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# *The Enduring "Arab Spring": Change and Resistance*

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*Ten years ago, the Arab Spring uprisings brought down four long-standing authoritarian rulers. The uprisings (in the early 2010s) had been driven by a desire to replace tyranny, crony capitalism, and corruption with an order that was transparent and accountable, and provided for popular participation. However, rather than ushering in the wide-ranging reforms that were being demanded from the street, West Asia has been engulfed in several conflicts as the forces of counter-revolution attempt to maintain the existing political and economic order. In order to stem the tide of change, Saudi Arabia has sought to mobilise domestic and regional support by accusing Iran of harbouring hegemonic designs in the region, and is challenging Iranian influence in Syria and Yemen.*

*However, the Arab Spring events have also thrown up competitions within the votaries of political Islam, in which Turkey and Qatar are ranged against Saudi Arabia, backed by the UAE and Egypt. The "second wave" of the Arab Spring uprisings in four countries in 2018–20, which led to the fall of four more rulers, suggests that the popular struggle for reform in West Asia remains resilient and is likely to be a long-term revolutionary process.*

We are now commemorating ten years of two events that took place in Tunisia, which began innocuously but, within a few weeks, had cataclysmic effects across West Asia and North Africa, and continue to reverberate today in regional and global affairs. These region-wide reverberations are referred to collectively as the "Arab Spring".

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Through January–March 2011, there were major uprisings in six countries - Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Syria and Bahrain - and public agitations in many others during this period: Morocco, Algeria, Jordan, and Kuwait. They led to the fall of four potentates: Zine el Abedine Ben Ali of Tunisia; Hosni Mubarak of Egypt; Ali Abdullah Saleh, President of Yemen; and Muammar Gaddafi, the Libyan head of state for over forty years.

Counter-revolutionary initiatives in different countries ensured that no more leaders would fall and that states would revert to the earlier authoritarian order that has characterised West Asia over the previous century. However, it soon became clear that the forces unleashed by the Arab Spring uprisings have not withered away. In 2018-20, four Arab countries witnessed large-scale street demonstrations-in Sudan, Algeria, Lebanon, and Iraq-calling for a complete overhaul of the political, economic, and social order. These demonstrations led to the departure of four rulers: the Presidents of Sudan and Algeria, and the Prime Ministers of Iraq and Lebanon.

Ten years after Mohamed Bouazizi immolated himself, the spirit of the Arab Spring remains vibrant and is robustly confronting authoritarian rulers of the region.

## Socio-economic Malaise

The unexpected origin, spread, and dramatic effects of the Arab Spring uprisings have encouraged a continuous investigation of factors that had led to these developments. While different studies tend to emphasise one particular factor or the other, the consensus is that they resulted from a deep and sustained social and economic crisis across the Arab world.

The first alarm bell rang many years earlier, when the ‘Arab Human Development Report’ (AHDR) was published in 2002. It was prepared under the auspices of the UNDP and the Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development. It highlighted three ‘deficits’ in the Arab world: freedom, status of women, and the state of the knowledge society. These deficits were examined in greater detail in subsequent reports. Thus, the AHDR-2004 looked at the deficit relating to freedom and good governance and called for the full engagement of all Arab citizens in comprehensive reform to spearhead a human renaissance in the region.

These reports were largely ignored, and the region continued to be governed on the basis of the existing ‘social contract’ between ruler and citizen. This entailed the state providing employment to the citizen in the public sector, access to free education and health facilities, and subsidised food and fuel. In return, the citizen gave the ruler loyalty and obedience, which included bestowing on the latter full authority over political and economic decision-making, the acceptance of non-transparent and non-accountable use of state resources by the ruler and his coterie, and the avoidance of dissent at all times. This social contract was kept in place through the coercive force available with the state[1].

An overview of the economy of West Asia-North Africa (WANA) countries reveals that, by 2010, economic conditions had been deteriorating for some time. Over the previous three decades, the GDP across the region had averaged 3 percent, while the rest of the developing world had grown at 4.5 percent. In the same period, the GDP per capita had grown at 0.5 percent, as against 3 percent for the rest of the developing world[2].

Under the influence of the IMF, the WANA countries began to implement "neoliberal" economic policies - that is, policies where the state's role in the economy would be minimal, and market forces would dominate. This approach in effect meant that market-oriented policies would be imposed on economies firmly controlled by governments, with rulers exercising monopoly control over all aspects of their economies. This combination of state monopoly and neoliberal policies institutionalised two features in the Arab economies: crony capitalism, in which economic policies would be moulded to benefit the ruler and his immediate coterie; and attendant corruption that would characterise all economic decision-making[3].

There were other problems as well. All the WANA countries experienced a "youth bulge", the result of low mortality and high fertility rates, so that young people constituted between 29-35 percent of the populations in different WANA countries. Across the region, they were also 25 percent of the unemployed in each country. Those who were educated formed a large part of the unemployed youth, while the less educated sought a place in the informal sector, with low wages and squalid living and working conditions.

Observers have also pointed to the food crisis that impacted harshly in the WANA region on the eve of the uprisings. By 2010, all Arab countries were food importers. Food prices began to rise globally from 2007, so that by 2011 they had doubled in international markets, leading to bread riots in several Arab countries[4]. Before the uprisings, one-fifth of the Arab people lived below the poverty line, and spent more than half their income on basic food[5].

Through the 2000s, it became clear that the old social contract was no longer sustainable, largely due to the high fiscal outlays for public sector employment and subsidies. A combination of demographic challenges that had engendered unemployment, the food crisis, and rising poverty, coupled with the rulers' resort to coercive force in several cases, led to a pervasive sense of dissatisfaction, and what Elena Ianchovichina has called the loss of 'subjective well-being'. She argues that the breaking of the social contract led to the Arab Spring uprisings[6].

Commentators tend to dispute Ianchovichina's analysis when she says that "the protestors … were mostly middle-class young people"[7]. Gilbert Achcar has pointed out that, while some people of middle-class background did join the uprisings, "the vast majority in the streets and squares belonged to middle– and low-income urban layers, working-class and unemployed", and that trade union mobilisation played a major role bringing popular unrest on to the streets[8].

## The Arab Spring Uprisings

While specific developments in each country were the result of its unique political situation, there are several similarities that link them with a "unifying thread"[9]. All of them called for "bread, freedom and social justice". Again, almost all the demonstrations, involving hundreds of thousands of protestors, were peaceful, despite bringing together diverse participants–men and women, Muslims and Christians, Islamists and secularists, lower and middle classes, and urban and rural communities. At times, the protestors were deliberately provoked by thugs sent by regimes to disrupt their gatherings, insult women, and divide them on communal or class lines. But they maintained a remarkable unity despite such provocations.

The uprisings had different trajectories in different countries.

- In two countries, Tunisia and Egypt, political change, marked by the departure of the ruler was orderly (in Egypt in the initial stages) in that it was negotiated between the demonstrators and the effective authority in the country: the armed forces.
- In two countries, Libya and Yemen, though their situations were different, the popular protests led to a regime change, followed by nation-wide civil conflicts that have persisted to this day, largely due to the interventions of external players.

- In two instances, Bahrain and Syria, the demonstrators were harshly put down by security forces, with regional players being actively involved- in one case, Bahrain, to support the ruling regime, and in the other instance, Syria, to overthrow the regime (and, later, others to back the regime as well).

An interesting aspect of the Tunisian scenario has been the role of the country's Islamist party, Ennahda, and its leader, Rachid Ghannouchi. During Ben-Ali's rule, Ennahda had been banned and Ghannouchi exiled to France, where he acquired a well-deserved reputation as a major intellectual of political Islam.

Ghannouchi returned to Tunis from exile in France after Ben-Ali's departure, and soon led his party to victory in the national elections. However, recognising the complexity of national issues and his party's lack of experience in governance, Ghannouchi accepted the setting up of a government of technocrats, and later backed the finalisation of a democratic constitution that makes no reference to Sharia in shaping legislation, and gives full rights to women and minorities. In 2016, Ennahda abandoned its affiliation with political Islam.

While developments in Egypt were initially similar to what had occurred in Tunisia, their paths soon diverged, and Egypt took the route of violence and reversal to autocracy. Despite the electoral successes of the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood, the political transition to civilian rule was difficult, even painful. The army retained effective authority, while the distrust between the Brotherhood and the military deepened, as did the divide between the government and the people, who had expectations of quick reform.

The President from the Brotherhood, Mohammed Morsi, failed to understand both the power-lust of his generals and the visceral hostility to the Brotherhood government from the Gulf sheikhdoms, particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The latter viewed the Brotherhood's grassroots politics, that sought to blend Islam with western-style democracy, as a threat to their monarchical order. It is now known that they funded the popular opposition to the Morsi government. This was done through an organisation called *Tamarod* which organised demonstrations across the country, with an estimated 10 million joining the protests on 30 June 2013.

The Army Chief and Defence Minister, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, presented Morsi with a 48-hour ultimatum to resign, and then took over the government through a coup d'état on 3 July 2013, bringing to an end Egypt's first attempt at a democratic order.

## The Gulf Monarchies

As Egypt slid into domestic discord and authoritarian repression, it was the Gulf monarchies that played a central in confronting the Arab Spring uprisings.

The six monarchies of the Gulf, collectively partners in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), are founded on the pre-oil tribal formations that accept the legitimacy and pre-eminent status of the ruling family. The rulers provide domestic and external security and welfare to their nationals, while the latter give them loyalty and obedience. The "social contract" in the GCC order has meant provision by the state of education and health services, and employment with state institutions.

The capacity of Gulf rulers to sustain the social contract has been largely facilitated by the availability of oil revenues. Thus, despite challenges thrown up at the monarchies during the early days of the Arab Spring uprisings, the GCC states had substantial funds immediately available to reaffirm the social contract by co-opting potential dissidents. This was largely due to the continuous rise in oil prices from 2009 to 2013: $ 62/ barrel in 2009; to $ 77 in 2010; to $ 109 in 2012; and $ 106 in 2013. Hence, not surprisingly, "the preference of states across the GCC was to buy their way out of trouble rather than to confront it head-on"[10]. Thus, on the back of high oil prices, the GCC states could not only purchase the obedience of their subjects through heavy financial outlays, but could also provide financial support to other monarchies, such as in Oman, Jordan and Morocco.

Only Saudi Arabia, with its large population and its lead role in regional affairs, faced serious concerns. The fall of Hosni Mubarak took away the kingdom's strategic partner, while the electoral success of the Muslim Brotherhood was viewed as a political challenge. In this background, the demand for reform in Bahrain, and the empowerment of the majority Shia population that any reform would entail, was a source of great alarm. It led to swift Saudi armed action on 14-15 March 2011 to disrupt the protestors, and the later harsh crackdown on dissent.

The twin concerns emanating from the Brotherhood's ascent to power in Egypt, and the reform movement in Bahrain, imparted to the Saudi rulers a deep sense of strategic vulnerability vis-à-vis Iran, and goaded them to challenge Iran's expanding influence in the region. This approach facilitated the shaping of the Saudi-Iran competition in a sectarian framework. It also later led to Saudi support for regime change in Syria, Iran's long-standing regional ally, as well as a military assault on Yemen against the Shia Zaydis, represented by the 'Houthi' militants who were seen as surrogates of Iran.

## Sectarianisation of West Asian Competitions

The US invasion of Iraq in 2003, and its occupation of that country till 2011, gave a central place to sectarian identity in shaping not just Iraqi but also, West Asian politics to a great extent. As Fanar Haddad has noted, from 2003, "sectarian categories [in Iraq] had gained unprecedented relevance and an outsized ability to colour social and political perceptions"[11]. Within a year of the US attack, King Abdullah of Jordan said in an interview that West Asia was witnessing the emergence of a "Shia crescent", that started from Iran and stretched to the Gulf, and then went on to the Mediterranean[12].

The monarch's allusion was clearly to an aggressive Iran that, in his view, was poised to dominate the regional order by overturning existing Sunni regimes with the help of local Shia populations in different countries. Subsequent events appeared to affirm the validity of King Abdullah's concerns. During the US occupation, the Iraqi political order was firmly shaped on a sectarian basis: politics in Iraq, defined under US tutelage, "elevated sectarian identity into the primary characteristic and chief organising principle of politics in Arab Iraq"[13].

Hence, not surprisingly, the country's politicians sought Iran's help to support their interests and ambitions. Besides its ties with Iraqi politicians, Iran further consolidated its influence in the country with the mobilisation of Shia militia that fought the Americans and the jihadi extremists of 'Al Qaeda in Iraq' (AQI) that had emerged to combat Shia empowerment.

Iraq's legacy of the sectarian divide fed into the existing security concerns and vulnerabilities of West Asian rulers on the basis of the threat from the "Other" sect: the Shias in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia; and Sunnis in the case of Syria. Thus, the Zaydi demand for political and economic participation in Yemen, the cross-sectarian demand for reform in Bahrain, and the Shia protests against discrimination in the Eastern Province were seen by Saudi Arabia as Iran-sponsored machinations towards asserting its regional hegemony. This perception justified for Saudi Arabia its military deployment in Bahrain to end the reform movement, the armed assault on Yemen, and the harsh action to put down the Shia demonstrations at home.

This approach reverberated in Syria as well. Syrian politics was already "sect-coded" in that the 'Alawi'[14] identity of the Al-Assad family, and its core support base had shaped political and economic patronage in Syria since 1970, when Hafez al-Assad became President. The 'opposition' to al-Assad rule had come earlier, in the 1980s, from the (Sunni) Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, thus providing a sectarian binary in a state that was avowedly Baathist and, therefore, secular. Hence, Bashar al-Assad had little difficulty in describing the early Arab Spring uprisings in Syria as “a Sunni-centric, extremist, Islamist, anti-Syrian plot orchestrated by foreign powers”[15].

This sect-based discourse worked for the other side as well: Bashar al-Assad’s Sunni-centric opponents saw, in the early Syrian uprisings, an opportunity to roll back Iranian influence not just in Syria but in the region in general.

These sect-based perceptions relating to regional political competitions led different nations to see in Syria and Yemen either a threat or as an opportunity for their own interests. This is what has made these conflicts so prolonged and so destructive and, seemingly, incapable of resolution.

Besides the lethal sectarian conflicts that the Arab Spring has unleashed, the competitions within Sunni political Islam have also been a major feature of the West Asian landscape after the uprisings.

## Competitions within Political Islam

Political Islam is the effort to imbue a political order with the values and principles of Islam. It has three broad expressions: one, Wahhabiyya, the ideological foundation of Saudi Arabia, that is ‘quietist’ in that the ruler is the repository of all political authority while his people owe him loyalty and obedience; two, the activist Muslim Brotherhood that is a grassroots movement whose political platform seeks to blend the tenets of Islam with the principles of Western-style parliamentary democracy, with a constitution, political parties, free elections, human rights, and equal rights for women and minorities; the third expression is referred to as “Salafi-jihadism”, that draws from its reading of Islamic texts and commentaries the authority to use violence to defend the faith and its adherents[16].

The Arab Spring uprisings have generated two broad ongoing competitions within political Islam: one, between the Gulf monarchies (mainly Saudi Arabia and the UAE) and the authoritarian republics (mainly Egypt) on one side *versus* Brotherhood-affiliated groups and regimes in the region. This is because the Brotherhood, with its affiliation with Islam, its accommodation of democratic norms and institutions, and its popular activism, is viewed as a threat to the authoritarian rulers. Hence, not surprisingly, the coming to power of Brotherhood-affiliated parties in Tunisia and Egypt in the early weeks of the Arab Spring was seen as a grave challenge to the authoritarian rulers in the Gulf and Egypt, and led to their cooperating to bring down the Brotherhood government in Egypt, and establishing the tyranny of Field Marshall Abdel Fattah el-Sisi.

The second competition within political Islam is between established governments in West Asia of all hues and the forces of jihad, represented by the transnational organisations-Al Qaeda and the Islamic State, and their diverse affiliated entities.

## Monarchies versus the Brotherhood

As in the inter-sectarian conflict, Saudi Arabia is again at the centre in the fight against the Brotherhood. Here, its principal allies are the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt, which are ranged against a coalition of Qatar and Turkey. Qatar is the outlier in Gulf affairs since its views are rarely in sync with those of its partners. Qatar's rulers are staunch supporters of the Brotherhood in Egypt and its various affiliates in West Asia. In an attempt to get it to correct its positions, Saudi Arabia and its allies cut diplomatic ties with Qatar in June 2017, and subjected it to an onerous logistical blockade. This continued for over three years, till it was unexpectedly relieved, largely at Saudi initiative, in November 2020, though there is no indication of any change in Qatar's policies.

In the pursuit of its agenda, Qatar has been working closely with Turkey. When the blockade was initiated, Turkey (and Iran) backed Qatar with immediate supplies. More importantly, in the face of a possible threat of regime change coming from Saudi Arabia, Turkey placed its troops in Doha to protect the ruler and his family.

Turkey's ruling party, the Justice and Development Party (AKP), is an Islamist party, which has been in power since 2002. Its leader, Recep Tayyip Erdogan has shaped his politics on political Islam. He has linked this with the glory of Ottoman rule which, in his view, reflects Turkish military and political successes, and with the sultan as caliph, its spiritual leadership of the Muslim world.

Erdogan poses a doctrinal and military challenge to Saudi Arabia by painting the kingdom as "Wahhabi" and, thus, rigid, doctrinaire, and the source of extremist thought. He projects Turkey as modern, moderate, and democratic (though his rule is being increasingly viewed as authoritarian). He has complemented Turkey's doctrinal claims with a region-wide military outreach - Turkish troops are today deployed in Qatar, Syria, Iraq and Libya, even as its navy is challenging the littoral states in the East Mediterranean.

These deployments are a mix of security concerns and Islamist interests. In Syria, Erdogan has positioned Turkish troops around Idlib to protect the Islamist militants from different groups, including Jabhat Nusra, in the hope that they would join a Turkish–sponsored militia that would ensure Turkey's interests against Assad and the Kurds, over the long term.

Turkey's interests and actions in Libya are overtly Islamist. Here, Turkey is backing the Tripoli-based 'Government of National Accord' (GNA), that is influenced by the Brotherhood, against the Tobruk-based 'House of Representatives' (HOR), whose military forces are backed by Egypt and the UAE. Erdogan has also used his links with the GNA to obtain a maritime agreement that gives Turkey control over large areas of the waters of the eastern Mediterranean.

## Jihad in Regional Confrontations

The US assault on Iraq, and the subsequent empowerment of the majority Shia population, led to a lethal jihadi movement in Iraq, headed by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian national who was a veteran of the Afghan conflict in 1989 and then again between 1999-2001. Zarqawi initially affiliated his organisation with Al Qaeda, and called it 'Al Qaeda in Iraq'. After he was killed in 2006, his successors renamed the body the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI), emphasising its independence from Al Qaeda, and its aim to set up an 'Islamic state' in Iraq. After several setbacks, it was rejuvenated in 2010 under the leadership of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Baghdadi consolidated the ISI in the Sunni-majority Anbar province and then, in a dramatic move in June 2014, took Mosul, Iraq's second city after the capital. He declared the territory under his control the "Islamic State", and a "caliphate" under his leadership.

Within two years, the Islamic State had territory across Iraq and Syria which was the size of the UK, a standing military force of 200,000, a functioning government, and revenues of several million dollars per month. It attracted about 30,000 militants from outside Iraq and Syria, including several neighbouring Arab countries, North Africa, Central and Southeast Asia, and even Europe. By 2018, the 'state' was destroyed by government forces in Iraq, and by Kurdish fighters armed and trained by the USA in Syria.

## The "Second Wave" of Arab Spring Uprisings

From December 2018, just when it appeared that the Arab Spring uprisings had been effectively put down with brute force, with only Tunisia, with a democratic constitution showing any sign of real change, a "second wave" of uprisings occurred in four other Arab countries–Sudan, Algeria, Iraq, and Lebanon. According to Asef Bayat, these uprisings affirmed that "the Arab Spring did not die",[17] while Dalia Ghanem of Carnegie Middle Centre described them as "a new season of discontent"[18].

The ignition for these uprisings was the same as before: the deep socio-economic malaise, crony capitalism and corruption, and the sustained failure of the rulers to provide employment and basic services to their people. These fresh uprisings took place in diverse national contexts, but it soon became clear that the protestors had learnt important lessons from the earlier uprisings - not to call off the demonstrations till real change in the political order had been obtained and, at all times, to remain peaceful and united despite provocations from the rulers.

The protests began in Sudan in December 2018, following a government decision to triple the price of goods at a time when the country was suffering an acute shortage of foreign currency and inflation of 70 percent. President Omar al-Bashir, who had been in power for more than thirty years, initially used force to quell the demonstrations. In the face of continued agitations, the armed forces stepped in on 11 April 2019, and declared that the President had been overthrown and was under house arrest. Sudan now came to be governed by the 'Transitional Military Council' that was made up of the country's senior military officers. Despite the coup, the protests continued with a massive sit-in in front of the army headquarters, demanding: "Freedom, peace, justice."

These agitations were spearheaded by the "Sudanese Professionals Association" (SPA), an umbrella association of 17 different Sudanese professional groups and trade unions. Despite a massive show of force by the armed forces and the killing of about a hundred protestors, the SPA called on the demonstrators to follow the method of nonviolent resistance "in all [their] direct actions, towards change". The protests came to an end when the "Forces for Freedom and Change"–an alliance of groups organising the protests and the Transitional Military Council–signed the July 2019 Political Agreement and the August 2019 Draft Constitutional Declaration; government now came to be controlled by the 'Sovereignty Council'. The council has eleven members–five military, five civilians, and one elected jointly by the other members. The council will be headed by a military officer for the first 21 months, and a civilian for the next 18 months. The new Prime Minister, Abdalla Hamdok, an economist who worked previously for the UN Economic Commission for Africa, was sworn in on 21 August. On 3 September, Hamdok appointed 14 civilian ministers, including the first female foreign minister and the first Coptic Christian, also a woman.

In Algeria, popular agitations, referred to as "Hirak", began in February 2019 to protest the announcement of President Abdelaziz Bouteflicka that he would be seeking a fifth term in office. Under popular pressure, Bouteflicka stepped down on 2 April 2019, and many of his immediate associates were tried and jailed. But Hirak's demands now expanded to a complete overhaul of the political order that had been controlled by the armed forces and marked by corruption, nepotism and repression, and its replacement by a genuine democratic system. However, against Hirak's wishes, the army pushed for presidential elections that brought Abdelmajid Tebboune, an old Bouteflicka associate, to high office.

Taking advantage of a suspension of the demonstrations in March 2020 due to the pandemic, Tebboune appointed a body of experts to frame a new constitution. A national referendum to approve this document was held on 1 November 2020. The turnout for the referendum remained modest at best: just 24 percent of an electorate of 25 million voted, of which 66 percent approved the constitution.

Tebboune was anxious to declare that Hirak had completed its mission. The preamble of the constitution said that it was a reflection of the "will of the people" expressed through its "authentic blessed Hirak" which had "put an end to [past] errors". However, the constitution has not impressed the votaries of change. It was not prepared by an elected constituent assembly and it retained a powerful presidency by giving it substantial executive, legislative, and judicial powers.

Popular protests against corruption, violence, and poor public services rocked Iraq from July 2018, beginning in Baghdad and Najaf, and then spreading to other provinces in late September 2019. After a short lull, protests started again on 1 October 2019, escalating into calls to end the existing political system, that is based on an ethno-sectarian "spoils' system", and its replacement by an authentic democracy, as well as the restoration of Iraq's sovereignty by ending foreign interference in Iraqi affairs. Violence by security forces, backed by Shia militia, and sharp criticism from Grand Ayatollah Ali

Sistani, in October 2019, led to the resignation of Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi and his cabinet.

Mustafa Al Kadhimi became Prime Minister on 9 April 2020, after three previous candidates failed to obtain a parliamentary majority. Kadhimi has promised parliamentary elections in June 2021 under new electoral rules that will provide for single-member constituencies. But he has not yet won the backing of Iraq's politicians who have benefitted from the old corrupt order.

Lebanese affairs are controlled by an oligarchy of the country's political and business elites who, as a commentator has recently noted, "have divided the country's public and private sectors between themselves and created a system in which they can extract rent on virtually any economic activity"[19].

On 17 October 2019, the first of a series of mass civil demonstrations erupted in Lebanon. They were initially triggered by planned taxes on gasoline, tobacco, and online phone calls such as through WhatsApp; but they quickly expanded into a country-wide condemnation of sectarian rule, the stagnant economy, unemployment, endemic corruption in the public sector, and the failures of the government to provide basic services such as electricity, water, and sanitation.

As a result of the protests, Lebanon entered into a political crisis, with Prime Minister Saad Hariri tendering his resignation and echoing the protestors' demands for a government of independent technocrats. On 19 December 2019, former Minister of Education, Hassan Diab, was designated the next Prime Minister and tasked with forming a new cabinet.

Through 2020, the country's economic situation worsened. In June 2020, the outgoing economy minister, Raoul Nehme, announced that 60 percent of Lebanese would find themselves below the poverty line by the end of the year. In July 2020, the price of food items and non-alcoholic beverages increased by 24 percent compared to the previous month, and by more than 330 percent compared to July 2019.

On 4 August 2020, an explosion at the port of Beirut destroyed the surrounding areas, killing more than 200 people, and injuring thousands more. Less than a week after the explosion, on 10 August 2020, the Prime Minister resigned. Since then, government formation has not been possible due to the splintered nature of Lebanese politics that is based on a confessional-sectarian distribution of seats in the assembly, and is divided between nineteen political parties, with each potential coalition partner demanding specific cabinet positions.

The "second wave" of the Arab Spring uprisings ended in early 2020 due to restrictions imposed by the pandemic. The uprisings led to the departure of four incumbent heads of state or government, but did not achieve fundamental changes in the national order that had been demanded by the protestors.

## Conclusion

Ten years after Bouazizi's self-immolation and the departure of Tunisia's President, an overview of WANA reveals a dismal scenario. Major states-Syria, Yemen, Iraq and Libya-have experienced extraordinary violence, with no end in sight for the ongoing contentions, several hundred thousand persons have been killed, millions have been displaced, and the states are going through severe humanitarian crises. In this scenario, it is easier to speak of an Arab "winter of despair" rather than of an Arab Spring.

The authoritarian Arab regimes in power have shown an extraordinary capacity for survival. They have used different instruments and approaches for co-option and, more frequently, coercion, the abuse of human rights at home, and a cynical use of sectarian sentiments to mobilise support. They have also exhibited their great propensity for violence against fellow Arabs - against sectarian enemies, and those from rival expressions of political Islam. The last decade has confirmed that the existing political order cannot be reformed; it has to be rooted out if real change is to occur.

And yet, this authoritarian order lacks inherent resilience. As Marc Lynch has noted, "as long as such regimes form the backbone of the regional order, there will be no stability"[20]. This is largely because, despite the coercion and violence, the sources of popular discontent remain as before. By around 2030, WANA will need 60-100 million new jobs. Egypt alone will need to create 3.5 million new jobs over the next five years. This is clearly beyond the capacity of the regimes in place, so that, as Paul Aarts has said, "an army of long-term unemployed people will come into being" who will, in all likelihood, be seen as a threat to incumbent regimes[21].

The last decade in WANA has also suggested that political Islam, in all its three expressions has eroded considerably in appeal. Saudi Arabia, for instance, has understood the limits of maintaining a coercive and intrusive order on the basis of an avowed "true" Islam, and is presently seeking to anchor royal legitimacy in moderate Islam and appeals to nationalism[22].

The Brotherhood in Egypt, presently underground and in exile, is in the throes of internal introspection, with at least some of its intellectuals looking to reshape its entire ideological base with fresh ideas that address issues of concern to developing countries–issues such as ethno-nationalist, communal and sectarian divisions, neoliberal economic policies and inequality, food security, environmental degradation, etc. As Abdullah Al-Arian has astutely observed, "the more politically successful Islamists become, the more likely they are to shed any vestiges of their core identity"[23]. Ghannouchi of Tunisia has declared that the Ennahda is no longer an Islamist party.

Popular opinion remains supportive of the Arab Spring uprisings. An Arab opinion poll of 2016 showed that most Arab people had positive attitudes: Egypt (78 percent); Tunisia (71 percent); Saudi Arabia (55 percent). They also had very positive attitudes toward democracy: 77 percent wanted to have a democratic order in their own country, while 72 percent thought democracy was better than its alternatives[24]. A later 2019-20 Arab opinion poll again showed that 76 percent preferred a democratic government; 58 percent felt the uprisings had been positive events, and only 30 percent believed that, with the victory of the ruling regimes, the Spring was over[25].

There is, therefore, little reason for pessimism. The Arab Spring uprisings are not a single movement, with a single-point programme. They are, as Gilbert Achcar has said, "a long-drawn revolutionary process" that is seeking a total overhaul of the Arab order[26]. Marc Lynch has reminded us that democracy was just one demand of the demonstrators. Their struggle, he says, was one that had gone on over generations to reject a regional order that was mired in corruption, and had failed both politically and economically. In that sense, the two waves of the Arab Spring "have profoundly reshaped every conceivable dimension of Arab politics, individual attitudes, political systems, ideologies, and international relations".

The first wave of Arab Spring uprisings created "a culture of political activism and dissent"; the second wave has affirmed that the movements for change are founded on a wide but cohesive support-base. They are now better-organised, with leaders and a programme, as well as agitators who are patient, persistent, and unafraid.

The third wave of the uprisings could be with us sooner than we expect.

**Notes:**

1 Elena Ianchovichina, "Eruptions of Popular Anger: The Economic of the Arab Spring and its aftermath", MENA Development Report, World Bank, Washington DC, 2018, p. 12, at https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/251971512654536291/eruptions-of-popular-anger-the-economics-of-the-arab-spring-and-its-aftermath assessed on January 14, 2021

[2] James L. Gelvin, *The Arab Uprisings*, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 11

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# *India's Challenges in Accessing Critical Minerals*

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*In June 2019, 10 countries formed a forum called the Energy Resource Governance Initiative or ERGI, to share their mining experiences and advice producer countries to discover and develop minerals like lithium, copper, and cobalt, with minimum impact on the environment. An American-driven venture, the ERGI includes countries that have some of the world's largest mineral reserves. Given the world's focus on de-carbonisation and technological innovation across all sectors, a race for access to critical minerals like rare earths, lithium, and cobalt is heating up. According to the World Bank, the demand for minerals for advanced batteries and magnets used in wind and solar panels as well as defence and telecom equipment could grow by up to 1000 percent in 20 to 30 years. Therefore, when China, which has succeeded in gaining control over the supply chain of these critical minerals suggested using them as a geopolitical weapon by threatening to deny access to these minerals, an alarming world, led by Washington, began to take steps to counter China. It is in this light that the timing of ERGI's establishment is being perceived as a strategic initiative.*

*As India takes its place as a frontrunner in adopting clean energy, its demand for renewable energy equipment will increase exponentially. However, India is deficient in many of the minerals that are required for the manufacture of renewable energy hardware. Moreover, with the recent hardening of relations between New Delhi and Beijing, India's dependence on China for equipment like solar panels and batteries render it vulnerable to any disruption in supplies. This article looks at China's strategy in acquiring strategic minerals, and the response of other nations, including India, in ensuring the security of their critical minerals supply chain.*

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One of the main objectives of economic warfare is the conquest of markets and scarce resources. Nothing illustrates this better than the numerous conflicts over the control of hydrocarbons, mainly oil, not least because they are non-renewable resources, but are critical for the economic growth of nations. However, as the digital age encompasses almost every aspect of human life, and technological prowess is increasingly perceived as necessary for global leadership, the battle for other natural resources is heating up. As global warming and climate change concerns take up more space in international negotiations, the demand for renewable energy (RE) has surged, with many countries making huge strides in increasing the share of RE in their overall energy basket(s). In fact, the generation from renewable energy is expected to expand by 50 percent in the next five years. The EU has set a target of 20 percent from RE for 2020, and 32 percent by 2030, and Europe is currently leading in EV sales with 57 percent growth for the first half of 2020. Latin America has pledged 70 percent of their energy from RE by 2030, while West African states are aiming for 38 percent by 2030. China is aiming to get 28.2 percent of their overall energy basket from renewables by the end of 2020, and by 2025, it expects EV sales to represent 25 percent of all car sales in the country[1].

India too is emerging as one of the largest green energy producers in the world. Growing at 2.5 times, the fastest rate of RE capacity addition among the large economies over the last six years the end of October 2020, India's total RE installed capacity has reached over 89.63 GW, according to the Ministry of New and Renewable Energy. RE now constitutes over 24 percent of the country's installed power capacity and around 11.62 percent of the electrical energy generation. An additional 49.59 GW of RE capacity is under installation, and another 27.41 GW capacity has been tendered, making the total capacity already commissioned/in the pipeline at around 166.63 GW[2].

However, while RE is seen as a more sustainable alternative to hydrocarbons, the minerals and metals that are required to make RE equipment - like solar panels and wind turbines as well as storage batteries–are not renewable and are, in fact, as finite as hydrocarbons. Moreover, these minerals are geographically confined to a few countries, thereby triggering a race among nations to gain access to them–quite akin to the race for controlling oil sources that began in the 1930s. According to a World Bank report titled, 'Minerals for Climate Action: The Mineral Intensity of the Clean Energy Transition', published in May 2020, the production of minerals like graphite, lithium and cobalt will need to be significantly ramped up by more than 450 percent by 2050 from 2018 levels to meet the demand from energy storage technologies. Any shortage of supply could impact the speed and scale at which certain technologies can be deployed globally[3].

The minerals and metals that are, and will be, most in demand include high impact minerals like graphite, lithium (also known as "white gold"), cobalt, and vanadium as well as conventional metals such as copper, molybdenum, and aluminium, all of which are intrinsic to energy storage equipment in the form of electric vehicle (EV) batteries and power grid stabilisation for the generation of wind and solar energy[4]. With regard to minerals, rare earth elements (REE), which are a set of 17 chemical elements in the periodic table–comprising 15 lanthanides plus scandium and yttrium–are necessary components of more than 200 products across a wide range of applications, especially high-tech consumer products such as cellular telephones, computer hard drives, electric and hybrid vehicles as well as flatscreen monitors and televisions. They are also used for defence applications, such as electronic displays, guidance systems, lasers and radar and sonar systems. Although the REE used in a product may not be of a significant amount, they are necessary for the device to function[5].

Hence, if States have to transition to clean energy, or stay ahead of the fast-paced technological changes that are taking place across sectors–from telecom, information technology as well as defence–they have to ensure that their access to these minerals are assured. But, as history has shown us, the behaviour of States when securing their supplies of critical resources is competitive, even conflictual, with producer States often using their resources as strategic weapons to be used to gain political and strategic leverage. This is particularly true of minerals like REE as well as lithium and cobalt, where one country, namely China, has gained control of global supply lines and, on more than occasion, has indicated that it may use its control over the REE supply chain for politico-strategic reasons.

## The Supply Challenge

Although China was one of the first countries to locate its REE resources in 1927, it was the USA that dominated the sector since it was first discovered (by accident in 1949) at Mountain Pass, California. By 1953, Molycorp (Molybdenum Corporation of America), which bought the mine, begun extracting a number of REEs, as scientists began to discover new uses for these materials. Till the mid-1990s, Molycorp dominated REE production as well as exports, and supplies were adequate. However, due to a sudden spurt in Chinese production, combined with environmental legislation in the USA, prices fell, which in turn caused production in the USA to drop, leading to supply shortages[6].

China started production of REE in the 1960s. Several mines containing some of the highest value REEs were discovered in the 1980s, and Beijing began investing heavily in the research and development of REE technologies. By 1989, it had averaged an increase in production by 40 percent; and by the 1990s, exports had increased rapidly, causing prices to plummet–although many believe that this was a deliberate strategy to put China's competitors out of business[7].

As China's mining capacity expanded, REE producers in other countries began to shift their production lines to China to benefit from the country's low labour costs and lax environmental regulations. But soon thereafter, Beijing placed its rare earth sector under the protected and strategic minerals category, prohibiting foreign firms from mining in China and restricting foreign participation in REE processing projects to joint ventures with Chinese firms. These partnerships not only allowed Chinese companies to gain access to the technology but also enabled them to cut out foreign competition from the supply chain[8]. As a result, by 2008, China accounted for more than 90 percent of world REE production, and 97 percent by 2011[9].

China's intention to dominate, indeed to control, the global REE (as well as other critical minerals) trade can be surmised from Deng Xiaoping's famous words, which is believed to have been said as far back as 1987. He said that, "The Middle East has its oil, China has rare earth"[10]. Deng also encouraged some departments in Chinese universities to devote themselves to REE processing technology, thereby providing China the technological advantage that continues till today. More recently, President Xi Jinping also decreed that, by 2025, China would be independent of the rest of the world in 10 key high technologies, many of which are critically dependent upon REE, especially rare earth permanent magnets[11].

Apart from mining and processing, China also sought to capture the super-magnet market. These magnets, which use REE like samarium and neodymium, are used to manufacture commercial and military equipment. Two companies - General Motors (GM) and Hitachi–acquired the patents for the manufacture of magnets. In 1995, two Chinese groups joined forces with a US investment firm and tried to acquire Magnequench, which is owned by GM, to produce the magnets. Although the US government allowed the deal to go through on the condition that the Chinese kept the company in the USA for at least five years, the day after the deal expired, the company shut down its US operations and relocated to China, taking the technology with them. An equally aggressive *modus operandi* was employed *vis-a-vis* Japanese companies. As a result, while in 1998, 90 percent of the world's magnet production was in the USA, Europe, and Japan, within a decade most of the magnet industry had moved to China, where it remains till today[12].

Moreover, China does not want any of its companies to assist foreign entities to develop any aspect of a complete REE supply chain. To add to that challenge, even as the demand for REE-infused components is set to grow, China has sharply restricted domestic REE mining, ostensibly to meet global standards of health and environmental safety. In fact, it is set to import nearly 40 percent of its requirement for REE ores[13]. The concern is that China will try and gain even greater access, indeed control, of REE resources worldwide, given its past behaviour. In 2005, it tried to make a deal with UNOCAL, which had bought Molycorp and the Mountain Pass mine. However, the US government did not allow the deal to go through. A similar Chinese attempt in 2009 to acquire a majority share in Lynas Corp. – the owner of the Mount Weld mine in Western Australia, the richest source of rare earths outside China–was also unsuccessful, although a Chinese company managed to acquire a 25 percent stake in another northern Australian mine. However, despite the USA's best attempts, it had to yield its position as the leading researcher in the field of REEs to China which, under the latter's Five Year Plans succeeded in establishing dominance over not only raw materials but also in REE processing as well as downstream industries[14].

Today, with reserves of 44 million tons (m.t.), China is the leading producer of REE, producing around 120,000 m.t. a year. However, several other countries also have substantial reserves of REE. Brazil has 22 m.t. of reserves, the second highest after China–although its production is much lower, at 1,000 m.t. Vietnam also has around 22 m.t. but produces 400 m.t. only. Conversely, Russia–which produces a comparatively larger amount at 2,600 m.t.–has only 12 m.t. of reserves. Fifth is India, with 6.9 m.t. of reserves. But, although it produced 1,800 m.t. in 2018, the country's rare earths industry is believed to have strong potential, with nearly 35 percent of the world's beach and sand mineral deposits containing monazite–which is a significant source of REE. In 2018, Australia produced the second highest amount of REE at 20,000 m.t., despite the fact that it has only the sixth largest reserves, at 3.4 m.t. Finally, USA with reserves of only 1.4 m.t., produced 15,000 m.t. of rare earths in 2018–up from zero production in 2017. All of this came from the Molycorp's Mountain Pass mine after it went back into production in the first quarter of 2018–although it continues to send REE oxides to China to be processed[15]. Some recent studies have also suggested that North Korea may hold the world's largest REE reserves, with initial assessments indicating a mineralisation potential of 6 billion tons, with over 216.2 m.t. of rare-earth-oxides. This suggests its potential to becoming a key player in the rare earth industry. This fact has not been lost on China, which has already secured many mineral resources in North Korea. Russia, too, has shown an interest in these minerals[16].

Given that REE reserves account for around 120 m.t. globally[17], and therefore cannot be deemed 'rare', they are found only as constituent parts of larger minerals, thereby making their extraction an expensive endeavour. Moreover, apart from Japan and China, no other country has developed the expertise for the entire process involving REEs–viz., mining, processing and separating the minerals, converting them to alloys, and then converting them to magnets, catalysts, or other intermediate products. The entire process is highly capital–intensive as well as environmentally damaging due to the chemicals required for the extraction of REEs from other ores. Few companies want to risk millions invested in a venture where they would have to absorb the costs of mining, processing, and separating low-value minerals that may not find buyers.[18] As one Canadian company official said, 'It's a very high risk for a company to begin committing hundreds of millions of dollars when you don't control your destiny–if the price goes up, China can still bring it down'[19].

Apart from REE, other minerals that are critical for the next phase of the technological revolution include lithium and cobalt and, more recently, valadium and graphite. While 90 percent of the world's cobalt (used to make cathodes which provide a source of power in batteries) reserves are found in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC); lithium, which is the lightest of all metals and provides the greatest electrochemical potential in combination with cost advantages for storage batteries, both for renewables as well as electric vehicles, is found mainly in a handful of South American countries: Argentina, with 17 m.t.; Bolivia, with 21 m.t.; and Chile with 9 m.t. Lithium is also found in Australia, which is estimated to have 6.8 m.t., followed by China with 4.5 m.t.

Unsurprisingly, Chinese companies have pursued investments in both South America's and Australia's mining sectors to ensure that they continue to dominate the minerals supply chain. A Chinese company became the second largest shareholder in a Chilean mining company, and also holds 51 percent stake in the world's biggest lithium mine in Australia[20]. Beijing is also trying to expand its presence and control minerals like vanadium and graphite. While vanadium is used in flow batteries, super-conducting magnets, and high-strength alloys for jet engines and high-speed aircraft, graphite is a crystalline form of carbon whose high conductivity makes it a major component in electrodes, batteries, and solar panels, as well as industrial products like steel. China has been securing additional supplies and building an integrated supply chains of vanadium from South Africa, which is the third largest producer after China and Russia, and has signed agreements with three firms in Mozambique for supplies of graphite, despite being the largest producer of graphite itself[21].

In fact, today, China has become the dominant producer of five out of the six critical minerals used for making hi-tech equipment, including REE, graphite, indium, gallium, tantalum, and cadmium. It controls more than 75 percent of the world's supply of at least three, and has consolidated its hold over them. Although it still lacks the technological expertise to produce many of these items (including magnets and semi-conductors) that are at par with the industry's leading companies and remains highly dependent on imports, it is spending huge sums of money to acquire the technological know-how, not only to become self-sufficient in these items but also to control the market for them[22]. If China decides to restrict its exports, it could set off a global shortage of REEs, which in turn could have serious consequences not only for the world's transition to renewable energy, but would also increase the reliance on China-sourced technologies for critical equipment.

## Threat of Chinese Dominance

Despite many indications, it was not until the 2010 incident that the international community woke up to the consequences of dependence on one supplier for REE. In 2010, after Japan's detention of the captain of a Chinese fishing trawler following a collision with two Japanese patrol boats, China blocked the export of REE to Japan–the main buyer of Chinese rare earths. Given that China and Japan were the only two sources of semi-processed blocks of rare earth magnetic material, the materials export ban had repercussions for all countries as they would now have to rely on China for the same[23]. More concerns were voiced in 2019 when China indicated that it might 'weaponise' its control over rare earths in its trade dispute with the USA.

This occurred after Beijing made threats to curb global supplies in retaliation for the trade war imposed by the USA on China. In fact, despite several WTO rulings against Chinese export quotas, Beijing has continued its policy of both restricting the export of raw materials and REE-containing finished products, instead of just raw materials. In August 2020, China cut REE exports by 62.3 percent from the previous year[24]. Moreover, with China's own demand growing for supplies for their Belt and Road Initiative as well as its focus on end-products, Beijing embarked on an extensive acquisition strategy**,** building links with countries that have significant reserves of both REE as well as other critical minerals. It has worked to provide alternative sources of financing *sans* the funding conditions many developed countries impose. Taking advantage of the drop in metal prices between 2011-2015– partly due to China's subsequent relaxation of export quotas, but which left several mining companies starved of funds–Chinese firms acquired mines, bought equity in natural-resource firms, and invested in new projects, thereby gaining control or influence over global production of these resources. Today, Chinese companies own or control over half of the DRC's cobalt production and hold a massive stake in its mining industry. It has also expanded its presence in other mineral-rich countries, including South Africa, Latin America (Chile, Argentina and Brazil), and Australia[25].

It should, therefore, come as no surprise that, in its report, the World Bank warned of significant supply risks for REE and other minerals. According to a 2020 report, the production of lithium and cobalt may increase by 500 percent by 2050 to meet the clean energy demand alone. Similarly, the research and advisory services firm, Adamas Intelligence, has said that the demand for certain rare earth minerals (like neodymium, praseodymium, dysprosium and terbium, used for making magnets) will be 'astronomical', and will grow at a compound annual growth rate of 9.7 percent percent till the 1930s[26].

As demand grows, supply shortages will lead to higher prices. While higher prices could lead to substitution with alternate minerals and metals, and the recycling of metals can also generate more supply, this varies across the metallic spectrum. For example, the recycling of lithium is currently non-existent due to both technical difficulties in recycling lithium batteries as well as the fact that there is not sufficient accumulation of stocks to recycle. Moreover, many clean-air technologies require a purity of metallic input that cannot be achieved by the current recycling capacity. This means that the need for primary mined metals and minerals will only increase, which will make countries which do not have adequate supplies, increasingly dependent on China[27]. And, with China's exports of rare earths decreasing in recent years, with the total export of REE down by 23.5 percent year-on-year in 2020[28] (the lowest since 2015), there could be a further shortage in the coming years.

## Call for Action

The 2010 Japan-China dispute over REE trade acted like a wake-up call for many nations. Prices of REE and magnets soared as supply concerns grew, setting off a scramble for alternatives. However, till 2018, Japan was the only country to have achieved some success at reducing its dependence on China – from 91.3 percent in 2008 to 58 percent in 2018[29].

Global concerns increased further when, in May 2019, amid an escalating trade war, Chinese state media warned that the country might halt rare-earths exports to the USA. The Chinese Communist Party's mouthpiece, *The People's Daily*, even asked 'could rare earths become China's counter-weapon against the unprovoked suppression of the US?'[30].

As the largest importers of Chinese REE, the USA and Japan have made it a priority to diversify their sources of rare earth metals. After adding REE to its list of critical minerals, the former US President, Donald Trump, issued an executive order in 2019 that local production should be encouraged. Japan too is determined to cut down its REE imports from China's to less than 50 percent by 2025. However, according to some reports, the US Department of Energy has told government scientists not to collaborate with MP Materials– the owner of America's only REE producing facility, the Mountain Pass Mine – as a Chinese investor owns almost 10 percent of the company, and relies heavily on Chinese sales and technical know-how. American government scientists are currently studying ways to recycle rare earth magnets to find substitutes and to locate new sources of the strategic minerals, none of which is shared with MP Materials[31]. Other countries with REE reserves were also encouraged to increase mining and, by 2019, succeeded in reducing China's global share of mining from 97.7 percent in 2010 to 62.9 percent.

Nonetheless, 80 percent of rare earth refining continues to be under Chinese control, with most REE, mined outside China being sent there for processing[32]. However, new facilities in the USA, as well as, Canada and Australia are being set up to address this problem. The US Department of Commerce has vowed to take 'unprecedented action' to secure 'critical mineral' supplies, including REE, which includes accelerating the process for mining permits to increase the production, increasing R&D, and expanding trade with allies. The Department of Defence was also tasked to increase production of rare-earth magnets, while Australia announced that it would boost production to secure supplies for itself and its allies[33]. Despite these initiatives, managing the environmental impacts of processing rare earths remains a challenge for these countries.

Meanwhile, in June 2019, the US State Department announced the formation of an Energy Resource Governance Initiative (ERGI), which is intended to find new sources for critical minerals, including rare earths. Ten countries, some with the largest reserves of critical minerals, have joined the initiative with the intention of sharing their mining experiences and advising producer countries on how to discover and develop minerals, including REE, lithium, copper and cobalt, with minimum impact on the environment.

Nonetheless, although new sources of REE are emerging, and a concerted effort is on to cut the overwhelming dependence on China, the latter still controls 98 percent of REE production, including dysprosium which is needed for making permanent magnets, and which are used in a variety of renewable equipment, including EV batteries and wind turbines. Furthermore, the various stages of producing REE and converting them to magnets are not only very capital-intensive but also environmentally damaging, which in turn draws criticism from environmental groups and lobbies[34]. Therefore, other countries need to find alternative sources for the entire REE supply chain–from raw materials to finished products–with least damage to the environment. Till then, the world will remain reliant on China.

## The Challenge for India

India produces 95 minerals, including atomic, metallic, and non-metallic minerals. The metals and minerals that are deemed 'strategic' are: tin, cobalt, lithium, germanium, gallium, indium, niobium, beryllium, tantalum, tungsten, bismuth, and selenium. The rationale behind deeming them being 'strategic' is that they have few substitutes, and are available only in a few countries. They are also technologically difficult to extract, have limited supply potential yet whose demand is expected to escalate, are subject to abstract mining regulations and legislative regimes, and entail environmental risks. However, they are important across sectors–from energy to health, communications, and national security, and defence[35].

Unlike most other countries, India's REE are derived mainly from monazite (found in beach sands) as against ionic clay. In fact, India was one of the first countries to realise the importance of rare earths way back in the 1950s, and had even set up Indian Rare Earth Ltd. (IREL) to extract the minerals. However, it did not exploit its early advantage in becoming a major source of REE; instead, around 2007, mining and development of REE were frozen due to a lack of competition in the domestic market. This not only prevented investments in the mineral and manufacturing processes but also pushed large industrial consumers to source their mineral needs from the global market, particularly China. Now, with relations between the two countries becoming increasingly tense (especially after the recent skirmishes in the Galwan Valley), the government is cognizant of the growing risk of being dependent on China for the supply of critical materials and equipment, given Beijing's penchant for using its market control for strategic ends.

However, over the years, India has progressed from only mining activities to setting up facilities for separating REEs, albeit not on a commercial basis; but it has yet to gain the know-how for further valorisation, including REE processing and producing magnets, which places it in the category of only a low-cost raw materials provider[36]. Moreover, despite owning around 6 percent of the world's REE reserves India's share of rare earth oxide production is less than 2 percent of the total world production, making it dependent on China for both raw materials as well as end-products.

Nonetheless, after the 2010 Japan-China episode, Tokyo turned to India for the supply of REE, and both countries, in fact, signed a deal in 2011 to set up a plant in Vishakhapatnam to produce rare-earth oxides[37]. In 2016, a report by the Council for Energy, Environment and Water (CEEW), titled 'Critical Non-Fuel Mineral Resources for India's Manufacturing Sector: A Vision for 2030', recommended that India should increase domestic exploration and mining as well as acquire the know-how in mineral processing technologies. It also recommended that India make the strategic acquisition of mines as well as diplomatic and trade agreements with other countries a priority[38].

Realising the vast potential of its REE reserves, and in accordance with its policy of *Aatma Nirbhar*, IREL recently announced plans of setting up a Rare Earth and Titanium Theme Park in Madhya Pradesh. This envisages setting up a pilot plant based on laboratory scale technologies developed by BARC and other research institutes to encourage the production and consumption of REE within the country, and to facilitate the setting up of a value chain in the sector. It is also in the process of setting up a plant producing permanent magnets at Visakhapatnam, based on indigenous technology[39].

However, while India does have the means to develop its REE potential, the same cannot be said about other critical minerals, like lithium, cobalt, and nickel. This is presenting a challenge to achieving the goal of its renewable energy target of 450 GW by 2030, as also to the goal of electrification of transport, without remaining–indeed increasing–its dependence on the imports of the requisite minerals and materials.

Recently, some lithium reserves were discovered in Mandya, Karnataka. However, these are not sufficient to meet India's huge and growing demand for lithium, given its ambition to become a major supplier of li-ion batteries. To address the problem, the government plans to buy lithium stocks to ensure supplies that could potentially last decades, and make India self-reliant. It has also formed a joint venture to form Khanij Bidesh India Ltd. (KABIL), comprising three public sector companies–the National Aluminium Company (Nalco), the Hindustan Copper Ltd (HCL), and the Mineral Exploration Corporation Ltd (MECL) – to scout for strategic mineral assets, like lithium and cobalt (particularly in Australia and South America), acquire mines abroad, and participate in the exploration and processing of strategic minerals overseas to meet domestic requirement[40]. Moreover, reforms have been introduced in the country's mining sector which will provide more incentives for mining activities.

Apart from domestic initiatives, India is also looking at partnerships with like-minded countries to ensure diverse sources of supply. According to media reports, the four Indo-Pacific Quad members–comprising of India, Japan, Australia, and the USA–are working together, and pooling resources to rapidly build collective self-reliance in the critical minerals sector. In September 2020, the trade ministers of Japan, India, and Australia agreed to hammer out details of a new supply chain network– which is likely to include REE–by the end of the year. Further, while Japan and Australia have formed a partnership following the China-Japan conflict in 2010, in June 2020, Australia and India reportedly inked a preliminary agreement for supplying critical minerals. A deal has also been signed between Australia and the USA, whereby Lynas would process mined minerals in Texas in partnership with the Pentagon, while another Australian company, Syrah has earmarked a production line in the USA for manufacturing REE downstream equipment[41].

However, India should aim at gaining knowledge and expertise in the processing and valorisation of REE. Although India has the capability of separating and extracting dysprosium from monazite, it has not commercialised the process. By commercialising the separation process and supplying dysprosium of high purity (which is used for making neodymium magnets) to Japan, and eventually manufacturing neodymium magnets possible with Japanese cooperation, India can valorise its REE, and gain both economically and strategically. Currently, India's R&D efforts are believed to have progressed to samarium-cobalt magnets, which are used for space activities, and are a predecessor of neodymium magnets.

## Overcoming Chinese Monopoly over REE

From REE to lithium, to cobalt, several countries are racing to explore and develop their own sources of these materials[42]. However, despite the slew of activity by numerous countries, and several government initiatives aimed at establishing alternate rare earth supply chains that would alleviate their growing reliance on China, these have been piecemeal at best. The main reason is that while access to rare earth ores is not a challenge as they are available in and from many countries (including Vietnam, Brazil, India, Australia, Canada, and Greenland), few countries, apart from China and Japan, have acquired the knowledge and expertise in the complete value chain–from raw materials to permanent magnets. While Japan makes superior magnets, they are more expensive; moreover, Japan is  dependent on REE ore imports.

However, given the importance and growing demand for critical minerals, no country can afford the risk of having its supply being curtailed or stopped. Hence, governments need to do the following. First, both governments and the private sector will have to commit to large sums of capital to build the requisite facilities that can compete with the Chinese. But, given Beijing's control over production and exports and hence pricing, most companies are wary of losing money to price manipulations. As a result, non-Chinese producers are presented with a Catch-22 situation in which, in a reflection of OPEC's tactics, China could flood the market with REE, which would cause prices to drop, and force companies to go bankrupt. Hence, there is a need for developing processing technology that selectively separates high market value minerals economically.

Second, supportive legislation for the sector is required to encourage investment. In order to allay local opposition to mining activities, legislation allowing local communities to share the company profits could be imposed. This would also ensure the accountability of the mining companies in various fields. Third, environmental issues will have to be dealt with sensitively. REE extraction produces hazardous by-products, like toxic gases and radioactive waste water. More R&D will have to be developed to lessen, even eradicate, these environmental hurdles. The good news is that new technologies which cause less harmful environmental damage are being discovered, although China is, once again, at the forefront of such technologies.

Finally, a feasible, albeit difficult, means by which the above issues can be resolved amicably is through recycling rare earth metals. No doubt it is a lengthy and challenging process, involving de-magnetisation (by heating), crushing and roasting, followed by a leaching process, and separating materials that are embedded in devices before a rare earth oxide can be produced. However, this would reduce the need for mining and other environmentally harmful processes if these minerals can be derived from discarded cell phones as well as IT and energy equipment. Moreover, over time, it could be cost-effective while maximising the use of these minerals. Also, a lot of research is going into finding extraction methods that use less-harmful chemicals, while EV manufacturers are looking to reduce, even eliminate, the use of REE by replacing magnets with copper windings or using motors that do not require magnets.

Be that as may be, it is time for other nations to put their REE mining industry on a level playing field with China's, given the criticality of these minerals for grave issues like energy transition, defence, communications and, indeed, overall national security. It is, therefore, imperative that the world's focus should be on maximising ongoing efforts to consolidate critical raw materials, and gain access to the entire processing and end-use technology. There is an urgent requirement to understand strategic industries, and the long-term investments needed to expand and diversify the supply chain of these critical minerals and metals. There is also a need to impose international regulatory mechanisms to ensure affordability and open access for the same. The good news is that several countries have woken up to the danger of economic and strategic dependence on one source country.

Thus, it is time to  consider innovative policies in place.

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# *Positioning the Indo-Pacific in India's Evolving Maritime Outlook*

Rushali Saha*

*This paper attempts to trace the evolution of India's maritime outlook and shows how, over the years, a paradigm shift is evident in India's worldview whereby a continental focus on South Asia has been complemented by a maritime focus. India has come to formally recognise the geo-strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific to its own national security and strategic interests. This is reflected in its naval modernisation efforts as well as in official policy positions and diplomatic manoeuvrings. The paper identifies inclusivity and ASEAN centrality as the main pillars of India's Indo-Pacific approach which, while converging with ASEAN's outlook on the Indo-Pacific, is distinct from the US vision for the region. In assessing India's approach to the QUAD, the paper identifies some tension between India's Indo-Pacific approach and the QUAD. However, it also argues that such tensions have been accommodated, and India's maritime moves have to be seen as an extension of the fundamental principles driving its own foreign policy, i.e. ensuring self-sufficiency and independence.*

*The paper argues that such a position is well suited for the rapidly changing balance of power equations in the region which demand flexible restructuring rather than a formal security "alliance." Moreover, focusing on inclusivity would allow India to allay the fears of smaller South Asian neighbours, such as Sri Lanka, of increasing the securitisation of the region as well as of traditional partners such as Russia who see QUAD as "anti-China." The paper concludes that India's nuanced SAGAR vision is based on an acknowledgment of the unique reality of the dynamic balance of power equations in the region, and reflects its diplomatic exceptionalism.*

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## Tracing India's Maritime Outlook

India's tryst with the oceans can be traced back to the 11th century when the Indian Chola dynasty built a strong military maritime capability through which they were able to secure crucial trade routes[1]. Although in 1945, K. M. Panikkar wrote that "the importance of the sea came to be recognised by the Indian rulers only when it was too late"[2]— he hoped that independent India would create a naval tradition, and utilise its geopolitical positioning to its advantage. Unfortunately, however, compelled by a preoccupation with continental threats, post-independence leaders largely ignored his vision, and the Indian navy remained underfunded and underutilised. Much of this had to do with India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's own aversion to geopolitical alliances and focus on international global issues. Admittedly, Nehru did recognise the geo-economic potential of the Indian Ocean;[3] but he did not think in terms of securing the region from foreign powers to protect India's own strategic interests. His successor, Indira Gandhi, did not share the same worldview; but compulsions arising from domestic and international politics of the time forced her to prioritise land neighbours, namely Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sikkim. Due to the exclusive focus on establishing India as a powerful force in South Asia, the development of a comprehensive maritime outlook beyond the region suffered.

Speaking almost prophetically, Panikkar predicted that "rivalry is likely to transform the Indian Ocean again into a major strategic theatre"[4], and that managing great power rivalry in the region would be "one of the major problems of the future"[5] for India. Growing out of India's own position of opposing Cold War and Great Power politics, India supported calls for the denuclearisation of the Indian Ocean, and declaring it as a "zone of peace." Although the UNGA declared the Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace in 1971 in Resolution 2832, it made no mention of restricting the movement or presence of nuclear weapons in the region. Thus, it did little to stop great power rivalry in the region effectively. In fact, following the 1973 oil crisis, the shipment of oil through the Indian Ocean and the region's own oil resources became strategically important questions for Western nations[6].

Meanwhile, during the same period, Soviet naval deployment in the region soared, and it became the principal supplier of arms to nine countries on the Indian Ocean periphery[7]. This was done mainly to counter increasing American presence in the region. India's own posture in the region could not be insulated from the larger Cold War dynamics. Since the 1971 war with Pakistan and closer US-Pakistan ties, India aligned itself more closely with the Soviets, and deliberately downplayed Soviet military presence in the region, describing Western accounts of the same as a "deliberate exaggeration"[8]. New Delhi even defended Soviet presence to be of a "defensive nature"[9] in view of America's strategic presence in the region. Nevertheless, even Indo-Soviet convergence had its limits as is evident from the Naval Arms Limitation Talks (NALT) negotiations in which New Delhi complained that the Soviets were deliberately trying to keep India out of the loop during the negotiations[10]. Differences between the Indian and Soviet positions over NALT negotiations – which came to a grinding halt by 1979 – paralleled the progress in Indo-American ties which, in turn, reduced New Delhi's threat perception of American presence in the region.

India distanced itself slowly from the denuclearisation theme after conducting its first atomic test in Pokhran in 1974. Throughout the Cold War, India saw the Indian Ocean as a subset of Cold War politics and practiced "selective alignment"[11] to secure its own interests in the region. Although such a position did allow India to maintain strategic autonomy while retaining its ambitions to have a regional naval presence, its policies were at best reactive. The Indian navy played only a modest role, being restricted to conducting naval training exercises with Oman, and helping to avert a coup in Seychelles. In other words, it was concerned only with elementary maritime security needs. A positive push towards enhancing India's naval capabilities was visible during Rajiv Gandhi's tenure when India purchased a second aircraft carrier, leased a nuclear submarine from Russia, and successfully conducted Operation Cactus in the Maldives[12].

The end of the Cold War and the resultant changes in India's economic policy focusing on liberalisation and privatisation brought the focus back on the Indian Ocean as a medium for importing its hydrocarbon energy needs. The dissolution of the Soviet Union freed India to independently cultivate ties with Washington, which it strategically started through the Malabar naval exercises. As an extension of trying to move away from its Cold War 'non-aligned' posture and take advantage of the new international environment, India developed ties with countries such as the UK, France, and Russia through bilateral naval exercises in the Indian Ocean.

China also started making its presence felt in the region by expanding its naval capabilities beyond its coastal waters. It is during this period that the seeds of what came to be later described (in 2005) as China's "String of Pearls"[13] strategy, were sowed. Through the 1990's, China supported the construction of new naval facilities on Myanmar's Hainggyik and Great Coco Islands increased naval co-operation with Pakistan through grandiose plans to develop the Gwadar

Port, and developed existing naval facilities at Sittwe near the Bangladesh border, etc. An important consideration in Chinese thinking was how to secure the important Sea Lanes of Communication to protect maritime trade routes. However, at this stage, the PLAN was seriously ill-equipped to carry out even non-combat operations from its shores – as was evident from its failed operation to evacuate Chinese citizens from Somalia[14] – which restricted China's naval ambitions. Since then, China has been steadily investing in developing its sea power, and blue water logistics capabilities.

However, a positive development during this period was a decisive shift in India's strategic vision, which expanded beyond South Asia to an "extended neighbourhood" with the adoption of 'Look East policy.' India entered the 21st century with a more decisive outlook to face the challenges of a multipolar world. It revealed itself to be more confident about its regional and global aspirations, and more vocal about its own maritime ambitions. India's strategic thinking was now shaped by a desire to be the "most important maritime power in the region"[15]. To achieve this, New Delhi published its first Maritime Doctrine in 2004 (later updated in 2009) and Maritime Strategy in 2007 which reflected these aspirations, and expanded the navy's military role to cover "constabulary", "combat", and "diplomatic" roles.

The 2015 updated version of the Maritime Strategy explicitly recognises that India's "strategic imperatives" (which guides its relations with the seas) also have a "security connotation". It outlines the Indian Navy's aspirations to become a "net security provider" for the region[16]. These aspirations are supported by some remarkable achievements, such as the development of the *INS Vikrant*, India's first indigenously built aircraft carrier, which is expected to join service in 2022; the building of Shivalik Class stealth frigates, the first indigenous warships to be built with stealth features; the commissioning of Kolkata class guided missile destroyers; the commissioning of two Scorpene class submarines in 2017; and the latest being the Defence Acquisition Council approving the construction of six diesel electric submarines at the cost of over ₹45,000, crores.

A key focus of the Indian Navy over the years has been on indigenisation efforts which, despite several hurdles, have made steady progress[17]. The Indian navy's engagement has been matched with swift diplomatic soft power persuasion which has clearly sent out the message that there has been a shift in India's maritime strategy and policies. The 2015 document's formal acknowledgment of the Indo-Pacific, and its importance for securing India's maritime security shows a willingness on India's part to renew its own strategy, keeping in line with India's strategic interests.

## The Indo-Pacific in India's Maritime Vision

Although the term "Indo-Pacific" has entered the strategic lexicon relatively recently, the geopolitical amalgamation of the Indian and Western Pacific Oceans and the existence of both as a single strategic system can be traced back to over 200 years when British imperial forces were consolidating their position in India[18]. British withdrawal from the Pacific during the inter-war period and, subsequently, Japan's unconditional surrender in 1945, left uncertain the fate of the region. It also left America in an enviable position to spread its influence in this region.

In the ensuing bipolar competition between the US and the Soviet Union, and regional developments such as the Sino-Indian conflict in 1962, and the emergence of the Association of Southeast Asia in 1961 (later expanded and renamed Association of Southeast Asian Nations in 1967), the region was fragmented into smaller parts in the 1960's. The result of this fragmentation, along with frayed Indo-US relations during the Cold War period was India's isolation from the wider Southeast and East Asian region.

Although it was Shinzo Abe who first promoted the concept of the Indo-Pacific in his 2007 "Confluence of Two Seas" speech in the Indian Parliament[19], it was largely due to the US administration's efforts that the term came to occupy a space in the geopolitical imagination. Washington's own moves to re-prioritise the region emerged against the backdrop of the "pivot to Asia" after its relative neglect due to a preoccupation with the Middle East under the banner of the "war on terror". It was also a recognition of the need to work with 'like-minded' partners to maintain its position, given the emerging multipolar distribution of power, and to create a hedge against China. What emerged as a diplomatic effort to reassure Asian allies (and make new ones) of the US commitment to the region under the Obama administration, became a foreign policy priority for the Trump administration. The US Department of State's Indo-Pacific report of 2019 reiterates that Washington has a "fundamental interest" in ensuring that the "future of the Indo-Pacific is one of freedom and openness rather than coercion and corruption"[20].

Given India's central location, it is inconceivable to think of the Indo-Pacific without India. This is being increasingly recognised by all the relevant actors in the region. The move away from the Asia Pacific to the Indo-Pacific in the official vocabulary of countries like the USA, Australia, and Japan is, in many ways, a recognition of this centrality. However, with it also comes an appeal to India to become a part of the larger solutions to the region's problems.

Although India has embraced the ‘Indo-Pacific’ construct – even setting up an Indo-Pacific division to focus exclusively on geopolitical developments in the region – it has expressed some caution, given the dangers of posturing in a region that has delicate and constantly changing balance of power equations. Therefore, India has come up with its own vision of Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) for the Indo-Pacific, which although similar, is not the same as that of the USA.

The most obvious difference is the geographic delimitation of the region. While the USA officially still considers its own west coast to the west coast of India as the Indo-Pacific expanse[21], India’s definition expands from the eastern shores of Africa to the western shore of the USA. Speaking at Shangri La in 2018, Prime Minister Modi gave the clearest exposition of India’s Indo Pacific vision by describing the region as a “free, open, inclusive region” which is not a “club of limited members”[22]. By making ASEAN centrality the foundation stone of the region, New Delhi is trying to maintain a distinction from the US vision for the region which has generated anxieties among certain South-East Asian countries.

The Trump administration went beyond any of its predecessors to strengthen the “anti-China” rhetoric in Washington’s “free and open Indo-Pacific” strategy. This has, in the eyes of many, reduced it to nothing more than a narrow, security-centric effort to contain China. With the escalation of US-China confrontation and the Indo-Pacific as the epicentre of this competition, Washington is construing Indo-Pacific cooperation against China. This was the theme of Mike Pompeo’s latest five-nation Asia tour (which included India), which was termed as an “anti-China roadshow”[23] because of his repeated denunciation of the Chinese Communist Party. This, however, has created more unease than assurance for the Southeast Asian countries which share a complicated relationship with China, and which cannot be reduced to the binaries of friend or foe. Although China’s own assertive foreign policy actions in its immediate neighbourhood – such as establishing new administrative units in the disputed Paracel and Spartly Islands[24], and the Chinese attack on a Vietnamese fishing vessel[25] – has reignited apprehensions in these countries about Chinese intentions in the South-China Sea. Thus, US attempts to bring these nations into an ideological struggle against China have borne little fruit. This narrative of a “free” order led by US v/s a “repressive” order represented by China is based on a fundamental misreading by Washington of ASEAN’s Indo-Pacific Outlook which is premised on deepening regional cooperation in a manner that does not "create rival blocs", "deepen fault lines, or force countries to take sides"[26].

India's approach to the Indo-Pacific is motivated by awareness and understanding of these regional realities. With inclusivity and ASEAN centrality as central pillars, India has positioned itself in a comfortable place to maintain the delicate balance in the region while maintaining strategic autonomy, which is true to its core foreign policy principles. Such a stance has undoubtedly been complicated by India's frayed relations with China post the border conflict in Ladakh. This has made managing Chinese presence in the Indo-Pacific New Delhi's topmost foreign policy priority. By stepping up quadrilateral security cooperation with the USA, Japan, and Australia, India has sent out the message that this group of "like-minded democracies" are ready to counter Chinese growing assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific. Nevertheless, such a position is not a deviation from its inclusive vision but is derived from the shared values the democratic countries share in the region, which are being repeatedly violated by Beijing.

## Incorporating QUAD in India's Indo-Pacific Outlook

Two important developments took place last year which refocused attention back on the QUAD, after a rather hasty dissolution in early 2008. Firstly, in contrast to the previous assistant level and working-level meetings, which were held on the side-lines of other summits, the first standalone meeting of QUAD took place in Tokyo on 6 October[27]. Secondly, Australia's induction into the Malabar exercise[28] – conducted between Indian and US navies since 1992 and joined by Japan in 2015 - finally operationalised naval coordination among all the four QUAD countries. It is not a coincidence that these developments come at a time when all four countries have been at the receiving end of Beijing's abrasive actions. Clearly, China has been irked by this unity and has quickly changed its official discourse towards the QUAD from one of outright dismissal to a more defensive posture. After comparing the QUAD to "sea foam" which would "dissipate soon"[29], the latest Chinese move has been to project it as an "Indo-Pacific NATO"[30] in the making in Asia. This is a deliberate misrepresentation of the shared principles of respect for the rule of law, freedom of navigation, territorial sovereignty, and other common values, and reflects its growing anxieties.

There is no doubt that there is a tension between India's vision of the Indo-Pacific centred on inclusivity and the multilateralism which the QUAD presupposes[31]. On one hand, the QUAD's emphasis upon a "rules based world order" aligns well with India's diplomatic and political priorities in the region; on the other hand, its image as a closed and exclusive clique undermines the narrative of inclusivity that it stands for. India's attempt at decoupling the QUAD from the Indo-Pacific[32] has also raised more questions rather than answers. It also does not bode well in presenting the region as a strategic continuum in which India is an important actor.

However, these tensions can be accommodated, and some of the questions answered if one looks at the purpose and fundamental nature of the QUAD. The quadrilateral template took birth in 2004 in the aftermath of the tsunami in the Indian Ocean in which the navies of the four countries participated in humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations. This ad-hoc organisation was given some structure when a framework was set up among the Foreign Secretaries of the four countries. The first meeting of the organisation focused on security collaborations, centred mainly around non-traditional security threats of terrorism and sea piracy. Following this, the four navies came together in Singapore to conduct naval exercises in September 2007 to enhance mutual interoperability. Beijing was uncomfortable with this development from the start. It feared "that the four countries were ganging up against China in a security alliance"[33]. This created apprehensions among member states and, with Australia succumbing to Chinese pressure[34], the QUAD collapsed.

Although the QUAD's revival took place against a very specific geo-strategic context –Beijing launching its BRI initiative – with the proclaimed aim of creating a new geopolitical and geo-economics map, India was more cautious than its partners in the continued emphasis upon inclusivity. In fact, India was the only country to mention "inclusive", in addition to "free, open, prosperous" in the individual statements released by each country after the first meeting of the QUAD 2.0 in November 2017[35]. In the subsequent meetings, the QUAD has not brought out a single joint statement. This largely indicates the lack of a common vision for the framework. However, this has not halted cooperation among member states. On 21-22 November 2019, India hosted the first counter terrorism exercise among QUAD members. Later, in the virtual summit held on 20 March 2020, the QUAD members, together with senior representatives from South Korea, Vietnam, and New Zealand, issues such as cooperation in vaccine development was also discussed. Beijing's "gross aggression"[36] figuring in the latest QUAD meeting (held on 6 October) should not come as a surprise, given how it directly threatens the strategic interests of all members.

However, it is worth noting that it was only the USA which alluded to the CCP's "authoritarian nature." The other three countries chose to use their words carefully, and defined the agenda of the meeting in more positive terms, with only veiled references to China.

The expansion of areas of cooperation beyond hard security issues is in keeping with the fundamental nature of the QUAD as a forum for "diplomatic consultation" for "countries who have convergences … who do not agree on every issue, but have substantial common ground"[37]. The flexibility inherent in the structure of the QUAD provides India enough space for diplomatic manoeuvring which is necessary for it to maintain self-sufficiency and independence. Ultimately, it is India's vision of multi-polarity which shapes its strategic choices; and, the participation in QUAD is no different. It holds the potential to promote a multi-polar Asia through inclusive multilateralism.

Given the uncertainties surrounding the US commitment to the region under the upcoming Biden administration, it is crucial that India continues with its multi-directional diplomacy. In doing so, India must be careful to accommodate the sensibilities of all regional stakeholders, including Russia which has been particularly apprehensive about the Indo-Pacific construct in general, and the QUAD in particular. Despite repeated diplomatic outreach by New Delhi, Moscow's official position is that the Indo-Pacific is an artificial construct which divides the region into rival blocks[38]. The latest reiteration of this position came when the Russian Foreign Minister described the QUAD as a "devious policy" by western powers to engage India in "anti-China games"[39]. Russia is not alone in harbouring such apprehensions: Sri Lanka's foreign secretary, Jayanth Colombage, also expressed apprehensions about the QUAD giving rise to a "cool war" in the Indian Ocean[40].

It is imperative for India to allay such fears, which it has done by reiterating its official policy that it does not see the Indo-Pacific region as a strategy or an exclusive club; nor is it directed against any country, and that it stands for an "open and inclusive region"[41]. A positive response from Russia to India's diplomatic efforts to include it in the Indo-Pacific came when it applied for dialogue partner status in the Indian Ocean Rim Association[42]. Although the inclusion of Russia would strongly support New Delhi's claims that the Indo-Pacific initiatives are not simply a US-centric plan and boost its claims of inclusivity, there are significant hurdles as Australia, South Africa, and Iran have opposed Kremlin's application.

## Conclusion

At a time when geopolitical equations are in a state of flux, a fundamental tenet of geopolitics is worth remembering: perceptions may change, but geographies do not. Currently, the discourse on a free and open Indo-Pacific is centred upon China. However, viewing India's perceptions of the region through such a narrow lens would misconstrue its inclusive vision, and negate the long history of maritime activism which predates Independence. Although domestic and international compulsions prevented India from materialising its inherent maritime potential for a long time, the geostrategic insights of K. M. Panikkar has resurfaced in India's strategic discourse at a time when New Delhi has embraced its maritime identity. This embrace has been a slow but steady development, paralleling India's own growing capabilities and intentions. As an emerging global power, India is taking a broader view of its naval responsibilities – securing territorial waters and island territories; the protection of global commons; a focus on the "freedom to use the seas", and "ensuring secure seas."

Ensuring a stable and favourable Indian Ocean is particularly crucial for India to secure its maritime interests, given its vulnerability to traditional and non-traditional threats in the region due to its geography. Moreover, India's increasing dependence upon seas for its trade - with its seaborne trade growing twice the global growth rate over the last decade – makes it imperative to work with partners to protect them against disruptive forces. India has attempted to achieve this not only by bolstering its naval capabilities but also by pursuing nuanced maritime diplomacy, couched in the language of cooperation and mutual benefit – a natural extension of its foreign policy discourse centred around strategic autonomy. Although many misconstrue such a position as New Delhi's hesitation to face an assertive China, India's latest moves have shown that a retaliatory posture does not negate strategic autonomy.

The flexible geometry of the QUAD has allowed it to send out a strong message to China that its disruptive behaviour will not be tolerated. This has been done without threatening ASEAN countries. Although it is tempting to get swayed in nationalistic fervour, and bandwagon with the USA in its anti-China tirade as Beijing openly violates international laws and undermines a rules based order in the region, this will only harm India's long term interests. The exclusionary nationalist framework does not have much worth beyond its rhetorical value. Instead, a flexible, inclusive, and plural notion is better suited, given the regional realities. India's nuanced SAGAR vision is based on an acknowledgment of the unique reality of the dynamic balance of power equations in the region, and reflects its diplomatic exceptionalism.

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# *West Asia: From Non-State Radicalism to State Revisionism*

Adil Rasheed*

*The crater left by the decimated ISIS proto-state has become the epicentre for a new wave of turmoil in West Asia. As shell-shocked jihadist groups struggle to regain their footing in the region, some of their shadowy patron states have decided to militarily step into the hollowed out geostrategic space, even as US forces continue to draw down their troop levels from the region. With Turkey and Iran making blatant incursions into Arab lands as part of their revisionist imperialism, Gulf monarchies seem to be dumping their Salafi-Wahhabi extremism in favour of a fledgling Semitic neologism, envisioned as 'Abraham Accords', to keep non-Semite powers out of bounds. Meanwhile, the scattered jihadist forces are scouting for safer havens in sub-Saharan Africa, Central Asia, and the Af-Pak region. Thus, non-state radicalism appears, for the time being, to be giving way to state revisionism, and a more conventional form of militarism in West Asia.*

*The first half of this paper focuses on the causes for the current phase of evident decline in jihadist activity in West Asia, while the second half hones in on the incipient haggling for hegemony between Turkey and Iran which has started to arouse historical strains of imperialist rivalry. In making these propositions, the paper is not oblivious to the outward facade of cooperation within present-day frail alliances; nor does it claim that the stated historical hostilities would invariably manifest in the future. This paper is merely a Rorschach reading of West Asia's shifting sands: that is, the study of a few inchoate trends that might strengthen over time.*

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## Lull in the Jihadist Storm

After major reversals for ISIS in 2019, transnational jihadism seems to be closing in on itself and is developing incipient new strains. The COVID-19 pandemic and the global economic downturn seem to have thrown terrorism off its high perch on the list of major international challenges for the time being. For instance, in the US presidential election debates held late last year, the word ‘terrorism’ was not uttered even once by either candidate, in spite of the terrorist killings taking place in France and Austria around that time[1].

Way back in July 2016, when ISIS held large swaths of Iraqi and Syrian territories, US citizens had polled 3 (in a Pew survey) that they considered terrorism as the second most important issue after the economy for that year’s presidential elections[2]. Curiously, terrorism did not even feature among Pew’s questions to Americans before last year’s presidential elections[3].

Statistics from the recently published Global Terrorism Index (2020) provides us with more evidence on this major shift. Figures show that fatalities from terrorism fell for the fifth consecutive year in 2019 to 13,826 deaths. This represents a 15 percent decrease from the prior year, and a 59 percent fall from 2014 till the end of 2019[4].

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA), Russia and Eurasia, South America and South Asia regions – all recorded falls in deaths from terrorism of at least 20 percent. In fact, seven of the ten countries with the largest increase in terrorism were in sub-Saharan Africa, and not West Asia. Although the Taliban remained the world’s deadliest terrorist group in 2019, deaths attributed to the group declined by 18 percent to 4,990. Some experts attribute this to the effect of peace talks in Afghanistan.

A decline in jihadist violence was also registered in Europe for four years until 2019, which may continue in spite of periodic spikes in terror attacks over political controversies, like cartoon publications, etc. The still unconfirmed death of Al-Qaeda supremo, Ayman Al-Zawahiri, and the gunning down of Abu Muhammad al-Masri, Al-Qaeda’s second-in-command in Iran in 2020, are recent examples accentuating the serious leadership crisis facing the global jihadist movement.

However, the return of Taliban to power, infighting within its ranks, the growing strength of ISIS in Afghanistan, etc. may register a spike in terrorist incidents in the Af-Pak region. Still, the FATF’s increasing economic squeeze on Pakistan could inhibit its support for proxy terrorist groups.

Thus, almost two decades after the 9/11 attacks, Al-Qaeda and ISIS appear to have been stripped off their erstwhile resources or militants to disrupt international peace and security in a major way, in spite of the few surprises they might spring, like the 2019 Easter bombings in Sri Lanka, or a major lone-wolf attack in the West.

In fact, from September 2019 to August 2020, the USA and its allies have also been successful in removing some of the key henchmen of global jihadist groups. These include[5]:

- Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi, the self-styled caliph of ISIS, was killed by the US Special Operations Forces during a raid in Syria on 26 October 2019.
- Abdelmalek Droukdal, head of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, was eliminated by French Special Forces in Mali on 3 June 2020.
- Abdullah Orakzai, the supposed founder of ISIS in Afghanistan, was arrested by Afghan intelligence officials on 4 April 2020.
- Khalid al Aruri, de facto leader of Al-Qaeda's Syrian affiliate Guardians of the Religion Organization, was killed by a US drone strike in Syria on 14 June 2020.
- Earlier, Qassim al Rimi, founder of al-Qaeda's Yemen affiliate, was killed in a US airstrike in Al Bayda Governorate of Yemen on 29 January 2020.
- Again, in November 2020, *The New York Times* reported the gunning down of Abu Muhammad al-Masri, Al-Qaeda's second-in-command, by two Israeli operatives in Tehran[6].
- Unconfirmed reports of Al-Qaeda supremo Ayman Al-Zawahiri's death from natural causes appeared in the noted Saudi daily, *Arab News*, on 20 November 2020[7].

There is no denying that jihadist non-state groups remain a serious threat as they try to re-assert their presence around the world. As the USA continues to shift resources and redeploy troops to new theatres, the Idlib Province in Syria which is in the control of terrorist groups – such as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and the Al-Qaeda-linked Hurras al-Din - can still stir up turmoil in the Levant. Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, ISIS managed to carry out 126 attacks in Syria, and expanded its control in southern Raqqa. It is even feared that ISIS attacks would increase further in the year ahead.

## Internecine Feuds among Jihadists

However, it is noteworthy that bitter infighting among jihadist groups, both in Syria and Africa's Sahel region will continue to dog transnational jihadism in the future, and may become the most potent factor behind its growing unpopularity and decline.

Internecine bloodletting among jihadist groups is not a new phenomenon; still, the extent and intensity of the problem has increased manifold in recent years. Ironically, the biggest split in the Salafi-jihadist ranks came when ISIS was itself thrown out of Al-Qaeda's fold in February 2014[8]. Favouring Abu Mohammad Al Julani (leader of the Al-Qaeda affiliate then titled Jubhat Al Nusra), Al-Qaeda chief Ayman Al Zawahiri disavowed Al-Baghdadi and the ISIS group nearly six years ago, when the latter refused to comply with the head honcho's decision to stop operating in Syria. However, Al-Zawahiri's bonhomie with Al-Julani was also short-lived.

The deep divisions within jihadist groups became evident when fugitive ISIS leader, Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi, tried to take advantage of the feud within Al-Qaeda affiliates - Hayat Tahrir Al Sham (HTS) and Hurras Al Deen in Syria - when he took shelter in the latter's compound, but was killed there by US Special Forces in October 2019[9].

Al-Qaeda and ISIS affiliates are also fighting each other in other hotspots, such as in Yemen and Somalia, as they compete for declining influence, recruits, and resources. However, it is in sub-Saharan Africa that a raging hostility amongst them has claimed many innocent lives as well. There was intense fighting between these groups in Mali and Burkina Faso in the summer of 2020. The broader Al-Qaida-aligned coalition called Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), have been engaged in turf wars and the control of resources[10].

## A Shift Towards 'Post-jihadism'?

There is also a growing public disillusionment with some of the more cherished ideals invoked by jihadist groups over the decades to gain recruits. Although Al-Qaeda often raised the slogan of a Caliphate, it never worked toward its creation, preferring it to remain an idyllic concept in the Muslim imagination. However, ISIS's attempt to practically manifest it exposed the hollowness of the jihadist vision. This seems to have disillusioned the many who migrated and lived in that dystopian reality.

Evidence to this effect comes from many of the returnees from ISIS itself. About two years ago, law enforcement agencies in Europe were apprehensive that a new wave of jihadist attacks would sweep through the continent as ISIS fighters were surreptitiously returning to their countries of origin. After a couple of years, however, experts have found an overwhelming majority of returnees from Syria keeping themselves away from radical activities. In a report published in *The Washington Post* last year, Joby Warrick and Souad Mekhenet reported: "Despite initial fears, an overwhelming majority of the returnees appear to be shunning extremist causes so far, and many avowedly reject the Islamic State and its violent tactics"[11].

In the words of Thomas Renard, a Belgian terrorism researcher and author of a forthcoming study on prison radicalisation, "A number of signs point to disillusionment among returning fighters and released offenders." He adds: "They don't seem to be reconnecting to their previous networks or returning to violent extremist activities. We are seeing reports from the security services that confirm this"[12].

As the scale of atrocities, destruction, and devastation caused by the votaries of jihadism become evident, "the understanding that Islamist ideology cannot solve the region's problems has started resonating", writes Yishai Fleisher in the Jewish News Syndicate. He admits that "post-jihadism has a long way to go, to be sure. But the old thinking is being challenged"[13].

In fact, there is a perceptible shift in public support for peace and reconciliation in the Arab world, even with the traditional 'arch-enemy', Israel. Writing in the noted magazine, *The Spectator*, Jake Wallis Simons points out:[14] The most stunning development has been the change of feeling on the Arab street. Traditionally, levels of anti-Semitism have soared across the Middle East, with a seminal 2014 study finding that 74 percent of adults across the region harboured anti-Semitic beliefs. But as country after country has made peace with Israel, these attitudes have softened significantly. Recent polls report that about 80 percent of Saudis are now in favour of normalization, and 40 percent of citizens across a range of Arab countries want their leaders to take an active role in encouraging peace.

The recent novel coinage 'post-jihadism', used by many commentators like Fleisher, seems to be a derivative of a well-known political trend, already acknowledged and being studied among experts on political Islam as 'post-Islamism'. First propounded by Professor Asef Bayat, the phenomenon has been corroborated and studied by such noted scholars like Olivier Roy in "Le post-islamisme" (in *Revue des Mondes Musulmans et de la Méditerranée*), Henri Lauzire "Post-Islamism and the Religious Discourse of Abd al-Salam Yasin)", and Gilles Keppel 'Islamism Reconsidered'[15]. In his edited volume (2013) titled *Post-Islamism: The Many Faces of Political Islam*, Asef Bayat defines post-Islamism as "political and social conditions where following a phase of experimentation, a rethink about the Islamist project takes place, leading to emphasizing rights instead of duties, plurality instead of a singular authoritative voice, historicity rather than fixed scripture, and the future instead of the past"[16].

A Catherine and Bruce Bastian Professor of Global and Transnational Studies, Bayat contends that the Muslim world is, on the whole, already living in a post-Islamist and post-Jihadist phase in its history, which is obfuscated by the headline-grabbing activities of only a handful of jihadist groups, which are desperate to revive a losing cause.

## Reclaiming of Radical Ideologues

From post-Islamism, the trend seems to be moving towards post-jihadism. In 2018, Julie Chernov Hwang wrote about this dynamic in her compelling book: *Why Terrorists Quit: The Disengagement of Indonesian Jihadists*[17]. Then, there is Omar Ashour's seminal work, *The De-Radicalization of Jihadists: Transforming Armed Islamist Movements*, which corroborated the trend as early as 2009[18].

For many years, these researchers have been suggesting that several jihadist groups have been disbanding or mending their ways even when Al-Qaeda and ISIS were on the ascendant. Prominent among such disbanded groups have been the once-notorious Gamaah al-Islamiyah (GaI) of Egypt, the Armée Islamique du Salut (AIS) of Algeria, the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), Tandheem al-Jihad (TaJ), and Indonesian Laskar Jihad. It is averred that the process of abandoning Islamist militancy has only increased in recent times, while the feedback loops of propaganda and recruitment that allow terrorist organizations to grow have been notably disrupted[19].

Even many violent extremist leaders of the past, like 'the mastermind of Al-Qaeda[20], Sayyid Imam Al Shareef (popularly known as Dr. Fadl), who was a member of Al-Qaeda's top council, as well as the religious guide and associate of Bin Laden and Ayman Al Zawahiri, completely changed his religious and political philosophy. He called on Al-Qaeda and other jihadist groups for a stop to violent jihad activities both in Western and Muslim countries.

In his earlier work, *The Essential Guide for Preparation* (1988) that is deemed as "one of the most important texts in the jihadis' training", he wrote that jihad is the natural state of Islam. Muslims must always be in conflict with nonbelievers".

However, his later book titled *Wathiqat Tarshid Al-'Aml Al-Jihadi fi Misrw' Al-'Alam* (Document of Right Guidance for Jihad Activity in Egypt and the World also translated as "Rationalizing Jihad in Egypt and the World") vigorously proclaims: "We are prohibited from committing aggression, even if the enemies of Islam do that"[21].

Like 'Dr. Fadl', many radical scholars of the past have either completely changed their views on violent extremism and terrorism or have tempered their belligerent ideology to a great extent. For example, former Jordanian member of Al-Qaeda, Abu Qatada, recently spoke out against the killing of women, children, and civilians[22]. Abu Muhammad Al Maqdisi, the dubious mentor of Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi, after his release from jail, has spoken on several occasions against ISIS' barbarity on Jordanian television[23].

In this respect, the efforts of mainstream Islamic scholars and religious institutions, who have been preaching against violent extremism and radicalism, deserves commendation. These include scholars such as Saudi Arabia's Grand Mufti Sheikh Abdulaziz bin Abdullah Al Sheikh; Imam of the Grand Mosque in Mecca Abdul Rahman al Sudais; Egypt's Grand Mufti Shawki Allam; Iraq's top Shiite cleric Grand Ayatollah Ali al Sistani; Mauritanian Professor of Islamic Studies Abdallah bin Mahfudh ibn Bayyah; and many more.

## Arab Spring: Double-Edged Scimitar

Another cause for the apparent decline of jihadism in West Asia is the near zero-tolerance it has received from within Sunni Arab states in recent years. The defining moment that marked a clear break for many Arab countries, particularly Saudi Arabia and other GCC states, against any form of sponsorship or support for Islamist terrorism came in the aftermath of the deeply unsettling 'Arab Spring' upheavals. It was now clearly understood by most Sunni Arab states that radical Islamist ideology is more of an existential threat to these countries than it is a security hazard for the non-Muslim world. It is from this time onwards that these states began to show greater resolve in clamping down on all forms of radical religious organisations, and provided greater support to the global campaign against terrorism. Ironically, Iran has been dubbed as the "state sponsor of terrorism"[24] around the world, even for supporting Salafi-jihadist Al-Qaeda and the forces of the Taliban.

The recent decline in jihadist activity, particularly in West Asia, has also been attributed to the fall in global oil prices. With the price of crude crashing in recent years, the extra wealth in the hands of the private donors as well as some regimes funding terror groups appears to have diminished substantially.

Even the lure of capturing oil wells, which had previously incentivised upstart radical groups to become powerful overnight, does not seem so feasible anymore. For instance, it was the ISIS capture of Mosul city and the oil-rich adjoining area in 2014, which gave it international notoriety overnight, and even helped it capture more recruits and territory across Iraq and Syria. A repeat of that phenomenon seems highly unlikely and less of a windfall today. In fact, the slump in oil prices appears to be in secular decline because of increased production by non-OPEC members, the rise of shale oil, the emergence of non-oil energy technologies, the launch of hybrid cars, etc. [25]

It has also been contended that the presence of US forces in the region has been the main trigger for terrorist violence in the region. The anticipated withdrawal of US forces from West Asia (whether real or perceived) has also reduced the motivation among Arab youth to fight the Western military presence.

In addition, a new generation of Arab leaders, who have received modern education and wish to build a post-oil knowledge economy over an already thriving economic base are charting future policies. This young leadership – led by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman, the Crown Prince of the UAE, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the Amir of Qatar Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, among others – was raised after the historic Six Day War of 1967, and in a geopolitical environment quite different from that of their predecessors. These leaders have witnessed Israel as a powerful West Asian state from the time of their birth, unlike the earlier generation of Arab leaders had resisted its creation in the 1940s. The young Sheikhs are also more dedicated to their newly forged national identities, and they like to identify themselves as Saudis, Emaratis, Qataris, etc. – unlike the previous generation that remained beholden to the larger Arab national identity and causes. Thus, trite ideological slogans invoking Arab and Islamic references fail to resonate with this breed of Arab millennials as much. They have become deeply suspicious of these after the Arab Spring, and are anxious to secure the economic gains derived from oil revenues in order to build an equally prosperous post-oil future[26].

As Saudi Arabia moves ahead with its Vision 2030 economic blueprint, the real security threat to its development goals issues not from Israel but from the revisionist expansionism of Iran, Turkey, and the several jihadist actors in the region. This realisation marks a major shift in the threat perception of most Sunni Arab states, including GCC monarchies, Egypt, and other countries of North Africa.

## Abraham Accords: The Fledgling Semitic Neologism

In fact, the threat of Iran looms large as USA completed its troop-level draw-down to 2,500 each in Iraq and Afghanistan by 15 January 2021[27]. The fact that Tehran already holds greater sway over at least four major capitals of the region – Baghdad, Damascus, Beirut, and Sanaa[28] – and can instigate dissensions and unrest even within GCC states (such as in Shiite majority populations of Bahrain and in some Saudi regions), points to a greater sense of insecurity in the Sunni world – perhaps unrivalled in its history, with the arguable exception of Mongol invasions in the 12th and 13th centuries.

It is this sense of foreboding that has resulted in the coming together of former arch-enemies – Israel and Sunni Arab states - under a Semitic banner to stave off the imperial challenge posed by the neo-Safavid and the neo-Ottoman hegemons. In fact, the moniker ‘Abraham Accords’ seems more exclusivist than inclusive, as the Semitic Israelis and Arabs (purported descendants of Abraham’s grandfather Shem, from where the word Semitic originates)[29] seek to keep out non-Semite Iran and Turkey from their territories.

Another curious astringent to the fledgling neologism-cum-accord is the Israeli-Arab distrust of the USA itself. Both the Obama and Trump administrations[30] have been favourable to the idea of the so-called ‘Pivot to Asia’, which refers to US plans for a shift in its focus away from the so-called Middle Eastern sphere and towards a greater diplomatic, military and economic investment in East Asian countries, some of which are in close proximity to the People’s Republic of China[31]. With US President Joe Biden’s recent appointment of Kurt Campbell (known as the brains behind the ‘Asia Pivot’ concept),[32] as Coordinator for the Indo-Pacific in the National Security Council, it is believed that the new American dispensation would speed up its delayed ‘rebalancing’ *out* of West Asia. This makes the Sunni Arab states -

particularly the GCC sheikhdoms – and Israel highly uncertain about US intentions in being their longstanding security provider. In fact, both Israel and the GCC were critical of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), known commonly as the Iran nuclear deal, signed under the Obama presidency.

When the Trump administration withdrew from the JCPOA in May 2018, these newly reconciled Semitic brothers felt more reassured, and less apprehensive that the USA might be tempted to make Iran a possible US geostrategic ally against Russia and China, at the expense of Israel and the GCC. In fact, the prospect of the Biden administration reviving the JCPOA can be surmised as the bait Trump dangled for these two feuding US allies to normalise relations, and put up a united front against any prospective US-Iran rapprochement. In fact, the Gulf States and Israel have recently asked the Biden administration to grant them a seat at any imminent talks over the revival of an Iran nuclear deal[33]. However, news in the media about the forthcoming release of a US intelligence report on the Khashoggi murder[34], and the adverse views of Biden's incoming team on Israeli settlement activities[35] do not seem reassuring signs to the traditional US allies.

## Iran's 'Land Bridge' to the Mediterranean

In fact, any prospective rapprochement between the USA and Iran would strengthen the latter's rising sway over much of the Levant, and several other theatres across West Asia.

On the pretext of clearing ISIS remnants in Syria and Iraq, Iran is said to have sent in tens of thousands of its military personnel (particularly from its Quds Force) into Syria who, along with Shiite fighters of the Lebanese Hezbollah, have taken direct combat roles in that country since 2012. There are also US reports that Tehran is building a supposed 'land bridge' that links Tehran to the Mediterranean, as it passes through the cities of Baghdad, Damascus, and Beirut.

"The regime continues to seek a corridor stretching from Iran's borders to the shores of the Mediterranean," claimed former US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo. "Iran wants this corridor to transport fighters and an advanced weapons system to Israel's doorsteps"[36]. Former national security adviser, Ambassador John Bolton has also said on record: "Iran has established an arc of control from Iran through Iraq to Assad's regime in Syria to Hezbollah in Lebanon." He claims that this "invaluable geo-strategic position" enhances Tehran's ability to threaten Israel, Jordan, and US allies in the Persian Gulf[37].

Initially dismissed as an implausible proposition, Western assessments began to change in the wake of increasing evidence to the contrary. By early 2018, there was a general consensus on the meaning of "land bridge," even though its significance was disputed. It was then understood as essentially three main road routes cutting through Iraq and Syria, ending at the Syrian coast, southern Lebanon, and even Israel's border. However, since 2019, the 'land bridge' is being understood as a land corridor used for transporting people, resources, and weaponry deep into Iranian-backed militias across various parts of the region[38].

In fact, the stretch of this corridor has extended further eastward, with Iranian Foreign Minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, stating in December last year that the Iranian-trained militia Liwa Fatemiyoun, currently fighting in Syria, might be deployed to Afghanistan to help a future Afghan government with counterterrorism operations[39].

Many commentators liken Iran's 'land bridge' into the Levant and beyond, to the Achaemenid extension into the Mediterranean,[40,41] as well as its growing sway over West Asia as reminiscent of the Parthian and Sassanid hegemony over the region. But, more than the 'land bridge' or 'corridor to the Mediterranean", Iran has, over the decades, developed a worldwide conglomeration of proxies, surrogates and partners, now known as the Iran Threat Network (ITN), which are a major cause of Western concern.

The main poster child of this enterprise is the Lebanese Hezbollah, which by itself maintains a global outreach, with operatives active in several countries as far as central Africa, Latin America, and even Southeast Asian countries. The ITN also has groups trained and supported by the IRGC as well as the elite Quds Force, and includes the Houthis in Yemen, the Shiite militias in Iraq and Syria (part of the Popular Mobilization Forces), and the Afghan and Pakistan Shia militant groups – the Liwa Fatemiyoun and Liwa Zainebiyoun battalions - some of which were transported to Syria in recent years[42].

Today, the ITN is said to be a key pillar of Iranian grand strategy, and its most effective means of force projection. Thus, Iran is able to wield tremendous influence far from its borders to hurt the vital interests of its adversaries.

Iran's revolutionary and revisionist outlook also gets a fillip from its version of Shiite Islamism, which is born out of Ayatollah Khomeini's doctrine of Vilayat-e-Faqih (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist) as well as Shiite millenarianism that envisions the coming of the Awaited Mahdi to liberate Jerusalem.

## Neo-Ottomanism and the Neo-Safavid Antithesis

However, Iran's imperial revisionism in the region finds a major contender in President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey. In 1923, the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of the modern Turkish state came about with the signing of the Treaty of Lausanne. Following this treaty, Turkey oriented itself towards Europe, and geopolitically turned its back on West Asia. However, Turkey's failure in being accepted as a member of the European Union brought in the rule of the Islamist AKP by the turn of the millennium.

Over the last 15 years, the Turkish government under Erdogan has drifted away from the spirit of the Treaty of Lausanne in an attempt to revive a pre-Kemalist Ottoman outlook, showing greater interest in its Islamic identity, and making more ingress in the affairs of West Asia[43].

For instance, in 2020 itself, the Turkish government converted the historic Haga Sophia into a mosque meddled with Greece in the Mediterranean waters, insulted the French president over his counter-terrorism policies, launched a military offensive in support of Azerbaijan in its war with Armenia over the Nagorno-Karabakh region backed Islamist GNA coalition fighting Egypt-backed Haftar forces in Libya, continued its military incursions into Iraq and Syria, hobnobbed with Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Palestinian territories, backed Pakistan premier's vitriol against India, and spurred its military and business influence in countries of Central Asia and Central Africa.

In fact, Erdogan's maverick policies seem to have antagonised not only its erstwhile allies the USA and Israel in recent years, as Turkey seems to be foregoing its NATO commitments and pursuing its own plans at variance with Western interests. It has also emerged as a threat to Russia and Iran, following his support for Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Iran, in particular, has been incensed by the Turkish president's participation in the Azerbaijan victory celebrations over the 'liberation' of Nagorno-Karabkh from Armenia, where Erdogan recited a line from the controversial Azeri poem 'Aras'. The line runs thus: "They tore the Aras [River] and filled it with rocks and sticks, I will not be separated from you. They have separated us forcibly"[44].

Tehran took exception to Erdogan's recitation, with its Foreign Ministry issuing a harsh warning. In fact, both the Iranian government and its media found the recitation an attempt to arouse Azeri-Turkish nationalists to foment separatism among Iran's restive Azeri population. Interestingly, the editor-in-chief of Iranian daily, *Sazandegi*, Mohammad Kuchani, reacted to Erdogan's recitation thus:

As an Iranian, I believe that the only answer to neo-Ottomanism is 'neo-Safivism. [I am not advocating] reviving the Safavi rule (which made many mistakes), but [reviving] a reformed [version of it] and reviving its heritage in the modern age, just as Erdogan shifted from Ottomanism to 'new' Ottomanism[45].

It is noteworthy that, throughout recorded history, Ionian and Persian rulers have fought legendary wars against each other to carve out their empires across much of West Asia – an archetypical rivalry which harks back to the Achaemenid conquests of Cyrus and Darius, followed by the Alexandrian victory over Persia, the Byzantine-Sassanid wars, and the Ottoman-Safavid hostilities.

Therefore, the Russia-backed Turkey-Iran cooperation brought about by the Astana talks in 2017 is already starting to fray at the seams, with both countries objecting to each other's actions in Syria, Azerbaijan, and other places. The rivalry is, in fact, quite old and bitter in that it is believed that Iran's conversion from majority Sunni Islam to Shi'ism was mainly the result of the Safavid dynasty's (1507-1722) opposition to their Ottoman overlords, which led to such extreme animosity that Safavid Iran forged for itself a new and different sectarian identity[46,47].

Thus, even the seemingly religious and sectarian fault lines in West Asia, often have deeper and more hidden nationalist, racial, and historical roots – sometimes predating Islam – which may now re-emerge as the pressure exerted from extra-regional powers gradually lifts from the region and a new wave of historical revisionism rises among old imperial powers. At this time, one can only hope that the incoming Biden administration at the White House manages to heal the deep sectarian and nationalist fissures running through the West Asian geostrategic arena and the regional balance of power is set on a more even keel.

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# *Pandemic Geopolitics and India*

Sitakanta Mishra*

*By now, the world seems to have learned to live with the Corona virus which is likely to cast its spell for some more months. Meanwhile, active and new infection cases have started to decline in many countries, along with a growing momentum in the vaccination drive around the world. Nevertheless, the aftershocks of the pandemic are real. No event since World War II has triggered such distinct global effects on human and state behaviour so rapidly. The pandemic's transformational effects on global affairs are yet to surface fully. While there is no unanimity yet on the ushering in of a new world order, the pandemic's upshot is consequential for the current world order.*

*Will 2019-20 be viewed as another turning point in the geopolitical history of the world? Will 2019-20 be a hinge in human history with an ex-post shift in the core concepts that defined pre COVID-19 world politics? Has a transformation process of the fundamental factors of global politics – like the distribution of power, the calculation of interest, or the constitution of global actors – begun?*

The debate over the pandemic's transformative effects on geopolitics is gradually unfolding. Many argue that the effects of the pandemic will be more sweeping; others think 2019-20 is unlikely to be an inflection point. Undeniably, pandemics and politics are always intertwined and, for most of human history, pandemics have had considerable effects on international affairs.

## Extrapolating the Pandemic-Geopolitics Nexus

Historically, pandemics have altered the geostrategic dynamics of the time they have occurred: be it the spread of plague from Ethiopia to Athens in 430 BC; the French expedition plans in North America which were disrupted by

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the endemic of Yellow fever in Haiti against which the French Armada had no immunity; the epidemic disease that felled Napoleon's 1812 invasion of Russia; the Spanish flu that occurred during 1918-19; or the 2003 SARS outbreak, and the H1N1 pandemic in 2009. All these shook world politics in their time. However, such precedents cannot be extrapolated fully to the current pandemic situation as the COVID-19 effects seems to be comparatively muted, owing largely to contemporary advancements in healthcare systems and global cooperation. Therefore, the pandemic's lasting effects may be minimal, even though the aftershocks of COVID-19 will be real.

Furthermore, it is absorbing to enquire into the state of inter-state relations and global political discourse during the pandemic. Has the common threat of the pandemic helped to improve or to worsen inter-state relations? One can already see the tense relationship between China and the USA owing to their 'trade war' and its worsening conflict dynamics, especially in the accusations and counter-accusations between them regarding the origin and spread of the Corona virus. Ever since the unfolding of the pandemic, US-China rivalry has become intense. The pandemic, therefore, has adversely affected the relations between major powers that were already beset by a variety of pre-existing conditions[1].

Germany has also slapped a 130 billion Euros damage claim on China for its mishandling of the Corona virus pandemic. In response, China has accused Germany's claim as an act of xenophobia and racism. Japan-South Korea relations worsened when Japan decided to quarantine all arrivals from South Korea. This resulted in Seoul questioning whether Tokyo had other motives than containing the outbreak. A similar trend is discernible in the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Russia over oil production and price fixation. Iran, on the other hand, spread the narrative that the virus is an American biological invasion and the result of a conspiracy. Taking cognizance of the worsened conflict dynamics in various parts of the world, the UN Security Council has adopted a resolution demanding a global ceasefire in all the conflicts.

On the positive side, countries hitherto at odds, such as Iran and the UAE, are cooperating at least temporarily. China has reached out to some worst-affected countries in Europe enthusiastically, signalling its strength in trying to provide crisis-time leadership to the world. India has also exhibited its leadership capability to shoulder global responsibility, especially when there is a paucity of global leadership to manage the pandemic. All these developments warrant an in-depth analysis of the dynamics of international politics during the COVID-19 pandemic in general and challenges and opportunities for Indian diplomacy in particular.

The sections that follow delve into the changing dynamics of international relations in the wake of the pandemic, and how India, as a leader in global crisis-management, has manoeuvred diplomatically; what opportunities it brings for India; and what challenges it is facing while driving through this difficult time.

## World Politics amidst the Pandemic

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic since the early months of 2020, a surfeit of scholarly arguments has been advanced on the effects of the pandemic on international politics. Many have confidently predicted that the pandemic would be consequential for the global order which has started to reshape and wilfully transform to its new *avatar*[2]. On the other hand, some other scholars think that the pandemic is unlikely to have transformative effects on international politics: "compared to past pandemics, COVID-19 is likely to be relegated to a footnote in international relations scholarship"[3].

One may not be able to decisively conclude at this point in time whether 2019-20 is the epoch-changing year. However, owing to the pandemic, there are discernible socio-political-economic transformations or breakaways (discussed subsequently) which have now come to be accepted as the 'new normal' in every sphere. Such transformations would facilitate the inception and culmination of a new era in the long-run. Expecting a radical redefining of the balance of power in international politics in the aftermath of the pandemic, as it occurred historically, would be unrealistic since technology prowess and defence preparedness, besides trade, determine 'status consistency', or inconsistency in international politics now. Undoubtedly, the pandemic has adversely affected the global trade and supply chain; but it did not derail the technology drive and the war fighting capability of any major power significantly. Therefore, 2019-20 may not be an inflection point. Rather, as Richard Haass says, it may be just "a way station along the road that the world has been travelling for the past few decades". Trends like waning American leadership; faltering global cooperation; great-power discord, etc. that characterized the pre-COVID-19 world will be "brought into sharper-than-ever relief", which might culminate in a new world order in the long-run. But, in the short-term, the world that will emerge post-pandemic "will be recognizable", and unlikely be radically different from the one that preceded it[4].

Although it is difficult to conclude on the post-pandemic world order – that is, whether "the post-corona virus world is already here"[5] – some broad contours of the post-pandemic world are increasingly evident. According to a Carnegie India report (September 2020), "the pandemic has exacerbated existing geo-economics, geopolitical, and strategic fault lines"[6] globally. Secondly, the role and importance of the state has been increasingly re-emphasized; cross-border movements between and among nations have become more restrictive than before; nationalist sentiments have grown sharper; and protectionism and populist politics have gained more traction. In essence, the pandemic has "reinforced the democratic recession"[7]. "The principal responses to the pandemic have also been national or sub-national, not international" in the true sense[8]. Third, global governance structures, constituting the supranational institutions like the UN and the WHO, are now struggling to mediate the global response to the pandemic. Fourth, no one country or group of countries can claim global crisis-time leadership alone. It is argued that, for the first time since 1989, great power rivalry has, once again, become a defining feature of global politics as the pandemic is exacerbating friction between China and the USA, and the split between them is wide open now.

Undoubtedly, the current state of international politics seems to be under stress as the distribution of power and interests in global society has been adversely affected by the pandemic. First, there seems to be an acceleration of a hegemonic transition between China and the USA. This is visible from the trend in which the USA continues to flounder while China offers supplies and coordination to countries badly affected by the virus. No doubt a Teaching, Research and International Policy (TRIP) snap poll conducted in May 2020 suggests that the majority of IR scholars (54 percent) in USA disagree with the notion that the COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally altered the distribution of power in world politics[9]. However, this is far from the consensus view, as 31.7 percent scholars believe the opposite. In support of the former opinion, analysts argue that China has become "powerful but unliked"[10] the world over, and its soft power has not borne much fruit. The Chinese medical supplies to other countries have been found to be substandard. The USA, on the other hand, became inward looking and could not offer global leadership during the pandemic. However, by rejuvenating its own economy with an injection of US $ 2 trillion (the world's biggest monetary stimulus), it acted as the world's lender of last resort, dwarfing the IMF[11]. In contrast, China still faces harder budget constraints. However, despite the China-USA trade war, and the increase in hostile attitudes towards each other (especially during the Trump presidency), their economic interests are not yet fully decoupled. It has even been predicted that drastic shifts in global supply chains are unlikely.

Historically, rapid shifts in the distribution of power, or the global power hierarchy, have come about only after great power wars, and after the collapse of communism. Will the COVID-19 pandemic lead to great power wars or ideological altercations in the world? The answer to both the suggestions is definitely 'No'. No apocalyptic notion can be traced to this pandemic phase, except, perhaps, a "substantial shock to the post-war order, established by the United States"[12] – that is, the rule-based order predicated on liberal democratic values established seven decades ago now seems challenged.

## Inter-State Dynamics

The most adverse impact of the pandemic can be seen on inter-state dynamics, especially in the context of global cooperation and crisis-time leadership for dealing with the challenges. "Actual responses of states" to the pandemic … are predominantly competitive and self-centred"[13]. In the opinion of Li Haidong, a Professor in the Institute of International Relations, China Foreign Affairs University, published in *Global Times*, the "setbacks emerging in the fight against the virus" are threatening international stability. Global coordination and cooperation among major powers is almost non-existent. In fact, Haidong hints at the USA when he says,

> Some major powers have become self-centred, blindly pursu[ing] national priorities, unilateralism and hegemony. This may not only worsen the situation in their own nations but international concerted efforts to curb the pandemic will also be impacted. The inherent detriments of hegemony and unilateralism are exposed amid the global war against the COVID-19[14].

The absence of international cooperation during a global public health crisis is puzzling. In the midst of the Cold War, the USA and the former Soviet Union cooperated on smallpox eradication. Previously, USA and China have cooperated on a range of issues, including the Ebola outbreak during Barak Obama's Presidency. Coincidentally, when the relative decline of America as a super power is being perceived, no inclination has been shown by Washington to lead the world in this time of pandemic. Will it be logical to argue that the durability, or lack, of cooperation, is dependent on the hegemonic decline? There is no indication yet whether the USA wants to play the role of a benign hegemon.

With rising multipolarity in the economic arena, the hegemon could become less willing and able to provide public goods. The rising challenger itself may not be inclined to do so either. The United States, beset by its own struggles, clearly has no appetite for leadership on the corona virus[15].

In other words, "the corona virus pandemic is shaking bedrock assumptions about US exceptionalism. This is, perhaps, the first global crisis in more than a century where no one is even looking for Washington to lead"[16]. Meanwhile, "the strict adherence to alliances as a dominant force in the international order is losing appeal"[17]. For example, the US-China trade war has brought to the fore the dilemma in Japan: how to preserve economic cooperation with China while avoiding tensions with the USA, which is the only credible security guarantor in the region. Japan has to find balance between the two, and not devote itself solely to its alliance with America.

The idealistic expectations from countries to concertedly deal with the crisis do not really work. "Previous epidemics and pandemics didn't alter the conflictive nature of global politics, and COVID-19 is unlikely to change the fundamental nature of it, which is the pursuit of power"[18]. Rather, competitive dynamics of the current world order prompt states to adhere to self-dealing and predatory behaviour, and not cooperation. Mutual vulnerability in recent years has been weaponized by states, with countries trying to use others' dependency on them to extract benefits for themselves. It may be observed that powerful nations have instrumentalized the corona virus pandemic in their rivalry. For example, in the wake of COVID-19 pandemic, to keep oil prices at moderate levels as a dramatic drop occurred in oil consumption, "Saudi Arabia orchestrated a worldwide decrease in oil production." But, when Russia refused to reduce oil production, Saudi Arabia triggered an oil price war in March 2020, leading to oil prices becoming negative in April 2020, despite US pressure on both sides to end the hostility[19].

The COVID-19 pandemic seems to be a testing time for international politics. In a way, the pandemic is testing the legitimacy of the present global order, and the crisis-leadership ability of its chief protagonists, especially the USA and other Western powers. First, it is testing the agility of the domestic governance of nation-states – the prime actors in the international system. Secondly, it is also questioning the relevance of global governance structures and institutions erected in the name of 'lasting global peace and development' in the post-World War II period. And third, it has revealed the inability and unwillingness of the existing 'super powers' to muster a global response to a global crisis. So far, in all these respects, the current world order has faltered.

In addition, today the global governance structure centred around the UN and the Bretton Woods system has been under serious stress and has been subject to manipulation during the last few decades by their champions themselves. The obstruction of the UNSC meeting to discuss the pandemic-related issue by China, and the WHO position regarding China's dealing with the pandemic, have renewed the longstanding debate about whether the world body is "sufficiently independent to allow it to fulfil its purpose". These and many such instances in the past give rise to a perception that the current global governance structure has become inept, and therefore, warrants a complete overhaul.

A global power vacuum appears to have emerged. Given the fact that all major powers are consumed with internal problems, they have become inward looking while fighting the pandemic. All are aware of the fact that no nation is powerful enough to provide global 'crisis leadership' at the moment. The absence of American leadership to manage the pandemic provides a new opportunity for Moscow and Beijing. China is already asserting its leadership aggressively as the USA falters. But many also feel that 'China as world leader' just died, given the massive negative impacts of its efforts to be helpful. Given the change of political leadership in America, one has to wait and watch if there will be any change in Washington's strategy in the future.

Moreover, during this time of paucity in global leadership, will the world see the arrival of a new super power to lead the new world order? Will the United Nation Security Council (UNSC) arrive at a consensus to recompose the high table by accommodating a new influential power like India which is wilfully shouldering at least some crisis-time leadership?

## New Geopolitical Dynamics in the Post-Pandemic World

There are many other indications of new geopolitical dynamics which are still unfolding. The sections that follow recognise nine overlapping symptoms to identify the broad contours of the post-pandemic world order[20]. They are not all likely to engulf the global sphere all at once; rather their gradual unfolding would herald the historic moment "when the world changes permanently, when the balance of political and economic power shifts decisively, and when, for most people, in most countries, life is never quite the same again"[22]. These symptoms are listed below.

### Spread of Authoritarianism

Given the right-wing political upsurge and consequent authoritarian political trends in various parts of the world today, it would be safe to assume that the post-COVID-19 world order will be marked by a relative decline of democracy, along with the legitimizing of authoritarianism. In the name of prompt implementation and the containment of the pandemic, political authorities and the administrative machinery have used discretionary powers. Visibly, "democracies being hampered by inherent inefficiency and political division[s]" have been proved ineffective in dealing with crisis situations in comparison to the authoritarian systems[22]. Democratic decline and increased political centralization have led to the concentration of power and could come to mark the 'new normal'. "The trend towards centralised, authoritarian rule is evident in many countries. Some are now attempting to weaponise the virus for political ends," writes Simon Tisdall in *The Guardian*[23]. In essence, the post COVID-19 order will nurture "a world that is less open, less prosperous, and less free"[24].

## The Retreat of Hyper-Globalisation

A downturn in the Western economies leading to a global depression has culminated in protectionism and authoritarianism in different parts of the world. International bodies designed to safeguard public health appear weak and unable to contain the crisis, and alliances with transatlantic partners are fraying as nations turn inwards and close borders. It would safe to assume that the post COVID-19 world will be a re-aligned world, with a "retreat from this phase of hyper-globalisation, as citizens look to national governments to protect them, and as states and firms seek to reduce future vulnerabilities"[25]. On the one hand, the world may see "increased post-pandemic protectionism if, as some predict, countries attempt to limit future exposure to global threats."[26] The re-globalized world ("Globalization 2.0" as Robert Kaplan names it)[27] will be marked by the emergence of

> …great-power blocs with their own burgeoning military and separate supply chains, … the rise of autocracies, and … social and class divides that have engendered nativism and populism, coupled with middle-class angst in Western democracies. In sum, it is a story about new and re-emerging global divisions…[28].

Robert Kaplan sees "the corona virus pandemic as an economic and geopolitical shock", "the historical marker between the first phase of globalisation and the second … In sum, it is a story about new and re-emerging global divisions"[29]. "The primacy of the states, state sovereignty, state borders, border controls seems to loom large … and health and demographic security concerns are virtually tormenting statesmen and policymakers alike"[30].

## Towards a Virtual Civilization

The post COVID-19 world will nurture a "virtual civilization"[31] as the physical mobility of people is significantly curtailed, and will remain so during the foreseeable future. Most nations would be reluctant to support and facilitate human migration anymore. It has been seen how many European and West Asian countries have pushed back migrants in the recent past. As far as the control of the pandemic is concerned, the only effective method is 'social distancing' and the restriction of movement. During such a situation, connectivity through virtual platforms or the cyber domain is the only medium which has grown exponentially and is sustaining the globalised world. While social or physical distancing is the 'new normal' or *nom de guerre*, virtual cohesion and capability will shape and drive global discourse from now onwards. But, the world is likely to confront a new dilemma: *of how to make the virtual reality*, as it is prone to intense manipulation and disguise.

## Crisis-Generated Alliances

The post-pandemic world will see the shifting and formation of alliances on the basis of crisis-time cooperation, and the blame game involving the source of the outbreak of COVID-19. While conspiracy theories involving the virus origin and spread have worsened the China-USA rift, the pandemic-time collaboration might prompt strange alliances and counter-alliances elsewhere. The split between the two is wide open; which way it would escalate is a matter of concern. Logically, the world will see coalitions for fighting the pandemic. The leading countries with advanced virology expertise will rally around to form a super-league to fight the pandemic, as was the case in the 'global war on terror'.

## The Global Bio-Defence Regime

Within the prism of the new apprehension of biological warfare and conspiracy theories about the corona virus, the building of a permanent bio-defence force would be a national security imperative in the post COVID-19 global security discourse. The ninth review Conference of the Biological Weapons Convention is scheduled for November 2021 where an assessment might be undertaken by state-parties on how the COVID-19 situation would be managed from the biological weapons standpoint[32]. The reinforcement of the biological convention with an additional verification mechanism might be pressed upon the regime, or a new regime would take shape. Besides, the post-COVID-19 global discourse would press for a multilateral bio-defence regime, with mandatory compliance mechanism to monitor national pandemic prevention policies, measures, and commitments.

## India: The Emerging Power

If human history codifies the COVID-19 outbreak as an epoch-changing event that shook the global balance of power, India will be placed on a high pedestal. Post-pandemic, the global power hierarchy may not remain the same, and the redistribution of global power is unfolding. It would not be far-fetched to argue that there is enough scope for nations who have been relatively resilient in fighting the pandemic, and shouldered crisis-time global responsibilities. India has shown such a leadership quality even as all other major powers have become inward looking. India's message for the world is that it is willing and prepared, within its limited resources and capabilities, to undertake responsibilities in preserving and promoting the global common good[33]. The initiatives New Delhi has shouldered so far "underline India's commitment to become a credible global player", says S. D. Muni[34].

Besides, there are many other transformative trends that have emerged as offshoots of the pandemic that might complicate the global order, if not addressed early. The pandemic has put "hard security threats between nations back into the spotlight. The geopolitical rivalry between the great powers is likely to worsen as the American and Chinese economies become less interdependent"[35]. A trend of intensifying conflicts and increased insecurity has been observed, as "policy responses to the pandemic give opportunities to state and non-state actors alike to tighten or advance their power and undermine their opponents while leaving civilians more exposed and vulnerable"[36] to violence. Else, this pandemic "might be a harbinger of larger shocks to come"[37]. Sensing this, the UN Secretary General, António Guterres, made an unprecedented demand for "a general and immediate cessation of hostilities in all situations", and called for a global ceasefire of all hostilities[38]. The call raises hope that the pandemic might serve as a catalyst for the cessation of armed hostilities.

## India's Crisis-Time Global Leadership

Even though international cooperation to address the pandemic concertedly seems grim at the moment, and the global situation itself is in a state of flux, the crisis is ripe with opportunities for countries like India to showcase its global leadership capabilities, and resolve. In fact, India has demonstrated that it is a responsible member of the global community by bringing "its domestic requirements and global responsibilities in sync"[39]. India's pandemic response and diplomacy has so far been steadfast. It has gone the extra mile in extending its cooperative hands to whoever is in need.

**Global Health Crisis-Leadership**

When the paucity of global leadership was palpable across the world, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi called the SAARC conference on Covid-19, and suggested a coordinated response among the SAARC neighbours to combat the virus at the regional level. The video conference of SAARC leaders, in which Pakistan was also on board, welcomed Modi's proposal. Modi proposed the creation of a Covid-19 emergency fund, with India making an initial contribution of US $10 million[40]. Prime Minister Modi also proposed the setting up of 'rapid response teams' of doctors and specialists, and arrange for testing equipment, besides imparting online training to emergency response staff so as to build capacity to fight such challenges across the region. "Modi's initiative came much before any other such regional initiatives and drew a positive response not only from regional states but also from countries like the USA and Russia as well as the World Health Organisation"[41].

**Faith in Rule-Based Order**

A close observation of India's diplomatic activism in the wake of the pandemic reveals that India has expressed its commitment to a rule-based global order and multilateralism. It took the difficult task of resurrecting a couple of moribund and obsolete platforms to present a united front against the pandemic[42]. Prime Minister Modi became the first global leader to call for a G20 summit via video conferencing to advance "a coordinated response to the COVID-19 pandemic and its human and economic implications." This was accepted by Saudi Arabia, the current chair of the G20. In the Extraordinary Virtual G20 Leaders' Summit, he underscored,

> the need to put human beings at the centre of our vision of global prosperity and cooperation, freely and openly share the benefits of medical research and development, develop [an] adaptive, responsive and humane health care systems, promote new crisis management protocols and procedures for an interconnected global village, strengthen and reform inter-governmental organisations like WHO, and work together to reduce economic hardships resulting from COVID-, particularly for the economically weak[43].

Similarly, in the NAM platform, Prime Minister Modi also highlighted how India has promoted coordination in the neighbourhood; and ensured medical supplies to partner countries, including 59 member countries of NAM. Moreover, he called on the leaders to help usher in a new globalisation for the collective well-being of humankind, and have a multilateral focus on promoting the shared interests of humanity.

**India as the Pharmacy of the World**

While catering to the explosive demand for drugs and medical supplies, India stood by 150 countries through initiatives such as Operation Sagar and Operation Sanjeevani, and through these proving itself to be the "pharmacy of the world"[44]. India's Rs. 1 billion COVID-19 medical assistance plan targets 90 countries[45]. In addition, India has undertaken tangible humanitarian measures like the evacuation of nationals, the supply of medical resources and support teams, and, above all, moral support to the needy while managing huge challenges at home. While evacuating its own nationals stranded in parts of the world, India has also extended this support to nationals from Maldives, Myanmar, Bangladesh, China, the USA, Madagascar, Sri Lanka, Nepal, South Africa, and Peru[46]. Requests for emergency medical equipment from Bhutan and the Maldives have also been responded to by India. India provided 15 tonnes of medical supplies worth Rs. 2.11 crore to China on 26 February 2020[47] for which China has expressed its appreciation[48]. India has exported 90t of medical protective equipment to Serbia under the guidance of the UNDP. Most importantly, as part of India's measures to assist neighbouring countries in dealing with the COVID19 pandemic, "six Navy ships have been kept ready and five medical teams are on standby by India for deployment in the Maldives, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, and Afghanistan when required", as the Ministry of Defence has said in a statement[49]. This brings to the fore India's political will and capability to secure those in the vicinity.

## Vaccine Diplomacy

As Harsh Pant has pointed out, given India's comparative advantage over China in vaccine manufacture and distribution, New Delhi now "can play a crucial role in health and safety in an increasingly interdependent world. …The world's pharmacy is looking to inoculations to build friendly ties around the world - and compete with China."[50] Committing to its crisis-time leadership resolve, India is reaching out first to its South Asian neighbours as a goodwill gesture with free shipments of the vaccine developed by the Serum Institute of India to Bangladesh, Nepal, Myanmar, Seychelles, Bhutan, and Maldives.

It also plans to supply the same to countries beyond the neighbourhood – like Brazil, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and South Africa.[51] This proves how India has become a leader in the bio-revolution, having the capability to cater to the demands of the entire world. It must be acknowledged that the External Affairs Ministry has efficiently converted pandemic challenges into opportunities "to do away with what has not been working and adapt systems to a changed external environment".[52]

## Conclusion

Undeniably, India has walked a fine diplomatic line during the global health crisis, and its diplomacy has ably tried to turn the pandemic into an advantage for New Delhi's leadership to be felt globally. This is not to discount the enormity of the pandemic India is facing at home. Owing to the huge population and inadequate medical resources at its disposal, the days ahead will be tough for India. However, India has "managed to bring its domestic requirements and global responsibilities in sync", and showcased how India is a silent global player with new ideas, enlightened leadership, and can be a balancer in the global balance of the power game. It would not be farfetched to vouch that India would be the linchpin for rebooting or resetting the global order and international cooperation in the post-pandemic phase.

The pandemic, in fact, is a testing time for the resilience of global powers and, in the process, most of them have faltered so far. Even if drastic a transformation in the world order in vogue may not occur immediately, the emergence of a global power is not an aberration. In all calculations, India has made its way through, especially during the pandemic. India has arrived as a formidable power in the world that the pandemic has just reshuffled, or is in the process of overhauling. It is expected that India's position in the UN Security Council as a non-permanent member during 2021-22 will be utilized tactfully to fructify its clarion call for 'human-centric globalization' – a new form of globalization, which is based on fairness, equality, and humanity in the post-Covid world – and its new orientation for a reformed multilateral system (NORMS) to sustain its arrival.

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## BOOK REVIEW

Achal Malhotra, ***The South Caucasus: Transition from Subjugation to Independence***, (New Delhi, ICWA / Macmillan Education, 2020), Pages: 248, Price: Rs. 2,215.00.

The South Caucasus region (Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia) has been largely neglected by Indian policy makers and academia. The recent conflagration in Nagorno Karabakh has brought some attention to the area. Hence, this is a timely book. It is a commendable effort to introduce the region to Indian students of International Relations (IR), and those who are interested in India's foreign policy towards this strategically important area which is gaining importance as many of the connectivity projects, including those promoted by India (INSTC) and China (BRI), pass through this area. The South Caucasus is at the crossroad of Asia and Europe, and significant oil reserves make the region important for energy supplies.

The good thing about the book is that while it aims to introduce the region, it also focuses on its complexities. After a brief introduction to the region, the author traces its historical development over one and half centuries, especially its socio-economic and political transformation under the Soviet system, and the events leading to its demise. He then discusses the complex political and economic development of the three states since the Soviet disintegration in 1991.

It has been well pointed out that, despite belonging to the same geographical space and with an intertwined history, the three countries have followed different trajectories in their domestic, political, and economic development, and especially their foreign policy, during the last thirty years. In the initial years after independence, all three countries sought to build a market economy, a multiparty competitive political system, and sought to improve relations with the USA and Europe - although the extent and degree of their engagement with the USA, Europe, and Russia varied with the passage of time. Georgia has been most eager to join Euro-Atlantic structures (for example, the European Union and NATO), while Armenia and Azerbaijan have followed a more complex policy. Azerbaijan has tried to keep aloof from the rivalry between Russia and the West. While seeking greater economic and trade ties and more investment and technology transfers from

West, it has faced problems on the issue of democracy and human rights in view of the nature of its polity (institutionalised and personalised family rule). Despite its over dependence on Russia, Armenia has tried to balance its ties with the EU. Major developments in the three countries in the initial twenty-five years of their evolution have been covered in adequate detail in this book. The complexities and difficulties of transition, political instability, and civil wars have also been documented very well.

The author deals with the two lingering/simmering conflicts in the area: the breakaway regions of Abhkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia, and the Nagorno Karabakh dispute between Azerbaijan and Armenia. The book provides a lot of information about the antecedents and factors behind these conflicts. The roles of Russia and other powers have been discussed. It makes a prognosis about oil rich Azerbaijan's military build-up, and its desire to make territorial gains against Armenia - something that was proved right by subsequent events. However, a greater discussion of the Soviet nationality policy, which created this problem in the first place, would have been very useful. Critics say that the Soviet nationality policy, which was complex and at times contradictory, paved the way for the subsequent conflict,. They accuse Soviet leaders of paying lip service to the principle of national self-determination, while actually adopting a divide and rule policy with the nationalities.

The fundamental problem, according to the author, is not the ethno territorial but two conflicting principles: the territorial integrity of states, and the right to self-determination. Another reason which makes any settlement difficult is that all parties have taken maximalist positions which makes compromise and resolution difficult to achieve. While the Abhkhaz, South Ossetian and Nagorno Karabakh Armenians want nothing less than complete secession from their respective states, Georgia and Azerbaijan are willing to offer some autonomy, at best. Factors which led to the recent conflagration have been discussed at length.

Another contribution of the book is that it brings out great power politics in the past, and at present. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Ottoman, Persian, and Russian empires tried to control the area, in which the latter got the upper hand. Since the Soviet disintegration, Russia, the USA and the EU are competing in the military, strategic, economic, and ideological arena. The USA/EU wish to make the end of Communism irreversible, liberate the region from Russian dominance, and promote a market economy and Western style democracy. Russia does not have ideological motives, but security concerns - that is, limiting the presence of adversarial powers. One can argue that Turkey and China might have been given more space in view of their increasing role and presence.

The last two chapters deal with India's ties with the region during the past and at present. The Indian settlements in Armenia during ancient times and the Fire temple, together with an Indian Caravan Sarai near Baku during medieval time has been well documented. The book also talks about the presence of Armenian traders in India, especially in Calcutta, and their departure around the time of India's independence. The author is quite candid in admitting that the region has not been on India's foreign policy radar. Its relations have been uneven with the three countries: quite warm with Armenia (with three Presidential visits), not very friendly with Azerbaijan, and no embassy in Tbilisi (Georgia). The reasons have also been discussed. Azerbaijan's support for Pakistan's position on Kashmir, and Georgia's difficult ties with Russia have come in the way. There is no clearly articulated Indian policy towards the region. The author rightly maintains that, in view of India's emerging global status and ambitions, the country should be engaging more with the three states.

All in all, this is an interesting and comprehensive narrative, and a must read for students of IR and Indian Foreign Policy.

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S. Narayan and Sreeradha Datta (Eds.), ***'Bangladesh at 50: Development and Challenges',*** (New Delhi, Orient BlackSwan, 2020), Pages: 292 Price: Rs. 829.00 (HB), Rs. 509.00 (PB)

The emergence of Bangladesh as an independent state in 1971 was preceded by large scale violence committed against the Bengali population of erstwhile East Pakistan that led to the launch of the Liberation War. Although the bloody Liberation War culminated in an independent Bangladesh, the newly founded nation was left with a fragile economy, and a devastated infrastructure to cope with thousands of homeless people, widespread disease, alarmingly high levels of malnutrition, and starvation. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the founding father of Bangladesh, popularly known as Bangabandhu, had a dream of making his country *Sonar Bangla* - a prosperous nation - free from poverty, hunger, and all sorts of exploitation. Since Bangabandhu had high regard for state-led and state-owned growth processes, he decided to establish economic institutions such as the Planning Commission and launched the first Five-Year Plan in 1973.

The first Five-Year Plan was intended to reduce poverty, and increase the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth rate to 5.5 percent per annum, and the per capita income at 2.5 percent per annum. The plan failed to live up to the expectations of both the leadership and the people. Indeed, the situation became quite problematic in the Fall of 1974 when a famine swept the country and hit the lowest strata of the society quite hard. At this stage, sceptics painted quite a bleak picture of Bangladesh's future. Henry Kissinger, the then US Secretary of State, was one of those sceptics, and he infamously termed Bangladesh as a "Bottomless Basket." Throughout the 1970s, the country could post only a depressingly 2-3 percent GDP growth, with per capita income hovering around US$ 200. In order to meet the growing socio-economic challenges at home, adequate mechanisms, and a workable strategy was the much-needed requirement. Leaders and policymakers decided to introduce economic reforms, and liberalise the economy. Such reforms were aimed at strengthening market forces at home on the one hand, and integrate the economy with the rest of the world on the other. These measures proved helpful as, during 1980s, the Bangladeshi economy grew at around 3.5 percent per annum. This was followed by an average growth of 4.5 percent during the first half of the 1990s, which further improved in the second half to reach 5.0 percent. Such an impressive performance was recorded at a time when a devastating flood ravaged the country in 1998. Ever since, Bangladesh has never looked back, and continued to march on the path of development and prosperity. Prior to COVID-19, the economy was growing at over 7.0 percent.

It is at this crucial juncture that S. Narayan and Sreeradha Datta have come up with an edited volume which analyses Bangladesh's development, and challenges it faces. The volume is composed of eleven chapters, and an "Introduction" by the editors. The first five chapters deal with Bangladesh's performance in the areas of economic growth and development. Chapter six and seven discuss socio-political issues and women empowerment, respectively. Chapter eight focuses on militancy, while chapter nine explores issues related to energy and development. Chapter 10 analyses five decades of India-Bangladesh relations, whereas chapter 11 focuses on Bangladesh's foreign policy.

In the very first chapter, Mustafizur Rahman analyses the impressive track record of Bangladesh's resilience, business, entrepreneurship development, economic growth, and socio-economic progress. He argues that Bangladesh's impressive score card is built on her ability to attain a consistently high pace of economic growth one the one hand, and of good performance in areas of development indicators on the other. The overall result of all these is reflected in the country achieving dual graduation: from being a Low-Income Country to a Lower Middle-Income Country in 2015 as per the criteria set by World Bank; and from having the Least Developed Country status to achieving Developing Country status in 2018, according to criteria set by the United Nations.

In the fourth chapter, S. Narayan underlines the role played by Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) and various multilateral agencies in helping Bangladesh overcome a number of developmental challenges. The country was heavily dependent on aid in its initial years, and most of its development needs were financed by grants received through multiple development partners, such as USAID, UNDP, World Bank, ADB, UNFPA, DFID, JICA, AUSAID, GIZ, CIDA, etc. No one can ignore the contributions of the Grameen Bank to deliver credit to small enterprises as well as BRAC's initiatives in education in general, and women's education in particular.

In the third chapter, Selim Raihan discusses the importance of the Ready-Made Garment (RMG) industry in the overall economic growth of the country. The RMG has been the flagship export product of Bangladesh. At home, the RMG sector provides employment to at least 3.5 million people, and is responsible for a significant chunk of foreign exchange earnings. An interesting fact about the RMG industry is that women account for over 60 percent of the workforce. In the second chapter, Amitendu Palit cautions about the challenges that are expected to come with Bangladesh's dual graduation. The success story of Bangladesh is closely linked to its effective use of the non-reciprocal market access available to LDCs. Once Bangladesh graduates to a Middle-Income Country, these benefits would cease to exist. This would bring about new sets of challenges, and might result in losses in export earnings.

In the sixth chapter, Sreeradha Datta critically analyses Bangladesh's politico-social fabric. She raises certain pertinent questions regarding democracy and political stability in the country. She underlines the fact that the Bangladeshi polity is still very much dominated by dynastic politics. Weak political institutions, and the absence of a strong political opposition has given rise to unaccountability, and a poor law and order situation. Violence, both organised and unorganised, is visible at almost every level of society, which sometimes gets out of control. Observers believe that there are visible signs of social fragmentation, especially due to the violence against minorities, such as the Chakmas and the Hindus. Sreeradha Datta also points towards the continuing violence against women in a country that has consistently been ruled by women leaders. This assertion is also supported by Amena Mohsin in the seventh chapter in which she exclusively focuses on women's empowerment and development in the country. However, she also points out that Bangladesh has make remarkable progress in terms of narrowing the gender gap in different areas.

In chapter 8, Amit Ranjan and Roshni Kapur focus on militancy in Bangladesh. They argue that the narration of the 1971 Liberation War has been one of the country's biggest problems as it has divided various ethnic groups of the country. A section of the population appears to be intolerant towards other religious groups. In recent times, social media has provided people avenues to express their public ire against people of different religions, and this often threatens the minorities. The authors also point out that some of the militant groups have built linkages with international terrorist outfits.

The presence of millions of Rohingya refugees in the country is something that, many observers believe, has the potential to fuel instability not only in Bangladesh but in region as a whole. Sheikh Hasina has, of course, taken measures to address the issue of radicalisation among the youth, and to keep a check on the spread of militancy. However, it seems the nation needs to do much more. Without active regional and international cooperation, it will not be easy for Bangladesh to deal with such complex issues.

Shamsher M. Chowdhury analyses Bangladesh-India relations in the tenth chapter. Like many others, he too notices that India-Bangladesh relations become smooth whenever there is an Awami League government in power. The only exception in this context was the period when Moraraji Desai became the Prime Minister of India in 1977. At this time, there was a Non-Awmai League government at the helm in Dhaka, and yet the bilateral relations were pretty good. Chowdhury suggests that India-Bangladesh relations become problematic during the Non-Awami League dispensation at the helm, especially under Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). During this period, issues like water-sharing and the killing of Bangladeshis on the border by the Indian

Border Security Force (BSF) pop up, and receive greater attention. There is a perception in Bangladesh that India has been biased in favour of the Awami League. More or less, perceptions are same in India about Non-Awami League governments, that they prioritise relations with China.

The book covers many aspects of Bangladesh's growth story, and how the country overcame various challenges on the way. India's contribution in the success story of Bangladesh, could have been covered in greater detail. Similarly, more in-depth study of recent developments in China-Bangladesh relations could have added value. Overall, it is a good book, and a must read for those having an interest in developments in Bangladesh and South Asia.

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