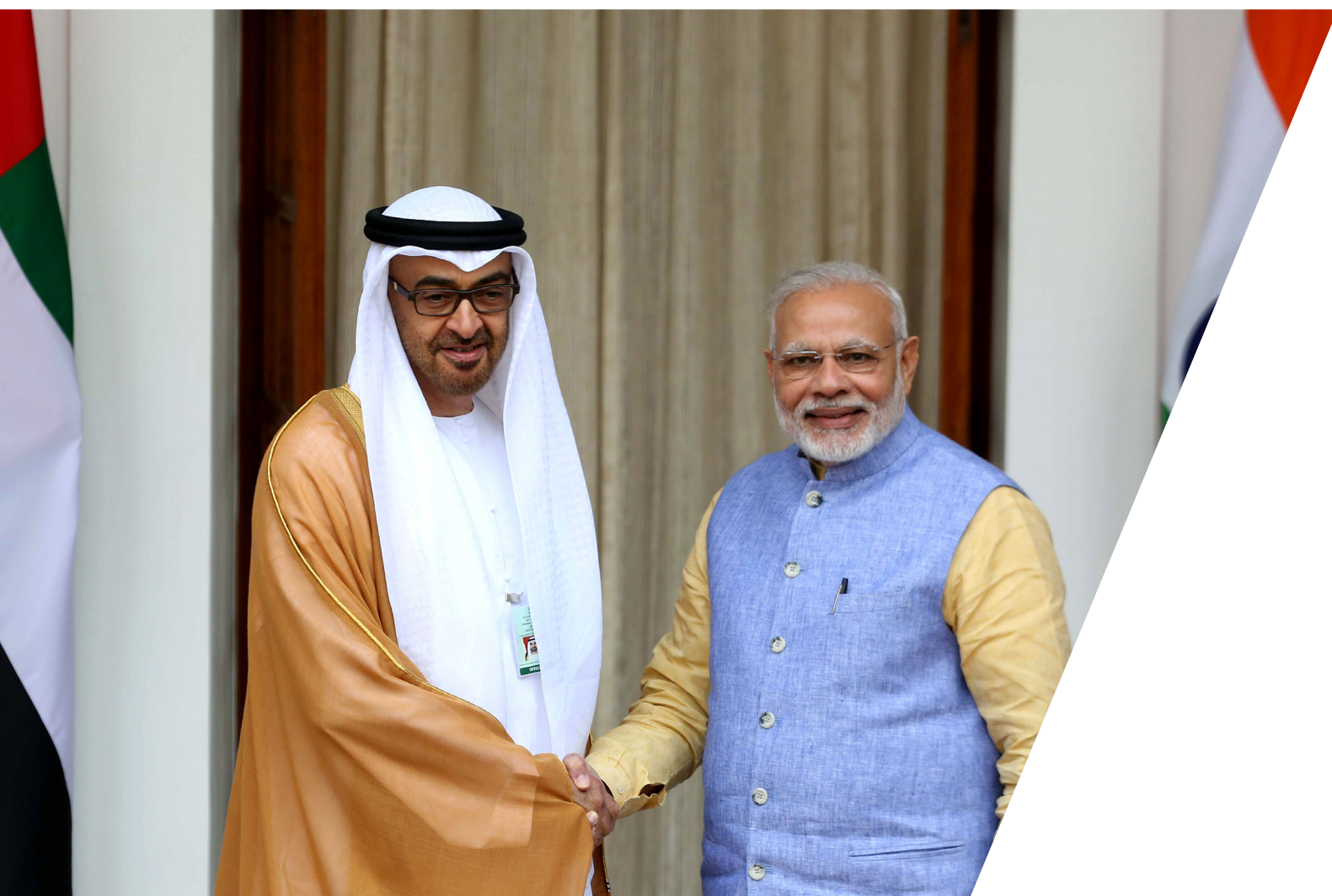


# INCOMING BIDEN PRESIDENCY: IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA-MIDDLE EAST RELATIONS

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## Introduction

With the electoral victory of Joe Biden and Kamala Harris, US foreign policy towards the Middle East will witness a few course changes based on previous statements made by the incoming president. It behooves analysts, therefore, to understand what sort of changes a Biden presidency can bring to India's foreign policy specifically towards the Middle East.

This article therefore looks at how a Biden Presidency will impact India's trajectory in the Middle East. It will begin by explaining the historic influence of the United States (US) on India's positions with regards to countries in the Middle East. It will then explain what India's current role in the region is and how it lines up with the major powers in the region, the Gulf nations (mainly Saudi and the UAE), Israel, Iran and Turkey. It then explores the Biden administration's projected trajectory in the Middle East and how that may influence India's positions in the region.

The paper argues that largely, India's engagement with nations in the Middle East will undergo a course correction due to Biden's positions on countries like Iran and Israel among others. Biden's reconciliatory approach to Iran will bring India back to its previous role of balancing relations in the region, even if it takes a while. Moreover, it also argues that, like for most nations, Biden's stable and grounded approach will provide a slightly more predictable and less erratic foreign policy approach that will make it easier for India to plan its own presence in the Middle East without being subject to the vagaries of Donald Trump's moods and abrupt foreign policy changes. As such, the rules of engagement in the Middle East will likely change and follow old trajectory allowing India to capitalize on the balancing act it has had in the region.

## How the US has historically cast a shadow on India's foreign policy

Historically, India's interests in the Gulf and broader Middle East were shaped by the US Soviet Union cold war.<sup>1</sup> While India was avowedly nonaligned with the USSR, it still favored Russian interests more than the US' preferences in South Asia and the Middle East. For instance, it refused to condemn the USSR invasion of Afghanistan in the 80s, putting it

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on the opposite side of the table from gulf nations like the UAE and Saudi Arabia which supported the US.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, India was also ideologically in support of the Palestinian cause as well throughout the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, another sore point for India-US relations.<sup>3</sup> This was regardless of the fact that Indians' had been working in the Gulf since the mid 70s.<sup>4</sup>

It was only after the fall of the USSR in the 1990s and internal economic issues that India began to open up its economy and see eye to eye with the United States on many issues. Thus, despite few diplomatic tussles with the Gulf nations on their support for the Taliban, international Jihadist groups and Indian insurgents, their positions largely began to converge.<sup>5</sup> This accelerated after the 9/11 attack when the Gulf nations realized the problems of funding violent non-state actors after they were themselves targeted by such groups and were scrutinized by the US for their ties to such groups.

21<sup>st</sup> century relations between India and the Gulf were moving towards more agreement, a process that was further advanced by the closeness between Indian Prime Minister Modi and many of the Gulf's regimes (such as UAE and Saudi Arabia) with a shared dislike of Islamist elements (violent and non-violent).<sup>6</sup> With the US taking a more cautioned approach in the Middle East since mid 2010, India's role as a potential security provider has become more prominent resulting in an increase of its importance to countries of the Gulf in competition with Pakistan.<sup>7</sup> As such, the United states has had an indirect role in affecting India – Middle East relations although this tie has slowly become more independent over the last decade. Moreover, not only did India improve its relations with the Gulf but also Israel as well, building robust defense relations with Israel (eventually discarding its professed ideological support for the Palestinian cause).<sup>8</sup> Part of the reason was due to the collapse of the Soviet Union and India's own need to nurture better relations with the US and its allies.<sup>9</sup>

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In summary, Indian foreign policy towards the Middle East in the second part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was dictated by the cold war dynamics and India's broad opposition to US hegemony and what it perceived as colonial hangover, thereby putting it on the opposite side of US allies such as Israel and countries of the Gulf. As the cold war ended and India began to pursue better relations with the US, its ties with US allies improved as well and slowly began to take its own course since the 2000's. By now, India has cultivated strong ties with many Arab nations and the US factor, while diminished, continues to play an indirect role in its relations as showcased in the next section.

### **Trump and Indo-Middle East ties**

Primarily though, aside from the conflicts taking place in the region, Trump's time as president of the US was characterized by a belligerent approach to Iran. This led to him dismantling the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) which several allied nations had crafted with Iran whereby Western nations would remove sanctions on Iran on the condition that it would scale back its uranium enrichment programme.<sup>10</sup> This belligerence was shaped by Trump's distrust of Iran and extensive lobbying efforts on the part of Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE (by order of importance to the US) – major opponents of Iran in the region. This was also supported by Israel, a bitter rival of Iran in the region. All of this allowed for a formal peace deal between the UAE and Israel (apart from a few other Middle Eastern nations).<sup>11</sup>

These acts had a significant impact on India's dealings with Middle Eastern nations. For one, although it secured some exemptions from US sanctions on Iran, it was ultimately forced to cut down its trade with Iran.<sup>12</sup> This compelled India to turn to the Arab nations in the Gulf for its oil purchases,<sup>13</sup> an issue that would have likely frustrated India's independent policy in the region.

Perhaps one effect of this belligerence and the general erratic nature of Trump's policy in the Middle East has been India's renewed interest in maintaining its strategic interests in the Gulf by engaging with multiple partners at the same time, a strategy referred to as

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multi-alignment. Given that there will be some level of backtracking between different US presidents, it is expected that India will always be cautious of hinging its relations too much on the US. This will be especially important given the reversal of a few key policies that Biden will likely do as charted out in the next section.

### **Iran, Israel, and the UAE – Saudi factor: India back to balancing interests**

Most analysts have predicted that a Biden presidency would present a continuity with many broad foreign policy aspects of both the Trump Presidency and Biden's Vice presidency from 2008 – 2016 under President Obama.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, Biden is also expected to diverge from some of Donald Trump's positions on countries in the Middle East. The most significant of these will be his position on Iran. Joe Biden was one of the strongest proponents of a softer and more reconciliatory approach to Iran during his time as Vice President resulting in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).<sup>15</sup>

Biden's reconciliatory approach to Iran will allow India to reenergize its own relations with Iran and bring about a balance in its otherwise skewed relations among the Middle East relations.<sup>16</sup> This will be in line with India's broader push to maintain a balanced relation with countries on different sides of the table in multiple conflicts/rivalries such as the UAE/Saudi – Iran relations, the Iran-Israel rivalry, the Qatar – Gulf nations tension and so on.<sup>17</sup>

However, this also means that it may have to trade off some of its goodwill with Saudi Arabia which is fiercely opposed to Iran. Similarly, India may also see some of this animosity emanate from Israel as well which was quite enthralled with the downgrade of India-Iran relations since Trump came to power.<sup>18</sup> Yet, this will not lead to any significant fall out in the short or long term. India will go back to projecting its economic potential as a reason for the UAE, Saudi, and Israel to respect its trade relations with Iran without creating too many ripples.

For instance, before Trump's belligerence, India positioned itself as a major consumer of oil, security partner, and a suitable destination for investments given its massive size

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and population. These factors allowed it to counterbalance different countries such as Iran, Israel, etc. It was only with the US' persuasion that it had to let go of its positions in Iran. A possible reset of relations will allow it to re-establish its clout without the threat of Trump's animosity hanging over its head.

Ultimately though, this will mean that a Biden presidency will not be as polarized and extreme as a Trump presidency will. Aggression towards Iran and proximity to Israel and the Gulf nations were mainstays of previous US administrations as well. However, Trump has driven these to extreme levels, making foreign policy decisions in the Middle East a zero-sum game for countries like India.<sup>19</sup> Undoubtedly, India will welcome a recalibration of foreign policy and a less polarized Middle East.

One other change that may come from the Biden presidency as some have argued is that Biden would bring in stability and less polarization in the US' foreign policy trajectory.<sup>20</sup> Under President Trump's leadership, there was a significant amount of instability stemming from Trump's erratic decision making process. Apart from continuously changing national security advisors throughout his time, he also kept firing his own officials over Twitter without formal declarations. Moreover, he often tweeted out his foreign policy decisions in different parts of the world solely based off any individual convincing him to make such a decision.<sup>21</sup> Such decisions often led different nations to wait with bated breath over the state of foreign policy (largely based on a new advisor). Accordingly, just the fact that Biden will not be hiring and firing as quickly as Trump did would mean a welcome change from the erratic nature of foreign policy over the last four years. India's Middle East relations over the years have gone from strength to strength and a polarized region was something that India would have preferred to avoid. As such, Biden's stability and level headedness would only assist India's ambitions in the Middle East and provide it with much needed balance.

For instance, India's interest in Iran lies in purchasing oil to ensure some level of independence from relying solely on the Gulf nations, as well as its goals to link a trade corridor from Iran to Afghanistan and act as a counter to Pakistani – Afghanistan trade links. Trumps' hardline position led to Iran developing closer relations with China and marginalizing India's goals

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in Iran especially with respect to the Chabahar port which China proposed taking over.<sup>22</sup> A gradual reset of relations may just help India slowly regain its presence in Iran although that will likely take a while.

Moreover, Trump's frequent escalation of events such as a near war with Iran after the assassination of general Qassim Solaimani always made his allies nervous.<sup>23</sup> For India too, war in the Middle East often makes it jittery since its neutral stances during times of conflict could ruffle feathers as was seen in the Iraq – Iran war of 1980 if not managed properly.<sup>24</sup>

In addition, Trump's disregard of Palestine and strong support for Israel including acts such as moving the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem also dislodged careful trajectories that his predecessors had adopted previously. Such drastic moves have the ability to inflame populations across the Muslim world (even if the governments are in support or neutral to such moves).<sup>25</sup> Apart from affecting business continuity in the nations that India has operations in, it could also spawn anti-Indian sentiments in continuation with such trends in 2020 and thereby lead to attacks on Indian interests in the Middle East.<sup>26</sup> This is unlikely but plausible and India would definitely want to avoid all possible instability.

## Conclusion

Slowly but surely, India has cast a wide net in the Middle East, a function of its growing economic prowess and a stable foreign policy trajectory. This has also been aided by the fact that the government in charge has been helmed by PM Modi for two terms now and a strong majority in the Indian parliament making it easier to forge ahead with the chosen course of foreign policy in the Middle East.

In essence, while the US has an effect on India's relations in the region, India has long cultivated its own alliances with countries in the Middle East and commands a certain level of independence in the region. This independence has been challenged slightly during the Trump presidency as was evidenced in the case of Iran. However, with the Biden presidency geared up to make one big and a few minor changes, India's engagement in the region would likely remain the same barring a few corrections. What is new, however, is a clearer trajectory and a less polarized Middle East which is what India will hope for in the region.

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