



Strategic Balancing in a Divided Region: India's West Asia Policy

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Abstract:

The involvement of India in West Asia has changed, as in the post-independence era, it was more ideologically oriented but in the modern times, it is more pragmatic and multidimensional in its foreign policy. Both the opportunities and limitations to India are found in the region that is usually rife with instability, power centres and entrenched conflicts. Being an importer of energy to West Asia, a large expatriate base, and growing economic and strategic connections, India has had to implement a flexible and adaptive policy framework. This paper will discuss the idea and practice of strategic balancing in Indian relations with West Asia and how India can be involved in a relationship with oppositely hostile actors without necessarily forming formal alliances. It claims that the Indian strategy has been a deliberate attempt to maintain strategic autonomy, and enhance the national interests in the economic, political, and security spheres. Meanwhile, the paper highlights the threats of regional polarization, great power rivalry, and the changing geopolitical alliances. By putting the policy of India in the context of the past and the present, the paper will give an in-depth analysis of the changing nature of the role of the country in a very divided and varied region.

Keywords: Diaspora Diplomacy, Energy Security, Strategic Balancing, Geopolitical Competition

Introduction:

West Asia holds a status of long-term interest in India foreign policy as it has been a mix of historical interactions, economic needs, and geopolitical realities. The region has been an important point of contact between India and the rest of the international system, whereby it has been used to transport goods, people and ideas across continents. This importance has also been increased in the modern era, with increasing

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economic demands of India, especially its reliance on foreign energy sources and its rising internationalist aspirations.

Meanwhile, West Asia is one of the most intricate and unstable regions of the globe. The continuation of wars, political tensions and alliances have resulted in a very disjointed geopolitical environment. As regional dynamics go on, rivalries like Iran versus Saudi Arabia, and the long-standing Israel and Palestine conflict remain. This is further complicated by the participation of third-party actors or countries, such as the United States and China, who have turned West Asia into a serious competition site on the world stage.

In the case of India, the interaction with such a region is a strategic issue. India wants to have some freedom in foreign policy as opposed to smaller states that can choose to be aligned to a superior power either in security or economic gains. This goal requires a balanced management of relations with a variety of actors, most of whom are directly opposed to each other. Old fashioned methods of narrow alliances or ideological devotion do not sit well in this scenario. Rather, India has been pursuing an approach of strategic balancing, which enables it to negotiate the intricacies of the region and protect its own interests.

The change towards strategic balancing is part of a wider change in Indian foreign policy. During the decades of independence, the policy of external relations of India was shaped by such a normative principle like non-alignment, anti-colonialism, and the unity with the Global South. Although these principles still have a key effect on the diplomatic rhetoric of India, the realities of the modern international system have demanded a more pragmatic approach. This change has been brought about by economic liberalization, technological progress and shifting world power balances.

Historical Evolution of India's West Asia Policy:

The historical curve of the Indian interaction with West Asia is a valuable source of information about the formation of its present policy. The foreign policy of India in the early years after gaining independence was influenced by colonialism and the urge to establish an independent identity in the international arena. India pursued a policy of non-alignment under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru, to ensure that India was not sucked into the conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union. This strategy was coupled with an anti-imperialist spirit and desire to support the decolonization processes throughout the world.



In this context, the Indian relations with West Asia were marked by the unity with the Arab countries and the Palestinian cause. India was one of the first nations to recognize Palestine Liberation Organization and always promoted Palestinian self-determination in international bodies. Meanwhile, India never officially engaged in diplomatic relations with Israel, as it not only was a part of domestic political reasons but also a part and parcel of its dedication to Arab unity.

They required a shift in the foreign policy of India including how it dealt with West Asia. India made full diplomatic relations with Israel in 1992 and this was a significant departure of its previous policy. This choice was motivated by multiple factors, such as necessity of technological and defence collaboration, and the shifting geopolitical situation. Meanwhile, India still allied itself with the Palestinian cause, which indicated its efforts in trying to reconcile conflicting commitments.

Over the following years, India increased its interaction with the Gulf nations as they were seen as energy providers and suppliers of migrant workforce. These ties were further enhanced by the rise of the Indian diaspora in the region, as well as rising trade and investment flows. Strategic partnerships and high-level visits increased, indicating the further strengthening of relations.

By the early 21st century, the policy of India in West Asia had been transformed to a multidimensional and holistic one. It was increasingly based on a pragmatic evaluation of national interests rather than merely being influenced by ideological factors. Such transformation formed the background of the emergence of strategic balancing as one of the key aspects of Indian involvement in the region.

Theoretical Framework: Strategic Balancing of Foreign Policy:

In order to properly understand the Indian attitude towards West Asia, it becomes necessary to place their foreign policy in the context of a larger theoretical framework of international relations. The idea of strategic balancing, though not as clearly stated in official discourse, is based on several lines of foreign policy, such as realism, neo-realism, and the discourse of strategic autonomy as it is being developed. The approach of India is rather based on the combination of ideas that were oriented to the specific geopolitical location and developmental priorities.

The concept of hedging which is commonly linked with the foreign policies of the middle powers is another helpful window. Hedging is the act of seeking opposite or diversified approaches in order to reduce the risks in a volatile environment. An example of such hedging strategy in the context of West Asia is the concurrent involvement of India with both Iran and Saudi Arabia or with Israel and Palestine. India can



mitigate its risks to instability in the region by sustaining various relationships and keeping its strategic alternatives.

Central to the Indian approach is the idea of strategic autonomy which has been a core aspect of its foreign policy since independence. Strategic autonomy focuses on the capacity of a state to make unilateral decisions according to its national interests without any external influence or commitments. This principle has changed in the modern world to be flexible and pragmatic. Instead of the rejection of interaction with the major powers, India wants to use these relationships and maintain the autonomy of decisions.

Strategic balancing, in this sense, may be interpreted as a pragmatic expression of strategic autonomy, in a complex regional context. It enables India to manoeuvre competing pressures and pursue various interests and adjust to changing circumstances without being bound to rigid alignments. The method is especially applicable to West Asia where the elasticity of alliances and the number of actors demand a great level of diplomatic nimbleness.

Strategic Balancing in Action: Patterns and Mechanisms:

The mechanisms of operationalizing the idea of strategic balancing in the West Asia policy of India are a complex of distinct yet interrelated mechanisms. These are the compartmentalization of bilateral relations, cooperation based on issues, diplomatic neutrality in controversial matters and development of economic interdependence. The combination of these mechanisms allows India to maintain a fragile balance in a region characterized by the strong divisions.

Compartmentalization of relationships is one of the most significant aspects of the Indian approach. In contrast to the traditional system of alliances, where interrelation and reinforcement of the relationships is common, India views any bilateral relationship in West Asia as being very independent. This will enable it to interact with one actor without necessarily influencing the relation with another. As an example, India has defence relations with Israel that exist independently of relations with Iran and its energy relations with the Gulf states or its economic relations with the Gulf states. This compartmentalization minimizes the risk of diplomatic spill over and offers more flexibility in the handling of the different relationships.

Another key mechanism is issue-based cooperation. Instead of having a comprehensive or all-embracing view of partnerships, India concentrates on certain areas of common interest. This helps it to personalize its interaction with various actors based on their strengths and priorities. Indicatively, the focus of cooperation with Israel is based on defence technology and innovation, whereas with the Gulf countries it



is based on energy, trade and mobility of labour. This discriminative strategy enables India to have the maximum benefits and also limits the prospects of conflicts.

The strategic balancing of India is also enhanced by economic interdependence. India develops vested interests in ensuring stable relations by enhancing trade and investment relations with various actors. This does not only increase its own economic security, but also minimizes the chances of being sucked into regional conflicts. The increased economic interconnection is therefore a source of as well as a stabilizing influence in the interactions between India and West Asia.

A combination of these mechanisms depicts the complexity of Indian strategic balancing. Quite on the contrary, it is not a reactive policy, but a strategic and active planning, alteration and subtle interpretation of the dynamics in the region.

Non-Alignment to Multi-Dimensional Engagement:

The present strategy of India towards the West Asia can also be explained as a continuation of a wider change in its foreign policy towards non-alignment to a more multifaceted multi-dimensional relationship. Although the non-alignment principle worked well during the Cold War era where there were two superpowers, the principle does not work well in the multipolar and interconnected world today.

The foreign policy as experienced in India in the modern era shows a realization of the need and benefits of interacting with various actors. India does not want to avoid any kind of relationships with the competing powers and tries to use it to its advantage. This change does not mean that the previous principles are to be abandoned but that they are being adjusted to the changes. Indian policy, as with strategic autonomy, is still executed in a strategic manner but this time it is executed by active involvement and not by purposeful isolation.

This transition is most vividly demonstrated with West Asia. Meanwhile, this method is subject to continual calibration. The dynamics of the region are so fluid that the relationships have to be constantly re-evaluated and changed. Strategic balancing is thus not a policy but a continuous process, and developments in the external environment as well as internal priorities influence it.

Limits of Strategic Balancing: Theoretical Reflections:

Although strategic balancing has a lot of benefits, it has its drawbacks. Theoretically, the success of such a strategy relies on how well a state can be credible and trusted by several partners. When any of the actors



believes that the policy of India is too opportunistic or inconsistent, it may destroy the relationships that the strategy is trying to maintain.

The other restraint is due to the structural constraints of the international system. Being a growing yet not the hegemony, India is influenced by the policies of the more powerful players. The growing presence of the United States and China in West Asia, such as the one of the examples, diminishes the strategic space of India. These pressures need more than just diplomacy to navigate but they also demand a clear vision of the long-term goals.

Lastly, the effectiveness of strategic balancing may be affected by domestic factors. Foreign policy decisions are shaped by public opinion, politics and economy. The strategy should thus be maintained by ensuring that there is coherence between domestic concerns and external activities.

In spite of these restrictive factors, strategic balancing is a practical and, in most aspects, required strategy to be adopted by India in West Asia. It represents a practical understanding of the intricacies of the region and the necessity to be flexible to navigate them.

Core Drivers of India's Engagement with West Asia:

The long-standing and growing involvement of India in West Asia is not an accident, but rather a result of a complicated game of structural imperatives and strategic possibilities. These drivers do not exist in isolation, but strengthen one another, creating a multidimensional policy framework that requires strategic balancing. A more in-depth analysis of these factors will demonstrate why India is not able to prioritize any of these relationships over the other and should remain diversified and flexible instead.

Energy security remains at the centre stage of India involvement in West Asia. Being one of the most rapidly developing major economies in the world, India has been experiencing the rise of its energy demand over the last several decades. Although attempts have been made to diversify energy supply and invest in renewable energy sources, hydrocarbons are still imperative to ensure the continued economic growth. West Asian countries are key to the energy stability of India, as a significant part of its crude oil imports and exports is produced there. Nevertheless, the concentration of energy supply in the politically unstable area creates the inherent vulnerabilities. The changes in oil price, regional conflicts, as well as the strategic employment of energy as a political instrument can be taken as a threat.



In this regard, strategic balancing is not an option, but a necessity. The fact that India maintains relations with various energy providers, such as Saudi Arabia and Iraq, or even Iran and the United Arab Emirates, is aimed at reducing the risks of overreliance on a particular actor. Not only does this diversification boost the security of supply, but it also gives India a better bargaining power when negotiating energy contracts. Meanwhile, the investments of India in the upstream and downstream energy activities in the region further entangle the Indian investments and generate interdependence.

Another important aspect of the West Asia policy of India is the role of the Indian diaspora. Millions of expatriates of Indian origin work in the Gulf region, working in an extremely diverse sector, including construction and services, health care and education. These labourers not only play a great role in the economies of the host nations, but also send a significant amount of the remittances to India. The remittances form a substantial foreign exchange contributor and directly affect the household incomes and the development of the regions in India. Such a big diaspora poses opportunities and responsibilities on Indian foreign policy.

Economic factors are not limited to remittances but also include trade, investment and development of infrastructures. India has been trying to increase its economic presence in West Asia in recent years through its participation in the renewable energy, logistic and digital technology sectors. In fact, the Gulf nations especially have become key players in the economic development of India, as they have invested in infrastructure projects and are involved in efforts that would help to improve connectivity. This increasing economic interdependence creates impetuses to stable relations and to prevent actions that may undermine these relations.

Another complication to the Indian involvement in West Asia is the issue of security. The region has long been related to numerous security issues such as terrorism, piracy and political instability. In the case of India, which has been a victim of terrorism itself, intelligence sharing and counterterrorism in the region is of utmost importance. The other area of concern is maritime security, as the sea lanes in the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf have strategic importance in terms of global trade and transportation of energy.

Challenges and Structural Constraints in India's Balancing Strategy:

As much as the strategic balancing approach by India in West Asia has paid off dividends, it does so in a framework of structural and situational constraints which restrain its functionality. The increasing polarization in the region is one of the leading challenges. Competitions like the Iran and Saudi Arabia



rivalry, intermittent escalation of the Israel and Palestine war, and others, are such that it becomes harder and harder to remain equidistant. In a situation like this, any small interaction with one actor can be seen by another as a change of allegiance, making the diplomatic stance of India a complicated affair.

The other major limitation is due to the growing presence of foreign powers in West Asia. The enduring role of the United States as a security provider, as well as the increased economic and infrastructural investments of China, have increased great power rivalry in the region. This adds another dimension of complexity to India. Although it aims at ensuring that it has a good relationship with the United States in the wider Indo-Pacific equation, it has to consider the growing involvement of China with West Asian states. A delicate balancing act of policy decisions is necessary in navigating this triangular dynamic without jeopardizing its own interests.

India is also facing economic vulnerabilities which make its position even worse. Diversification has led to decreased overdependence, but the changes in the global energy markets still directly affect the Indian economy. Any supply chains disturbances, be it triggered by geopolitical tensions or economic crises can limit the strategic flexibility of India. Moreover, the current shift towards renewable energy worldwide brings about long-term uncertainties about the future of the relationship with the West Asian states based on hydrocarbons.

India also has a domestic factor that contributes to its foreign policy. Decision-making can be affected by public opinion and political discourses, as well as by economic interests, especially in such delicate matters as relations with Israel or Iran. Although India has been successful to a great extent to ensure a balanced approach, the interactions between internal and external factors are still a significant limitation.

Recent Developments and Emerging Trends:

During the recent years, a number of events have changed the geopolitical environment of West Asia, which has offered opportunities as well as challenges to balancing of the Indian strategy. Among them has been the slow normalization of relations among some regional actors, such as the Abraham Accords. Though India was not an immediate stakeholder, the developments have a bearing on its relationships with both Israel and the Gulf states, which may open new possibilities of trilateral or multilateral relations.



The other major trend is the emergence of new Mini lateral patterns of West Asian countries and foreign powers. India is engaging in regional groupings like I2U2 (India, Israel, the United Arab Emirates and the United States) which is an indication of its changing attitude towards regional engagement. These structures focus on economic cooperation, technological collaboration and infrastructure development, which are in line with the overall strategic goals of India.

Another trend is the growing influence of China in West Asia, especially in terms of infrastructure development and energy relations. The efforts connected with connectivity and trade have increased the Chinese impact in the region, and they present a competitive and complementary dynamics on India. Although there is room to coexist, it is yet to be determined what the long-term implications of this increased presence will be.

The slow transition to renewable energy and sustainability also presents its effects on the Indian involvement with West Asia. With renewable energy technologies being invested in by both India and the West Asian countries, new spheres of collaboration are being formed. This shift can help redefine the foundation of their relations by shifting to less traditional hydrocarbon relations to more diversified relations.

Conclusion:

India has a complex foreign policy towards West Asia, indicating an advanced, flexible foreign policy approach aimed at balancing conflicting needs in a multifaceted geopolitical landscape. By embracing strategic balancing, India has been in a position to sustain positive relations with a wide array of actors, including Israel, Iran, and Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states. This policy highlights a more general shift in Indian foreign policy, which is marked by pragmatism, flexibility, and national interests.

Nevertheless, the long-term viability of this solution is not ensured. The growing polarization of the region, the sharpening of great power rivalry, as well as the ambiguities of economic and energy transitions, are all challenges. It will take ongoing adaptation, diplomatic creativity, and articulation of the long-term strategic goals to address these challenges.

In conclusion, India will continue to be an important factor in its foreign policy overall because of its capacity to balance itself in an otherwise polarized region. With West Asia constantly changing, the process of strategic balancing of India will have to be improved and reinforced so that it is always receptive to the new realities without losing the fundamental concept of strategic autonomy.



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