



INDIA AND WEST ASIA: STRATEGIC CONVERGENCE AND THE EMERGING MULTIPOLAR WORLD ORDER

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Abstract

India's engagement with West Asia has undergone a profound transformation in the twenty-first century. Historically guided by the principles of non-alignment, anti-colonial solidarity, and strategic caution, India's approach to West Asia has evolved into a pragmatic, multidimensional foreign policy framework shaped by economic interdependence, geopolitical competition, and emerging regional realignments. The growing significance of energy security, maritime connectivity, counterterrorism cooperation, defence partnerships, technology exchange, and diaspora welfare has made West Asia one of the most strategically important regions in India's external relations. This paper examines the changing dynamics of India–West Asia relations in the context of the evolving global order. It analyses India's balancing strategy among major regional actors including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Israel, Iran, Qatar, and Oman, while also assessing the impact of recent geopolitical developments such as the Abraham Accords, regional normalization initiatives, the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC), and the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC). The paper argues that India's West Asia policy reflects a broader shift from ideological diplomacy to interest-based strategic engagement. The study further explores the role of economic diplomacy, defence cooperation, maritime security, digital partnerships, energy transition, and people-to-people connections in shaping the future trajectory of India–West Asia relations. It concludes that India and West Asia are increasingly interconnected through shared geopolitical and economic interests and that their growing partnership may contribute significantly to the emergence of a more balanced and cooperative multipolar international order.

Keywords: India, West Asia, multipolarity, strategic partnership, energy security, geopolitics, maritime security, economic corridors, foreign policy

Introduction

West Asia occupies a central position in contemporary international politics due to its strategic geography, vast energy resources, maritime routes, religious significance, and geopolitical complexity. The region serves as a critical junction connecting Asia, Europe, and Africa and remains vital to global trade and energy flows. For India, West Asia has emerged as one of the most significant regions in foreign policy owing to historical civilizational ties, economic interdependence, energy requirements, diaspora connections, and strategic security concerns.

India's engagement with West Asia has evolved considerably since independence. During the Cold War period, India's policy toward the region was shaped largely by the principles of non-alignment, anti-imperialism, support for the Palestinian cause, and cautious diplomacy. However, the post-Cold War era and the economic liberalization of the 1990s marked a turning point in India's external relations. India gradually shifted from ideological engagement to pragmatic diplomacy driven by economic priorities and strategic considerations.

The twenty-first century has witnessed a deeper transformation in India's approach toward West Asia. The rise of multipolarity in international politics, growing instability in the Gulf region, shifting alliances, and the increasing importance of maritime trade routes have compelled India to develop stronger and more diversified partnerships across West Asia. Simultaneously, West Asian countries have also begun to view India as an emerging economic power, technological partner, and strategic actor capable of contributing to regional stability and development.

India today maintains productive relations with nearly all major powers in West Asia, including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Israel, Iran, Qatar, Oman, and Egypt. India's ability to balance these relationships despite regional rivalries demonstrates the maturity and flexibility of its contemporary diplomacy. Unlike earlier decades, India no longer engages with West Asia through a narrow ideological lens; instead, it follows a policy based on strategic autonomy, economic cooperation, and mutual benefit.

This paper seeks to analyse the evolution of India–West Asia relations and assess their significance in the emerging global order. It examines the historical foundations of India's engagement with the region, the strategic and economic dimensions of contemporary partnerships, and the challenges and opportunities shaping future cooperation.

Historical Evolution of India–West Asia Relations

India and West Asia share ancient historical and civilizational connections rooted in trade, culture, religion, and maritime interaction. For centuries, Indian merchants maintained commercial ties with Arab traders through the Indian Ocean, facilitating the exchange of spices, textiles, pearls, and cultural traditions. These interactions contributed significantly to the spread of ideas, languages, architecture, and religious influences across both regions.

After independence in 1947, India adopted a foreign policy framework influenced by anti-colonialism, non-alignment, and peaceful coexistence. India strongly supported Arab nationalist movements and opposed colonial interventions in the Middle East. It also maintained consistent support for the Palestinian cause and advocated a two-state solution in international forums.

During the Cold War period, India's relations with West Asia were constrained by geopolitical alignments and domestic political considerations. India maintained cordial ties with Arab countries while limiting engagement with Israel. At the same time, India depended heavily on oil imports from the Gulf region and increasingly relied on remittances from Indian migrant workers employed in West Asian economies.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War significantly altered India's foreign policy priorities. Economic liberalization in 1991 encouraged India to pursue stronger economic and strategic partnerships with countries across West Asia. Diplomatic relations with Israel were formally established in 1992, marking a major shift in India's regional policy.

Since the early 2000s, India has steadily expanded its engagement with all major actors in West Asia. High-level diplomatic visits, defence agreements, economic partnerships, and technological cooperation have transformed India's presence in the region. The adoption of the "Link West" policy further reflected India's intention to strengthen political, economic, and strategic cooperation with West Asian states.

Strategic Importance of West Asia for India

Energy Security

One of the most important dimensions of India's engagement with West Asia is energy security. India is among the world's largest importers of crude oil and natural gas, and a significant proportion of these imports originates from the Gulf region. Countries such as Saudi Arabia, Iraq, the UAE, Kuwait, and Qatar are among India's principal energy suppliers.

India's growing economy and expanding industrial sector require stable and affordable energy supplies. Consequently, maintaining strong political and economic relations with energy-producing states in West Asia remains a strategic necessity. India has also sought to diversify its energy partnerships by investing in upstream oil projects, strategic petroleum reserves, and renewable energy cooperation.

The ongoing global transition toward renewable energy has further opened opportunities for collaboration in green hydrogen, solar energy, and sustainable technologies. Countries such as the UAE and Saudi Arabia are increasingly investing in clean energy initiatives, creating new possibilities for long-term cooperation with India.

Trade and Economic Relations

West Asia represents one of India's most important trade and investment partners. Bilateral trade between India and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries has expanded substantially over the past two decades. The UAE and Saudi Arabia have emerged among India's leading trading partners.

India exports a wide range of products to West Asia, including food items, textiles, engineering goods, pharmaceuticals, chemicals, and information technology services. In return, India imports crude oil, liquefied natural gas, petrochemicals, and fertilizers.

The growing economic engagement between India and West Asia is also reflected in rising investments. Sovereign wealth funds from the Gulf region have increasingly invested in Indian

infrastructure, technology, telecommunications, renewable energy, logistics, and real estate sectors.

India's expanding digital economy and technological capabilities have also encouraged new partnerships in artificial intelligence, fintech, cybersecurity, smart cities, and innovation.

Indian Diaspora and Remittances

The Indian diaspora constitutes another major pillar of India–West Asia relations. Millions of Indian expatriates live and work in countries such as the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman. Indian workers contribute significantly to the economic development of these countries across sectors including construction, healthcare, engineering, hospitality, education, and technology.

The welfare and protection of the Indian diaspora remain key priorities in India's foreign policy. The Indian government has undertaken extensive diplomatic initiatives to ensure labour rights, legal support, evacuation assistance during crises, and social security arrangements for overseas workers.

Remittances from Indian workers in West Asia also contribute significantly to India's economy. These financial inflows support household incomes, regional development, and foreign exchange reserves.

India's Relations with Major West Asian Powers

India and Saudi Arabia

India's relationship with Saudi Arabia has evolved into a comprehensive strategic partnership. Historically centred on energy cooperation, bilateral relations now encompass defence collaboration, counterterrorism cooperation, investment partnerships, and technological engagement.

Saudi Arabia is one of India's largest suppliers of crude oil and an important strategic partner in the Gulf region. High-level visits by political leaders from both countries have strengthened diplomatic trust and expanded institutional cooperation.

Counterterrorism cooperation has emerged as a particularly significant area of engagement. Both countries have increased intelligence sharing and security coordination to combat extremism and transnational threats.

Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 initiative has also created opportunities for Indian companies and professionals in infrastructure development, information technology, healthcare, renewable energy, and urban planning.

India and the United Arab Emirates

The UAE has become one of India's closest strategic and economic partners in West Asia. Bilateral relations have expanded rapidly in areas such as trade, defence, space cooperation, fintech, renewable energy, and logistics.

The Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) between India and the UAE marked a major milestone in economic relations. The agreement aims to increase trade volumes, reduce tariffs, and facilitate investments.

The UAE also plays an important role in India's maritime security strategy due to its strategic location near major sea lanes and ports. Cooperation in naval exercises, cybersecurity, and maritime surveillance has strengthened bilateral security relations.

India and Israel

India's relationship with Israel has grown substantially since the establishment of full diplomatic relations in 1992. Defence cooperation forms the backbone of bilateral relations, with Israel emerging as one of India's leading defence technology partners.

India and Israel collaborate in areas such as missile systems, drones, cybersecurity, intelligence sharing, border management, and military modernization. Beyond defence, both countries have expanded cooperation in agriculture, water management, healthcare, innovation, and space research.

India has successfully maintained strong relations with Israel while simultaneously preserving strategic ties with Arab countries and supporting the Palestinian cause. This balanced diplomacy reflects India's broader policy of strategic autonomy.

India and Iran

India's relationship with Iran has historically been shaped by civilizational ties, energy cooperation, and strategic connectivity interests. Iran occupies an important geographical position connecting South Asia, Central Asia, and Europe.

The Chabahar Port project represents a major component of India-Iran cooperation. The port provides India with access to Afghanistan and Central Asia while bypassing Pakistan. It also forms part of the broader International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC).

However, India's relations with Iran have occasionally faced challenges due to international sanctions, regional tensions, and geopolitical rivalries. Despite these constraints, India continues to view Iran as an important strategic partner.

India and Qatar and Oman

Qatar and Oman also occupy significant positions in India's West Asia policy. Qatar is a major supplier of liquefied natural gas to India and an important investment partner. Oman, meanwhile, plays a critical role in maritime security and defence cooperation.

India and Oman conduct regular naval exercises and cooperate closely in maritime domain awareness and anti-piracy operations. Oman's strategic location near the Arabian Sea and the Strait of Hormuz enhances its importance for India's regional security interests.

Geopolitical Transformations in West Asia and India's Response

The Abraham Accords and Regional Normalization

The Abraham Accords represented a significant geopolitical development in West Asia. The normalization of relations between Israel and several Arab states altered traditional regional alignments and created new opportunities for economic and strategic cooperation.

For India, these developments opened possibilities for trilateral and multilateral partnerships involving Israel, the UAE, and other regional actors. India's participation in new economic and technological initiatives reflects its adaptability to changing geopolitical realities.

Multipolarity and Strategic Competition

The contemporary international system is increasingly characterized by multipolarity, with the United States, China, Russia, the European Union, and emerging powers competing for influence.

West Asia has become an important arena for this competition. China's growing economic presence through the Belt and Road Initiative, Russia's strategic involvement in Syria, and continuing American security engagement have reshaped regional dynamics.

India seeks to navigate these complexities through strategic autonomy and balanced diplomacy. Rather than aligning exclusively with any single power bloc, India has pursued issue-based partnerships and flexible strategic engagement.

Maritime Security and the Indian Ocean

Maritime security has become a central component of India's engagement with West Asia. The Indian Ocean and adjoining maritime routes are essential for global trade and energy transportation.

India has expanded naval cooperation with Gulf countries to ensure the security of sea lanes, combat piracy, and protect maritime commerce. Joint naval exercises, port access agreements, and maritime surveillance mechanisms have strengthened regional security cooperation.

India's SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) doctrine also emphasizes the importance of maritime collaboration and regional stability.

Economic Corridors and Connectivity Initiatives

Connectivity projects are emerging as key drivers of India-West Asia relations.

International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC)

The INSTC aims to connect India with Iran, Central Asia, Russia, and Europe through an integrated network of sea, rail, and road routes. The corridor has the potential to reduce transportation costs and strengthen regional trade connectivity.

The development of Chabahar Port is closely linked to the INSTC and remains strategically important for India's connectivity ambitions.

India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC)

The announcement of the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor represents another major development in regional connectivity. The corridor seeks to establish an integrated network linking India with Europe through West Asia.

The project is expected to enhance trade efficiency, infrastructure development, energy connectivity, and digital cooperation. It also reflects the growing strategic convergence among India, the Gulf states, Europe, and the United States.

IMEC has the potential to transform regional trade patterns and strengthen India's role as a key economic and geopolitical actor.

Defence and Security Cooperation

Defence and security cooperation constitute essential pillars of India's engagement with West Asia.

India has increased defence exchanges, military exercises, intelligence cooperation, and counterterrorism coordination with several West Asian countries. Security cooperation has become increasingly important due to concerns regarding terrorism, maritime threats, cybercrime, and regional instability.

India's defence partnerships with Israel and Gulf countries have expanded significantly in recent years. Cooperation now includes defence technology transfers, joint production initiatives, cybersecurity partnerships, and strategic dialogues.

The protection of maritime routes and energy infrastructure has also become a major area of cooperation. The Strait of Hormuz remains one of the world's most critical chokepoints for energy transportation, making regional stability a strategic necessity for India.

India has additionally demonstrated its ability to conduct humanitarian assistance and evacuation operations during regional crises. Operations such as the evacuation of Indian nationals from conflict zones have enhanced India's image as a responsible regional actor.

Challenges in India–West Asia Relations

Despite significant progress, India's engagement with West Asia continues to face several challenges.

Regional Conflicts and Instability

West Asia remains affected by prolonged conflicts, political instability, sectarian tensions, and proxy rivalries. Conflicts in Syria, Yemen, Gaza, and other areas continue to create uncertainty.

India must carefully navigate these conflicts while protecting its strategic interests and maintaining balanced relations with competing regional powers.

Balancing Competing Relationships

India's simultaneous engagement with Israel, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE requires sophisticated diplomatic balancing. Regional rivalries occasionally place India in difficult strategic positions.

India's policy of strategic autonomy helps reduce these pressures, but maintaining equilibrium remains a constant challenge.

Energy Transition and Economic Uncertainty

The global shift toward renewable energy may gradually alter the economic foundations of traditional India–Gulf relations. Declining dependence on fossil fuels could reshape regional economies and strategic priorities.

India and West Asian countries will therefore need to diversify cooperation into emerging sectors such as renewable energy, digital innovation, logistics, education, healthcare, and advanced technologies.

Geopolitical Competition

Growing competition among global powers in West Asia may complicate India's strategic environment. China's economic expansion and infrastructure investments, particularly through the Belt and Road Initiative, present both opportunities and challenges for India.

India must strengthen its economic and strategic capabilities to remain a relevant and influential actor in the region.

India, West Asia, and the Emerging Multipolar Order

The growing convergence between India and West Asia reflects broader transformations in the global order. The decline of unipolarity and the rise of multiple centres of power have created opportunities for regional partnerships based on mutual interests rather than rigid alliances.

India increasingly views West Asia not merely as a source of energy but as a strategic partner in trade, connectivity, technology, defence, and global governance. Similarly, many West Asian countries see India as a stable economic partner, a major market, and an emerging geopolitical power.

The emergence of minilateral groupings and issue-based coalitions also reflects changing patterns of international cooperation. Platforms involving India, the UAE, Israel, the United States, and European partners indicate the growing importance of flexible strategic partnerships.

India's balanced diplomacy and strategic autonomy position it as a credible actor capable of engaging with diverse regional powers. Unlike some global actors, India is often perceived in West Asia as a non-threatening and constructive partner.

The future of India–West Asia relations will likely be shaped by economic diversification, technological innovation, maritime connectivity, sustainable development, and regional security cooperation.

Findings and Analysis

The study demonstrates that India's engagement with West Asia has evolved significantly from an ideologically influenced approach to a pragmatic and multidimensional strategic partnership. India's foreign policy toward the region is now driven by economic interests, energy security, geopolitical balancing, maritime connectivity, and technological cooperation.

The analysis further indicates that India has successfully adopted a policy of strategic autonomy in dealing with competing regional actors. Unlike traditional alliance systems, India's approach is based on issue-based cooperation and balanced diplomacy. This strategy has enabled India to simultaneously strengthen relations with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Israel, Iran, Qatar, and Oman despite regional rivalries.

The paper also finds that the changing geopolitical environment in West Asia has created new opportunities for India. The Abraham Accords, regional normalization initiatives, and connectivity projects such as IMEC and INSTC have increased the strategic importance of India in regional economic and security frameworks.

Another major finding is that economic diplomacy has become central to India–West Asia relations. Trade expansion, investments, technological cooperation, renewable energy partnerships, and digital connectivity are now as important as traditional energy ties.

The study additionally highlights the importance of maritime security and regional stability in shaping India's engagement with West Asia. The security of sea lanes, protection of energy infrastructure, and counterterrorism cooperation remain vital components of bilateral and multilateral partnerships.

At the same time, persistent regional conflicts, geopolitical competition among global powers, and uncertainties associated with the global energy transition continue to pose significant challenges.

Policy Recommendations

1. **Strengthening Energy Partnerships:** India should diversify energy cooperation beyond crude oil by expanding collaboration in renewable energy, green hydrogen, solar technology, and sustainable infrastructure.
2. **Enhancing Maritime Cooperation:** India should deepen naval and maritime security partnerships with Gulf countries to ensure secure sea lanes and regional stability in the Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea.
3. **Expanding Economic Connectivity:** India must accelerate connectivity initiatives such as the INSTC and IMEC to improve trade efficiency and strengthen regional integration.
4. **Promoting Technological Collaboration:** Cooperation in artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, fintech, digital governance, and innovation ecosystems should become major areas of strategic engagement.
5. **Protecting Diaspora Interests:** India should continue strengthening labour agreements, legal assistance frameworks, and welfare mechanisms for Indian workers in West Asia.
6. **Maintaining Strategic Balance:** India should continue its policy of strategic autonomy and balanced diplomacy while avoiding entanglement in regional rivalries.
7. **Institutionalizing Regional Dialogue:** India and West Asian countries should establish regular strategic dialogue mechanisms involving policymakers, academics, security experts, and economic stakeholders.

Conclusion

India's engagement with West Asia has evolved from an ideologically constrained relationship into a multidimensional strategic partnership shaped by pragmatism, economic interdependence, and geopolitical realities. Today, West Asia occupies a central place in India's foreign policy due to its importance in energy security, trade, connectivity, maritime strategy, diaspora welfare, and regional stability.

India has successfully cultivated strong and balanced relationships with major regional actors including Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Israel, Iran, Qatar, and Oman. Through strategic autonomy and flexible diplomacy, India has managed to maintain productive ties despite regional rivalries and geopolitical complexities.

The changing geopolitical environment in West Asia, including regional normalization agreements, economic corridors, maritime cooperation, and the rise of multipolarity, has created new opportunities for India. Connectivity projects such as the INSTC and IMEC highlight the increasing integration of India with West Asian and global economic networks.

At the same time, challenges such as regional instability, geopolitical competition, energy transitions, and security threats continue to require careful diplomatic management. India must therefore continue strengthening its economic resilience, strategic partnerships, and regional engagement.

In the emerging multipolar world order, India and West Asia are becoming increasingly interconnected through shared economic, strategic, and technological interests. Their evolving partnership has the potential not only to promote regional stability and prosperity but also to contribute to a more balanced, cooperative, and inclusive international system.

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