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India's West Asia Policy: Delicate Manoeuvres

India's ties with its neighbours to the West have traditionally been meaningful. For one thing, as suggested in Chapter 2, most of the non-native conquerors of northern India hailed from the West or, when from Central Asia, penetrated India from the West (through Afghanistan and what is now Pakistan).[1] Afghan invaders were heavily influenced by Persian culture, and most conquerors after the eleventh century were Muslim (the British being the most obvious exception).[2]

During the British Raj, India was closely connected, administratively and otherwise, with West Asia by the British overlords.[3] Under them, Indian army divisions participated in campaigns in Egypt and Palestine in the First World War and in Iran, Syria, and Iraq during the Second World War.[4] As the British colonial role faded, throughout the twentieth century, in South and West Asia (including in Egypt and Palestine), close economic links persisted, particularly with countries of the Persian Gulf, including Iraq and Iran.

These ties were often challenged by the profound antagonisms within West Asia after the Second World War, but also, in the specific case of South Asia, by rivalries in that region also, not least Pakistani attempts to isolate India from the Islamic world. Even if West Asia enjoyed less complex ties with India, it might well be worth surveying the relationships, particularly for Western readers, as the global weight of Western-centric international relations may be declining in importance, relative to the international relations of other regions and countries, particularly Asian ones.

For West Asia, an area with complex, often contradictory impulses towards the United States (hitherto the sole remaining superpower, but now playing more of a *primus inter pares* role), other partners, particularly powerful energy-hungry ones like China and India, are much more important than they were even twenty years ago.[5] Already, the beginnings of a new 'great game' can be detected between rising powers around the world, opening up new possibilities for all involved, but also new dangers, including in relation to energy supplies and to Middle East politics, that perennial tinderbox.

For centuries, West Asia has represented one of the few major regions that empires and superpowers could not fully dominate, although most have tried. Until the discovery of vast oil supplies in the Persian Gulf region, much of the effort exerted by major powers to govern West Asia, directly or indirectly, revolved around its strategic position between Europe and India (or more generally between the north Atlantic and Asia). The constant pursuit of trade routes between these areas has ensured a steady flow of cultures, people, and goods in all directions. The economic rise of India, and the continuing energy riches of West Asia, have ensured that India no longer has merely a diplomatic and neighbourly connection with West Asia, but also an expanding and vital interest in this area, building on a solid foundation of substantive relations with virtually all countries of the region at a time of great geostrategic uncertainty. For example, it has yet to be seen whether the conflict and now political deadlock in Iraq will resolve itself peacefully, or descend into further sectarian violence once US forces largely exit Iraq in 2011.[6] The difference between relative instability as opposed to chaos in Iraq is a critical factor for all its immediate neighbours and the Persian Gulf countries (as well as for naval powers present in the Gulf). Moreover, fears over Iran's nuclear programme, variously pronounced around the globe but most acute in Israel, constitute a wild card in the region and beyond.

In addition, while Israel's campaign to subdue Hamas in Gaza in 2008–9, much decried internationally, was conducted in part with the aim of producing a new deal in the Levant, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict continues to simmer menacingly. And positive relations between Israel and Turkey, one of the few hopeful signposts in the region, were damaged by the flawed interception of a Turkish flotilla carrying pro-Palestinian activists and supplies to Gaza in May 2010.[7] Thus, the Middle East quagmire was no less worrying in the late summer of 2010 than at other times over recent decades.

India has a strong interest in positive outcomes to each of these West Asian challenges, despite not being involved in the 'great power' diplomacy to address them (for example, among the permanent members of the UN Security Council, or within the West Asia 'Quartet' of key international players, i.e. the USA, the EU, Russia, and the UN). India's largely successful approach has been to tend to its various bilateral relationships in West Asia, seeking to maintain friendships (and through them, the promotion of its economic interests) in good order. Indeed, India's diplomacy with West Asian countries stands out as particularly accomplished, despite tense Indian ties with Muslim Pakistan holding the potential to disrupt relationships with other Muslim countries. (This is less true today, with all international actors increasingly willing, often eager, to deal with an increasingly significant India on its own terms.)[8]

India's long shared history with West Asia is a tremendous advantage to it in negotiating the shoals of unpredictable rivalries and hostilities in the region.

West Asian complexity is much better understood in India than in most Western capitals. Further, India's trading relationships in West Asia, dating back to well before European colonialism, are etched into the neighbourhood's DNA.

Throughout the Cold War, India's official policy of non-alignment globally was translated into a policy of 'equidistance' in West Asia, which worked well in the main, although it required constant calibration. This policy largely left the Indian government free to adjust to evolving dynamics at play in the region, and to balance out instability in one state by placing at least temporary, in some cases more long-lasting, emphasis on another. The end of the Cold War, however, brought new (or in some cases rediscovered) complexities to the region, ranging from ethnic tensions to questions of leadership succession and the risk of further proliferation of nuclear weapons. Given these developments, its continuing security concerns and growing energy interests have led India to redouble engagement in the region.

An examination of the dynamics of the relationship between West Asia and India reveals actors on both sides crafting policies that are largely pragmatic. National interests have dominated India's involvement in the region, and the states in West Asia have responded in kind. Also, while trade has historically provided both the incentive and the underpinning for these relationships, security interests are playing an increasing role either by choice, as with Israel, or because of global dynamics over which India has little control, as with Iran.

India's status as a nuclear and economic power is leading to its involvement and participation in global leadership, for example through membership in the G-20. But its new international profile and greater responsibilities are attended by a need to grapple with greater complexity and possibly greater risk. And the expansion of India's interests in West Asia suggests that a policy based mainly on principles of 'equidistance' can no longer alone address its interests, requiring India to make tough decisions in the future in order to maintain the success to date of its West Asian policy.

The past as prologue

The contemporary geostrategic relationship between India and West Asia in its essence dates back to the period of British Empire. West Asia provided key passageways towards Britain's global economic interests, which were primarily anchored in India and parts of the Far East. Testament to this relationship is the fact that responsibility for the Persian Gulf region was delegated from London to the British Viceroy in India, an arrangement that was maintained until India won independence in 1947.[9] During British rule, interaction between Indian and Gulf traders facilitated not only an exchange of ideas

between India and the Persian Gulf, but also of commodities, people, and administrative practice.[10] Most of these habits of interaction survived Indian independence and are today a constant for the countries involved.[11]

The fact that West Asia and India share a degree of ethnic and religious heterogeneity has also played a part in India's foreign policy towards the region. India's need to maintain harmony among Hindus and Muslims has played a role in how it approaches the Arab–Israeli conflict and Turkish secularism.[12] For example, although Turkey, like India, is a secular democracy, electoral gains made by political parties with leanings towards Islam have caused tensions, with the military, which is constitutionally the protector of Turkey's secularism. Indians are consequently more interested in Turkey than one might expect. This, coupled with Turkey's geostrategic significance, has led to the quest for closer ties.[13]

While many in the past argued that India's adoption of non-alignment during the Cold War was a moral decision, current scholars and practitioners argue convincingly that the policy of non-alignment for India represented a pragmatic, realist approach to protecting India's international interests through policy independence at a challenging time, and study of India's policy towards West Asia tends to corroborate this conclusion.[14] The advantages of non-alignment as an umbrella ideology for India's foreign policy in its early years of independence included being able to hold a number of international disputes (including ones involving other developing countries) at bay while India focused on essential domestic objectives vital to consolidating the state and tending to the urgent needs of its population.[15] The policy also served India well in fostering a web of bilateral relations with partners of many different persuasions: democratic or authoritarian, Muslim or Christian, Sunni or Shia, and so on, even while instances of West Asian regional cooperation (for example, the Baghdad Pact, CENTO, and the United Arab Republic) proved short-lived or still-born.

This bilateral approach to building and maintaining relationships in West Asia resulted in a policy of equidistance with most of India's partners in the region and enabled India to ensure relatively stable relationships throughout an area long racked with instability. Hamid Ansari writes that some issues touching on religious or other loyalties have affected India's relationship with states in West Asia, specifically citing the Kashmir conflict and the 1971 war in East Pakistan, but Delhi did not allow these to inhibit wider efforts to promote cooperation on interests such as trade.[16]

India's key interests in the region will likely remain similar to what they have been in the past few decades: security and stability in order to guarantee a stable supply of fuel; cooperation and engagement in order to promote trade; and the ability to leverage its position to gain increased access and standing in global forums.

The status quo: India and North Africa[17]

In recent history, the most important focal point for Indian diplomacy in north Africa was Egypt, because of its position of leadership within the Arab world. This was particularly true during the presidency of Gamal Abdel Nasser, whose nationalist, secular, and anti-colonialist rhetoric was very much in line with India's Cold War foreign policy.[18]

The warming of relations between Egypt and India during the 1950s had much to do with personal diplomacy by the leaders in the two states, who saw similar qualities in each other. Bansidhar Pradhan describes how Nehru admired Nasser's condemnation of the US-led Baghdad Pact and the unifying aims of pan-Arabism. Simultaneously, Nasser viewed Nehru as a fellow anti-colonialist who had contributed to forcing the British out of India, much as Nasser was trying to do in the Middle East. These ideas were mirrored in India's support of Egypt during the 1956 Suez Crisis, and the subsequent opposition of each state to the Eisenhower Doctrine, which suggested a greater role for the USA (as the influence of Britain and France faded in the wake of their failure), together with Israel, to impose their will on Egypt over management of the Suez Canal.[19]

While the Indo-Egyptian relationship during this time had a distinct ideological streak, India's interests region-wide were well served by establishing a strong relationship with the most charismatic Arab leader of the age. India's support of Nasser during the Suez Crisis was appreciated throughout the Arab world. This helped to build mutual trust that allowed India to pursue economic interests in the region thereafter.[20] The Indian relationship with Algeria, which at the same time was engaged in its struggle for independence from France, had similar drivers as the Cairo–Delhi relationship, although it was of lesser immediate significance for India as Algiers was less pivotal in the Arab world.

The states in north Africa have taken a back seat in the more recent Indian approach to West Asia. Indeed, in the past two decades, India's West Asian policy has been focused on a new set of key partners: Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Iran.[21] This makes sense in relation to India's pursuit of interests, because India can maintain mutually beneficial relationships with all three of these states (although Iran was an extremely sensitive relationship for India when set against a geopolitical backdrop defined in large part by the George W. Bush Administration's 'war on terror' and 'axis of evil'). In 2008–9, India's exports to Egypt totalled US$1.69 billion and its imports from it US$2.12 billion.[22] By comparison, India's trade in 2008–9 with Israel (linked to India by official diplomatic ties only since 1992) accounted for US$1.45 billion in exports and US$2.09 billion in imports.[23] Notwithstanding Algeria's role as an oil producer, the states in north Africa, save perhaps Egypt because of its political

influence, can offer little economic incentive to India to justify more intense bilateral or subregional relationships.

While India has few pressing strategic interests in north Africa, it cannot ignore the area altogether. China, India's primary competitor in many areas, has been increasing its involvement in many African states, specifically in the energy and economic sectors. Although clearly driven by its resource needs, China's policy may also be influenced to a degree by predictions, perhaps more hopeful than imminent, of an African 'renaissance'.[24] With the same view, India will likely maintain its footholds in north Africa so that it can be in a good position there as elsewhere throughout the continent should this happy prospect materialize in the future.

Although India would doubtless support regional integration in north Africa, the dismal history of neighbourly cooperation in this region, notably through the economic Maghreb Union, does not bode well for such a scenario.[25] For now, north Africa will likely remain on the periphery of India's West Asia policy, taking a back seat to others.

India and the Gulf States: economics trump

India's stake—energy needs above all

With an increasing thirst for energy, the centrality of the Gulf states in India's West Asia policy is ever more obvious. India's importing of Gulf oil, however, raises several hard questions for the country regarding its ability to operate alongside potential competitors such as China, and its willingness to invest heavily, in policy terms, in an area which is prone to destabilization.

On all current projections, India's energy consumption will vastly increase over coming decades, barring significant changes in the country itself, in energy technologies, or in the oil market.[26] India has plentiful coal resources and fully intends to draw on them, but thermal energy will not suffice.[27] As discussed in Chapter 4, India's demand for imported oil and gas is only likely to rise as its domestic ability to produce energy stagnates. Juli A. MacDonald and S. Enders Wimbush assert that:

> the strategic reality is that Asian states will become more dependent for energy on the Persian Gulf, not less, as conventional wisdom—which tends to exaggerate the size of energy supplies elsewhere and understate the difficulty of bringing them to market—might suggest.[28]

Thus, the Gulf states will continue to be central in India's foreign policy. In particular, the security of the energy that these states can supply to India will be a key factor, and India's ability to manage it is limited.

Democracy promotion—preferably not in the Gulf

C. Raja Mohan writes that the promotion of democracy was not much of a priority in Indian foreign policy during the Cold War, and the 1990s saw little change even though the demise of the Soviet regime had opened up new margin for manoeuvre in recasting it.[29] However, Washington—the only remaining superpower—itself never pushed democracy promotion in the Persian Gulf countries, with the arguable exception of Iraq, and India saw no need to take the lead. Even in Egypt, where the USA did exert some pressure, Washington's efforts under the George W. Bush administration were episodic and unconvincing. India's response to the Bush Administration's enthusiasm for democracy promotion was to support cross-cutting multilateral initiatives on the topic, often of American design, rather than to engage in bilateral initiatives on this front.[30] Thus, India's principle of non-intervention in the sovereign affairs of other countries (except, occasionally, close neighbours) remained intact. With the Obama Administration mostly playing down the democracy promotion theme, and India sceptical of its relevance to its own foreign policy, Indian energy requirements will likely continue to outweigh local governance factors in India's relations with Gulf capitals and West Asia more generally.

Protecting investments—hard power

A growing stake in the West Asian oil market, and by extension in energy security in the region, is likely to draw India further into West Asia diplomatically and possibly militarily. In his seminal 1836 work *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History*, A. T. Mahan convincingly argues that a nation's status on the global stage is directly linked to its ability to protect trade and commerce routes and project influence through naval capacity.[31] His argument is still broadly valid nearly two centuries later. Even a quick examination of what is known of India's plans, specifically with respect to major military procurements, indicates that India sees its navy as central to projecting its rising military capability (as does China).

India's ability to protect sea-lanes (and thus indirectly project military power) will increase significantly with the addition of new naval and air capabilities including the *Admiral Gorshkov*, a retrofitted ex-Russian aircraft carrier, and long-range SU-33 fighter aircraft. India also has plans to purchase several new diesel-powered submarines, with the top contenders for supply likely being Russian or French export models,[32] and is pursuing an indigenous aircraft carrier design, which is to be constructed by 2011 and to begin operations by 2014.[33] Moreover, it is now conceivable that India will operate at least three aircraft carriers by 2015–20 and finally reach its goal of fielding three operational carrier battle groups.[34]

In 2008–9, India played an active role in policing the Gulf of Aden (alongside several Western powers and the Chinese Navy) to discourage rampant piracy emanating from Somalia, the United Nations Security Council having supplied the necessary mandate.[35] The publication of the first 'Indian Maritime Doctrine' confirms India's new emphasis on a wider mandate beyond the South Asian neighbourhood.[36] Tariq Ashraf addresses the link between the Indian Navy's renewal and the Gulf:

> The emergence of geo-economics as the main determinant of interstate relations requires the availability of adequate naval power to secure sea lines of communication against interference or interdiction by hostile navies. For India, which is predicted to encounter enormous energy shortfalls in the coming years, this is especially relevant; India cannot afford to have its maritime link with the Persian Gulf obstructed or tampered with.[37]

The ability to keep choke points open is dependent on specific systems such as 'blue water' surface and subsurface naval vessels and long-range aviation, and India has recently placed significant emphasis on increasing these capabilities. Overall, as Brunel University scholar Andrew Brunatti notes: 'India's dogged pursuit of naval capacity suggests that power projection in Asia is likely to remain largely a naval project across oceans and sea-lanes that are still of great economic and strategic importance, recalling the earlier colonial period when control of the seas and important ports was paramount in the fierce competition for commercial dominance.'

Furthering investments—soft power

While India's interests in the Persian Gulf are clear, it is unlikely that the use, as opposed to the existence, of 'hard power' will play a predominant role in India's West Asia policy, unless there are serious perceived threats to India's interests there—in which case it would likely prefer to act with others. Diplomacy will continue as the main Indian instrument of policy for the area. While India historically has tended to resort to multilateral institutions to achieve 'diplomatic force multiplication', Ishrat Aziz argues: 'Bilateralism is best pursued when others need you. With its recent political and economic success, India is much better placed to pursue bilateralism today.'[38] India's leverage has indeed increased, and with it, India's bargaining position has improved. Thus, while India will not always prevail (particularly on issues such as better conditions for Indian migrant workers in the Gulf), the pursuit of bilateral agreements between India and Gulf states will likely continue to be an important and effective option. Multilaterally, India will likely continue to contribute troops to UN peacekeeping operations in the West Asian region, sometimes alongside contingents from Pakistan, Bangladesh, or Sri Lanka, in

line with its proud peacekeeping history in the area, notably with UNEF 1 (in Sinai, 1956–67) and more recently in UNIFIL (South Lebanon) prior to and following the Israeli-Lebanese border conflict of 2006.[39]

Although the bilateral approach seems well suited to India's objectives in West Asia, it can also prove diplomatically exhausting with a multiplicity of small Persian Gulf actors. The Mumbai Declaration of the First Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)—India Industrial Conference, issued in February 2004, indicates India's willingness to engage multilateral institutions where this is possible.[40] The 2006 Conference identified not only the energy sector as ripe for joint ventures (involving governments and more so private sectors), but also the petrochemical, communications technology, biotechnology, and tourism sectors.[41] While then Indian Industry and Commerce Minister Kamal Nath strongly supported India–GCC cooperation, talk of a free-trade area has remained just that.[42] It is nowhere near being seriously attempted or achieved. However, save for the GCC (a group of countries sharing many interests), given the relative lack of credibility of regional institutions in West Asia (for example, the Arab League), prospects for regional as opposed to bilateral diplomacy are limited.[43]

Indeed, India's approach to Saudi Arabia is primarily rooted in bilateral arrangements, as recorded in the joint New Delhi Declaration of January 2006, which include efforts to combat terrorism, commitments to Indian assistance in technology sectors, and cultural and educational initiatives.[44] Most importantly for India, the Declaration committed Saudi Arabia to energy initiatives including joint public and private ventures and a guarantee of a cheap and stable supply of oil backed through long-term and flexible contracts. More recently, in the Riyadh Declaration signed during Prime Minister Singh's first visit to Saudi Arabia in February 2010, the two nations re-emphasized the importance of implementing their earlier commitments and upgraded their relationship to a 'strategic partnership covering security, economic, defence and political areas'.[45] If followed up, enhanced cooperation in these fields could prove valuable to both countries.

The conflict in Iraq

India historically maintained close relations with modern Iraq. The two were linked by British influence: and many Indians died under British command in the failed UK effort to subdue Iraq during the 1920s. More recently, close ties have been maintained due to India's energy requirements and significant trade with the region. Until late 1990, trade with Iraq was extensive and much Indian migrant labour was employed there. Nonetheless, the chaos attending and following the US invasion in 2003 has hampered Indian initiatives with Iraq thus far.[46] The economic losses suffered during the first Persian

Gulf War, and Delhi's largely passive diplomacy at the time, resulted in the Indian policy being re-examined in 2002–3 as tensions built up between the USA and Iraq.[47] Some consideration was given to offering troops to the US-led coalition effort, as a multilateral peacekeeping gesture to help stabilize the country and partly in connection with efforts to improve ties with the United States, although Delhi came down against the idea.[48] Subsequent statements by US officials (including military ones) indicated that the USA was not overly concerned with the Indian decision. Significant recent improvement in Indo-US relations, rooted in a breakthrough on nuclear cooperation, suggests Delhi's decision was the right one.[49]

Following the change of government in Delhi in 2004, the notion of serving the UN (or the Coalition) in Iraq did not resurface again. This was partly because of stiff resistance on the home front to any form of military engagement in Iraq. Rejecting the possibility, Amitav Ghosh, a much admired Indian novelist, wrote: 'in many parts of the world Indians are still remembered as Imperial mercenaries, as slaves who allowed themselves to be used without reflection or self-awareness'.[50]

Since then, the self-absorption of state institutions in Iraq in the post-Saddam Hussein era has discouraged economic linkages, and Indian migrant workers there have faced very serious risks. However, if Iraqi politics prove conducive to an orderly draw-down of American troop numbers in 2011 and a degree of reconciliation is engineered among Iraq's leading communities, India would be eager to resume its place as one of Iraq's leading trade partners. But for now Iraq represents, in the short term, a truncated possibility.

Migrant workers

Historic trade relations between South and West Asia have led to a significant flow of people between the two regions. In 2001, the Indian labour force in the Persian Gulf was estimated to be around 3.5 million, and is thought to have remained stable since then, although the figure will have been affected by the economic downturn in the Gulf in 2008–9 temporarily forcing many Indian labourers and even some managers to return home.[51]

One Indian state, Kerala, is particularly dependent on labour flows to the Gulf. Frequent spells of communist rule, which have favoured strong social policy and, in particular, a commendable focus on education, have led to neglect of, and sometimes hostility towards, a vibrant role for the private sector in the state (in contrast to the dispensation in other South Indian states), resulting in a lack of local employment opportunities. This, in turn, has compelled many well-educated Keralites to emigrate in search of employment. Kerala is believed to provide at least half of the Indian labourers in the Gulf who send an estimated US$6 billion back to the state annually.[52]

Table 8.1. Relative magnitude of remittances to Kerala from Persian Gulf migrant workers

Year	Remittances as % of			
	SDP	Govt. expenditure	Value added in manufacture	Value added in industry
1975–6	2	11	16	12
1979–80	7	32	46	34
1989–90	12	47	70	42
1994–5	22	111	179	105
1999–2000	23	113	208	110

Note: SDP refers to 'State Domestic Product'.
Source: K. P. Kannan and K. S. Hari, 'Kerala's Gulf Connection: Emigration, Remittances and Their Macroeconomic Impact, 1972–2000', Center for Development Studies Working Paper No.328 (March 2002).

Table 8.1 shows striking growth in the share of remittances in the make-up of Kerala's economy over the course of twenty-five years from 1975 to 2000.

This high concentration of emigrant labour in a sometimes unstable and at times economically vulnerable area has been a source of concern for India, for example in the run-up to, and during, the Gulf War of 1991.[53] Because India sought to maintain friendly ties with both sides in the lead-up to that war in order to maintain oil supplies and to protect Indian workers, there was criticism in India of the government's hesitant response to the crisis.[54] However, it is hard to see, even with hindsight, what alternative approach would have worked better for India.

More persistent problems have been affecting India's migrant workforce in the Gulf. For example, several Gulf governments are trying to keep worker earnings within their borders rather than allowing them to be mostly repatriated as remittances to the home countries of foreign labour. Furthermore, increasingly some Gulf states have encouraged their own nationals to take on jobs hitherto performed by foreigners—not least because of worries about foreign influence over social and political debates locally.[55] The Indian workforce in the Gulf, like others, is generally treated poorly, and demands by Indian workers that Delhi and its embassies intervene on their behalf create significant challenges for the Indian government, which has generally managed these pressures by responding through 'quiet diplomacy'.[56] (Given that Kerala is a politically influential state within the Indian Union, disproportionately represented within circles of power and influence in Delhi, any Indian government is attentive to its problems, including those faced by its migrant workers in the Gulf.)

Even pressures for change that, at first glance, might seem to undermine Indian interests, hold out opportunities in the Gulf. Greater participation of nationals in the workforce would create pressure for new forms of vocational education, which could create higher-end jobs for Indians in the region, and in which Indian entrepreneurs could invest. The demand for advanced

business technologies and software also plays to Indian strong suits.[57] Likewise, the emergence of various Gulf Emirates as tourism hubs opens opportunities for Indian involvement, as picked up in India's joint declarations with the GCC.[58]

The wider, symbiotic, relationship between Gulf countries and India is likely to grow further over time, although the forms it will take are uncertain.

Evolving diplomatic architecture: India and Israel

Full recognition

India recognized Israel as a state in 1950, but did not follow up with diplomatic ties.[59] During the Suez crisis in 1956, India pressed hard for multilateral opposition to the military actions of Britain, France, and Israel. India also reacted strongly against Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon, with Prime Minister Indira Gandhi accusing Israel of trying to eliminate the Palestinian cause.[60] Whether driven principally by pragmatism (for example, with its own Muslim population in mind), ideology, India's closeness to the Soviet camp by the 1970s, or a mix of these factors, the outcome was that prior to the 1990s India's West Asia policy was pro-Palestinian and not friendly towards Israel.

The end of a bi-polar world in 1990 opened up diplomatic possibilities in West Asia that were inconceivable during the Cold War years. As a result, India and Israel established full diplomatic relations in January 1992. Lalit Mansingh, then deputy head of India's embassy in Washington (and later Indian ambassador to USA) recalls some nervousness that, based on the sentiments of India's Muslim community, Prime Minister Rao might veto the move, but he did not.[61] Bilateral trade between India and Israel has increased from US$202 million in 1992, to US$3.54 billion in 2008–9.[62] Further, several high-level visits have hinted at close cooperation between the two states, particularly in the security sphere, but also in wider economic cooperation and even in cultural exchange.[63] But in deference to India's close ties to many Arab states, the relationship with Israel remains an ostensibly low-key one.

Security at the forefront

While the 1990s saw steadily increasing Indo-Israeli cooperation, the Vajpayee government emphasized the security dimension in the relationship.[64] Brajesh Mishra, National Security Advisor under the Vajpayee government and a chief architect of its security policy, stated in an address to the American Jewish Committee in 2003 that the USA, Israel, and India 'have to jointly face the same ugly face of modern day terrorism'.[65] Ensuing joint exercises by Indian

and Israeli military forces included collaborative training by each state's special forces, and counterterrorism and counter-insurgency operations.[66] Also, India's formation of a new national investigative agency, following the 2008 Mumbai attacks, could provide countries like Israel with a new focal point through which to form closer ties in the intelligence and security field.[67]

The terrorist attack in Mumbai in 2008 was hardly the first terrorist outrage in India, and certainly not the worst.[68] However, because of the capacity of a very small number of terrorists to hold India's security forces at bay for forty-eight hours, the attacks publicly revealed the fractured and, in the aggregate, unsatisfactory nature of the Indian security apparatus, a serious matter in a country dealing with elusive militants hiding among urban millions or holed-up in the Kashmiri mountains and the country's forests.

This tenuous internal security situation is driving one strand of India's relationship with Israel, which has spent decades trying to prevent, counter, and cope with terrorism. Israel has also been looking for stable export markets for its indigenous military and high-tech industries, and in the process of upgrading its military capabilities, India has turned into a major client.[69] While the security relationship is not the only factor driving the Indian-Israeli relationship, it is the most salient one, and likely to remain so as long as terrorist violence threatens both nations.

However, the recent sale of major Israeli weapons systems to India points to Delhi's preoccupation with larger concerns. Pakistan's development of nuclear-capable missile technology has led India to consider ways of defending against such threats, and to address this need, India turned to Israel and its Arrow II theatre missile defence system.[70] Although Washington objected to some elements of the contract,[71] India was still able to purchase the most significant component of the Arrow system, the Green Pine radar, from Israel and is reportedly developing a way of marrying it with a domestically produced interceptor to complete the system.[72]

In addition to ground-based missile defence components, Israel has provided India with the Phalcon airborne warning and control system (AWACS).[73] This sale is significant because it greatly increases India's early warning, command, and coordination capabilities. AWACS are one of the few systems that have been considered 'balance-changing' for states.[74]

These military procurement developments unfolded largely shielded from the glare of public debate and controversy in India (although not in secrecy), suggesting that Indian governments can indirectly discourage some security-related debates considered potentially sensitive.

Despite this evident deepening of relations, Rajan Menon and Swati Pandey advise realism with respect to some limitations in the Indo-Israeli relationship.[75] For one, Israel's strategy and tactics in addressing its own security challenges may not always fit with Indian policy preferences. The December

2008 – January 2009 military action against Gaza, aimed at undermining the capabilities of the militant group Hamas, evoked some sympathy in India for the inhabitants of Gaza (while, typically of India, evoking elsewhere sympathy for Israel's security dilemma).[76] An Israeli strike on Iran would test the limits of flexibility in Indian policy and doubtless provoke widespread criticism in India. Thus, the bilateral relationship, while serving both countries well, could encounter road bumps ahead which would require careful management.

The Palestinian issue

India's independence coincided with another botched British colonial pull-out, from Palestine, leaving Jews and Arabs contending with incompatible commitments made by the British, as well as with each other. The outcome was a Jewish state (soon recognized by India), the incorporation of some remaining Palestinian territories into Jordan, and large numbers of Palestinian refugees uprooted within Israel itself, but mostly consigned to camps in Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt. These events, which coincided with India experiencing and then beginning to recover from the trauma of partition, created a wellspring of enduring sympathy in India for the Palestinian cause.

Predictably, since the establishment of full diplomatic ties in 1992 and the gradual warming of Indo-Israeli relations, it has become harder for Palestinian authorities to catch India's official ear.[77] However, during the BJP-dominated years, the Congress-led opposition did make token gestures in support of the Palestinian cause, including denunciation of the Israeli military's siege of Arafat's headquarters compound in Ramallah.[78]

Harsh V. Pant believes that India will be careful to avoid allowing its relationship with Israel to be perceived as an anti-Palestinian 'Hindu–Jewish axis'.[79] Indeed, India's intelligentsia is overwhelmingly sympathetic to the Palestinian cause. India is helped here by Israel's quiet recognition of Delhi's quandary, manifest in its willingness to conduct the relationship with a minimum of fanfare and ceremonial visits.

The election of Hamas to political authority in Gaza, which came as a surprise to many, puts India in an awkward position. Hamas ideology and tactics are hardly consonant with the philosophy of the Indian government on both terrorism and secularism. India has not been unduly ideological with its international interlocutors and might well be able to accommodate itself with a Palestinian leadership including moderate elements of Hamas, but to the extent that Hamas casts itself as opposed to peace negotiations with Israel, Delhi will inevitably prefer the more flexible leadership of the Palestinian authority in Ramallah, led by Mahmoud Abbas. In any event, India is not seeking to play a lead role on Israeli–Palestinian relations.

India and Iran: two major regional powers

Historical ties

India's relationship with Iran is rooted in history, yet its salience in India's foreign policy has ebbed and waned over time. Islam was first introduced to north India by Persian Muslims around AD 1000. The sixteenth century saw the beginning of a close relationship between the Shiite communities in what are today Iraq and Iran, and the new Shiite-dominated provinces which arose in India during this time. Some scholars point to the importance of the financial support that Indian Muslims provided for the Shiite shrine in Najaf and Karbala in Iraq as a major factor boosting economic relations between the two areas.[80] Meanwhile, cultural links between Safavid Iran (at its apex in the early seventeenth century) and Mughal India were rich and extensive.

Beginning in the 1960s, Iran's natural resources, particularly its oil and natural gas, became increasingly important for India, and the two states engaged in joint projects to exploit these and other resources.[81] Beyond the energy sector, Iran was a meaningful but somewhat peripheral partner for India through much of the Cold War. But Iran emerged as a more central focus of India's West Asian policy in the new millennium, spurred by trade and energy security preoccupations, India's concerns about nuclear proliferation in its wider neighbourhood, and the risk of friction with the USA over Iran's nuclear programme at a time when Delhi was negotiating with Washington a radically improved relationship centred on nuclear cooperation.[82] India views Iran as a significant partner for other reasons as well: as part of its extended neighbourhood, Iran's important but sometimes vexed relationships with Pakistani and Afghan governments have always been relevant to India, which has sought to enhance its influence in Afghanistan whenever possible, if only in connection with its broader strategy of containing Pakistan. By and large, Indian and Iranian views and actions on Afghanistan have been compatible for at least a couple of decades.

The 1979 Iranian Revolution, which shook up the balance of alliances and partnerships in West Asia, had little overall effect on India's relationship with Iran, a testament to the pragmatism of India's West Asia policy. But the Iran–Iraq War, which began in 1981 with an Iraqi assault on Iran, then distracted both Baghdad and Tehran, which became too preoccupied to focus attention and resources on any but the most vital external relationships. While both Iran and Iraq were unhappy with the neutral stance India adopted during the eight-year conflict, equidistance allowed India to weather the Iran–Iraq war with both relationships largely intact.[83]

The end of the Iran–Iraq War in 1988, followed by the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s, saw India and Iran both looking to renew old friendships.

India was increasingly aware of its energy needs, while Iran's theocratic regime enjoyed being treated by a major regional power as a serious partner rather than a pariah. The relationship proved resilient because it was built on mutual interests. Iran viewed India as helpful in escaping its isolation, as a useful trade partner particularly in the technological sector, and as a reliable source of income because of India's energy requirements. India, in turn, saw Iran as a source of energy, a vital link with Central Asia and the Persian Gulf, and a valuable partner inside the Islamic tent.[84] The Iran–Pakistan–India gas pipeline project mentioned earlier in this volume, while controversial with Washington, and improbable as it would require active Indo-Pakistani cooperation, demonstrates how serious India's quest for diversification of its energy supply has become and also its determination to forge a policy on Iran that serves its own interests, not Washington's. Iran's nuclear programme remains a much more significant source of friction for both the India–USA and Indo-Iranian relationships.

The nuclear issue

Established in the 1950s, Iran's nuclear programme was stated to be for peaceful purposes only, and as such was supported by Western allies including the USA, France, and Germany, who were convinced of the Shah's loyalty towards the West (although his pro-Western orientation was somewhat in question after he raised oil prices considerably in the wake of the 1973 Israeli–Arab war).[85] However, as early as the 1970s, and before the Iranian Revolution, there were concerns that Iranian nuclear development could be used in a weapons programme. Indeed the US intelligence community issued a Special National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE) on 23 August 1974, which raised the possibility, with an Indian twist:

> If [the Shah of Iran] is alive in the mid-1980s, if Iran has a full-fledged nuclear power industry and all the facilities necessary for nuclear weapons, and if other countries have proceeded with weapons development, we have no doubt that Iran will follow suit. Iran's course will be strongly influenced by Indian nuclear programmes.[86]

In 2002, hidden nuclear facilities came to light in Iran.[87] This sparked serious concern, particularly in the West, that Iran had embarked on a parallel secret nuclear weapons programme. The concern was reinforced by Iran's stonewalling of the IAEA's demands for full access to Iranian facilities for inspection.[88] The development of nuclear weapons by Iran would be a destabilizing move in West Asia, and for the global non-proliferation regime, which the earlier government of Iran had accepted in 1968 by signing the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). It would doubtless spark further attempts at proliferation in the area.[89]

For India, this challenge raises difficult issues, not least as it introduced nuclear weapons to South Asia itself in 1974, prompting Pakistan to follow suit in 1998. India, which did not sign on to the NPT, has always emphasized adherence to international rules and treaties it does accept. Failure on Iran's part to heed its obligations under the NPT, which it has accepted, places India in the position of having to oppose Iran (as it has in several IAEA votes) or (presumably in an attempt to placate a major oil supplier) attempt to gloss over the serious implications for West Asian and global stability of a nuclear weapons programme there.[90]

For now, India is holding Iran to its NPT obligations. In September 2008, India's Prime Minister Manmohan Singh stated that, 'Iran is a signatory to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT); as such it is entitled to all cooperation in its civilian nuclear programme; at the same time, as NPT signatory, it had undertaken all the obligations.'[91] The Prime Minister also indicated that India was opposed to Iran pursuing nuclear weapons, and would not wish to see the emergence of another nuclear-armed state existing in its region.[92] India's sincerity in wanting to avoid further proliferation in its extended region is beyond question.[93] India has been careful not to engage with the merits of Iran's claims or those of its antagonists mainly in the West, although during its upcoming term on the UN Security Council in 2011–12, it will not be able to duck the core of the challenge to the non-proliferation system that Iran's programme probably represents, and will need to vote on any change in the UNSC-mandated sanctions regime against Iran, most recently strengthened in May 2010.[94] Indeed, India's November 2009 vote against Iran's nuclear programme at the IAEA strained its relations with Tehran at a sensitive time in relation to Delhi's worries about Afghanistan.[95] C. Raja Mohan writes: 'Delhi's diplomatic skills will be tested as the tensions between its regional imperatives and wider interests rise.'[96]

Nevertheless, ever more uncertain prospects for Afghanistan, as NATO countries debate withdrawal and Kabul is encouraged to negotiate with the Taliban by Western capitals that swore only a year previously that they would never contemplate such an expedient, remind students of the region that Tehran and Delhi may well find themselves cooperating actively to salvage their own interests in that war-torn country in light of future decisions by Washington, Kabul, and Islamabad.

Conclusion: different partners, same strategy

As Bansidhar Pradhan suggests, India's West Asia policy has seen a change of focus from the actors who constituted the core of its West Asia policy during much of the Cold War to others, a change more of players than of playbook.[97]

Where once Egypt, the Palestinians, and Iraq were central to India's policy, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Israel have now taken centre stage. India's energy needs are an increasingly important variable. The Centre for International Security Studies' *South Asia Monitor* states that by 2025, India's energy requirements will have doubled and that 90 per cent of its petroleum will be imported by that time.[98]

The 2008 attacks in Mumbai, as well as many other terrorist successes, indicate the need for India to develop a more sophisticated and effective approach to asymmetrical threats, specifically a more convincing counterterrorism capacity. Indeed, with national security under such threat, might foreign investors one day take fright?[99] Concern over Pakistan's nuclear arsenal and its continuing development of a long-range missile capability is also on Indian minds.

Taken together, these factors ensure that Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Israel are now central to India's West Asia policy.

During the Cold War, policy was anchored in a pragmatic non-alignment that extended to tactical neutrality in cases of crisis or tension between specific actors. In West Asia, primarily through bilateral channels, India managed to maintain a remarkably stable set of relationships. Since then, Israel has been a very useful addition for India.

But each of India's major relationships in the region operates within certain constraints, which are largely interconnected. India's relationship with Israel is constrained by its reliance on Saudi Arabia and Iran for energy imports, while at the same time, its relationship with these Islamic states is constrained by India's need to acquire military hardware (and conceivably its advice on counterterrorism, as well as intelligence of mutual interest) from Israel. Another factor, if not a constraint, is India's recently deepened relationship with the USA, which could be of interest to Tehran but might also induce suspicion in Iran's official minds.

In West Asia, India has been a brilliant straddler. However, as its international role increases, simultaneous to its reliance on West Asian partners, its strategy may come under strain from unforeseen events. Tension or conflict over Iran's nuclear programme, internal unrest in the Gulf states, or geostrategic brinkmanship focused on the Gulf region could each test India's diplomatic dexterity in the years ahead.

India's National Security Council secretariat produced, in 2002, the initial *National Security Index*, which ranked countries on their ability to ensure the national security of their populations. While the methodological elements of the *National Security Index*, as in other such exercises, are debatable, India's ranking of tenth, following such states as the USA and China (first and third respectively), is suggestive of official thinking in India on its rising security capacity.[100] Mirroring this Indian report is the 2009 effort by the US National

Intelligence Council, entitled *Global Trends 2025: A World Transformed*, which outlines a shifting geopolitical environment as a result of both long-term forces and short-term catalysts.[101] The most significant change identified is a waning of US global dominance and the rise of new regional powers to fill the void.[102]

But in a changing world order, the rise of new players is not always orderly, and their rivalries could either derive from competition in the Gulf, or spill over into it. Thus, while India will want to continue to engage in confidence-building measures with China (as well as, if possible, Pakistan) and other regionally significant emerging powers such as Turkey (with which it entertains a good relationship) it also needs to prepare to, willingly or not, assume a larger role in the various West Asian 'great games' in years ahead.

Such will be the challenges for India in West Asia arising out of the more multipolar world that it has yearned for in recent decades. In West Asia, as of now, India is better equipped than most, by instinct, through its relationships, and due to its growing assets, to tend to its interests.