

Analysing India's Look West Policy: A Study of Modi government's Strategic Shift Towards Middle East

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Abstract

India's foreign policy under the Modi government has witnessed a noticeable recalibration with a pronounced emphasis on its "Look West" strategy, particularly towards the Middle East region. This study aims to delve into the intricacies of India's evolving diplomatic engagement with Middle Eastern countries under Modi's leadership. By employing a multidimensional analytical framework, the research investigates the underlying drivers, objectives, and outcomes of India's strategic shift towards the Middle East. It examines the historical context, geopolitical dynamics, economic imperatives, and socio-cultural linkages that have shaped India's policy orientation in the region. Furthermore, the study assesses the impact of India's enhanced diplomatic overtures, economic partnerships, and defence collaborations on its regional influence, security interests, and broader foreign policy objectives. Through a comprehensive analysis of official documents, policy statements, scholarly literature, and empirical data, this research aims to provide valuable insights into the complexities of India's Look West policy and its implications for regional stability, global geopolitics, and India's aspirations for a more prominent role on the world stage.

Keywords: Look west policy, strategy, political.

Introduction

In the realm of international relations, the strategic orientation of nations plays a pivotal role in shaping global dynamics and regional stability. India, as one of the world's largest democracies and a rising power, has been actively redefining its foreign policy outlook under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. One significant aspect of this recalibration has been the Modi government's pronounced emphasis on its "Look West" policy, particularly towards the Middle East region. This strategic shift marks a departure from India's traditional focus on its immediate neighbours and signals a deliberate effort to expand its diplomatic footprint and leverage in the geopolitically crucial Middle East.

The Middle East has long been a crucible of geopolitical rivalries, economic interests, and cultural exchanges, making it an area of strategic importance for global powers. Against this backdrop, India's renewed engagement with the Middle East under the Modi administration warrants thorough analysis and examination. This study aims to delve into the intricacies of India's evolving diplomatic, economic, and security ties with countries in the Middle East, elucidating the drivers, objectives, and implications of its Look West policy.

By adopting a multidimensional analytical framework, this research seeks to explore the historical context, geopolitical imperatives, economic motivations, and socio-cultural linkages that underpin India's strategic reorientation towards the Middle East. Moreover, it aims to assess the efficacy of India's enhanced diplomatic overtures, economic partnerships, and defence collaborations in advancing its national interests, bolstering regional stability, and consolidating its position as a major player in global affairs. Through a comprehensive examination of official documents, policy pronouncements, scholarly literature, and empirical evidence, this study endeavours to shed light on the complexities and nuances of India's Look West policy. It seeks to unravel the strategic calculus guiding India's engagements with Middle Eastern nations, discern the challenges and opportunities inherent in this endeavour, and discern the broader implications for India's foreign policy objectives, regional dynamics, and global aspirations. In essence, this research endeavours to contribute to the scholarly discourse on Indian foreign policy and Middle East studies by offering critical insights into the Modi government's strategic shift towards the Middle East and its ramifications for India's position in the international arena..

Pre-election 2014: India and Middle East

Following the Cold War, the disintegration of the Soviet Union, which had been India's major ally—led to the development of India's Look West policy. With the United States emerging as the predominant global power, India was compelled to recalibrate its international relations. Simultaneously, India's economic model, formerly centralized under state control, faced exposure to market forces and globalization, becoming the primary drivers of economic activity.

The imperative for India to foster economic growth heightened its reliance on the Middle East, both for energy imports and for the deployment of Indian labour, whose remittances played a crucial role in India's economy. Especially, countries like Iran, Qatar and Saudi Arabia became indispensable suppliers of hydrocarbons.¹ The influx of Indian workers into Gulf states surged, particularly from southern regions such as Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and Kerala, with a majority securing employment in low-wage sectors like construction.²

Acknowledging the growing Indian expatriate community, the government instituted the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs in 2004. By 2018, the Indian population in Arab Gulf states alone had soared to 8.5 million.³ Significantly contributing to global remittances, which rose from \$64 billion to \$79 billion between 2012 and 2018.⁴ Over time, Indian leaders grasped the potential for these Gulf countries to offer

¹ Iraq continues to India's top oil supplier, imports from US rises 4-fold. *The Economic Times*, May 1, 2019, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/industry/energy/oil-gas/iraq-continues-to-be-indias-top-oil-supplier-imports-from-us-rises-4-folds/articleshow/69129071.cms>. Mohammad Sinan Siyech. India-Qatar Relations: Navigating Turbulent Seas. *Middle East Institute*, April 09, 2019, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/india-qatar-relations-navigating-turbulent-seas>.

² Rhea Abraham. India and its Diaspora in the Arab Gulf Countries: Tapping into Effective Soft Power and Related Public Diplomacy. *Diaspora Studies* 5, 2 (2012): 124-146. DOI:[10.1080/09739572.2013.807544](https://doi.org/10.1080/09739572.2013.807544).

³ S. Irudaya Rajan, V.J. Varghese, and M.S. Jayakumar. *Dreaming Mobility and Buying Vulnerability: Overseas Recruitment Practices in India*. (London: Routledge, 2011).

⁴ <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/nri/forex-and-remittance/india-highest-recipient-of-remittances-at-79-bn-in-2018-world-bank/articleshow/68788815.cms?from=mdr>. Accessed on 22 February, 2024.

more than just oil and gas,⁵ their amassed wealth presented opportunities for foreign investment.⁶ This realization likely influenced the Indian government's cautious stance during the Arab uprisings of 2011, as evidenced by its abstention from the UN Security Council vote on imposing a no-fly zone over Libya and its ambivalence towards the conflict in Syria. Despite voting for sanctions, India opposed any measures aimed at regime change, reflecting its pursuit of a balanced approach to regional dynamics.⁷

Modi's Strategy and Western Outlook

India's Middle East policy framework, established prior to Modi's assumption of office in 2014, remained largely unchanged during his tenure. However, the new administration under Modi's leadership accentuated the existing "Look West" strategy by placing heightened emphasis on three primary focal points: the Arabian Gulf states, Israel, and Iran. India's relationship with the Arab Gulf states has changed significantly over the years, but its interactions with Israel and Iran are relatively new, having occurred mostly in the 1990s. Historically, India maintained a tepid rapport with Israel, aligning itself with Arab states and the Palestinian nationalist cause during the Cold War era. This stance was influenced significantly by domestic considerations, including the Arab states' support for India's policies in Muslim-majority regions like Jammu and Kashmir and efforts to appease the substantial Muslim population within India.⁸

With the passing of time, these factors became less important. The increasing communication between Arab nations and Israel in the 1990s, as well as the Oslo peace process fostering talks between Israel and the Palestinians, minimized the significance of the Israeli-Arab conflict both in the region and among the Indian Muslim community. Additionally, India faced mounting challenges from critical resolutions concerning its administration of Jammu and Kashmir by the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), comprising several Muslim-majority Arab states. In contrast, Israel exhibited a greater degree of sympathy towards India regarding the Kashmir issue. Amidst the US's threat of an arms embargo during the Kargil crisis in 1999, Israel emerged as a significant ally by substantially increasing its arms supply to India. Notably, from 2000 to 2015, the bilateral arms trade between Israel and India amounted to over \$2.2 billion.⁹

Given that it is among the Middle East's most sophisticated and technologically advanced economies, Israel's appeal goes beyond transactions involving weapons and might potentially lead to increased prospects for value-added trade and investment. Narendra Modi made history in July 2017 when he became the first Indian prime leader to visit Israel. Modi and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu

⁵ <https://www.mei.edu/publications/india-qatar-relations-navigating-turbulent-seas>. Accessed on 22 February, 2024.

⁶ <https://www.mei.edu/publications/think-west-go-west-origins-and-implications-indias-west-asia-policy-under-modi-part-ii>. Accessed on 22 February, 2024.

⁷ R .P Kumaraswamy. *Reading the Silence: India and the Arab Spring*. (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 2012). pp. 14-16.

⁸ Richard Ward, West Asia In Indian Foreign Policy. PhD Dissertation, University of Cincinnati, 1970. Aariz, Mohammed. Demographic Dividend and Indian Muslims-1, *Milli Gazette*, June 4, 2013. Religious census 2011, <https://www.census2011.co.in/religion.php>.

⁹ Guy Burton. Rising Powers and the Arab-Israeli Conflict since 1947. *Israeli Journal of Foreign Affairs*. (Lanham: Lexington, 2018) pp, 243-245. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23739770.2019.1660948>. Rajendra Abhyankar. The Evolution and Future of India-Israel Relations. Daniel Abraham Center for International and Regional Studies Research Paper 6 (March 2012). <https://www.tau.ac.il/humanities/abraham/india-israel.pdf>.

had talks during the visit, which resulted in the signing of agreements for cooperation in space exploration, agriculture, and international development. The visit may have weakened the status and influence of the Palestinian cause in India's foreign policy, a development that was made worse by the Arab Gulf countries' growing rapprochement in late 2018, as seen by the UAE and Oman's hosting of Israeli officials.¹⁰

Similar to its dealings with Israel, India's interactions with Iran encompass both national security and economic considerations. Indian policymakers perceive relations with Iran not solely as vital for energy procurement but also as a strategic avenue to bolster India's security interests in Central and South Asia. This includes efforts to counterbalance Pakistan, India's principal rival, while also providing a counterweight to China's expanding regional influence. For both Iran and India, the strategy to curb Pakistan's influence traverses through Afghanistan, where militant groups pose threats that extend beyond national borders.¹¹

In 2003, India and Iran initially reached an agreement to collaborate on enhancing trade and transportation connections across Central Asia, with a focus on directing them towards Iran's Chabahar port located on the Indian Ocean.¹² However, it would require an additional ten years before the two parties could come to an agreement with Afghanistan, ultimately achieved in 2016. The advancement of Chabahar port and its accompanying infrastructure holds significance for India in two primary aspects. Firstly, it facilitates easier access to oil imports from Iran. Secondly, it potentially serves as a counterbalance to Chinese trade and development initiatives in Central Asia and the Middle East, particularly those linked with its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Specifically, Chabahar presents an alternative to China's endeavours aimed at extending influence in the region, including its initiatives to enhance the port of Gwadar on the Pakistani side of the border.¹³

Mapping Obstacles in Implementing the 'Look West' Policy

Although Modi has made attempts to strengthen relationships with the Arab Gulf, Israel, and Iran, there are potential obstacles and dangers associated with each.

Initially, Israel's enhanced relations with the Arab world might not remain stable. If there were to be another intifada or a resurgence of backing for the Palestinians from the broader Arab populace, it could compel Gulf regimes to reconsider their current warming towards Israel.¹⁴

Should such a scenario occur, India's position could also become vulnerable due to its increasing alignment with Israel.

¹⁰ P.R. Kumaraswamy. India's New Israel Policy. SWP Comment (Berlin: German Institute for International and Security Affairs. No. 11, 2019).

https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2019C11_kumaraswamy.pdf.

¹¹ ISIL expands its reach in Afghanistan, threatening the West. *Al Jazeera*, June 10, 2019. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/6/10/isil-expands-its-reach-in-afghanistan-threatening-the-west>. Accessed on February 27, 2024.

¹² Sujata Ashwarya. *India-Iran Relations: Progress, Problems and Prospects* (London: Routledge. 2017): Meena Singh Roy. Iran: India's Gateway to Central Asia. *Strategic Analysis* 36, 6 (2012). pp, 957-975.

¹³ Shawn Amirthan. What are India, Iran, and Afghanistan's Benefits from the Chabahar Port Agreement? *Strategic Analysis* 41, 1 (2017). pp, 87-93.

¹⁴ Omar Rahman. What's behind the relationship between Israel and Arab Gulf states? Brookings Institution, January 28, 2019. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/whats-behind-the-relationship-between-israel-and-arab-gulf-states/>.

Additionally, India's involvement with Iran regarding the Chabahar port is improbable to eliminate the option of Pakistan and China. One reason for this is the relatively limited scope of India's endeavours in Central Asia and the Middle East, especially when compared to China's extensive Belt and Road Initiative. Present evaluations suggest that China has already poured around \$68 billion exclusively into the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and approximately \$200 billion into all other associated projects up to now.¹⁵ Additionally, there's a possibility that India's aspirations could become obsolete, particularly if Iran and Pakistan manage to resolve their differences and collaborate to connect their ports, as they have asserted.¹⁶

Lastly, the endeavours of India could be obstructed by other influential nations like the United States. The agreement between India and Iran concerning Chabahar has faced numerous delays, partly due to the sanctions imposed by the US on Iran. A considerable portion of these sanctions targeted Iran's nuclear program, which seemed to exhibit advancement in 2015 following the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) by the P5+1, consisting of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany.

India initially supported the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), seeing it as a way to boost trade and collaboration with Iran. However, in May 2018, the US pulled out of the JCPOA and reinstated sanctions. At first, India, a major purchaser of Iranian oil, was granted an exemption, but this waiver ended in May 2019. As a result, the Gulf region has become more unstable. Iran, purportedly attempting to pressure other JCPOA signatories, allegedly carried out attacks on several tankers, including a British-flagged vessel with predominantly Indian crew, on July 19.¹⁷

India, finding itself in a challenging position, ultimately obtained consular access to its citizens.¹⁸ Nevertheless, the occurrence highlighted another obstacle for India in the Middle East: the susceptibility of its citizens and economic assets. In response, India has dispatched two warships and surveillance aircraft to the Gulf to safeguard its maritime activities. However, it has clarified its stance by opting not to participate in the coalition led by the United States in the region.¹⁹ The choice made by India could also indicate its internal strains with the United States, particularly evident in the escalating trade dispute between the two nations.²⁰

Fourth, India is vulnerable to regional conflicts over which it has little influence, as the confrontation between the United States and Iran has shown. The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran is particularly noteworthy, as is the blockade of Qatar spearheaded by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The

¹⁵ Andrew Chatzky and James McBride. "China's Massive Belt and Road Initiative," Council on Foreign Relations Backgrounder, May 21, 2019. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chinas-massive-belt-and-road-initiative>.

¹⁶ Mir Sherbaz Khetrar. Gwadar and Chabahar: Competition or Cooperation. *Strategic Studies* (Islamabad) 38, 2 (2018): 43-55.

¹⁷ Steven Erlanger. "Iran Links British Seizure of Oil Tanker to Ailing Nuclear Deal" New York Times, July 28, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/28/world/europe/iran-tanker-britain-nuclear.html>.

¹⁸ Nandika Chand. Indian Crew From Detained British Tanker Stena Impero Given Consular Access By Iran. *International Business Times*, July 26, 2019. https://www.iisajournals.ir/article_110962.html.

¹⁹ Sanjeev Miglani. Indian warships to stay longer in Persian Gulf, but won't join U.S. coalition. July 18, 2019. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-iran-india-idUSKCN1UD22S/>.

²⁰ Trade war: India and USA must address issues as early as possible, says Indian envoy, The Hindu. July 17, 2019. <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/news/trade-war-india-and-usa-must-address-issues-as-early-as-possible-says-indian-envoy/article28506643.ece>.

rivalry for influence in the area is the main cause of these disputes. Furthermore, because Iran and Qatar support Islamist groups, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have misgivings about them. Additionally, Israel charges Iran of aiding Hezbollah and Hamas in their attacks against Israel.

India was under pressure to support a certain side during the most recent round of the Qatar dispute in the middle of 2017. Nevertheless, it chose to maintain its neutrality in order to maintain business relations with both sides. Though thankfully these never happened, there were worries at the same time about possible retaliation against Indian people.²¹

Looking Ahead

The fact that the Qatar issue has not had any detrimental effects is evidence of India's deep involvement in the Middle East, which has continued under several Indian governments and includes Modi's Look West policy. Politically, Delhi has maintained a low profile, whether dealing with the Arab uprisings or Iran's nuclear affairs and the JCPOA, while actively pursuing economic opportunities. Presently, India's Look West policy appears effective, but its sustainability remains uncertain. The current approach benefits from the region's evolving structural dynamics. Unlike in the past, when India had a limited presence during the Cold War and the 1990s dominated by US influence, today's landscape is more intricate. US authority, while still present, faces competition from other major players like China and Russia, the latter notably involved in the Syrian conflict.²² The Middle East has transitioned into a more multipolar landscape, characterized by the presence of numerous regional and international actors sharing power. Amidst this complex scenario, India has adopted a strategy aimed at maintaining equilibrium amidst the various rivalries and interests at play. However, as power dynamics shift and consolidate, the room for such balancing acts may diminish, potentially closing the current window of opportunity.

²¹ Naser Al-Tamimi. The Gulf crisis: Why is India still neutral? Arab News July 29, 2017. <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1136101/columns>.

²² Mehran Kamrava. Multipolarity and instability in the Middle East. *Orbis* 62, 4 (2018): 598-616; and Francesco Cavatorta. International Politics of the Middle East. in Ellen Lust (ed.). The Middle East 13th ed. (Washington DC: CQ Press, 2014): 341-370.