

## Turbulence in West Asia: Implications for India

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American activist and political philosopher Martin Luther King famously argued, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” A parallel can also be drawn regarding the outcome of injustice, which is conflict. It is a fact that conflict anywhere poses a threat to peace everywhere. This ‘threat to peace’ becomes particularly relevant and urgent when conflict arises in a nearby region, often described as an “extended neighbourhood”. This situation holds true for all countries, and India is no exception. The developments in West Asia over recent months have raised significant concerns for policymakers in New Delhi. West Asia has never been a metaphorical island of peace. Protracted conflicts, artificial state formations, colonial legacies, and sectarian tensions have been defining features of the region. Recent incidents such as the terrorist attack on Israel by Hamas, Israel’s ground offensive in Gaza, missile exchanges between Iran and Israel, and attacks on shipping vessels by Houthis in the Red Sea have escalated tensions in West Asia to new levels.

The region has always been susceptible to the influence and interference of external powers, with its history shaped more by states outside West Asia than within it. Since the third decade of the twentieth century, the US became a significant player in the region, defining its trajectory. While it continues to

exert influence, its role as the foremost external actor has significantly diminished, opening the door for other players like Türkiye, Russia, and China to assert themselves. Their presence has had a profound impact and thus demands serious scholarly attention. For India, the region holds critical importance due to its energy security, diaspora, remittances, regional aspirations, and external security concerns.

This paper will first define the concept of the extended neighbourhood in the context of India and then examine the roles of the US, Türkiye, Russia, and China in shaping the politics of West Asia. The next section will address the pivotal issue in West Asia, the Israel-Palestine conflict. Subsequently, it will delve into its current dynamics and discuss the major challenges and opportunities in West Asia for India.

### West Asia as India’s Extended Neighbourhood

West Asia is considered by many scholars as part of India’s extended neighbourhood. The concept of an “extended neighbourhood” encompasses India’s projection of power through cultural and ideological ties, alongside military strength and economic influence. Over time, this concept has expanded to encompass India’s geographical boundaries, extending to the east, south, north, and west. This

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broader perspective is often described as a comprehensive “360-degree vision” of India’s opportunities beyond South Asia, which some perceive as economically and politically limiting. During the first NDA government under Atal Bihari Vajpayee, the idea of the Extended Neighbourhood gained prominence, emphasising that India’s interests and engagements extend well beyond South Asia to include both its immediate and additional neighbours.<sup>1</sup> Subsequent governments have continued to endorse this concept, with the Modi government particularly enhancing efforts to bolster India’s influence in its extended neighbourhood.<sup>2</sup>

### **Tracing the Role of US in West Asia**

The United States’ involvement in West Asia has been complex and varied, driven by a combination of geopolitical objectives, economic interests, and ideological considerations. While US engagement in the region dates back to the early twentieth century, it became significantly more pronounced during and after World War II. A major catalyst for US involvement in West Asia was its strategic imperative to secure access to oil reserves. Consequently, strong alliances were forged with oil-rich nations in the region, including Saudi Arabia and Iran. Throughout the Cold War, West Asia was viewed by the US as a crucial theatre in its global struggle against communism.

A pivotal event in US-West Asia relations was the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948. The United States played a key role in facilitating Israel’s creation and has maintained a robust partnership with the nation ever since. However, in recent years, there has been a gradual reduction in US involvement in

the region. This shift in policy has been influenced by factors such as domestic political pressures, evolving global dynamics, and a reassessment of strategic priorities in West Asia. Furthermore, the United States’ decreased engagement in West Asia has created opportunities for other countries like China, Russia, and Türkiye to increase their influence and fill the void left behind.

### **Türkiye as a New Player in West Asia**

Another key actor that has emerged as critical in West Asian affairs is Türkiye. Over the last two decades, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has worked to establish Türkiye as a significant force in West Asia, exerting power and pursuing its own geopolitical objectives. During the past decade, Türkiye’s involvement in West Asia has been characterised by confidence, aspirations for regional dominance, and evolving partnerships. Türkiye’s pursuit of EU membership, with limited success, has prompted increased engagement in the West Asian region.

A pivotal aspect of Türkiye’s role in West Asia has been its involvement in the Syrian crisis. Türkiye has supported multiple opposition factions in their resistance against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, providing military and logistical support. Another significant factor contributing to Türkiye’s influence in West Asia has been its connections with Islamist organisations. Under Erdogan’s leadership, Türkiye has cultivated relationships with Islamist governments and groups in the region, such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Hamas in Palestine.

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## Russia's Engagement with West Asia

For nearly a decade, Russia has been competing with the US to regain influence in West Asia, a position it hasn't held since the Soviet era. In 2015, Russia significantly escalated its involvement in the region by supporting Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's government during the country's devastating civil war. This support from Russia and Iran effectively prevented the collapse of the Assad regime and thwarted Western efforts, particularly those led by the US, to establish a pro-Western government in Syria.

Russia's strategic sale of advanced weaponry, including fighter jets and air defense systems, not only generates revenue but also enhances Moscow's leverage and influence in nations that purchase these systems. Iran, Syria, Iraq, and Egypt are among the significant customers of Russian defense equipment.<sup>3</sup>

Although Moscow has refrained from forming official alliances in West Asia, it has sought to gather and cultivate strategic allies that advance its objectives, including mitigating its global isolation resulting from the conflict in Ukraine. Moscow and Iran have strengthened their relationship, particularly in the realm of defense. Iran has been supplying Moscow with significant unmanned combat aerial vehicles for its conflict efforts in Ukraine.

Facing economic isolation due to sanctions from the US, EU, Japan, and others, Russia has been cultivating relations with West Asian countries to access essential supplies like microchips and gain entry into their financial and commercial markets.<sup>4</sup>

Russia's once amicable ties with Israel have noticeably deteriorated, with the country now publicly

supporting Hamas. This stance reflects Russia's pronounced pro-Palestinian position in the ongoing Israel-Palestine conflict, part of a broader geo-strategic plan to cast the US, Israel, and the West as responsible for the situation while positioning Russia as a peacemaker. Russia's West Asia policy aims for strategic alignment with its interests while avoiding unnecessary commitments.<sup>5</sup>

## China as the New Peace Broker in West Asia

China's engagement in the region can be traced back primarily to the Iran-Iraq war, during which it supplied weapons to the combatants. However, after the war, its influence in the region waned. As part of its foreign policy, China has traditionally refrained from interfering in the internal affairs of other nations. Nevertheless, there has been a noticeable shift in its foreign policy approach in recent times. At the 2022 Boao Forum for Asia's annual conference, Xi Jinping introduced a new initiative called the Global Security Initiative (GSI). The GSI statement marks a departure, advocating that China should be seen not just as a provider of goods but also as a peacemaker, emphasising its strategic importance alongside its economic significance. This initiative also indirectly challenges the rationale behind initiatives like the Quad and the Indo-Pacific strategy.<sup>6</sup>

In 2023, Saudi Arabia and Iran announced the normalization of ties mediated by China, issuing a joint trilateral statement confirming an agreement between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran. The agreement focuses on resolving internal issues to ease tensions without external

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involvement, aligning with China's alternative global security strategy. However, China's mediation in the Riyadh-Tehran peace process is driven by strategic interests rather than purely altruistic motives, particularly given the Gulf's significance to China's economic and energy interests.

China has invested billions of dollars in Gulf projects to support its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and secures a substantial portion of its energy supply from the region. Despite sanctions, Iran remains China's third-largest oil supplier, following Saudi Arabia. Joint ventures like Aramco-Sinopec further illustrate China's efforts to meet its energy demands. China's role as a mediator in the Saudi-Iran agreement underscores its strategic objective of using initiatives like the Global Security Initiative (GSI) to exert influence in West Asia as a counterbalance to the US.

It should be noted that, like other parts of the world, West Asia is also witnessing an ongoing power struggle between the US and China. The primary reasons for the US's dominant presence in the region have been to protect Israel, combat terrorism, prevent nuclear proliferation, maintain military bases, and supply weapons to allies such as Saudi Arabia. The established diplomatic and political hegemony of the US is now facing a challenge from China's increasing influence. The recent Saudi-Iran deal is a clear indication that China's rising influence in West Asia will contest US dominance and its capacity to shape the region's stability and politics.<sup>7</sup>

## **Israel-Hamas Confrontation and The Palestinian Question: The Elephant in the Room**

The recent confrontation between Israel and the Palestinian Hamas Movement has once again drawn global attention to West Asia, an area fraught with ancient conflicts and complex geopolitical dynamics. The wars in this region offer valuable insights into the intricate political landscape that defines the area. The October 7, 2023 attacks by Hamas terrorists on Israel and Israel's subsequent response highlight a shift in warfare dynamics—from traditional battles between national armies to prolonged engagements against non-state actors. It also underscores the ongoing challenges faced by Israel and the US in adapting conventional tactics to counter unconventional threats posed by groups like Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthis.

The current conflict between Israel and Hamas has debunked several misconceptions prevalent in the region. Initially, Israel's 'divide-and-rule' strategy towards the Palestinians appeared effective until October 7, 2023, when the dynamics shifted. Despite deals struck with Hamas, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's dismissal of the Palestinian Authority (PA) as negotiation partners underscored Israel's evolving challenges. There was a prevalent belief that global interest in the Palestinian cause had waned, assuming Palestinians were too divided and oppressed to pose a credible threat to Israel. However, the escalating conflicts in Gaza have proven otherwise, reigniting hostilities and demonstrating that the Palestinian cause remains potent and capable of catalysing renewed violence in the region.

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Moreover, the recent confrontations and the responses of Arab states, particularly the UAE and Qatar, have disrupted the previously calm relations that had developed between Israel and the Gulf states over the past decades. These relations were vigorously supported by the US and motivated by a shared concern over Iran's influence. The 2020 Abraham Accords, signed between Israel, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Morocco, laid the foundation for a burgeoning regional security alliance. Discussions on normalisation with Saudi Arabia also indicated progress in this direction. However, the absence of Gulf states in recent events has left Israel and a US-led coalition to contend with Iranian proxies such as the Houthis in the Red Sea region on their own.<sup>8</sup>

### **India and West Asia: Challenges and Opportunities**

India's strategy towards West Asia has undergone significant transformation over the years. Following independence in 1947, India initially pursued a primarily geopolitical strategy focused on cultivating positive relations with Muslim-majority countries in the region to counter potential influence from Pakistan. Energy security was not a major consideration in India's engagement with West Asia during this period, despite its reliance on the region for energy supplies.

However, starting from the 1970s, India's approach to West Asia began to pivot towards economic concerns and energy demands. The oil crises of the 1970s and subsequent economic growth in the Gulf region prompted India to shift its diplomatic focus towards oil-rich countries in West Asia.

In the post-Cold War era, India's foreign policy in the region evolved further, becoming more pragmatic due to economic reforms and advancements. Economic factors now play a crucial role, outweighing political rhetoric in shaping India's strategy towards the volatile region. Since assuming power in 2014, the Modi government has prioritised West Asia, fostering high-level visits and expanding relations beyond oil to encompass defense, space cooperation, pharmaceuticals, infrastructure, and more. West Asia presents both challenges and opportunities for India, influencing its strategic engagements and economic interests in the region.<sup>9</sup>

### **India's Contemporary Focus in the West Asian Region**

India's West Asia policy is built upon three key pillars: Gulf Arabs, Iran, and Israel. Notably, none of these three entities trust each other and often find themselves in conflict. Balancing relations among them has been challenging yet crucial for India's national interests. Energy security ranks as a top priority for India, aiming to ensure a stable and reliable long-term energy supply. India has become the world's third-largest consumer of energy and is poised to increase its consumption further in the coming decades. West Asian countries have traditionally been India's primary suppliers of crude oil, with Iraq emerging as the largest supplier in 2023, followed by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

India views territories in West Asia, particularly the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Iran, as preferred

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trading partners. Trade volumes between India and these nations have consistently risen. West Asian countries perceive India as a rapidly expanding economy capable of competing with major global economies. Currently, India is negotiating a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to enhance economic ties with West Asian countries. India also seeks to attract Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) from wealthy Gulf nations, which have significant potential for investment across various sectors in India, yielding mutual benefits.<sup>10</sup>

In recent years, Israel has emerged as a crucial defense partner for India, with bilateral ties strengthening notably under the Modi government. India's proximity and collaboration with Israel are also underscored by their participation in the newly formed regional group I2U2 (India, Israel, UAE, and US).

India and West Asian countries are increasingly concerned about the threats posed by Islamic extremism, terrorism, and maritime piracy. Consequently, they are focusing on enhancing military cooperation and collaborative efforts to combat these challenges. There is a growing apprehension regarding the escalation of criminal activities, illicit financial flows, and unlawful trafficking of weapons between the two regions.

India has entered into defense cooperation agreements with several countries in the region, including the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Oman, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia. These agreements aim to facilitate military training, joint exercises, cooperation in military medical services,

collaborative development and production of advanced military equipment, as well as defense science and technology exchanges. Both India and West Asian nations have been affected by the recent increase in piracy incidents in the Indian Ocean, particularly in the Gulf of Aden. India considers the security of the Indian Ocean vital due to the large number of oil tankers that transit through these waters. Indian navy vessels have been deployed to deter piracy activities in the region.

Safeguarding the interests of the Indian diaspora, which comprises around nine million individuals, is a significant aspect of India's strategic objectives in West Asia. The Indian diaspora in the Gulf region plays a crucial role in contributing to foreign currency reserves. India is the world's leading recipient of remittances, as reported by the World Bank on Remittances and Migration. According to the Reserve Bank of India, from 2014 to 2020, the Gulf region accounted for an average of 28 percent of total remittances sent to India. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia are the primary sources of these remittances due to the substantial Indian expatriate communities residing there.<sup>11</sup>

India's outreach to West Asia has shifted in recent years from bilateral engagements to sub-regional and regional interactions, adopting new strategies. One notable initiative is the India Middle East Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), a connectivity project introduced in 2023 during the G20 summit in New Delhi, involving the UAE, Saudi Arabia, India, and several Western nations. IMEC



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aims to revolutionise integration across Asia, Europe, and West Asia by enhancing efficiency, reducing costs, securing regional supply chains, increasing trade access, fostering economic cooperation, creating employment opportunities, and cutting greenhouse gas emissions. Despite the ongoing Israel-Hamas conflict delaying its implementation, member nations remain committed to the project. For example, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and UAE authorities signed a framework agreement during Modi's recent visit to the UAE to facilitate IMEC's progress.

Furthermore, India seeks enhanced cooperation with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), offering more opportunities for Indian companies with substantial investments in the region. Over the past decade, China's economic and strategic influence has grown significantly in West Asia through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), while Pakistan's influence has waned due to internal economic and political challenges. India faces new challenges as regional players pursue their own "Act East" strategies and seek strategic alignments that avoid taking sides between China and India. Amidst competition among regional powers and the global repercussions of conflicts such as Israel-Hamas and Israel-Iran, West Asia will continue to play a pivotal role in shaping India's foreign and security policy framework.

Countries in the region look to India to play a larger role globally, commensurate with its status as a major power, and trust its prudent and benevolent foreign policy approach grounded in

strategic autonomy. Therefore, rather than merely facilitating dialogue among conflicting parties in the region, India could consider taking concrete actions and acting as a mediator to mitigate disagreements. Deploying Special Envoys to assess the situation and reassuring allies in West Asia that New Delhi is prepared to take proactive steps would be highly beneficial. While success is not guaranteed given the complexity of regional issues, making efforts to defuse tensions is inherently valuable.

Effectively leveraging soft and smart power is crucial to harness the region's historical ties. This approach aligns with the objectives of regional powers like Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which are pursuing significant socio-economic reforms alongside more inclusive, secular, and humane policies. A recent example is the donation of land for and opening of a Hindu temple in Abu Dhabi. To promote stakeholder engagement through reciprocal investments in key economic and business sectors, focused efforts are essential.

Addressing the growing challenges posed by non-state actors and terrorist groups demands a robust and comprehensive strategy in intelligence, security, and defense. India's strong track record of secularism and pluralism can serve as a counterbalance to aggressive actions by members of organizations like the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), such as Pakistan. India must also remain vigilant regarding potential shifts in West Asia's geopolitical landscape, such as the emergence of CRIPTAQ (China, Russia, Iran, Pakistan, Türkiye, Afghanistan, and Qatar), which

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could significantly impact India's regional outreach efforts.<sup>12</sup>

The frequency and intensity of Houthi rebel attacks at sea, spanning from the Northern Indian Ocean to the Red Sea, have significantly increased. Recently, Indian commercial ships have been targeted in these attacks. Consequently, due to the Red Sea situation, more than 90% of India's cargo bound for Europe, the US East Coast, and North Africa is now being rerouted through the Cape of Good Hope route. Freight costs have surged substantially, sometimes up to six-fold, affecting all shipments, particularly those involving low-value, high-volume, and perishable items. Given India's heavy reliance on crude oil and petroleum imports, this crisis could adversely impact efforts to stabilise fuel prices. Currently, India has issued a Navy warning and deployed destroyers and warships to patrol the Red Sea, Gulf of Aden, Central, and North Arabian Sea. The Modi government has instructed the Indian Navy to take proactive measures and has intensified maritime surveillance.

## Conclusion

Conventional wisdom suggests that for a state to achieve global power status, it must transition from moral principles to pragmatic strategies, abandoning ethical considerations. However, India, as a civilisational state, has demonstrated that it can maintain moral high ground even in high-level negotiations. This stance is evident in India's West

Asia policy over the past decade, where the country has made significant strides. While upholding humanitarian causes such as Palestinian statehood, refugee issues, peaceful dispute resolution, adherence to international laws, and providing humanitarian aid during disasters, India has also pragmatically prioritised its own interests. This includes maintaining a de-hyphenated approach between Israel and Palestine, supporting Israel against terrorism, balancing relations between regional rivals like Iran and Saudi Arabia, advocating for the Chabahar port project in Iran despite US sanctions threats, and pursuing mini-lateral initiatives such as the I2U2 group.

West Asia is undergoing profound changes, and recent events have shattered the perception of regional stability, alliance formations, and geopolitical dynamics. The region lacks a dominant authority and is in a state of transition. Notions of a post-American West Asia and the strength of newly formed alliances have given way to a more complex reality where conflicts persist and the Palestinian cause gains prominence. West Asia remains a challenging and dynamic geopolitical puzzle that requires deeper understanding and challenges conventional wisdom. The threats of Islamic terrorism, instability, piracy, and oil price shocks continue to pose challenges for India as it aspires to become a Vishwa Guru. Therefore, India must remain vigilant, proactive, and pragmatic in navigating the complexities of West Asia.



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