put the figure at 9.3 million. Around 70 percent of these Indians fall under the category of blue-collar workers, while the rest of them belong to a class of skilled professionals.⁵ This expat population is also a major driver behind India's growing economy – with about 60% of remittances coming in from the Gulf countries.⁶ Therefore, the reason for India's long-term investments and strong economic relations in the Middle East can be explained in view of the huge Indian diaspora in the region.

India's Look West Policy

India's 'Look West Policy' emerged as a strategic and diplomatic offshoot of India's Look East Policy.⁷ The latter was propagated after the cold war and the subsequent disintegration of

the Soviet Union; a situation which forced India to assume a closer position to the United States. This policy was destined to fortify relations with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in specific and East Asia in general.⁸

Driven by its strategic interests, India aims to develop long-term ties with West Asian countries. While India's involvement in the Middle East is smartly projected, it simultaneously balances the ongoing clash between Saudi Arabia and Iran. This is reflective of India's non-interventionist policy and how it keeps itself in a secure position while maintaining relations with the countries beneficial for its economic growth. Since the adoption of the Look West Policy in 2005, there have been several developments in the process. As Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh said:

The Gulf region, like Southeast and South Asia, is part of our natural economic hinterland. We must pursue closer economic relations with all our neighbours in our wider Asian neighbourhood. India has successfully pursued a 'Look East Policy' to come closer to the countries of Southeast Asia. We must come closer to our western neighbours in the Gulf.⁹

Given India's economic development needs, the Middle East has become a vital outlet for fuel imports as well as an economically sound environment for the Indian workforce, in addition to being a dependable source of remittances. Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Qatar have all been significant hydrocarbon suppliers. However, the number of Indians living and working in the Gulf countries has increased dramatically since the mid-1970s oil boom. Majority of these Indians belong to southern states such as Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and Kerala. Presence of such a vast Indian diaspora in Middle East resulted in the creation of the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs (MOIA) in 2004 in order to optimally facilitate Indian nationals.¹⁰ The Indian engagement in the Gulf region includes cooperation in the segments

of trade, energy supply, and the protection of the Indian migrants in the region. While India is pushing towards a soft power approach by facilitating different educational and cultural exchanges, it is seemingly persevering its non-interventionist policy by not interfering in the political and military segment of its relationship with the Gulf at the same time. To put it simply, India's larger interest in the region is driven by the vision of *amplifying* its economic might rather than *exercising* it. The only instance where India has felt the need to use the defence or military strategies has been to contain the threats of terrorism and other criminal activities.

Historically, the parameters of India's West Asia Policy have mostly been multi-directional. For instance, during the ideological clash of the communist and capitalist bloc, India maintained relations with the rival poles of the regional geopolitics, i.e., Iran and Saudi Arabia. Recently, however, the Indian policy approach towards the Middle East has become more multifaceted. The focus of Indian foreign policy *vis a vis* the Middle East has been subject to three key players—Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Israel—now.¹¹

India-Saudi Arabia Relations

Saudi Arabia and India have been trading partners since 1947. The cooperation between the two countries is stated to be based on peaceful co-existence, tolerance, harmony, diversity, and emphasising dialogue along with peaceful dispute resolution. An era of new developments in their bilateral relations began with the visit of the Saudi Monarch to India in the year 2006 and the subsequent signing of the Delhi Declaration.¹² Initiatives based on mutual cooperation as per the Delhi Declaration focused mainly on fighting terrorism and crimes that exceed transnationally such as money laundering, drugs, and arms smuggling.¹³ Similarly, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Saudi Arabia in April 2016 proved highly successful in terms of political, economic, security, defence, energy, trade, and investment

cooperation.¹⁴ India's ties with Saudi Arabia deepened further with two other high-level visits in 2019. These visits of Narendra Modi and Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Salman further bolstered the already existent bilateral ties between the two and were followed by announcement of some major economic commitments including investment opportunities worth \$100 billion by Saudi Arabia in India, increased Hajj quota to 200,000 which currently accounts for 170,000, release of 850 Indian prisoners in Saudi prisons accused of minor offences and a proposal for setting up a High-level Partnership Council.¹⁵ Furthermore, substantial trade between the two countries has also been a vital component of the bilateral relationship. Saudi Arabia is India's fourth largest commercial partner, following China, the United States, and the UAE. Saudi Arabia is seen by India as a dependable and long-term energy partner in ensuring its energy security. The hydrocarbons trade with Saudi Arabia accounted for roughly 61.1 percent of India's bilateral trade in the fiscal year 2020-21. In the same financial year, India imported 34.2 Million Metric Tonnes (MMT) of crude oil, accounting for 18.20 percent of total crude imports.¹⁶

Despite extensive engagement on bilateral level and cooperation in trade and energy sectors, the relationship between India and Saudi Arabia is beset with some complications, mainly due to their distinct preferences towards other regional players, especially Pakistan. Although Saudi government has not been as responsive to Indian accusations of terrorism against Pakistan, it has purposefully refrained from openly criticising the revocation of Article 370 and 35-A. The statement of Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi about Saudi Arabia delaying the peace process and dragging its feet on Kashmir could be an outcome of the growing Saudi silence on matters related to Indian excesses.¹⁷ More recently, India and Saudi Arabia have discovered a strategic compatibility for establishing a regional order that is safe and stable.¹⁸ Arguably, it could be a

consequence of Shah Mahmood Qureshi's statement regarding Saudi Arabia, and similar disconcert with the invitation to India as the guest of honour at the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) session by the Foreign Minister of UAE.¹⁹ Qamar Javed Bajwa's call for a meeting with the Crown Prince Mohamed bin Salman that was rejected, is reflective of the clear disruption in the bilateral relations.²⁰ Although the Army Chief's meetup was focused on mending ties between the two historically linked countries but this declination seemingly appeared due to Saudi Arabia's increasing tilt towards India. One of the very crucial factors keeping Saudi Arabia and Pakistan interlinked was the ideology and the vision of a Muslim bloc. In case Pakistan chooses to step back and tries to build an alternative Islamic bloc²¹ (substantially with Iran, Turkey, and Malaysia) then the vision and ideology will both slip away, leaving minimal grounds for future cooperation. In this regard, the choices that the Saudi government will make will be based on easy dispositions with a concluding opinion that, a tilt towards India is a far-reaching and a more rewarding choice.

India-Iran Relations

The alliance between India and Iran has had its highs and lows. With Iran being an Islamic Republic and India a democracy dominated by a Hindu nationalist party, the two countries have overcome the friction collectively and have entered into a mutually benefitting relationship. India formally established its relations with Iran in 1950.²² Prior to the partition of the subcontinent and the creation of India and Pakistan as separate states in 1947, India and Iran maintained a common border as neighbours, with cultural and linguistic links dating back to thousands of years. Indeed, the legacy of Persian influence on Mughal architecture can still be found in significant constructions from Lahore to New Delhi, including that of the Taj Mahal.²³

India's relations with Iran can be traced back to Iran's alignment with the US and its participation in the Central Treaty

Organisation (CENTO) at a time when India was more inclined towards the Soviet Union and was in the process of founding the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). The Iranian revolution of 1979 led by Ayatollah Khomeini and the fall of the Soviet Union greatly altered the stance of both the countries towards each other. With its rising economy, the Indian need for oil imports from Iran was further augmented, resultantly, enhancing the need for creating bilateral trade.²⁴ There is a nexus between Iran and India which keeps both countries together despite the complications of their relationship. For Iran, a balanced relationship with India saves it from strategic isolation, considering that it has been labelled as a part of the 'Axis of Evil' by the US. Similarly, for India, a stable relationship with Iran serves as an opportunity to fulfil India's increasing oil and energy needs.

Bilateral relations between Iran and India are subject to three key elements, i.e., trade, education, and religion. When compared to the same period last year, the value of Iran's exports to India increased by 240 percent during the first quarter of the current Iranian fiscal year (i.e., between March 21-June 21).²⁵ Economic activities between the two countries further expanded with the construction of the port project in the city of Chabahar, Iran. This port appears as a new stream for geopolitical competition and a bastion-to-be for global trade. India has contributed \$85.21 million in capital and \$22.95 million annually to equip two berths at Chabahar port for Phase I. It is further building a \$1.6 billion railway line from Chabahar to Zahedan which is close to the Iran-Afghan border.²⁶ Indian interest in the Iranian cities through the construction of Chabahar port has a far-reaching goal. The port connects Delhi to the Afghan and Central Asian markets and ultimately reduces India's dependence on Pakistan's land routes. Furthermore, the port might improve Indo-Iranian ties by potentially offsetting rising Sino-Pakistani collaboration. Simultaneously, China has grown its influence in Iran, seeking access to important natural resources and transportation routes.²⁷ For Iran, the port might develop

new diplomatic and commercial ties and given Iran's position as a pariah state in the West, the country sorely needs to discover other possibilities.

From religious point of view, India is home to one of the world's largest Shia communities. It is safe to assume that Iran's official strategy of employing the sectarian card as a foreign policy weapon played a crucial part in the current state of bilateral relationship between the two countries. Iran too, has an Indian Shia minority of nearly 30-million people.²⁸ Despite the lack of official numbers, it is estimated that the Shia community in India accounts for around 15% of the country's overall Muslim population.

A successful Indo-Iranian relation is a strategic move in Southwest Asia and the Arabian Sea, leading to the elevation of the regional influence of both countries. Perhaps, this can be consequential for Pakistan and Saudi Arabia but being key players in the region and strategically equated in the realm of geopolitics, both can enter into a myriad initiatives facilitating peace, prosperity, and changing dynamics of politics in West and South Asia.

India-Israel Relations

Although India had recognised Israel in 1950 two years following the latter's independence in 1948,²⁹ it only opened its Embassy in Tel Aviv in 1992 owing to its longstanding non-aligned policies. Since then bilateral relations on the levels of economic, military, agriculture, and politics has continued to progress.³⁰ Historically, both countries were under the colonial rule and got independence around the same time.³¹

The initial few years following independence were difficult for both countries. Israel was marred by the constant trouble over its existence leading to its isolation in the global arena and India was held back by the inter-religious quarrels followed by widespread illiteracy, unemployment, and financial challenges to the detriment of its

already fragile democratic setup. Similarly, their policy preferences led both countries in different directions. Israel's policy of non-alignment linked it with the United States for a more balanced relationship and likewise, India pursued a policy of non-alignment with both the western and eastern blocs.³² However, Israel's inclination towards the foreign policy of non-alignment did not guarantee her a place in the expanded NAM due to the opposition of the Arab countries. Arguably, the initial driving force behind India's policy on Israel was Jawaharlal Nehru. After the opening of consulates in both countries, he stated:

"It is not a matter of high principle, but it is based on how we could best serve and be helpful in that area. We should like the problem between Israel and the Arab countries to be settled peacefully. After careful thought, we felt that while recognising Israel as an entity, we need not at this stage exchange diplomatic personnel."³³

More recently, India's deepening cooperation with Israel has gained tremendous momentum under Prime Minister Modi's proactive policies. Beginning with high-level visits, including the one in July 2017. Prime Minister Modi made the first visit to Israel during which the relationship was elevated to a strategic level with the signing of seven Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) in the domains of research and development (R&D) innovation, water, agriculture, and space. Similarly, Benjamin Netanyahu, Israeli Prime Minister paid a visit to India in January 2018 during which four G2G agreements on cyber security, oil and gas cooperation, film co-production, and air transport were signed along with five additional semi-government agreements. Before these trips, former Indian president Pranab Mukherjee also conducted a state visit to Israel in October 2015. In November 2016, Israeli President Reuven Rivlin visited India. Such increased high-level exchanges and ministerial visits from both sides have boosted collaboration in a variety of functional

sectors, including commerce, agriculture, science and technology, culture, and security.

This bilateral cooperation is anticipated to grow further in the battle against Covid-19 as both countries have entered into cooperation for the development of test kits to deal with the pandemic. Amidst the standoff with China at Ladakh, both countries have continued their cooperation in the field of military and cyber security as well.³⁴ The relations between the two have apparently become institutionalised and any disruption in regional dynamics of West Asia will seemingly stand incapable of reversing the course of this relationship. The reason behind this is the realisation of how important it is for India to maintain bilateral relations with Israel. However, leftist parties in India continue to question the reasons behind smooth bilateral relations with Israel. Nevertheless, the pragmatic approach adopted by both the countries has only reiterated their respective role as significant regional players.

Striking a Balance: Iran vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia

Easy choices are a luxury in a complex geopolitical situation. While India expands its engagement with the Middle East, it faces a stark rivalry between two important players, i.e., Iran and Saudi Arabia.³⁵ The Saudis, on the one side, are backing the anti-government Islamist group in Syria and Iranians, on the other side, staunchly stand behind the Bashar Al-Assad regime. Riyadh and Gulf allies are in support of Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi's government, whereas Iran continues to back the Shia Houthi rebels because of the Shia majority in its country.³⁶ Thus, amidst all of these complexities, being drawn into the Middle Eastern cold war is the last thing that India would choose to indulge in. Interestingly, India holds a competitive advantage as both Saudi Arabia and Iran want it as an ally and an economic partner. For instance, the Kingdom is going through an economic transition and according to its 2030 vision, Saudi Arabia

aims to diversify its economy. In that, India can play a huge role in providing the sought stream of economic opportunities.³⁷ Relatedly, US sanctions have affected Iran's economy and have led it towards global isolation. India through its partnerships with Iran is a beacon of hope to keep Iran's economy stable. Thus, India is balancing the relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia just as Saudi Arabia is striking a balance between India and Pakistan.

This balancing tactic reflects India's active participation in the region predicated upon political realism anchored in harmonious rapport with all regional countries instead of antagonism against any. However, as India's regional image and economic strength grow, it will need to broaden the scope of its participation. It is in that situation that India will be inclined to pick a side. It will also be put under pressure to make judgments that it would not have made otherwise. However, to protect its long-term interests, India must reject such temptations and pressures and avoid becoming entangled in regional rivalries.

Implications for Pakistan

While India makes inroads into the Middle East, one factor is of immense significance. It is vital to take note of India's interests behind its balanced stance with Israel, its continued support for the Palestinian cause, and its inclination towards Saudi Arabia. The first and foremost driving force is India's need for hydrocarbons and oil in the Middle East. However, one often overlooked reason is Pakistan. There are two possibilities concerning Pakistan that India is countering through its foreign policy in the Middle East:

1. Neutralising Pakistan's foreign policy in the region and suppressing its efforts to create a Pan-Islamic support for its causes.
2. Due to a large number of Muslims based across the country, India is at the risk of a conflict within, particularly in view of its

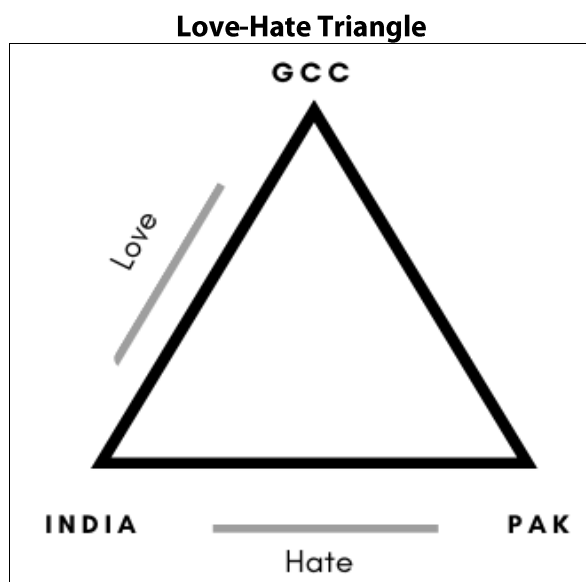
stance towards Israel. Thus, to minimise radicalisation, India has resorted to a rather balanced relationship with Israel.

Nehru's observation serves well to justify the aforementioned:

Any action that we may take must be guided not only by idealistic considerations but also a realistic appraisal of the situation. Our general policy in the past has been favourable to the Arabs and at the same time, not hostile to the Jews. That policy continues. For the present, we have said that we are not recognising Israel. But this is not an irrevocable decision and the matter will no doubt be considered afresh given subsequent developments."³⁸

Understanding the complex relationship

Figure.1



A 'Love-Hate Triangle' aptly defines the depth of the relationship between the GCC, Pakistan, and India. Figure 1 explains a double-ended adoration arrow between the GCC and India and it can apply to Pakistan-GCC relations as well. On the other hand, there is a long-held antagonism between India and Pakistan. While Winston Churchill did say that "the enemy of my enemy is my friend", there is

little to no explanation about what kind of a relationship transpires with 'the friend of one's enemy'. It is a strange analogy as to why a friend could possibly be friends with the enemy because there is a simple equilibrium model of structural balance that represents a connotation of positive and negative relationships. For instance, two common friends share an enemy but two enemies sharing a common friend is quite anomalous. Thus, some relational patterns come out to be balanced whereas others do not. In this case scenario, the anomalous existence of the GCC as a 'friendly' figure for two historically rival countries makes this triangular relationship rather debateable.

The fundamental question remains that why do Indian interests continue to grow in the region in addition to Saudi Arabia's strategic inclination towards India which is seemingly driving the former away from Pakistan. The biggest implication for Pakistan in view of the Indian expansion in the Middle East is other actors distancing themselves from Pakistan. As for the Middle Eastern countries, the choice to get along with India seems rational given its economic might and the strategic opportunities that the latter has to offer. There can be deliberate complications between the GCC and Pakistan but there is no chance that Islamabad would let the GCC slip away from its hands, keeping in view the importance of these ties and the huge economic activity that it has generated over the years. Their relationship could, however, be viewed under different lenses because of Pakistan's tilt towards China. In some areas, Pakistan would have to compromise too. For instance, in an upcoming potential reality where Israel and GCC would foster in their relationship, Pakistan can play the role of a neutral party and a non-interferer — securing its national interests without upholding the placards of its religious agenda.

Conclusion

India's inroads into the Middle East are not just focused on its energy security but rather appears to be a multi-dimensional approach

inclusive of Pakistan. The basic aim of India's strategy is to strengthen its relations in the Gulf region and engage in counter-narrative diplomatic engagements that would complicate Pakistan's foreign policy.

Thus, Pakistan should take steps such as including Gulf countries in foreign investment opportunities and engaging them in CPEC projects. This is an important step in facilitating Pakistan's economic situation, which continues to wane in the Middle East. Furthermore, India at this point is unstoppable. Thus, instead of focusing on how to exclude India from the Middle East, Pakistan should focus on how to make a comeback with a firm and a stronger foothold. This would result in a non-zero-sum game where the win of one party will not determine the loss of the other.

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