

INDIA'S WEST ASIA POLICY: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES**Manzoor Ahmad Hajaam**Guess Faculty, DPIS, Pondicherry University
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Rameezrajapol91@gmail.com**Abstract**

India has longstanding cultural and historical relations with west Asia. West Asia is important for its energy requirements. However, certain developments in West Asian region has created political and security consequences for India, but, its West Asian policy remained consistently pragmatic, non-interventionist and non-judgmental. India's bilateral relations with important countries of West Asia have been structurally progressive and have managed to achieve its national interests. To test this hypothesis the article will trace the outline of India's engagement in West Asia focusing on conflict, security and political related aspects of its policy. The article by taking examples of current developments on most pressing issues such as Israel-Palestine conflict, ISIS-Syria and Iran-Saudi rivalry will argue that India's approach towards West Asia has not undergone much transformation. Despite the change in government India consistently follows non-interventionist policy towards Israel-Palestine conflict. Its approach regarding ISIS remained cautious and non-interventionist. It has accepted honest and moderate intermediate role towards Syrian conflict. Finally, the paper concludes by asking how India might orient itself in west Asian region in the future.

Introduction

India has maintained cultural, diplomatic, economic and political relations with the West Asia since ancient times. This engagement has increased with the increase in Indian influence in economic and political matters in the world. West Asia is extremely important for India in terms of energy and human security as India imports its 70% crude oil from gulf countries and 85% its natural gas from Qatar according to International Energy Agency.¹The West Asian region accounts for the largest trade volumes for India overtaking china. The six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries constitute India's largest socio-economic partner as for instances, 35% of total expatriate population i.e. 6.5 billion people from India live and work in different West Asian countries thus constituting largest chunk of India nationals anywhere in the world. India receives largest remittances 35 billion\$ from West Asia which is largest than any region.² Indeed, the Gulf is a more important trading partner to India than the 28 nations of the European Union combined³so for India's foreign policy towards West Asia has largely remained around energy supply and strategic issues. India has not played any significant role in internal dynamics of West Asia. Traditionally India has followed the "hands off approach" towards the region thus enjoying good relations with them. India has avoided in overstretching itself and interfering in the internal affairs because of several reasons. Indian involvement in the region has mostly been motivated because of heavy dependence on energy resources⁴. However the region is undergoing a great turmoil which can only be described as destructive transformation. Firstly the horrific rise of ISIS, fragmentation of Iraq and Syria, the civil war in Syria and Iran, Saudi rivalry is tearing the region apart. Keeping these developments in view

¹ *Kaela Mananquil India in the Middle East An Interview with Waheguru Pal Singh Sidhu National bureau of Asian research December 18, 2015* <http://nbr.org/research/activity.aspx?id=635>

² Meena Singh Roy, March 2013, *Security Dynamics in West Asia* IDSA ,annual Asian Security Seminar, IDSA http://www.indiastrategic.in/topstories1965_Security_Dynamics_West_Asia.htm

³ Victor Mallet, '*Old ties between India and the Gulf are Renewed*'. Financial Times, June 29, 2014 www.ft.com/cms/s/0/577314ce-f856-11e3-815f-00144feabdc0.html?siteedition=uk#axzz361VYgq4C

⁴ Godbole shruti, june 12th, 2015 *Turmoil in the Middle East: Challenges for India* June brookings india <http://www.brookings.in/turmoil-in-the-middle-east-challenges-for-india/>

it is very essential to redefine the role of India in west Asia. In this paper we will outline the policy of India towards Wet Asian region keeping the three pressing ongoing issues I.e. The rise of ISIS, in Iraq and Syria, second the civil war in Syria and its repercussions and Israel Palestine conflict finally Iran and Saudi rivalry. The basic argument will be that in spite of much transformation and turmoil in Middle East the foreign policy of India has not gone under much transformation. The reasons will be given for the argument. Finally the paper will conclude with some policy recommendations.

India and the rise of Islamic state (ISIS)

ISIS is trans insurgent group which had captured large parts of Iraq and Syria. It was the direct result of American invasion of Iraq .This monstrous armed group has attracted fighters around the world so for India is concerned India being a large Muslim populated country is at the radar of ISIS, and conflict with Muslim country (Pakistan) and regular communal conflict between Hindus and Muslims gives an excuse for some to turn to extremism and radicalization. ⁵ There are only 20 estimated Indians who have joined the ISIS in Syria. The number is relatively lower than France which has 1200 or Britain which has 600 keeping in mind India's Muslim population which is second largest in the world.⁶ This is because Indian Muslims considered the group as un-Islamic and rouge and therefore local support does not arise however there are some misguided youths who have joined the group. Apart from the recruitment there is not any major threat from ISIS to India. The core of ISIS is focused on Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and neighboring countries and is not interested in India at least at this moment. India however at one point had announced its intentions to fight against ISIS but only under the banner of United Nations⁷ although ISIS has announced a province (*wilayah*) in the subcontinent but that is far from reality it may be aspirational and will help them in propaganda. The remaining question of people who have gone to fight in Syria well the best option will be to charge them and interrogate them. Also furling the ISIS flag should not be a cause of concern as it's not a security threat.⁸

India and Syrian conflict

Syrian conflict in the post-world war era has created one of the largest global humanitarian and refugee crises. The catastrophic effects of the conflict include range of factors such as alarming number of casualties, threatening level of violence, massive displacement of people and the increasing influx of Syrian refugees into the neighboring countries such as Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey. Large numbers among them have gone to European countries as well⁹.India's stand on Syrian crisis has been moderate and expected. During the congress rule India maintained its position of non-intervention and proposed the moderation in the resolution of conflict which NDA led Modi

⁵ India under threat from Al Qaeda, ISIS' January 27, 2016 23:15 rediff.com

<http://www.rediff.com/news/interview/india-under-threat-from-al-qaeda-isis/20160127.htm>

⁶How serious of a threat is ISIS to India? Can the Indian Armed Forces contain them easily?

<https://www.quora.com/How-serious-of-a-threat-is-ISIS-to-India-Can-the-Indian-Armed-Forces-contain-them-easily>

⁷ PTI , New Delhi, 16, 2015, *India ready for operation against ISIS if UN adopts resolution: Parrikar*, Indian express. <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/india-ready-for-operation-against-isis-if-un-adopts-resolution-parrikar/>

⁸ Nitin Pai , Dec 17, 2015, *Why India should not get into the fight against ISIS the jihadi threat to India comes from Pakistan, not Syrias*, scroll.in . <http://scroll.in/article/776195/why-india-should-not-get-into-the-fight-against-isis>

⁹ R Ranjan and M Z Haque August 29, 2015, *India's Elusive India's Great Power Perception: The Syrian Conflict And Leadersh* <http://swarajyamag.com/world/indias-great-power-perception-the-syrian-conflict-and-indias-elusive-leadership>

government continued¹⁰. There are number of core interests involved in the Syrian conflict which underpin its position primary among them are opposition to military intervention and support for state sovereignty this principle is grounded in third world solidarity, cultural values such as non-violence. Strategically West Asian stability is crucial to Indian interests.¹¹ India's muted approach towards Damascus is seen as silent support to Assad regime which has been the policy of NDA as well as previous government UPA. India's options are thus limited but they are for example India may be peripheral in the crisis but it cannot remain unaffected as this conflict has escalated into its neighborhood. India can play an effective role by upgrading its participation into the diplomatic activity into Syrian conflict¹². Syrians have expressed their willingness in the Indian mediation which is in itself the triumph of Indian diplomacy and have expressed satisfaction on Indian role.

India and changing equations of Israel Palestine conflict

India's relations with Palestine are rooted in the anti-colonial struggle and on the principle of the right of self-determination. Historically India has been sympathetic to the Palestinian cause and has supported them on all international forums. At one point India also provided Palestine 10 million \$ relief for its annual budget.¹³ Although relations between India and Palestine were established in 1974 but India recognized state of Palestine on 18th of November 1988¹⁴ however, the close ties between India and Israel which were established in 1990's primarily in military terms has made the support for Palestine lukewarm. But the Palestinian aspirations still enjoy legitimacy in the popular imagination of Indian people.¹⁵ Being India's most important strategic partner it is natural that relations between two countries have strengthened with BJP coming into power. The enthusiasm of the Modi government can be seen from high profile visits of Indian leader first Sushma Swaraj then prime minister himself¹⁶. India has bought Israeli anti tank spike missile which the US also offered India but India preferred Israel which signifies the depth of relations. This contract is worth \$25million dollars, thus making Israel second largest arm supplier after Russia¹⁷ but close ties with Israel has not kept India away from declaring support for Palestinian cause. India has historically voted in favor of Palestine in the United Nations. It was first time in previous year that India abstained from a UN Human Rights Council vote to condemn Israel's military offensive in Gaza. The issue is complex India has to maintain a balance between Israel and Palestine conflict as it cannot lose its largest arm dealer but on the other hand it cannot also look other way on Palestine issue.

¹⁰ Kabir Taneja, September 21, 2015, *India and the Syrian Civil War* How a potential permanent UNSC member approached the crisis in Syria. <http://thediplomat.com/2015/09/india-and-the-syrian-civil-war/>

¹¹ Kadira Pethiyagoda January 13 *India on Syria: The rising power's position on a global conflict*, brookings <http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2016/01/13-india-on-syria-pethiyagoda>

¹² Ibid

¹³ Sep 11, 2012, *India gives \$10 mn aid to Palestine, pledges support*, world, <http://www.firstpost.com/world/india-gives-10-mn-aid-to-palestine-pledges-support-451647.html>

¹⁵ <http://www.firstpost.com/world/india-gives-10-mn-aid-to-palestine-pledges-support-451647.html>

¹⁵ Amrith K. Mago, April 8, 2003, *India-Israel Military Ties Continue to Grow Troop Training to Supplement Arms Sales*, jewish institute of national security affairs, <http://web.archive.org/web/20061107084915/http://www.jinsa.org/articles/articles.html/function/view/categoryid/1948/documentid/1971/history/3,2360,1947,1948,1971>

¹⁶ 29 September 2014 "*Prime Minister Narendra Modi meets his Israeli counterpart Benjamin Netanyahu*". *The Economic Times..economic times* http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2014-09-29/news/54437450_1_prime-minister-narendra-modi-benjamin-netanyahu-islamic-state

¹⁷ 29 October 2014. "*India Chooses Israel Over US for Latest Defense Purchase*". *The Diplomat* <http://thediplomat.com/2014/10/india-chooses-israel-over-us-for-latest-defense-purchase/>

Iran Saudi rivalry and India's response

Saudi Iranian relations have been bitter since Islamic revolution in 1979. Saudi-Iranian rivalries have different causes primary among them is theological and ideological. Saudi Arabia accuses Iran of inciting its Shia population against kingdom. Secondly there is regional rivalry; both the countries are competing for influence in the region that includes support for proxy wars. Thirdly Saudi is very close ally of the United States which is seen in Iran as greatest enemy¹⁸. So for India is concerned, it has maintained a cautious and balanced approach towards both. Both the countries are vital for India. Saudi Arabia has maximum number of Indian passport holders outside their country. The security angle is also important as Saudi Arabia has cooperated in handling various terrorists to India particularly Abu Jindal. The security cooperation is growing under current government. Iran also holds the key for Indian ambitions to connect with Central Asian republics that are rich in gas and oil. Iran also provides access to landlocked Afghanistan via its chabahar port¹⁹, the Iran deal has provided opportunities for India which means it can restart its multifaceted relationship that includes increasing trade in oil and gas sector. India will be able to import more amount of oil with fewer restrictions. Therefore India was and is big supporter of nuclear deal. So for the rivalry between the countries is concerned India has not been affected by it neither has India take any ones side. India's approach towards both the countries is based on moderation and non-interference which explains its neutrality in conflicts in the region.

Conclusion

The India's Middle Eastern policy is driven by its national interests as every other country. But what is interesting about Middle Eastern policy is that India has sought the "middle ground" on the divisive issues such as Palestinian cause, Syrian conflict and Saudi Iranian rivalry. The cautious approach of non-judgmental helped India to achieve its national interests. By providing four related issues the paper tried to provide an analysis of how the policy has been consistent and has not been affected much. Understandably it can be argued that these developments were not affecting India as other countries were. For example India did not participate in the US led coalition against ISIS; it did not interfere in the Syrian civil war nor supported any faction but maintained that through dialogue a solution is possible. India has adopted a balanced approach towards Israel-Palestine conflict although India over the years has come close to Israel but it is not at the expense of Palestine. This is also evident from the visit of president Pranab Mukherjee when Israeli prime minister requested him to change its stance towards Palestine, which was not accepted.²⁰ Lastly in the regional rivalry of Iran and Saudi Arabia India has maintained a distance and rightly so. Both the countries are vital in terms of energy and security so ones preference cannot be at others cost. Overall west Asian strategy of India currently is consistent but will it remain only time can tell.

¹⁸ R. Sidda Goud, Manisha Mookherjee Allied Publishers, 20-Apr-2014 *India and Iran in Contemporary Relations* P 54

¹⁹ Jayanth Jacob and Aman Malik Jan 11, 2016 *Saudi-Iran spat likely to have a significant impact on India*, Hindustan Times, New Delhi <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india/saudi-iran-spat-likely-to-have-a-significant-impact-on-india/story-fXKbn3Pptqs07iuvUzDvOI.html>

²⁰ Stanly Johny October 16, 2015 *Israel 'upset' with India's ties with Palestine* the Hindu <http://www.thehindu.com/news/international/israel-upset-with-indias-ties-with-palestine/article7770354.ece>