

DEBATE

EXTERNAL INTERVENTIONS AND INTERNAL INSTABILITY IN WEST ASIA: IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA

West Asia, including the Persian Gulf region, is presently undergoing extraordinary upheaval. Civil wars in Syria and Yemen; foreign interventions, especially by the US and some NATO members in supporting elements opposed to the present Syrian regime; the advent of ‘*Daesh*’, recent dramatic entry of Russia into the Syrian scene as well as the spat between Russia and Turkey; reported internal squabbles within some Gulf States; mass exodus of refugees; regional rivalries, such as between Saudi Arabia and Iran; fallouts of the recent accords between Iran and the P5+1, the on-going Israel-Palestine issues; dwindling oil revenues; etc. have further deepened the precarious situation and have led to heightened anxieties around the world.

India, that has had intricate relations with West Asia in general and the Persian Gulf, in particular, is naturally affected. India’s historical links with this region have been strengthened over the past decades by the presence of huge number of Indian workers – one of the largest expatriate communities. India views the region as an extension of its immediate neighbourhood. As of date, over 7 million Indians live and work in just the six member countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) – collectively remitting over \$30 billion annually.

Trade between West Asia and India stood at around \$191 billion for the financial year 2013-14, which accounted for 25 per cent of India’s global trade. For the region, especially the Gulf, India is one of the largest consumers of its main export product – oil and gas.

Given this situation, India must find ways to navigate this flux and balance relations with the mutually antagonistic sides.

Prime Minister Modi’s recent visit to the UAE and President Mukherjee’s visit to Jordan / Israel are perhaps steps in the right direction. India has to nurture and constantly deepen ties with all the players in the region. The welfare of the Indian expatriate community in the area and uninterrupted energy supplies are of paramount importance. The fact that India and her people are viewed positively by most regional governments as well as the people in West Asian countries is an advantage to be built upon.

What are the ways in which we could deepen our relations with this geo-strategically important region? How will our energy security be impacted in

years to come and how will we be able to balance our relations with various states? What impact will the emerging situation in the region have on India's security and how will the safety of Indian Communities in the region be affected?

The *Indian Foreign Affairs Journal* invited four experts in the field to offer their views. Their comments are being published in the following pages.

Turmoil in West Asia: Challenges for Indian Diplomacy

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In the wake of the Arab Spring, over the last five years West Asia has been experiencing, what Philip Gordon has called, “a period of tectonic and destructive change”, with Syria, Libya and Yemen in the grip of widespread civil conflict, even as a military dictatorship has been restored in Egypt.¹ The scenario has been further complicated by the emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) as a political and military power across large parts of Iraq and Syria, now proclaimed as the Caliphate of the Islamic State (IS). Thus, high levels of turmoil, insecurity and uncertainty are apparent across the entire swath of territory from the Western borders of India to Palestine on the Mediterranean.

The most significant development in the Gulf, in the face of the challenge of domestic reform emerging from the Arab Spring, has been the decision of the GCC countries to abandon policies of moderation and dialogue and to actively oppose what they see as Iran’s hegemonic intentions in the region. Thus, the GCC countries, which till recently had been bastions of low-key, accommodative politics, are today confronting Iran on sectarian basis in Syria, Iraq and Yemen. The GCC role has included a direct military assault on Yemen, and provision of weaponry, training and logistical support to rebel forces in Syria, including to Salafi elements with ties to jihadi forces affiliated to Al Qaeda, some of whom are said to be cooperating operationally with the ISIS in Syria. In Iraq, the war against the ISIS has taken a sectarian colour, with the Shia militia, backed by Iranian forces, leading the fight against jihadis in that deeply fragmented country.

The silver lining in this grim scenario has been the dialogue between the P5+1 and Iran, culminating in the agreement on the nuclear issue in July 2015. However, both Israel and Saudi Arabia continue to see in the settlement with Iran a grave threat to their interests, and are mobilising support in Washington to obstruct the full normalisation of US-Iran ties. Thus, not only is the US paralysed in West Asia, its political order at home has also become increasingly divided due to differences between the two major parties.

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India's Interests in West Asia

The ongoing turmoil in West Asia has created space for India to craft and propel an engagement with the GCC and complement it with an interaction with Iran. It is proposed that this initiative be pursued by a joint India-China effort within the framework of BRICS. Perhaps, the strongest call for this joint intervention in West Asia was made by the Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, when he delivered his address at Tsinghua University during his visit to China in May 2015. Referring to the situation in India's neighbourhood, the prime minister said:

We [India and China] must also deal with the changing character of terrorism that has made it less predictable and more diffuse. We source a large part of our energy from the same region that faces instability and an uncertain future. India and China conduct their international commerce on the same sea lanes. The security of the sea lanes is vital for our two economies; and our cooperation is essential to achieve it.²

The logic behind this joint initiative is compelling. India has an abiding interest in Persian Gulf security: it obtains 80 percent of its oil from this region; this dependence will go up to over 90 percent by 2035. The GCC is also one of India's largest trade partners, with two-way trade valued at \$150 billion in 2013-14. India has already built very substantial investment and joint venture engagements with the GCC countries, with every indication that these will expand dramatically in coming years.

However, India also has a unique asset and a responsibility in the region—the presence of its community. Indians now number about 8 million in the GCC, with about 3 million each in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, well over half a million in Oman, Qatar and Kuwait, and just below half a million in Bahrain. In fact, Indians constitute the majority community in at least three GCC countries—the UAE, Qatar and Bahrain; they are also the largest expatriate community in every country of the GCC and are well ahead of the number two community.

The Indian work force in the GCC remits to India about \$35 billion annually. Assuming that one expatriate worker supports at least four others at home, it can be safely assumed that about 40 million Indians benefit directly from the Indian presence in the GCC.

The welfare of the Indian community is of abiding interest to all governments in Delhi, and several state governments as well. On several occasions during periods of grave regional crises, the Indian government

has mounted major rescue operations, mobilising substantial national resources for the purpose. The one point on which there is full understanding in India is that no national effort would be adequate to bring millions of its citizens out of the region in the event of a conflagration directly involving major powers. Hence, the primary responsibility of the Indian government is to ensure that such apocalyptic contingencies are prevented through diplomatic effort.

India enjoys an advantage in the Gulf that China does not have- deep familiarity with the region and its people, and a high level of cultural comfort that the two peoples have with each other. While India's political ties with the GCC states have had their fair share of ups and downs due to their different engagements during the Cold War, particularly the ties of GCC countries with Pakistan, their position against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, and their participation in jihad to combat the Soviet occupation in Afghanistan, there has been a steady upswing in bilateral political ties since the early part of the last decade.

This is best exemplified by the visit to India of every GCC head of state or government from 2005–07, and reciprocal visits by Indian leaders, culminating in the visit of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to Riyadh in February 2010. During this visit, the Indian prime minister and the Saudi monarch signed the Riyadh Declaration, which announced the commencement of a “new era of strategic partnership” on the basis of deeper political, economic, defence and security ties. This relationship emerged from the conviction of GCC leaders that they shared with India the threat from jihadi violence, dramatically illustrated by the Mumbai attacks of November 2008, and that this threat emanated largely from Pakistan.

This shared perception has continued to constitute the basis of India's ties with the GCC - as was re-affirmed during the visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to the UAE in August 2015. In the joint statement issued in Abu Dhabi, the two countries pledged to achieve a “comprehensive strategic partnership” in terms of which they would “oppose terrorism in all forms and manifestations” and “enhance cooperation in counter-terrorism operations, intel sharing and control of flow of funds”.³

Perhaps, the most important provision in the joint statement was the commitment of the two countries to “work together to promote peace, reconciliation, stability, inclusiveness and cooperation in the wider South Asia, Gulf and West Asia region”. This recognizes that the security of India's western neighbourhood across South and West Asia is interlinked and that India has a direct and abiding interest in ensuring that this ‘composite security

space' is stable.

From the GCC perspective, India represents the narrative of economic and technological achievements in a multicultural democratic order. India has the added advantage that in its foreign policy posture it adopts positions that are non-intrusive, non-prescriptive and non-hegemonic. India is thus well-placed to take the lead in setting up the proposed diplomatic initiative in West Asia.

China's Interests in West Asia

China already has very substantial energy and economic ties with West Asia: it imports 55 per cent of its oil, with five of China's top ten suppliers coming from this region. West Asia will also be meeting China's increasing gas requirements in the coming years, with Qatar having become its second largest supplier in 2013. China's two-way trade with West Asia is valued at \$300 billion annually, while the total value of its contracts is \$120 billion. Its FDI in the region is about \$10 billion. With the setting up of the Renminbi [RMB] clearing centre in Doha in April 2015, China has taken forward its plan to promote global trade in its currency instead of the dollar and thus realise its aspirations to become a global economic presence. The Chinese currency has been further buttressed after the IMF has included it in its basket of benchmark currencies to calculate the exchange value of its Special Drawing Rights.

One new factor that has now become resonant in China's interests in West Asia is China's "Silk Road" proposals ("One Belt, One Road", or OBOR) that also have a maritime dimension which links the Malacca Strait with India and Kenya, then north to the Horn of Africa and to the Mediterranean, before meeting the land route at Venice. These plans place West Asia at the centre of the land and sea routes connecting Eurasia with the Indian Ocean.

China's traditional policy in West Asia has been one of non-intervention. But, recent events seem to have persuaded at least some Chinese policy circles that continued adherence to this approach could jeopardise China's interests.⁴ They note in this regard that political turmoil in Syria, Libya and Iraq has directly affected China's energy and economic interests, since China had significant investments in all these countries. Again, in the case of Libya, China was required to evacuate 35,000 of its nationals to safety. The situation in Iraq is particularly difficult since China already imports 50 percent of Iraq's production and had planned to raise this to 70 percent [850,000 barrels per day] before the advent of the ISIS menace in mid-2014. Besides the purchase

of oil, Chinese companies had invested heavily in the exploration and development of major oil fields in Iraq. The threat to its interests in Iraq has compelled China to reach out to Iraqi Kurdistan.

The problem of Syria has forced China to take considered positions in alliance with Russia against Western military intervention: in 2011, China opposed external interference in that country, saying that the conflict was an internal matter. Since then, China has exercised its veto four times to deter foreign involvement in the conflict, while participating with the UN-sponsored initiative to rid Syria of its chemical weapons.

While China has gone against the US and GCC positions in regard to Syria, it has been more accommodative of the US in respect of Iran by respecting American sanctions and drastically reducing its purchases of Iranian oil. However, China remains Iran's largest trade partner, with two-way trade amounting to \$52 billion in 2014, a 31 percent increase over the previous year. Again, China has also maintained a steady rhythm of political engagement with the GCC countries and the Arab world in general through well-established dialogue platforms. The most important of these is the "Strategic Dialogue" it has with the GCC countries, established in 2010. At the third dialogue meeting in 2014, the two sides agreed to work towards shaping a strategic partnership, the highest level of engagement from the Chinese perspective.

However, while both India and China have a deep and abiding interest in West Asian security, there would be legitimate concerns about their ability to work together to pursue this important responsibility. This aspect is examined below.

While there is little doubt that Sino-Indian differences persist in spite of the recent exchanges of high-level visits, these have not so far had a negative effect on the BRICS agenda. The two countries have compromised on the BRICS's New Development Bank, agreeing that its headquarters will be in Shanghai, while India will provide the first president for a five-year term. China has dropped its misgivings related to India's membership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), so that India is poised to join this important regional security organisation in 2016, giving India a role in contributing to the security initiatives affecting Afghanistan and Central Asia, besides opening up opportunities to enhance energy links with the Central Asian nations. In February 2015, India joined Russia and China in announcing their joint commitment "to build a more just, fair and stable international political and economic order" and a "multi-polar" world. They also backed the Chinese

call for “a modern security architecture” in the Asia-Pacific.

India is certainly concerned about the recent upswing in China’s ties with Pakistan, specifically the Chinese promise to invest \$46 billion in the country to set up logistical connections as part of its OBOR project. With full Chinese control over Gwadar port at the mouth of the Gulf and the increasing presence of the Chinese navy in the Indian Ocean, India perceives a security threat.

However, these concerns need not be over-played: China’s presence at Gwadar is readily matched by the substantial links that India has developed with Oman: India has regular biennial exercises involving all three wings of the country’s armed forces. The Indian and Omani navies have been holding regular biennial maritime exercises since 1993; these now include complex seamanship drills, firing serials and tactical exercises. Over 150 Omani military personnel trained in India in 2014. Some of India’s defence analysts have even pointed out that given China’s stakes in the Malacca Strait and the Gulf, its enhanced naval presence in the Indian Ocean is quite natural, and that it would be good policy for India to engage with China on the subject.⁵ An excellent start in this regard has been the invitation from India to the Chinese navy to participate in the International Fleet Review scheduled to take place in Vishakhapatnam in February 2016, which has been accepted.

As far as the Gulf is concerned, India should shed its timidity vis-à-vis China: the latter can just not match India’s historic links, the high level of mutual comfort, and its assets in the shape of its community. While China has just experienced the challenge of evacuating 35,000 of its citizens from Libya, India has accomplished this feat several times, starting with the airlifting of over 150,000 of its nationals from Kuwait 25 years ago.

Again, the expansion of Sino-Pakistan ties and the integration of Pakistan into the OBOR should not alarm India. This should be seen as an attempt by China to contribute to Pakistan’s stability. As former Indian diplomat M.K. Bhadrakumar points out:

Pakistan’s stability has come to be a matter of serious concern from the perspective of China’s internal security, which is attributable not only to the spurt in terrorist activities in Xinjiang by groups that are to be traced to the Af-Pak region, but also out of China’s emergent concerns as a stakeholder in regional stability that is an imperative need to advance its regional and global policies more optimally.⁶

Similarly, India should be more positive about the Chinese OBOR project. The project enjoys the support of all regional countries led by Russia, which

has happily integrated it with its own regional cooperation proposals. With India expected to become a full member of the SCO, it makes little sense to remain outside the region's most important project. In this context, it is important to recall that for some years India has been pursuing its own dream project—the International North-South Transportation Corridor, a road and rail connection from Chabahar port in Iran (outside the Gulf, just next to Gwadar in Pakistan) to Turkmenistan and Russia and then on to northern Europe, with links to the Iranian ports of Bandar Anzali and Bandar Amirabad on the Caspian Sea. A separate road from Chabahar would link up with the existing Zaranj-Delaram highway in Afghanistan, which would then go on to Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. The importance of these projects when realised would be significantly enhanced if they were to be part of the Chinese-sponsored OBOR project.

Shaping the BRICS' Diplomatic Initiative

Clearly, BRICS does not have the capacity to address all, or even most, of the issues that divide the Gulf countries at present. These issues are a product of significant developments taking place in the region at the same time, resulting from serious debates (and differences) in most Arab countries about the national vision, and the principles and institutions supporting it. These discussions will consume national attention for several years to come. Nevertheless, what BRICS cannot ignore is that this turmoil has also given rise to forces of extremism and sectarianism that threaten the region as a whole, and in turn adversely impact the interests of wider international community. Hence, the BRICS diplomatic effort has to focus on providing a platform for interaction, principally for Iran and Saudi Arabia, so that they can build mutual confidence and trust.

The process of engagement will have three attributes:

- a) it will be diplomatic: it is not envisaged that BRICS will deploy military might to promote security;
- b) it will be inclusive: to shape a truly cooperative security arrangement in the Gulf, BRICS would need to pursue an inclusive structure that would include the P5+1 countries; and
- c) it will be incremental: given the complexity of issues involved, the variety of interests and their advocates, and the sharp antagonisms dividing different groups at present, the Gulf interlocutors would retain their existing alliances and affiliations, which could be shed or diluted as

confidence among the principal parties increases.

The next steps to implement this initiative would include: (a) internal meetings among BRICS officials and ministers to develop a consensual BRICS approach on the content and approach to shaping the initiative; (b) use of special envoys or national security advisors to engage with counterparts and ministers of the countries concerned; (c) at the appropriate time, convening a regional security conference by BRICS, perhaps initially at officials' level; in doing so, working groups could be set up to address specific topics, with each of them being chaired by a BRICS member. Given that BRICS already has an active Track-II Forum, it would be useful for the first approach papers to be prepared by this forum

Conclusion

No international issue has obtained as much attention from BRICS leaders as the situation in West Asia. The Fortaleza Declaration at the 2014 BRICS Summit devoted considerable space to the issues relating to Syria (which had four substantial paragraphs), Iraq, the Palestine issue, Iran, Al Qaeda and extremism, the Middle East as nuclear weapon-free zone, and piracy. In his brief opening remarks at Fortaleza, Prime Minister Modi devoted at least half of his speech to West Asia. He said "The region stretching from Afghanistan to Africa is experiencing turbulence and conflict. This is causing grave instability that is seeping across borders. This impacts us all. Remaining mute spectators to countries being torn up in this manner can have grave consequences. ... The situation in West Asia poses a grave threat to regional and global peace and security. India is particularly concerned because this affects the lives of seven million Indian citizens living in the Gulf region".⁷

There can be little doubt that, as new political crises emerge or present problems get aggravated, BRICS will take cognisance of them, develop consensual positions and take action; there will be no room for "mute spectators" as derided by Mr Modi in his remarks.

In this background and taking into account the deep concerns that animate the BRICS' leaders and their understanding that urgent remedial action is required, the case has been made in this paper for a BRICS diplomatic initiative, led by India and supported by China to engage the GCC as a grouping and Iran bilaterally, on the lines of similar interactions held with African and South American leaders. This is to be followed by an active diplomatic effort to prepare platforms for dialogue between the contending parties to promote mutual trust and confidence. BRICS is both prepared and well-equipped for

this initiative.

Notes

- ¹ Philip Gordon, “The Middle East is falling apart”, 4 June 2015, at www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/06/america-not-to-blame-for-middle-east-falling-apart-11861_full.html?VXIW_s9VhBc (8 June 2015).
- ² Address by the Prime Minister at the Tsinghua University, Beijing (15 May 2015), at www.mea.gov.in (11 June 2015).
- ³ <http://www.mea.gov.in/outgoing-visit-detail.htm?25733/Joint+Statement+between+the+United+Arab+Emirates+and+the+Republic+of+India>
- ⁴ Chaoling Feng, “Embracing Interdependence: The Dynamics of China and the Middle East”, Brookings Doha Centre, Doha, 2015.
- ⁵ Abhijit Singh, “Why China’s new military strategy has India worried”, 6 June 2015, at atimes.com/2015/06/06 (11 June 2015).
- ⁶ MK Bhadrakumar, “Pakistan, China, Iran and the remaking of regional security”, 18 April 2015, at atimes.com/2015/04/Pakistan-china-iran-and-the-remaking-of-regional-security (11 June 2015).
- ⁷ <http://www.mea.gov.in/outgoing-visit-detail.htm?23632/Prime+Ministers+statement+in+6th+BRICS+Summit+on+the+Agenda++quotPolitical+Coordination+quotInternational+Governance+amp+Regional+Crisesquot>



A Pragmatic Approach: Best Way Forward for India

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West Asia has been the world's most conflict prone region since World War II. It has been in flames for the past few years and is now going through the worst ever period in its long history. The GCC countries and Iran are the only parts of West Asia where some kind of a bloody conflict is not raging; nevertheless, in an utterly uncharacteristic and complete departure from the past, three of the six GCC countries— Qatar, Saudi Arabia and UAE, are very actively militarily involved in the ongoing conflicts in West Asia, particularly in Syria and Yemen, at their own initiative and, at least, in Yemen against the advice of their longstanding ally, the United States; even in Syria a divergence of approach between the U.S. and these three is becoming steadily more perceptible. This suggests that even if the U.S. finally starts pushing actively for a negotiated settlement, as it has been in the past 4-5 weeks, Saudi Arabia and its GCC allies could continue the fight against Assad by themselves. These policies militate against the possibility of a negotiated end to the war in the region any time soon. All this should be a matter of very deep concern for India because apart from the policies of the United States and China, developments in the Gulf region of West Asia, in particular due to the policies of the GCC countries and Iran, have enormous potential for positively or negatively affecting India's future well-being and security.

Overcoming considerable impediments in the first three decades after independence, India's relations with GCC countries are today India's one of the best external relationships globally. Over the last four decades the GCC countries have become India's pre-eminent oil and gas supplier and leading trade partner. Around 8 million Indians live and work there and send annual remittances of \$40 billion back home. The movement of Indian manpower to the GCC countries started with the setting in of the construction boom following the massive oil price hike in 1973; it continued picking up momentum year by year with Indians ultimately becoming the largest expatriate group in each of the six GCC countries. The largest number of Indian passport holders abroad is in Saudi Arabia, a little over three million – considerably more than Pakistanis, next largest in the UAE, a little under three million, again more than Pakistanis; in this context it may be recalled that these two countries have long had a particularly special relationship with Pakistan. Significantly,

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the number of Indians living and working in GCC countries has continued to rise notwithstanding the tightening of domestic policies to curtail the influx of expatriate manpower and despite the ongoing conflict in West Asia since February-March 2011. The GCC countries being predominantly Muslim countries where internal security is now an even greater concern than earlier, all these facts represent an enormous vote of confidence in Indians and India. The processes propelling this manpower movement have always taken place naturally, as a response to the laws of demand and supply mainly because of the high comfort level with Indians due to the millennia-old people to people interaction; there was no Indian government role at all in sending them to the region. Furthermore, it is particularly noteworthy and gratifying that Saudi Arabia and the UAE have provided excellent and expanding anti-terrorism cooperation by repatriating people India wanted for terrorist activities within India, despite intensive efforts by Pakistan to prevent such repatriations even going to the extent of often claiming that those persons were Pakistani nationals. In fact, the cooperation provided by Saudi Arabia and the UAE is one of the best that India has received from any country.

Some examples from the past are instructive. Way back in 1969 when the first Islamic Summit was convened in Morocco, at the initiative of King Faisal of Saudi Arabia, with King Hussein of Jordan and King Hassan of Morocco agreeing, they decided that India should be invited in view of the very large number of Muslims in India, the third largest in the world. Pakistan's President Gen Yahya Khan had travelled with King Faisal and King Hussein to Morocco and had been made aware of this. However, at night, on the eve of the summit Yahya Khan changed his mind and threatened to boycott the Summit and return home. Since that would have been a major catastrophe for this high profile initiative, the invitation to India was withdrawn. When King Abdullah came to Delhi as the Chief Guest for India's Republic Day in 2006, the second country visited by him after ascending the throne, to the utter consternation of Pakistan he publicly declared that it would be a good idea for India to be made an Observer at the OIC and that Pakistan should propose this – needless to say Pakistan again ensured that this idea remained stillborn.

Despite its particularly special relationship with Pakistan, Saudi Arabia never ever stopped the supply of oil to India or even threatened to do so even during the four wars between India and Pakistan. In fact, whenever India faced temporary disruptions in oil supplies from its then traditional major suppliers– all in the Gulf region, due to developments within the region, Saudi Arabia voluntarily stepped up to fill the gaps, despite the lack of any particularly meaningful relationship with India at that time. For example, during the Iran-

Iraq war in the 1980s; during the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq in 1990; and after the United States invaded Iraq in 2003.

A few days after Iraq invaded and occupied Kuwait in 1990, most newspapers in all GCC countries carried a picture of India's Foreign Minister I.K.Gujral embracing Saddam in the Presidential Palace in Baghdad – needless to say there was utter consternation in the GCC countries. The apparent bonhomie in Baghdad was explained to the leadership of Kuwait in exile and to the governments of all other GCC countries that India as a democratic polity faced the absolutely unavoidable imperative of safely evacuating its 178,000 nationals from Kuwait. This was simply not possible without the active cooperation of Iraq. India carried out the largest ever peacetime evacuation of civilians by civilian means of transport. Hundreds of thousands of Palestinians and even Yemenis working in Kuwait were expelled because their governments supported Saddam and have never been allowed back in any significant number; however, today there are almost 600,000 Indians living and working in Kuwait.

These three examples clearly exhibit the fundamental strength of the relationship between GCC countries and India.

India's relations with all other West Asian countries - particularly the major ones, such as Iran, Iraq and Israel - vary from very good to excellent. Apart from China, and perhaps Japan, no major power in the world can claim to have such good relations simultaneously with these three West Asian countries and the GCC countries, many of which are mutually extremely antagonistic to each other. This is a singular achievement of which India can legitimately be very proud.

In contrast to most world powers, India has never sought domination or influence, either politically or territorially, or in the economic and natural resource domains in West Asia despite a huge advantage, which no major power except Britain had. Before India became independent, Oman and the local sheikhdoms in the Arabian Peninsula, which later emerged as independent countries – Kuwait in 1961, Bahrain, Qatar, and the UAE in 1971, were under the protection and supervision of the British Government of India, which *inter alia* involved the stationing of Indian personnel for a variety of administrative and other reasons. Indian traders had been settled there for generations and had become particularly close to rulers and local elites; and Indian currency was the legal tender until the end of the 1960s. Despite this background, India chose a completely hands off approach, thus underlining a conscious decision that India did not have and does not have any interest

whatsoever in any way in getting intrusively involved in the internal affairs of the GCC countries, both individually within each country and between different countries of the Gulf region or West Asia at large.

The single major reason for these excellent symbiotic relationships is that non-ideological pragmatism, and mutual advantage and benefit have been the bedrock of India's policy. India's approach has been to remain non-intrusive, non-judgemental and non-prescriptive; India has also strictly abjured taking sides in regional disputes or exhibiting conspicuous partiality amongst regional countries.

Except with Oman with which there has been a traditionally strong political relationship, India's relationships in a truly substantive sense with Iran, Israel and Saudi Arabia/GCC countries began simultaneously with the end of the Cold War and the advent of Narasimha Rao as prime minister under whom India broke free of self-imposed ideological constraints both in the political and economic realms. India established diplomatic relations with Israel in 1992 and consciously initiated high level interaction with Iran after the difficult Khomeini era. Since then, all these relationships have developed in parallel with each country being fully aware what was happening between India with the other countries. It is particularly important that India maintains balance between these three countries and in this context India must be conscious that its actions and policies do not send ambiguous messages to these countries. This is difficult to pull off on a consistent basis but so far India has done rather well in this regard.

Leaders of GCC countries are sagacious enough to recognise that India does not and will not agree with or approve of their policies vis-à-vis Syria and Yemen and thus have not asked for Indian support. In any case India's support is not needed as they have enough allies. However intractable the problems in West Asia are at the moment, and admittedly it is going to take time for solutions to be arrived at, this mayhem has to end. World Wars I and II ended; the eight year long Iran Iraq war ended; the decade long Vietnam War ended and in each case those ranged against each other in those wars are today allies. The conflicts in West Asia will also end. At the end of the day a nation's main and permanent interests are ultimately ensuring the welfare of its people, which is essential for ruling dispensations to retain the support of the people.

From this perspective, for Saudi Arabia in particular and other Gulf countries in general, consciously cultivating a very good relationship with India is going to be a significant factor in the longer term. India is today the

world's fastest growing economy and in contrast to all major economies it has enormous potential demographic dividend; it is more than likely to emerge as the third global superpower. Despite India's efforts to diversify its sources of energy geographically and increasing the use of renewable energy, India will have to continue to rely heavily on oil and gas for many decades to come. Saudi Arabia has been India's largest source of oil for some years now and even if it does not retain this singular status, it will remain among the top two or three suppliers in the list. On their part, Gulf oil and gas producers, and particularly Saudi Arabia would need to continue exporting oil and require stable customers for the long term in the context of growing competition from others and rapid inroads of renewable energy in large markets. Saudi Arabia needs India as much as India needs Saudi Arabia; indeed the same applies to other GCC oil producers. Iran and Iraq will likewise need markets for their oil and gas long into the future. These are some reasons why it can reasonably be posited that current problems in the region will not adversely affect the excellent relationships India has with countries of the Gulf region.

India recognised a long time ago that in bilateral matters, countries of the Arab world in general and of the Gulf region in particular, specially Saudi Arabia and Iran, are going to be more supportive of Pakistan. Therefore, India stopped thinking of these special relationships as being impediments. All countries of the Gulf region have completely de-hyphenated their relations with India from their relations with Pakistan.

In 1990, Prime Minister Chandrashekhar granted landing rights in Bombay to U.S. military aircrafts going to attack Iraq during the first Gulf War. Soon this became publicly known and there was a national uproar. Chandrashekhar government was forced to rescind the decision. In 2003-2004 India came perilously close to joining the U.S. coalition against Iraq but wiser counsels prevailed. Last week, the Indian defence minister on a visit to the USA said that India could participate in a military operation against the ISIS under the UN flag if there was a UN Resolution mandating this; however, the External Affairs Ministry immediately downplayed such thinking.

Not a single Indian Muslim fought in Afghanistan; hardly any became a member of Al Qaeda; in a population of 180 million Muslims a couple of dozen may have some links with the ISIS and that despite some 3 million Indian Muslims living in the Gulf region. The ISIS does not pose any threat to India. Pakistani ISI-sponsored terrorism is a real danger. Moreover, the manner in which, increasingly, people from the Indian Muslim communities are randomly and capriciously arrested and harassed is laying the grounds for a much greater potential threat.

Many in India's strategic community advocate India displaying greater activism, including exercising a "leadership role" without suggesting any specific actions to be taken. Such a role would almost certainly be counter-productive and potentially even disastrous. The indisputable reality is that anything that India says or does will not even marginally influence the actions of any individual player in the context of the highly complicated political situation in West Asia. India does not have the institutional capacity, is not structurally equipped and lacks national political consensus for the huge strategic leap required for such a role yet. Policy should always be consciously tempered by a mature recognition of the limits of one's capabilities and influence at any given point of time. India has not faced any criticism from any of the countries of the region for its current policies in the context of the ongoing conflicts in the region. Given the proliferation of violent, irresponsible and irrational non state actors, India becoming intrusively involved could provoke them to harm Indian interests and may attack the very large Indian community in the region. India has to be very careful about potential blowbacks. Reticence or so called policy passivity in an unpredictable, changing and volatile environment does not reflect absence of decision making, abdication of "leadership", or of being a "freeloader". It is simply being sensibly prudent. India's non-intrusive low key profile, and pragmatic approach has yielded very satisfying results and there is absolutely no need whatsoever to change the broad contours of this policy. This is the best way to preserve India's excellent relationships and protect its interests in the Gulf region.

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India and West Asia: Challenges and Opportunities

Rumel Dahiya*

The security situation in West Asia has been continuously deteriorating ever since the onset of the Arab Spring in December 2010. The internal security situation in Syria, Iraq and Yemen has gone from bad to worse. The regional powers continue to fight proxy wars on sectarian lines, pumping huge amount of money and weapons to bolster their favoured groups. The involvement of extra-regional players such as the USA and Russia in the internal conflicts in West Asia has further aggravated the situation.

The prospect of the growth of democracy in the region in the immediate future has receded. Most regimes have been able to keep at bay, at least for the time being, the calls for change. The expectations from the Arab Spring have turned out to have been overambitious for a region where popular democracy was an oxymoron. The old order is reasserting itself and is trying to make things difficult for the fragile new order. The Arab Spring is now commonly referred to as Arab Winter, reflecting the failure of protest movements to bring about change in the region. Democracy may not have come to these countries as expected; yet the region has nevertheless changed dramatically in the last three years. The regimes have survived, but there is no surety about how long they will survive. The internal and external environment has changed. What is now clear is that further changes will be unpredictable, nonlinear and violence ridden. The desire for political transformation among the people has not vanished though. The protests are bound to resurface sooner or later unless a fundamental transformation of governance is ushered in. The use of force by the regimes as well as by non-state actors is only bound to increase in future.

Terrorism has emerged as the biggest security threat to the region. The rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is the most disturbing trend, and it has emerged as the biggest security challenge in the whole region. The ISIS announced a 'Caliphate' in June 2014, exercising effective control over sizable parts of Iraq and Syria - an area larger than many countries. For the first time, a terrorist organisation backed by ideology has become a proto-state, a feat that even Al Qaeda at its zenith could not achieve. This in part explains why many foreign terrorists and adventure seeking youth have joined ISIS. Various estimates suggest that 27,000 to 30,000 foreign fighters from

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100 countries around the world have joined the ISIS, including about 23 from India, of whom six or seven have already been killed. It has also been staging attacks in Saudi Arabia, Libya, Egypt, Pakistan, Tunisia, Kuwait, Afghanistan and some European countries. The National Directorate of Security (NDS) - Afghanistan's intelligence agency - recently claimed to have foiled a terrorist plot to attack vehicles of the Indian Consulate in Jalalabad city, the capital of the eastern Nangarhar province in Afghanistan. Since neither the regional countries nor the big powers are ready for placing boots on ground, and the air strikes have limited impact, ISIS' control of territory is likely to persist for a long time despite some of the setbacks it has faced of late. Similarly, Al Qaeda continues to grow in Iraq, Syria and Yemen as prolonged political instability and insecurity gives it more space to operate in and grow. In Syria, Jabhat Al Nusra remains a major force fighting against the Assad regime. It has joined hands with the other rebel elements like the Islamic Front.

The signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) - for limiting and monitoring of the nuclear programme of Iran in Vienna on 14 July 2015 by the P5+1 with Iran, and its subsequent ratification by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) has reduced the prospects of nuclear proliferation in West Asia considerably. There still remain some apprehensions in the minds of the Gulf Arab rulers over the deal; nevertheless, the deal is a positive development for establishing peace and security in the region. The deal will also have implications for regional geopolitics in West Asia in other ways. It will affect the US-GCC relationship, US-Israel relationship, and further dampen the GCC-Iran ties, among others. Iran's strong ties with its allies, such as Iraq, Syria, Hezbollah, Hamas, and Houthis gives it a pan-region presence through its proxies.

Barring Tunisia, other countries such as Libya, Egypt and Yemen continue to witness large scale violence, leading to the killing of innocent people, internal displacement, and increasing humanitarian crises. Even in relatively transformed Tunisia, there has been an upsurge of violence in recent times. Yemen is slipping into further instability in the aftermath of the Houthis' (Ansar Allah) takeover of the capital, and the subsequent Saudi-led 'Operation Decisive Storm' leading to large scale collateral damage. The Saudi bombing continues in Yemen; but it has not been able to push back the Houthis from Saana. The Houthis are reportedly backed by Iran, though Iran dismisses such accusations. At present, it seems that this situation will continue in Yemen in the foreseeable future. The situation in Yemen provides an ideal opportunity for Al Qaeda to regain influence in parts of Yemen.

The UN sponsored talks held in Berne between the warring parties was adjourned on November 19, 2015 to enable ‘additional bilateral consultations’ – as the Special Envoy for Yemen, Ismail Ould Cheik Ahmed, stated. Ceasefire violations continue unabated by both sides. On the positive side, the parties to the conflict agreed to establish a joint de-escalation committee and some confidence building measures besides an ‘in-principle’ agreement to release all prisoners. However, it is doubtful if peace can be restored in the war torn country anytime soon.

The Kurds in Iraq and Syria are being supported by the US to fight against the ISIS. The Kurdish forces have succeeded in retaking Sinjar in Iraq, and have also enlarged their cantons in Syria, raising concerns in Turkey. For Turkey, the Kurdish groups present a bigger security challenge than the ISIS. Therefore, it was initially ambivalent about joining the coalition to fight against the ISIS. Apparently, under pressure from the USA, it agreed to join the coalition in July 2015 but has continued to focus its attention on the Kurds. The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt has been facing the wrath of the Sisi regime, with many of its top leaders jailed. It is maintaining a low profile at the moment, but it keeps the potential to make a comeback anytime. The festering terrorism in Sinai is a major challenge for the Egyptian regime.

In one of the latest developments, Saudi Arabia has announced the formation of a Saudi led 34-state Islamic military coalition to combat terrorism, with a joint operations centre based in Riyadh to coordinate and support military operations. This proposed coalition includes countries such as Egypt, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, together with other Islamic countries such as Turkey, Malaysia, Pakistan, and Gulf Arab and African states. The forces of the coalition have proposed to undertake coordinated operations to fight terrorism in Iraq, Syria, Libya, Egypt and Afghanistan, but the details of the proposal are not in public domain as of now. There are apprehensions that this initiative will be still born - like its predecessor the Arab Common Defence Force announced with much fanfare during the Arab League Summit on 1 April 2015 - primarily because of differences in end goals of participating countries.

Oil prices are expected to remain low in the near future. Present trends indicate that they may not rise beyond US \$ 70 - 75 per barrel in next one to two years. The removal of sanctions on Iran will increase the competition in the oil market and, at the same time, the influence of the GCC oil producers will diminish. The oil producing Arab states in the Gulf Region are, therefore, forced to dip into their sovereign wealth funds to balance their budgets. They are also planning to levy value added tax on goods sold in the region in the future.

India has huge stakes and interests in the West Asian region. There are nearly 8 million Indians living and working in it. According to a World Bank report, India received about US \$ 35 billion in remittances during 2014 from the region. In case the energy prices continue to rule low for a prolonged period - a possibility that cannot be ruled out due to increased global focus on renewable sources of energy - the energy producing states are likely to face domestic instability in the coming years. Their investments in energy and other infrastructure sectors will diminish, and in that case migrant workers will also be retrenched. India will need to absorb the returning migrant workers, and the remittances will fall. In addition, India's total trade with West Asia in the year 2014 - 15 stood at US\$ 171.89 billion. The region is also vital for India's energy security. Nearly two-thirds of our hydrocarbon imports are from this region. Thus, any development in the region has direct implications for India. To mitigate the potential adverse impact of terrorism spreading to India, and for ensuring the safety and security of its migrant workers as well as its energy security, India has been proactively engaging with all the countries in the region.

The India-Gulf relationship is taking an upward trajectory, and India's stakes and interests have grown with time; thus it is time for India to adopt a formally articulated Look West Policy, in line with the successful Look East Policy. The sheer volume of India's engagement with the region and its critical importance for India's security means that standing aloof is no option. A Look West Policy should focus on strengthening bilateral political, economic, and security ties with the countries of the Gulf region. Regular interaction at the highest levels will infuse further confidence in the relationship. Thus, India must articulate its interests in the region clearly through a Look West Policy, backed by road maps and resources. A visit by the Prime Minister to some of the countries in the region will send the right message. But deliverables have to be thought through before undertaking the visit - not only to Israel but simultaneously to Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Iran. This will also convey the message that India is not party to the balance-of-power games in the region, and that it could become a dependable mediator when the time is suitable. It may be useful for India to resume the practice of appointing a special envoy for West Asia - one who engages with the leaders of the region on a regular basis. It would help in understanding the changing political dynamics in the region, and help shape India's policy towards them, as also coordinate anti-terrorism effort.

Along with strengthening bilateral ties with the countries of the region, India must also deal with these countries in multilateral forums - like the

GCC and the Arab League. GCC is one such important and influential regional organisation in the region that India has been trying to engage deeply with. India has links with GCC which must be continuously stimulated. Despite their internal differences on some matters, the countries of the GCC follow similar policies on several political, economic, security and strategic matters. Thus, it may be easier to deal with the organisation as a whole on matters on which all the members of the GCC have a common position.

The present security architecture in West Asia is still US-centric although potentially unstable. With the rise of new actors, the balance of power in the region is being altered. On account of its considerable security interests, India should be alive to the emergence of new developments in the security arena. India's recent initiatives with the region reflect its growing desire to strengthen defence and security ties with the Gulf countries, though this has been taking place at a slow pace. There are several issues - such as terrorism, piracy, criminal activities, money laundering, and small arms smuggling - which call for increasing security cooperation between India and the Gulf countries.

In the recent past, as the security situation deteriorated in some countries, India successfully undertook rescue efforts to evacuate its citizens from countries such as Yemen and Libya. Keeping in view the fluid political and security situation in the region, such contingencies may be expected to arise in future. India should pay special importance to building out of area capabilities. This will require building diplomatic and military capacities as well as a dialogue with partners in West Asia. The need for evacuating a very large number of our citizens from the region all at once may arise sooner than later. The planning and preparation to execute non-combat evacuation should be given urgent attention. The efforts made now will make the difference between a coordinated safe evacuation and a catastrophe.

The rise of extremism in the region will have unpleasant consequences for India. India must be prepared to deal with the fundamentalist blow back from the region by strengthening its internal security systems, by raising awareness about the looming threat, and by involving our moderate population in bilateral and multilateral contacts. There have been reports of some extremist elements in India being ideologically motivated by some groups in the region, and also of receiving money through the *hawala* channel. Thus, India should remain prepared for any such backlash coming from the region.

India's bilateral trade is heavily dominated by the energy supplies from the region. Also, a large chunk of the India's total trade is exchanged with big

trading partners like the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Thus, there is a need to diversify trade with other countries of the region which needs special effort by India. Early conclusion of the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) will provide a boost to the India-GCC economic relations.

The GCC countries' investments in India have increased in recent years. However, they remain much below their potential. India needs to take concrete steps to attract foreign investment by further relaxing regulatory restrictions, and inviting investors from this region to actively participate in India's robust growth story for mutual benefit. The current buyer-seller relationship in the energy sector needs to change into a partnership of criss-cross investments in India and the West Asian countries. This policy will facilitate greater interdependence. Iran must be selected for Indian investments due to its centrality for our engagement with the CAR and Afghanistan. India should look for opportunities for joint ventures in West Asia not only with international companies but also with local companies. Priority should be accorded to projects like LNG liquefaction, fertiliser and desalination plants, and other such ventures which will be beneficial for both sides. Through a mutually agreed upon mechanism, a share of the oil and gas revenues earned from India should be earmarked for investment in India. The purchase of a minimum fixed volume of oil and/or gas at average monthly prices could be worked out and agreed upon bilaterally, now that it is a buyers' market. Surplus refining capacity is India's strength, which should be leveraged through contractual arrangements involving the purchase of crude oil and the sale of refined products with as many countries as possible.

India's capability and enthusiasm to play the role of a responsible world power should be emphasised and spread in the intellectual discourse and among the policy makers in the region. Similarly, to give a further boost to the diplomatic presence in the region and spread Indian culture among the West Asian countries, India should seriously consider establishing India Cultural Centres and India Chairs in universities throughout the region. India needs to use its soft power such as cultural exchange, holding inter-faith dialogues and developing language skills. One dynamic step in this regard would be to bolster the teaching of Arabic and Persian languages and produce a crop of youngsters who can engage with the region at a level beyond that of skilled workers.

As the situation is still unfolding in West Asia, India should remain prepared for any exigencies emerging from the region. India has two choices: be passive and reactive as the region takes new shape; or be proactive, and help shape the region, keeping its own interests in mind. Most countries in the region

want India to play a more proactive role in keeping with its rising profile albeit without asking for specific help. India's substantial interests in the region would compel India to be proactive, and not be a bystander. India will have to carve out a well thought out strategy towards the region. It is important for India to maintain a calibrated approach towards all the important players in the region - such as Iran, GCC states and Israel - as India has huge interests with all of them. India should approach emerging West Asia as providing opportunities to play a more effective role in the shaping of the new architecture in the region. If India misses out, its political, economic, and security interests will be affected. India cannot deal with West Asia alone. It should coordinate its policies with the countries in West Asia as well as external players like the USA, China, Japan, the EU, etc.

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Not Business as Usual: Calculated Risks Required

Girijesh Pant*

A radicalised West Asia could potentially be the source of a security threat to its neighbours. Unlike in the past, when regimes could ensure a semblance of stability with external support and oil money, today the region is experiencing structural convulsions. A young unemployed population proactively engaged in cyberspace, depleting oil revenues and, above all, a high sense of alienation and discontent are collectively contributing to the radicalisation of the region. Ironically, the structural crisis is projected as a sectarian divide. This could pose a serious challenge to Indian interests and assets in the region and it may even impact India's internal security. Thus, West Asia needs to be high on our foreign policy priorities.

West Asia is passing through the most critical phase of its contemporary history. The tectonic shift in regional geopolitics triggered by the declaration of the Islamic State is now manifesting in a counter Islamic military coalition formation under the leadership of Saudi Arabia. The Saudi Arabian government argues it to be a response to the Western complaint against the Kingdom not doing enough to fight terrorism. Apparently, the incoherence of US policy towards ISIS, the return of Iran, the compulsions of young Saudi rulers to retain the leadership of the Islamic world, and the perceived threat from *Daesh* challenging their legitimacy as the custodians of Islam have motivated the Kingdom to launch the coalition of Islamic countries. This is a very significant and serious development of ideological import. This coalition could change the narrative by relocating the region away from the western strategic matrix into an 'Islamic orbit' which is apparently conceived of only Sunni countries. It has the potential to further radicalise Sunni Islamic space across the global geography as it will force the believers to take positions.

This new fault line is dangerous because it defines strategic interest not within geographical, political, or economic parameters but by religion. Its resonance can be found in attempts to redefine geopolitics across the region. Such a development seems to have echoed Huntington's views on 'clash of civilisations'. Thus, the ongoing turmoil in West Asia makes India vulnerable, by impinging adversely on our internal security. These developments need very careful reading, assessment, and considered response. As a member of

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the Islamic coalition, Pakistan could become a more difficult neighbour to negotiate peace with. Moreover, the growth of the terror constituency is not confined to West Asia alone. The eastern part of Asia (for example, Indonesia) is also facing the threat of radicalisation.

It is clear by all accounts that the premise of regional politics is no longer the same as designed by Skype-Picot Agreement. The architecture sponsored by the USA is crumbling, if not already crumbled. For America, the region is no longer a high strategic asset after its dependence on this region's energy has declined, and Israel – the second pillar of its foreign policy – is not threatened by Arab nationalism. America now perceives the region more as a source of terror emanating from regional politics, making regional players more accountable. However, Washington cannot abandon the region completely for it is a global power with global strategic interests. Correspondingly, the scale of its engagements with the region will be more in response to global concerns. Thus, though committed to fighting terrorism, the US would not like to bear the entire burden alone.

American appreciation of the Saudi initiative once again demonstrates that it has not learned from its mistakes in Afghanistan. In Afghanistan, it was the partnership of three – the USA, Egypt and Pakistan; today it is coalition of 34 states from Asia to Africa. Howsoever benign it might be in US understanding, this coalition is potentially highly malignant. Though yet to be spelled out in detail, it does underline the distinct thinking in the Saudi Arabian establishment, which is reflected in its military engagement in Yemen. Apparently, by scaling up its involvement in Yemen, the Saudi Arabian regime intends to securitise the wider political space in sectarian terms. Thus, a rigorous debate is required to look at the developments because it is no more confined to the Gulf, or to the Arabs, but to the entire Islamic world. Ironically, by defining the issue in sectarian terms, the security of the region gets further jeopardised. The plea for a comprehensive understanding is made because any misreading of the context based on the observations and prognosis flowing from dominant (read Western) discourse may not be in consonance with India's national interest. We can no longer remain prisoners of the 'wisdom of ambiguity.'

Competition to protect and promote influence is a well accepted premise and behavioural norm in international politics. It is understandable if Iran and Saudi Arabia are engaged in the politics of contest – which may even lead to skirmishes to promote and retain their stakes. The scaling up of the regional contest into the larger frame of the Islamic orbit (Sunni) to protect Islamic countries from terror is open to scrutiny on two counts: first, though the

epicentre of terrorism is in West Asia, the victims are not limited to the region or to the so-called Islamic world. If terrorism has no religion, then why should one think of countering it by caring for the concerns of Islamic nations alone? Secondly, the definition of terrorism still remains to be universally acceptable. Thus, it is imperative that all groups are named.

It needs to be emphasised that ISIS has questioned the legitimacy of religion based regimes; thus, the threat is more of political in nature which needs a political response. The discourse in the Islamic world should be on the nature of the relationship between the state and religion. The region needs a political understanding of defining its political framework which retains its cultural trappings, yet is responsive to popular sentiments. Surely, given its glorious past, the region does not need to import political solutions. But it certainly has to invent them.

A militarised response will push the region – and the world – to unimaginable catastrophe. A military alliance of 32 Islamic nations has both short term and long term ramifications. In the short run, it will impact upon the chemistry of the Islamic region by escalating the Shia- Sunni divide. Further, it will militarise the divide which is sectarian in nature. It cannot be ruled out that out-numbered nations would push non state players (militias) into the domain which, in turn, would make the coalition counter them by their own non-state outfits. Thus, the conflict will move to non-state arena, and could even go beyond the control of the state, thus enhancing the fracturing of the regional polity. The tribal chemistry of the region is germane to this.

An exclusive militarised response undermines the emerging democratic ethos in the region and strengthens autocratic tendencies. The growing military budget – despite the decline in oil revenues – substantiate the point. Dismissing Saudi Arabian response as whims of its young leader – and therefore a passing phenomenon – would be a wrong reading because almost all governments in West Asia are in the discomfort zone. They are vulnerable to the domino effect. They would like to bail each other out. From the subtext of the regional political ethos it seems clear that, after the Arab uprising, the popular voice cannot be muted. Today, the region has a dominantly young aspirational population, which is actively engaged in communication and conversation despite restrictions. They are sharing their concerns, as well as motivating and mobilising across the territorial jurisdiction. The internet intensity of the region is reported to be very high, and thus repression will not be a functional instrument. The political class in the region needs to review its assessment of threat – both its nature and magnitude.

In this scenario of a rapidly radicalising neighbourhood, can India afford to pursue a policy of wait, watch, and react? It needs no elaboration that our stakes are huge. Our seven million plus people, oil imports, and trade volumes are large enough assets to define the intensity of our engagement. The fact that India and the region recognise the mutuality of their interest is well reflected in their growing interaction. A closer scrutiny of India's West Asia engagement will demonstrate that there are four orbits: the Gulf, where it is visibly large but predominantly economic; Iran/Iraq, where it is defined bilaterally and is constrained by the specificity of the context; Israel, which is moving and scaling up robustly; and the rest of the region where it has been more or less dormant. Apparently, India does not define West Asia as a cohesive unit though it recognises its civilizational identity. It can be argued that this vision has its own merit; possibly it has paid dividends as well. But, West Asia is changing dramatically. And it is not business as usual. It is trying to redefine itself by contesting its Western political baggage. That was the spirit of the Arab uprising – though it drifted into the extremist formation of ISIS. While the regimes successfully resisted the Arab uprising, they are now posed to face ISIS. How is this tension going to be addressed by India?

Despite its stature, India cannot address the regional dimension of terror alone. Like India, many other Asian countries face the terrorist threat. Possibly, an Asian response to de-escalate the tension could be the defining principle of strategy. Should a coalition be formed to militarise the Asian security space? Surely, the answer is big NO. Should they intervene in promoting a counter premise to fight terrorism? The answer has to be Yes. India has a history and the tradition of taking the lead. The present crisis in West Asia demands a leadership initiative to provide an alternative narrative to fight against terror. Bombing may kill a terrorist, but not the ideas that are feeding it. An alternative narrative on regional conflict could be explored in an Asian platform. Asia cannot imagine its rise on the strength of the Western security architecture. It has to innovate and make its own peace architecture. It has to make an appraisal of the prevailing text of the war against terror because, despite billions dollars in investment, terrorism is growing, getting support, and manifesting itself in more violent ways.

Asian countries need to communicate to their extended neighbours that a sectarian view of perceiving terror is politically neither correct nor sustainable. It will further radicalise the region and expand the constituency of terror, both in quantitative and qualitative terms. Here, Asia connotes the land mass from the Mediterranean to the Pacific. The two leading Asian powers – China and India – with support from Japan, Korea, and others like Malaysia

and Indonesia can be effective interlocutors in bringing Saudi Arabia and Iran on the table to converse and promote confidence building measures. Despite their might, the USA, Russia, and the EU cannot do this at this juncture because of their partisan positioning. Their credibility is very low. They themselves have been the promoters of sectarianism in the region. In contrast, both India and China have pursued interest without any interference. They have looked at the region in economic, energy terms. It is time that India makes a reassessment of the developments in the region and, possibly, considers redefining its engagement with it. Indeed, it will have to do so.

The recent high power visits by the Indian Prime Minister to the UAE, and by the President of India to Israel, Jordan and Palestine do have their logic and rationale, but do not communicate an Indian vision on the region. India needs to go beyond looking at the region as an aggregation of entities. Surely bilaterals need to remain the key driver. The question posed here is: Should this bilateralism be defined in a broader regional frame work? Or, should it be seen as a stand-alone proposition? The answer can be argued either way: this is because while the region is losing its coherence, it is simultaneously regionalising too. The drop in oil revenues leading to economic diversification is likely to induce countries to chart their own respective pathways. India has to recognise that the labour market in the region is also undergoing shift. Recently, some countries have decided to retire expatriates at the age of fifty primarily to give jobs to their own nationals.

Moreover, even a tax regime is being explored. The rise of IT service based development choices is promoting economic engagement on spatial rather than geographical parameters. Thus, the countries find more incentives in being part of the global rather than the regional economy. The significance of regions in the foreign policy of countries is more a matter of strategic concern. The spatial economy needs a conflict free region. It is important to underline that India could play a significant role in contributing to the diversification of the economies and the regional needs of the energy market. Already, regional countries are competing for the Asian market, and India is a fast growing economy at the moment. While India needs to leverage its market size, it has also to recognise that the escalation of conflict in the region will not ensure such developmental partnerships.

India should recalibrate its policy in a frame which promotes economic engagement bilaterally but looks at politico-strategic issues in a regional perspective. The Gulf has to be relocated in the frame of the Persian Gulf – meaning thereby Iran, Iraq and Yemen along with the GCC countries. These should be seen as mutually interfacing entities, and not as mutually exclusive

ones. Today, the region is moving away from the Western and is looking more towards Asia – the civilizational space to which it has always belonged. This kind of vision may require more proactive and out-of-the-box diplomatic initiatives. The Prime Minister who encourages moving beyond the beaten track can surely push the idea of an Asian Peace Architecture (not security) as an alternative to failing Western moves in West Asia. Envisioning a rising Asia demands bold initiatives and a collective response from Asia towards the escalating conflict in West Asia – something which could undermine the very idea of the Asian Century. It is time to take a calculated risk.

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