Bharat and West Asia: Strategic Engagement and Emerging Partnerships in an Era of Regional Crisis

Taqdees Sajad* & Alam Musheer*

Abstract

West Asia's persistent instability, ranging from the Israel-Palestine conflict and post-conflict reconstruction in Syria and Iraq to humanitarian emergencies in Yemen, has reshaped the strategic calculus of external powers, including India (Bharat). This review article examines the trajectory of India's engagement with West Asia, tracing its evolution from a transactional relationship anchored in energy security and diaspora welfare to a multidimensional strategic partnership encompassing trade, defence, connectivity and cultural diplomacy. Drawing on secondary literature and government sources, the article analyses India's "Think West" policy, its de-hyphenated ties with Israel, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Cooperation Council states, and its participation in minilateral frameworks such as the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor and I2U2. It further situates India's approach against the backdrop of China's expanding footprint in the region and examines the domestic and diplomatic costs of sustaining strategic autonomy amid deepening polarisation. The article argues that India's approach is best understood through the lens of strategic autonomy and issue-based engagement, which allows New Delhi to balance competing regional rivalries while safeguarding its core interests in energy, remittances and maritime security. The study identifies emerging challenges, including the volatility triggered by the Israel-Iran confrontation, disruptions to the Red Sea shipping corridor, and the vulnerability of nearly nine million Indian expatriates in the Gulf, and offers policy-oriented recommendations for consolidating India's position. The article concludes that sustained, adaptive and multi-vector diplomacy will be essential for Bharat to consolidate its

* *Research Scholar, Faculty of Law, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, India, alammusheer342@gmail.com*

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position as a credible stakeholder in West Asia's evolving security architecture.

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Introduction

West Asia occupies a pivotal position in global geopolitics on account of its energy reserves, its location at the crossroads of Asia, Africa and Europe, and its centrality to international trade and diplomacy. The region continues to be characterised by persistent political instability, armed conflict, humanitarian emergencies and shifting strategic alignments, from the Israel-Palestine conflict and the aftermath of the Gaza war to reconstruction challenges in Syria and Iraq, the humanitarian catastrophe in Yemen, and instability in Lebanon.

For India, historically termed the "extended neighbourhood," these overlapping crises are not distant events but developments with a direct bearing on national interests, given the region's centrality to India's energy imports, remittance inflows and the welfare of a diaspora exceeding eight million people. The region supplies a substantial share of India's crude oil and natural gas, hosts the largest concentration of Indian expatriate workers outside South Asia, and lies astride the maritime and, increasingly, overland corridors through which a growing proportion of India's trade with Europe and Africa flows. Any disruption in West Asia, whether military, economic or humanitarian, therefore transmits rapidly into India's domestic economy and society, making the region a matter of first-order strategic concern rather than a peripheral foreign policy theatre.

Since 2014, India's engagement with West Asia has undergone a marked transformation. What was once a policy dominated by energy procurement and diaspora management has evolved into a comprehensive strategic engagement encompassing defence cooperation, investment, connectivity infrastructure

and cultural diplomacy. This shift has been described in the literature as India's "Think West" policy, a conscious effort to elevate the region's standing in India's foreign policy hierarchy alongside its long-established "Look East" and "Act East" orientations. The renewed emphasis has coincided with, and arguably been accelerated by, the very instability that might otherwise be expected to induce caution: successive crises have compelled India to develop more sophisticated, resilient and multi-track mechanisms of engagement rather than retreating into a narrowly transactional posture.

This article undertakes a review of India's evolving strategic engagement with West Asia against the backdrop of the region's contemporary crises. It examines the historical foundations of the relationship, analyses the key pillars of contemporary engagement, discusses emerging minilateral partnerships, situates India's position relative to China's expanding regional footprint, assesses the risks that regional volatility poses to India's interests, and concludes with policy-oriented reflections. The article draws on existing scholarship, government reports and policy analyses to construct an integrated account of a relationship that is simultaneously deepening and being tested by the region's turbulence.

Historical Foundations of India-West Asia Relations

India's ties with West Asia predate independence, rooted in centuries of trade across the Arabian Sea and the movement of people, goods and ideas between the Indian subcontinent and the Gulf littoral. In the post-independence period, India's approach to the region was shaped by the imperatives of Non-Alignment, solidarity with Arab and Palestinian causes, and a cautious posture towards Israel that persisted for over four decades.

Formal diplomatic relations with Israel were established only in 1992, reflecting the complex balancing act New Delhi sought to maintain between its ties with the Arab world, its historical support for the Palestinian cause, and its emerging strategic and defence interests. The normalisation of ties with Israel did not, however, entail a corresponding recalibration of India's Palestine

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policy; successive Indian governments have continued to affirm support for a negotiated two-state solution even as defence, agricultural and technological cooperation with Israel has deepened, illustrating an early instance of the compartmentalised, issue-based diplomacy that would later come to define India's broader approach to the region.

Energy security has long constituted the bedrock of India's West Asia policy. Saudi Arabia, Iraq and the United Arab Emirates rank among India's largest suppliers of crude oil, while Qatar remains a major source of liquefied natural gas. This dependence has historically inclined Indian diplomacy towards a cautious, non-interventionist posture in regional disputes, prioritising the stability of supply over alignment with any single bloc. Alongside energy, the Gulf region's demand for labour transformed West Asia into the principal destination for Indian migrant workers from the 1970s onward, generating a vast expatriate community whose remittances have become a significant component of India's external accounts.

Scholars have characterised the post-2014 period as one of "de-hyphenation," in which India has sought to develop independent, issue-based relationships with historically rival actors, including Israel, Iran and the Gulf Arab states, without allowing any single relationship to constrain the others. This approach reflects a broader continuity in Indian strategic culture that prioritises autonomy and multi-vector engagement over formal alliance commitments, a continuity that scholars trace back to the Non-Aligned Movement's founding logic even as its contemporary application looks markedly different from Cold War-era non-alignment.

Pillars of Contemporary Strategic Engagement

Energy and Economic Partnership

Energy security remains the single most consequential dimension of India-West Asia relations. The Gulf states continue to supply a substantial share of India's crude oil and natural gas imports, and bilateral trade with the Gulf Cooperation Council collectively exceeds trade with several major Western

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partners. The India-UAE Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement, concluded in 2022, has been identified as a template for deeper economic integration, encompassing tariff liberalisation, digital financial integration and local currency settlement mechanisms designed to reduce dependence on third-currency transactions.

Similar economic frameworks are under negotiation with the Gulf Cooperation Council as a bloc, reflecting an ambition to institutionalise trade ties beyond bilateral arrangements. Beyond hydrocarbons, Gulf sovereign wealth funds have emerged as significant sources of foreign direct investment into India's infrastructure, renewable energy and technology sectors, marking a gradual diversification of the economic relationship from a supplier-consumer dynamic towards a more reciprocal investment partnership.

Defence, Security and Counter-Terrorism Cooperation

Defence and security cooperation has emerged as a distinctive feature of India's contemporary West Asia policy, extending beyond the traditionally dominant spheres of trade and energy. India has expanded naval diplomacy in the region, including joint exercises and port calls, to safeguard sea lines of communication vital to its energy imports and trade.

Counter-terrorism cooperation and intelligence sharing with Gulf states have intensified, partly in response to shared concerns over radicalisation and extremist financing networks that traverse South Asia and West Asia. The development of the Chabahar port in Iran, undertaken with Indian investment, illustrates New Delhi's effort to secure alternative connectivity to Afghanistan and Central Asia while diversifying its strategic footprint in the region, even as the project's fortunes have periodically been complicated by extraterritorial sanctions regimes and the broader trajectory of Iran's relations with Western powers.

Diaspora and People-to-People Ties

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The Indian diaspora in the Gulf, numbering in the millions, constitutes both a strategic asset and a vulnerability. Remittances from Gulf-based workers form a critical pillar of India's foreign exchange earnings, while the diaspora itself has become a channel for cultural diplomacy and soft power projection.

The inauguration of the BAPS Hindu Temple in Abu Dhabi has been widely cited as emblematic of the deepening cultural and religious accommodation extended to the Indian community in the Gulf, reflecting a broader normalisation of India's civilisational presence in the region. At the same time, the concentration of Indian nationals in conflict-prone or economically volatile states renders their welfare an enduring foreign policy concern, as evidenced by large-scale evacuation operations conducted during past regional crises, including from Yemen, Libya and, more recently, from areas affected by the Israel-Iran confrontation. These operations have come to function as a recurring test of India's consular and logistical capacity, and their increasing frequency underscores the human security dimension that underlies an otherwise economically framed relationship.

Connectivity and Minilateral Frameworks

India's West Asia policy has increasingly been embedded within broader minilateral architectures. The India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor, announced in 2023, envisages rail and shipping links connecting India through the Gulf and Israel to Europe, positioning the corridor as a complement to, and in some analyses a counterweight to, China's Belt and Road Initiative.

Similarly, the I2U2 grouping, comprising India, Israel, the United Arab Emirates and the United States, reflects an attempt to institutionalise cooperation in food security, clean energy, water management and technology. These frameworks illustrate a shift from bilateral transnationalism towards structured, multi-actor engagement, although their long-term viability remains contingent on regional stability and the durability of great-power interest; the corridor's overland segments, in particular, traverse territory whose security cannot be taken for granted given the region's recurrent conflicts.

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Climate, Food Security and Technology Cooperation

Emerging areas of cooperation, less prominent in the earlier literature but increasingly visible in official statements, include climate action, food security and digital technology. Water-scarce Gulf states have shown growing interest in Indian agricultural technology and expertise, while India has sought Gulf investment in renewable energy generation, reflecting mutual efforts to diversify economies historically anchored in hydrocarbons. Cooperation in this domain remains at a comparatively early stage relative to the trade, energy and defence pillars, but it is notable for its potential to generate positive-sum outcomes less encumbered by the region's security rivalries, and may over time provide a more insulated channel of engagement during periods of acute political tension.

Regional Crises and Implications for India's Strategic Autonomy

The contemporary West Asian landscape is marked by overlapping crises that test the coherence of India's balancing strategy. The Israel-Palestine conflict, and its escalation following the events of October 2023, placed considerable strain on India's diplomatic posture, requiring New Delhi to reconcile its strategic partnership with Israel with its long-standing support for a two-state solution and its ties with Arab and Gulf states sympathetic to the Palestinian cause. Analysts note that India's response, combining condemnation of terrorism with calls for humanitarian access and restraint, exemplifies a broader pattern of issue-based engagement rather than bloc alignment, though it has also drawn domestic and international criticism from constituencies that view the balancing act as insufficiently decisive in either direction.

The direct military confrontation between Israel and Iran has posed an even sharper test of India's strategic autonomy, given New Delhi's simultaneous investments in the Chabahar port and its deepening defence partnership with Israel.[1] Scholars argue that India's ability to maintain functional relationships

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with both adversaries, while avoiding explicit alignment, demonstrates the resilience of its issue-based diplomatic model, even as it exposes the limits of hedging in a rapidly polarising regional order, where third parties increasingly expect visible signals of alignment rather than studied neutrality.

Instability in Yemen and disruptions to shipping through the Red Sea and the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait have had direct commercial consequences for India, given the corridor's importance to trade with Europe. Rerouting of vessels around the Cape of Good Hope has raised freight costs and insurance premiums for Indian exporters, underscoring the extent to which India's economic interests are entangled with the security of maritime chokepoints far beyond its immediate neighbourhood. The Indian Navy's deployment of assets for anti-piracy and escort duties in the wider Arabian Sea and Gulf of Aden region reflects a growing recognition that maritime security in West Asia's periphery can no longer be treated as a residual concern.

Political fragility in Lebanon and the protracted reconstruction challenges in Syria and Iraq constrain the scope for Indian economic and infrastructure investment, even as they open opportunities for humanitarian assistance and post-conflict capacity-building that align with India's Global South diplomacy. India's modest but symbolically significant contributions to reconstruction and capacity-building in Iraq and its humanitarian assistance to Syrian and Yemeni civilians illustrate a preference for low-footprint, non-military forms of engagement that avoid the reputational and financial costs associated with deeper involvement in the region's conflicts.

The China Factor: Comparative Regional Positioning

India's West Asia strategy cannot be assessed in isolation from the expanding presence of China in the region. Chinese investment under the Belt and Road Initiative, its 2023 brokering of the Saudi-Iran rapprochement, and its growing energy purchases from Iran and the Gulf states collectively signal an ambition to establish Beijing as an indispensable interlocutor in West Asian affairs.

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For India, this competitive backdrop lends urgency to initiatives such as the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor, which, while formally framed as a connectivity and development project, carries an implicit strategic logic of offering regional states an alternative to exclusive dependence on Chinese capital and infrastructure. Unlike China, however, India's engagement is constrained by comparatively limited capital reserves and a more cautious diplomatic style that eschews mediation of the region's core political disputes, a posture that scholars attribute to New Delhi's assessment that the reputational and strategic costs of overreach would outweigh the benefits of a higher-profile mediating role.

Discussion: Strategic Autonomy as an Organising Principle

The literature reviewed in this article converges on the observation that India's West Asia policy is best characterised as an exercise in strategic autonomy, understood not as isolationism but as the deliberate cultivation of parallel, non-exclusive partnerships.[2] This approach allows India to draw simultaneously on Gulf capital and energy, Israeli defence technology, and Iranian connectivity infrastructure, without subordinating any single relationship to the others. Such a model carries clear advantages in a region where formal alliance commitments would expose India to the volatility of shifting rivalries; however, it also imposes costs, requiring continuous diplomatic recalibration and leaving India dependent on the goodwill of multiple, sometimes antagonistic, partners simultaneously.

India's growing engagement with West Asia also reflects its broader ambition to project itself as a credible voice of the Global South, advocating inclusive development and reformed multilateral governance while positioning itself as a stabilising, non-interventionist actor.[3] This positioning is reinforced through humanitarian contributions, capacity-building initiatives and participation in reconstruction efforts, which allow India to build goodwill without the

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reputational costs associated with military intervention. Whether this model of engagement can be sustained amid deepening great-power competition in the region, particularly the expanding footprint of China, remains an open question meriting continued scholarly attention.

Challenges and Policy Recommendations

Several structural challenges confront India's West Asia policy going forward. First, the sheer scale of the expatriate population in the Gulf means that any escalation of regional conflict carries direct human security implications, requiring India to maintain and periodically upgrade its consular, evacuation and crisis-response capacities. Second, dependence on hydrocarbon imports from a conflict-prone region continues to expose India's energy security to supply and price shocks, underscoring the importance of continued diversification of import sources and accelerated investment in domestic renewable energy capacity.

Third, the widening gulf between Israel and Iran narrows the diplomatic space within which India can credibly claim neutrality, suggesting a need for more proactive, quiet-diplomacy channels that allow New Delhi to signal concern over escalation without appearing to take sides. Fourth, the long-term viability of connectivity projects such as the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor will depend on sustained political will among multiple partners and on the security of transit corridors that pass through historically unstable areas; India would be well served by pursuing modular, incrementally deliverable components of the corridor rather than treating it as a single, indivisible undertaking.

Finally, as China's regional profile continues to expand, India's comparative advantages, namely its historical ties, its large and well-regarded diaspora, its non-interventionist reputation, and its cultural and civilisational linkages to the region, should be leveraged more deliberately through sustained investment in education, healthcare and skill-development partnerships that build durable goodwill independent of any single government's tenure.

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Conclusion

India's relationship with West Asia has evolved from a narrowly transactional engagement centred on energy and labour migration into a multidimensional strategic partnership spanning trade, defence, connectivity and cultural diplomacy. This evolution has occurred against the backdrop of a region beset by conflict, humanitarian crisis and shifting alignments, compelling New Delhi to navigate an increasingly complex diplomatic terrain.

The article has argued that India's strategy of issue-based, non-aligned engagement, sustained through frameworks such as the India-UAE Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement, the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor and the I2U2 grouping, has enabled it to safeguard core interests while avoiding entanglement in regional rivalries. Nevertheless, the intensifying volatility surrounding the Israel-Iran confrontation, disruptions to Red Sea shipping, the vulnerability of a vast diaspora population, and the growing competitive presence of China underscore the fragility of this balance.

Sustained, adaptive and multi-vector diplomacy, responsive to both economic opportunity and humanitarian imperative, and backed by deliberate investment in human security capacities and durable people-to-people ties, will remain essential if Bharat is to consolidate its position as a credible and constructive stakeholder in West Asia's evolving security architecture.

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