

# THE TRANSFORMATION OF INDIA'S MIDDLE EAST RELATIONS UNDER THE BHARTIYA JANTA PARTY'S RULE

ANALYSIS

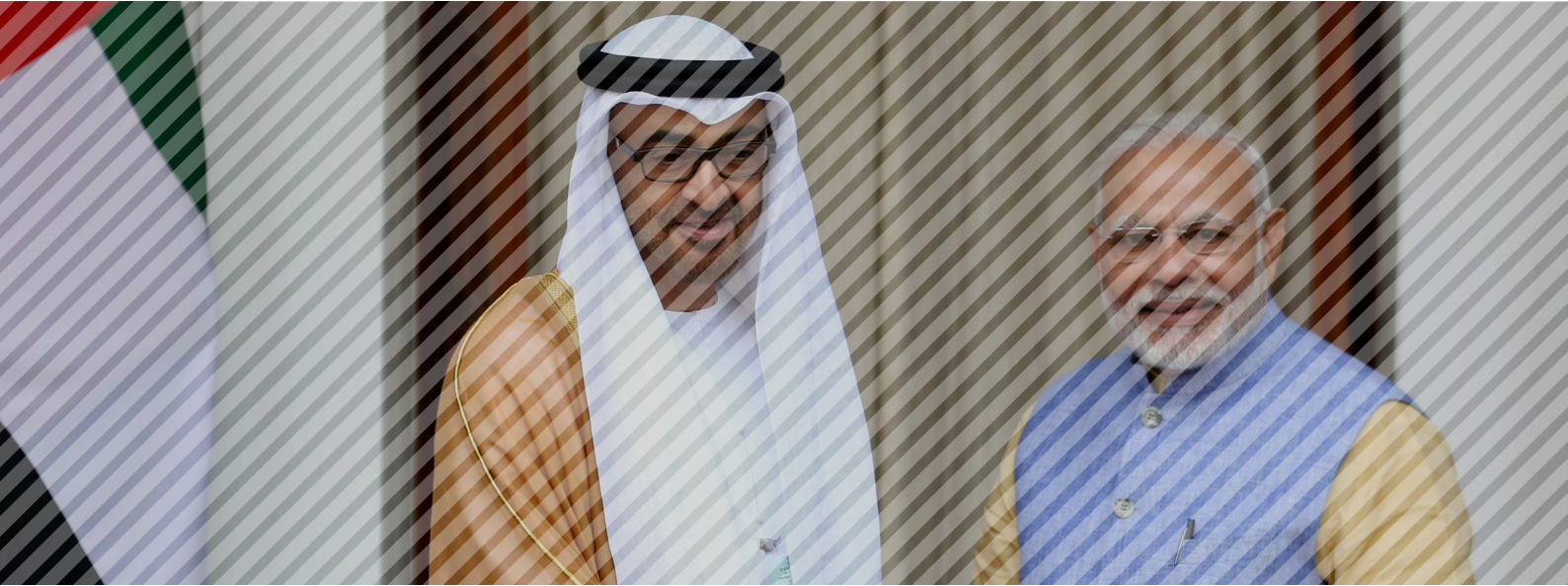


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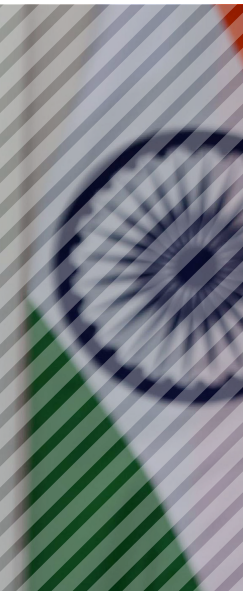
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**Abstract:** India's foreign relations policy under the current prime minister Narendra Modi was initially seen as a continuation of the previous governments position. This perception, however, has started to change as Modi's government has adopted a more assertive approach to international affairs. The 'assertive or aggressive approach' has also begun to transform India's Middle East or West Asia relations in recent years. This paper attempts to introduce the ideological and intellectual bases of India's two main political parties, the current ruling Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) and its predecessor the Indian National Congress (INC).

The INC governments had developed India-West Asia relations largely on three exigencies and principles. Firstly, that India stood in solidarity with all colonized countries, including Arab countries, against colonialism and imperialism. Secondly, that India defended the unity of the Arab-Islamic world vs. Israel in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and thirdly, that India was dependent on Middle Eastern energy resources. However, as time passed, this blueprint was reinterpreted and simultaneously, India's domestic political landscape generated stronger post-colonial narratives which diminished the INC's erstwhile political narratives and worldview. This paper outlines these shifts and discusses why India's Middle East relations under the Narendra Modi government should be seen not as a continuity with, but rather as a rupture from previous Indian policy in the region. The paper will argue that the BJP's worldview is particularly shaped by its ideological imaginations in which India is projected to play a far bigger role in world affairs.

## Introduction

India represents both a modern nation-state and a historical continuity of age old civilizations. The country has arrived at this juncture after a protracted internal struggle to define its modern nationalist identity. Perceptions of India's past and its historical narratives continue to be a major source of political and social friction. Long before Islam arrived on the Indian subcontinent, the region had already battled the spread of Buddhism (500 BCE), the invasion of Alexander the Great (327-326 BCE), and the Mauryan (324-187 BCE) and Gupta (324-297 BCE) empires when they had expanded their territories almost to the borders of Iran. The power struggle between Vedic Hindus, the Buddhist Empire in Tibet, and the Tang Empire of China took an interesting turn when Islam arose from Arabia, and the first Arab-Tibet alliance<sup>1</sup> further complicated the on-going power struggle in the region.

Regardless of how these centuries are construed by modern nationalists, at that time Buddhists, Muslims, Chinese and different Hindu Kingdoms were creating an alliance systems which gave rise to the Silk Route and created the first Middle Eastern-Asian economic corridor. In these centuries, India's relations with its Central Asian and Persian Gulf neighbours were the main foundations of the historical and civilizational relations between the Middle East and Indian subcontinent. Various Indian kingdoms and the Mughal Empire remained in close contact with all Middle Eastern rulers, the Arabs, the Turks, the Egyptians and the Persians. At the same time, Arab, Turkish, Persian and Hindu scholars interacted closely and translated the major scholarly works between their languages.

As the Middle East was the main sphere of competition between the Turks and Persians, the Indian Kingdoms, Mughal Empire and other Muslim Kingdoms were able to advance Indian trade and cultural exchanges with the region until the arrival of European colonialism started to upset the existing balance of power. India's continental or civilizational relations with the Middle East began to change after India re-emerged as a nation-state with multiple and rival nationalisms. These competing nationalisms took the form of; on the one side, the INC under

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the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru (both deeply inspired by European revolutions), and on the other side, Hindu Mahasabha (Great Society of Hindus) and its leaders, who advocated for India to be rebuilt upon its own Hindu religious values which had been neglected during centuries of foreign rule. Aside from their differences, both competitive ideologies had to redefine 'Indian' identity in a reality inherited from the end of British rule in 1947. This meant that regions which had historically been parts of India, ruled by the Mauryan, Guptas, Mughal, or the British Empires, had now become modern Afghanistan, Pakistan, and later on Bangladesh, Iran and even Central Asia.

For the first six decades after Indian independence, INC advanced India's foreign policy based on the modern European model of secularism and pluralist democracy. However, since the 2000s, the BJP has risen and returned to power with a full majority for the first time in 2014 under Narendra Modi, meaning that a new national identity has been driven by the intellectual sources of Hindu Mahasabha is being actively advanced for the first time. This new national identity now drives India's global and regional ambitions, and its diplomatic and strategic communications.

### **Foreign Relations Under The Indian National Congress**

By the time European colonialism had redirected the global power struggle by pushing the Indian, Chinese, Safavid, and Ottoman Empires to the periphery of the new global order, the anti-colonial struggles had forged solidarities among anti-colonial nationalist ambitions. Against this backdrop, the INC and its leaders Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru emerged as global icons of anti-imperial and anti-colonial struggles. The INC was trying to maintain its dissent against many of the British policies and was actively engaged in passing anti-British resolutions on international affairs. The All-India National Congress Working Committee opposed the government's decision to send Indian soldiers to take part in British wars abroad. Instead they sent delegations in support of several nationalist struggles in the Middle East, Indo-China region and Africa and Indian revolutionaries were in active contact with Germany, Turkey, Russia, Japan, and China. The INC supported the Khilafat Movement in an effort to build a pan-Asiatic and pan-Islamic alliance with both Asian and Muslim communities under colonial rule.

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In the March 1939 session of the INC in Tripuri, demands were made to control foreign affairs and national defence.<sup>2</sup> The All-India National Congress Working Committee opposed the British government's decision to send Indian soldiers to fight in Arab and Muslim countries against other colonial powers. The Government of India Act of 1935 was fiercely opposed by Indian revolutionaries because it excluded Indian people from deciding their own country's foreign relations. In his presidential address at the Faizpur Congress in December 1936, Jawaharlal Nehru said:

"...Indian defense forces should not be sent outside of India without the approval of the Indian people. Long before this incident, the "Forward Bloc" of the Congress was preaching Indian neutrality in case of any war in which Britain might be involved to preserve her empire. Just after Great Britain declared war, the Viceroy made a declaration of war without consulting the Indian Legislative Assembly. Furthermore, the Government of India Act of 1935 was at once amended, without the consent of the Assembly, to give the Viceroy full power to control and direct the provincial governments to serve British imperial interests."<sup>3</sup>

In the mid-twentieth century, Indian politicians formed their outlook on Asia and West Asia precisely on the basis of their anti-colonial and anti-imperial struggles. The primary reason for INC's opposition to the creation of a state for Jewish people, for example, was because of the Zionist Movement's close cooperation with colonial powers. So much so that Jawaharlal Nehru, even after becoming Prime Minister, saw many similarities between the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Kashmir problem. He likened the invasion of Arab lands to what he saw as the invasion of Kashmiri lands by Pakistan in 1949 to "establish rights by invasion".<sup>4</sup> They compared the Arab struggle against British imperialism in Palestine with India's own struggle for freedom.<sup>5</sup>

After independence in 1947, Indian leaders saw the post-war world being dominated by colonial and imperial powers and the military alliances being projected to counter the Soviet Union. While countries in South East Asia were joining the South East Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO), Pakistan became the first South Asian country to join the Baghdad Pact and India, being surrounded by western allies, became critical of these alliances.<sup>6</sup> Prime Minister Nehru expressed his bewilderment at the formation of military pacts and alliances between a superpower and a weak country, noting that it "had a direct effect upon India and, naturally, we have viewed them with suspicion and dislike." He also thought that the participation of Arab states in superpower-led alliances would weaken and break up the Arab League.<sup>7</sup>

***India's position on many international conflicts including the Arab–Israeli conflict, the Suez Canal crisis, and the Vietnam War ran mostly against Western positions***

Nehru explained his foreign policy principles when he outlined the Panch-Sheel (Five Principles of Restraint: (1) the recognition of territorial integrity and sovereignty of each country, (2) non-aggression, (3) non-interference in internal affairs, (4) mutual respect, and (5) equality. In his view, this posed an Asian challenge to the rest of the world.<sup>8</sup> India's foreign relations can therefore be seen as the INC anti-imperial and anti-colonial struggle evolving towards an Indian effort to mobilize former colonies to remain non-aligned or neutral in the bipolar world order. The idea of non-alignment meant, according to such Indian statesmen as Vijay Lakshmi Pundit; "India is friendly to all, afraid of none, feared by none."

For Prime Minister Nehru, non-alignment implied that "where freedom is menaced or justice threatened or where aggression takes place, we cannot be and shall not be neutral." As a result, India's position on many international conflicts including the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Suez Canal crisis, and the Vietnam War ran mostly against Western positions. The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) philosophy was a product of several Asian Relations Conferences. They started with the first unofficial summit held in March 1947 in New Delhi, followed by the second official Asian Relations Conference in January 1949 in New Delhi, and the third and first Asia-

Africa Conference in Bandung, Indonesia in 1955. This was attended by West Asian countries, the Republic of Egypt, Iran, the Kingdom of Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, the Kingdom of Libya, Saudi Arabia, the Syrian Republic, the Republic of the Sudan, Turkey, and Yemen. Despite many hiccups, Arab countries remained in close cooperation with NAM because of its pro-active anti-colonial and pro-Palestine policy.

**A De Facto End To The Non-Aligned Movement Template**

The events of the Islamic Revolution of Iran, the Iran-Iraq war, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and its consequent defeat, Afghan's subsequent descent into a prolonged civil war, Iraq's aggression against Kuwait and the American military interventions in 1991 and 2003 respectively have left the NAM template of foreign relations mostly irrelevant. Leading NAM countries such as Egypt had normalised relations with Israel, intra-Arab rivalries increased, and so India's foreign policy independently evolved away from NAM's ideological contours. India too decided to normalise relations with Israel in 1992 and liberalised its economy to be part of the new liberal market system.

The change brought new terminology into Indian foreign policy which redefined the NAM as "allying with none" in order to act with greater "strategic autonomy".



Former Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh is said to have redefined India's NAM philosophy with his own five points: developmental priorities, a global economic and security environment beneficial to all nations, greater regional cooperation and connectivity, strengthening regional institutional capability and capacity, and the framework of a plural, secular and liberal democracy.<sup>9</sup> As a result, India's relations with the United States and Europe deepened. India also entered into more institutional relations with Russia and China through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Group of Brazil, Russia, India China and South Africa (BRICS).

Critics of INC foreign policy, as well as India's relations toward the Middle East, also grew stronger politically. The main criticism came from the INC's long-term ideological opponent the Hindu Mahasabha (Est. 1915), Rashtriya Swyam Sewak Sangh (RSS) (Est. 1925), Bhartiya Jana Sangh Party (BJS) (Est. 1951) and its new avatar the Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) (Est. 1980), founded on the particular thinking and vision of Veer Savarkar of a Hindu Nation or a Hindu State. Sarvakar was a Hindu and Indian nationalist, as well as a leading figure in the Hindu Mahasabha, and his political visualisation in the 1930s aspired to India becoming a "Hindu-Buddhist" continental power, against both Muslim neighbours and China.<sup>10</sup> In his speeches as President of Hindu Mahasabha, Savarkar introduced the Mahasabha as "pre-eminently a Hindu Rashtra-Sabha and is pan-Hindu organization" which was shaping the destiny of the Hindu nation.<sup>11</sup> Some parts of this territory are located in today's Afghanistan and Iran. Krishnalal Shridharani points out that Japan's pan-Buddhism drive has especially appealed to a certain section of Hindus including the Hindu Mahasabha, which was wary of the Saadabad Pact being signed between the Muslim nations, Turkey, Afghanistan and Iran in 1939.<sup>12</sup>

The rise of INC's political critics had an immediate impact on Indian-Israeli relations. In the post-independence era, parties belonging to right wing ideologies such as Swatanytra Party and the BJS, as well as Hindu Mahasabha, strongly advocated for relations with Israel.<sup>13</sup> In its letter sent to President Chaim Weizmann of Israel in 1949, the Hindu Mahasabha informed the Israeli President that the group wanted the Indian government to recognise Israel and establish close relations with its people.<sup>14</sup> In its resolutions and popular literature, often published in its mouthpiece the Organiser Weekly, the Jana Sangh had always demanded strong relations with

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Israel. Its thinkers and ideologues have often compared Hindus and Jews and drawn similarities between India and Israel. Balraj Madhok, a prominent thinker of the Jana Sangh wrote how he wanted the “policy of strict reciprocity” to be implemented in the case of India’s relations with Israel. Madhok wrote;<sup>15</sup>

“as things are, most of the Arab countries have been supporting Pakistan against India. So India must support Israel against them. The U.A.R. (United Arab Republic) claims to be neutral in the conflicts between India and Pakistan and India and China. We would therefore like India to become neutral in U.A.R.’s conflicts with Israel or any other country Since U.A.R. claims to be a good friend of Pakistan and communist China, while retaining the friendship of India, Jana Sangh sees no reason why India cannot be a good friend of Israel while retaining the friendship of U.A.R.”

The BJS and its intellectual patron the RSS always had a different vision of India’s external relations, aiming to unite India once again, and adopt a more independent foreign policy which should reflect India’s position on Arab-Israeli relations. For instance, during the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, the Central Working Committee of the BJS passed a resolution on June 30, demanding that “the Government of India must revise its West Asia policy with a view to winning the friendship of both Arabs and Israelis and creating stable peace in the region. In this context, the Jana Sangh wishes to reiterate its demand that the Government of India must take steps to establish full-fledged diplomatic relations with Israel.”<sup>16</sup>

The BJS was critical of the government’s “over-enthusiastic support of the Arabs” which the party said originated from the ruling party’s obsession with “the communal vote”, a reference to Indian Muslims’ support of the Congress Party. In one of the resolutions, the BJS observed that India’s West Asia policy had failed to secure its objectives:

“The Central Working Committee disapproves of the partisan policy pursued by the government of India in regard to the recent conflict in West Asia. India should have exerted its influence first to check any eruption of hostilities between the Arabs and Israelites and, after war had broken out, with a view to restore peace. Instead of doing this, the government of India has right from the outset extended its blind support to the Arabs. As a result, its policy has neither promoted the cause of peace nor served India’s own wider interests (Resolution passed in Jana Sangh’s CWC meeting in Simla on June 30, 1967).”<sup>17</sup>

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In the 1970s, non-congress governments, mainly the Janta Party government, accommodated all the anti-congress parties from left to right. This was the time when the foreign minister from the right wing BJS strongly advocated establishing full diplomatic contacts with the state of Israel. According to a report published by the Jewish Telegraphic Agency on June 13, 1979, the leader and foreign minister of the Janta Party government Atal Bihari Vajpayee facilitated the secret visit of his Israeli counterpart Moshé Dayan to India.<sup>18</sup> As time passed, the intellectual and organisational influence of the INC started to weaken and different political parties challenged its single-party rule. In the years which followed, the Hindu nationalist group RSS took charge of facilitating India's relations with Israel, before the RSS leader M.D. Deoras used his personal diplomacy to convince the INC, and the Leftist parties to balance India's relations with the Arab world by establishing full diplomatic ties with Israel.<sup>19</sup>

The rise of BJP from 1981 onwards as an alternative to the INC coincided with a gradual decline of the NAM foreign policy worldwide. The perfect time came when India liberalised its economy and re-established relations with the United States, consequently advancing to full diplomatic relations with Israel in 1991. Since then, the two sides have exchanged several visits, though with little fanfare. Leaders from across the political parties have reached the consensus on the issue. Those who visited Israel in confirmation of India's changing relations were not only from the BJP or the Congress Party, but also; the Communist leader and then Chief Minister of West Bengal Jyoti Basu, a prominent Muslim leader from INC Najma Heptullah in 2000, and in 2006 the Nationalist Congress Party leader Sharad Pawar.

Muslim community leaders such as Prof. Akhtarul Wasey of Jamia Millia Islamic, Umair Ilyasi of All India Imam Organisation, former vice chancellor of Aligarh Muslim University (AMU) Mahmoodur Rahman, and the editor of Aziz Burney Sahara Samay<sup>20</sup> were also reportedly taken to visit Israel in order to create social harmony as well as improving political harmony between the two countries. Similarly, Hindu-Jewish summits took place alternatively in New Delhi and Tel Aviv to bring both communities closer.<sup>21</sup> In 2006, the first meeting of the Indo-Israeli Parliamentary Friendship Group took place in New Delhi. With the rise of right-wing politics in India, the narrative of "Islamic terrorism" has proliferated to such an extent that the Palestinian struggle, which was previously seen as an anti-colonial issue, is now worryingly associated with 'terrorism'. Ajay Sahini, a counter-terrorism expert in India writing about 9/11 for the RSS mouthpiece Panchjanya stated that;

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“In 1960, Palestinian terrorism started and spread all over the region. What did they do to it? They brought the terrorist Yasser Arafat to the United Nations stage and made of him a world leader. Other terrorists got the idea that they too can become leaders just like Arafat. By then, Palestinian terrorism was to some extent secular and gradually its secular thinking also became closer to Islam. It is how the Islamic terrorism emerged. The Afghan Jihad sent a message that this is victory of Islam. Islamic terrorism was ready to destroy the entire world.” [Author’s translation from Hindi] <sup>22</sup>

In November 2012, when Gaza came under Israeli attack, Ram Madhav, a top leader of the BJP, accused Hamas of terrorism and even condemned the INC-led Indian government for its muted response to Hamas’ actions. Madhav openly blamed the Indian government for not sympathizing with those “on the other side of the Gaza border targeted by Hamas terrorism”.<sup>23</sup> This indicates a substantial shift in Indian policy towards Israel, as well as to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

### **India’s Middle East Policy Under Modi**

The election manifestos of the BJP from 1989 to 2014 heavily criticised the foreign policy actions of the INC and promised an “assertive” foreign policy in response to an “altered importance of non-alignment, as a concept, in a rapidly transforming world”.<sup>24</sup> One such example can be seen in its 2004 manifesto, when the party called for an “Indian Renaissance . . . to reclaim India’s rightful inheritance as a Great Power contributing to humanity’s all-round progress.”<sup>25</sup> The narrative of a ‘resurgent India’, ‘Indian Renaissance’ and aspiration to a powerful status appealed to India’s increasing middle class in which conservative Hindus were at the centre of new growth. A decade later, the BJP presented a document outlining its vision and delivering a detailed critique of the INC’s foreign policy. The statement laid the foundations for the new foreign policy of the incoming Modi government:

“BJP believes a resurgent India must get its rightful place in the comity of nations and international institutions. The vision is to fundamentally reboot and reorient the foreign policy goals, content and process, in a manner that locates India’s global strategic engagement in a new paradigm and on a wider canvass, that is not just limited to political diplomacy, but also includes our economic, scientific, cultural, political and security interests, both regional and global...”<sup>26</sup>

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As Narendra Modi's popularity was rising on this election platform, his biggest challenge was to rationalise his party's ideological outlook and re-orientate India's Middle East relations in a way which did not disrupt the continuity of Indian-Middle Eastern relations in particular. In terms of style, given the fact that the intra-Arab rivalry has reached its most complicated phase, where not just two sets of rivalries, but multiple sets are playing off against each other, Modi has chosen a careful bilateral approach by putting a regional approach on hold. In light of a divided Arab world, a bilateral approach with each country individually, instead of engaging with the states Arab collectively, the Arab League or even the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), is the only viable format India is left with.

In terms of substance, one of the first tasks for Modi was to put India's Israel policy into a perspective which convinces not just Indians, but also the key players in the region. The key strategy which the Modi government has been trying to exercise in this respect is to disconnect the Arab-Israeli problem from Indian-Arab relations. The former foreign secretary of India, S. Jaishankar (2015-2018), said that "India and Israel, two societies who consider themselves cradles of civilization, have now found a more contemporary basis for their relationship."<sup>27</sup> This strategy has so far been successful, as the Modi government has not only de-coupled its Israeli relations from its Arab relations, but has also secured approval for deeper Indian-Israeli relations from key Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Gaining permission to use Saudi airspace for Indian-Israeli air connectivity is a significant success in securing a prototype for Israeli-Indian-Arab cooperation.

Modi's government has steered clear of 'condemning' the Israeli government on two issues: the attacks on unarmed Palestinian civilians in Gaza or in the West Bank, and on encroachment of Palestinian territories for Israeli settlements. Both the centrality of East Jerusalem as the capital of an independent Palestinian state and 'The right to return' of displaced Palestinians have also become notably absent from India's routine policy statements. The recent focus, not surprisingly, has turned toward the need "to resume direct talks". Here India's name has been thrown around as a possible mediator between Arab countries and Israel. The recent announcement made by the UN to request India for the mediation indicates that India's rising role in the Middle East is much beyond its traditional bilateral relations.<sup>28</sup>

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While Indian-Palestinian relations have remained limited to just humanitarian help, India and Israel have deep financial relations and billions of dollars in defence deals.<sup>29</sup> One of Modi's central Middle East policy objectives is to gain greater strategic autonomy, which has so far been curtailed by the curious balancing acts between various sets of rivalries in the region, such as Iran vs. Saudi Arabia, Iran vs. Israel, and Israel vs. Palestine, as well as the increasing role of China and Russia in the region. In the case of the Iran vs. Saudi Arabia rivalry for example, Indian policy makers appear content to adopt a wait and watch strategy until Iran resolves its differences with key regional players.<sup>30</sup>

Modi's second objective is to neutralize Pakistan's long-term India-centric foreign policy in the region. The third is to bring back India as an active player in the region by accepting more responsibilities and roles. In terms of geographical scope, a sharper focus on the Gulf has replaced Iran-focused policy of previous governments and Egypt-focused policies under Nehru. This is consistent with major power shifts (to the Gulf) within the region during the last two decades. The Gulf has offered India new opportunities and Narendra Modi, despite having a staunch Hindu nationalist background, has put his ideology to one side in accepting these opportunities.

### **Major Themes In Indian-Gulf-States Relations**

Under Modi, Indian foreign policy toward the Gulf has been successful. Modi's government has been able to develop individual security cooperation with the Gulf countries. Since the Afghan civil war erupted in the 1990s, India's major concern has been its spill-over into Indian and Kashmiri regions. In recent years, India has secured the assistance of Gulf countries in tackling armed non-state actors in South Asia. After the 2008 terrorist attack on Mumbai, India's counter-terrorism diplomacy was able to convince the GCC states of India's concerns. India and Saudi Arabia signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the Financial Intelligence Unit (FIU) - India and the Financial Intelligence Unit Saudi Arabia concerning Cooperation in the Exchange of Intelligence related to Money Laundering, Terrorism Financing and Related Crimes.

Similarly, intelligence cooperation in tracking groups accused of terrorism such as the 'Indian Mujahideen' group, (which was banned by the Indian government for many terrorist attacks) has become much more result oriented. This has included the deportation of several terror suspects from India by the Gulf governments.<sup>31</sup> On Kashmir, Modi's government has also been exchanging information on Kashmir with Saudi Arabia and the UAE.<sup>32</sup> However, though Modi's government has been

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able to counter Pakistan's Kashmir position in the Gulf, it still faces the problem of finding a way to establish more formal relations with Arab and Islamic groups, perhaps by becoming part of, or evolving its own regional partnership with countries in the region. Additionally, Modi's government feels the need to counter the impact of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation<sup>33</sup> and Arab League on Kashmir issues.

Indian policy makers had been reluctant to get involved with close military cooperation for a long time, particularly in conflict-prone regions. This changed when Gulf nations started to incorporate India into their changing security dynamics. In 2010, India and Saudi Arabia, for example, signed the 'Riyadh Declaration' which paved the way for closer defence ties.<sup>34</sup> Beside the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP), the Joint Defence Cooperation Committee, the Joint Committee on Security Matters (JCSM) between India and the UAE, India and Saudi Arabia have also now established a Joint Committee on Defence Cooperation (JCDC), which has been assigned to look at collaboration with India on defence in terms of procurement and joint production.<sup>35</sup> With Qatar also, India has been able to maintain high-level dialogues and exchange ideas which have brought the two countries into cooperation in areas of defence and security. The India-Qatar Defence Cooperation Agreement was signed in November 2008 which also established the Joint Defence Cooperation Committee (JDCC).

### **Energy And Maritime Security**

Since coming to power, Modi has tried to transform India's 'Look East' and 'Look West' policies into 'Act East' and 'Act West' policies. For West Asian regions, India has recently redefined its maritime security outlook by incorporating the Gulf region into its Indo-Pacific strategy<sup>36</sup> with aims to reconnect with its natural maritime borders in the Indian Ocean, Arabian Sea, Persian Gulf, Red Sea, and the Gulf of Aden (where China is increasing its activities through the Belt and Road Initiative). The Indian Ocean Region Association, formed in 1997, has also been reactivated in recent years and around "90% of India's foreign trade by volume and 70% in value terms is seaborne, accounting for 42% of India's GDP."<sup>37</sup> The Arab Gulf region remains key to India's maritime security and its rescue operation in Yemen, which evacuated around 4000 people including 900 foreign nationals from Yemen, has been one of the most successful operations (MEA Bilateral Relations Papers). In recent months, India announced its Indo-Pacific strategy and included the Western Indian Ocean as well as neighbours in the Gulf. Chinese and Russian observers are seeing the Indian move as an attempt to contain Chinese influence in collaboration with the United States.<sup>38</sup>

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India's energy security has left the country dependent on the Gulf region and subsequently it is sensitive to the Arab Israeli conflict and their regional issues. The new energy security policy is aimed at making India less dependent on the region by diversifying the energy resources as well as the import origins. India's net import of crude oil increased by 7.08% from 111.50 MTs during 2006-07 to 120.285 MTs during 2015-16. The gross import of natural gas has increased from 6.81 BCM in 2006-07 to 16.58 BCM in 2015-16, recording a CAGR of 9.3%.<sup>39</sup> India's cooperation in renewable energy has also become an important aspect of bilateral dialogues with Egypt, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, the UAE and Yemen joining the Indian initiated International Solar Alliance in March 2018. India's energy security policy is being redefined by the expansion of their energy ties from export-import to joint production and refinery industries into which India has attracted huge Saudi investments.<sup>40</sup>

India's dependence on the Gulf for oil is obviously in the favour of the latter and in order to reduce its import bills, India is aiming to diversify its trade and close the trade gaps with these oil producing countries by increasing the volume of non-oil trade. India-Iran non-oil trade reached US\$4.74 billion in the year between March 2016-17.<sup>41</sup> India-UAE non-oil trade is currently at its highest with US\$36 billion non-oil trade from a total US\$50 billion bilateral trade.<sup>42</sup> With Kuwait also, it has increased from US\$1,897.44 Millions in 2012-13 to US\$2490.45 Millions in 2016-

17.<sup>43</sup> The diversification of trade relations does however, face challenges from China, Turkey and Pakistan who are also pushing to increase their non-oil trade with the region.

### **Conclusion**

Under Narendra Modi's rule, India's foreign relations are being redefined both philosophically and strategically. Despite India remaining reluctant to enter into any international military alliance, it is now ready to assume greater responsibilities in its region and the world. India's ambitions and capabilities are fuelled by both its domestic political changes and changes in the global order. At home, India's foreign policy was being criticised, by right-wing sides mainly, for not living up to India's historical and civilizational greatness.<sup>44</sup>

As the global order is devolving into disorder, and regional cooperation models are either failing, or becoming ineffective at successfully responding, India's right-wing elite consider this an invaluable opportunity to rewrite India's global and regional role. What exactly India can offer to a region where the gradual withdrawal of the US is leaving a power vacuum and thus paving the way for a new great game in which Russia, China, and regional powers are in competition, remains unclear. Modi's government is only pursuing a bilateral approach, yet deeper engagement by joining regional groups and regional security architecture is still not in sight.

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