

# India's Innovative Diplomacy in West Asian Zone and Its Effects: A Comprehensive Analysis Previously and throughout Modi's Era

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## Abstract

India's diplomatic relations were rising due to its existence and interests in West Asia with widespread considerations when Prime Minister Narendra Modi was elected in 2014. Particularly, rather than choose a similar pathway, since 2015, the Indian government decided to have a new "Look West" policy, which is based on three main pillars e.g., Arab Gulf countries, Israel, and Iran. The article-specifically is addressing the questions: what is the new role of India to have strong initiative in West Asia? This article is aimed to examine the impact of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's new politics towards West Asia, indeed beyond measly buyer-seller economic relationship.

**Keywords:** West Asia, Middle East, Geopolitics, Make In India, Look West, Think West, Soft-Power Diplomacy.

### Introduction

India is one such country in the world, which is referred to as 'Middle East' as 'West Asia', however, other countries call this region prominently the Middle East.[1] For the last five decades, India's relations with the Gulf countries were economically linked, with power-security and Indian migrants at its axle-politics. India kept itself neutral from internal and external problems of the Gulf countries and kept itself from getting into any major risk. An important policy of India is non-alignment, which has traditionally distinguished itself from the internal affairs of other countries and follows a "non-interventionist" diplomatic policy (Asthana, 2016).

Moreover, during the past policy formation, India's foreign policy was influenced by the circumstances of the Cold War and established relations with the world countries according to these circumstances. At the same time, the Narrative of Pakistan also negatively affected the relations between India and Gulf countries. However, the scenario has changed rapidly in recent years and relations have been restored from both sides. India has made a big change in foreign policy and established diplomatic relations with West Asian countries.

### Review of Literature

There are also several important factors at present that India is emphasizing on increasing its strategic ties in West Asia: perhaps the most important factors that are increasing multi-polarity in the region. The United States of America (USA) has walked back from diplomatic leadership in West Asia towards conflict management and peace within the region. In fact, Washington slowly moved out from the axis of the region under Barack Obama and Donald Trump administration. Currently, non-Western powers like China are approaching rapidly to show their geopolitical presence. In fact, China is not playing a dominant role to direct regional affairs however, it is building economic and diplomatic ties across the region, and thus, it is expected that it can be more influential in the near future. Because of China's entry, India's strategy in West Asia rises. As a matter of fact, by changing policy, Delhi is increasing its own influence in West Asia and avoiding Beijing to ensure control over its energy security and being encircled by Chinese allies (Nandy, 2020).

In addition, a huge fund is needed for India to create quality infrastructure and boost its economy, and also generate jobs through initiatives like "Make in India" (Rajan, 2015, pp 2-3). The main purpose of India at present is to attract investment by projecting it as the world's number one investment destination (Maini, 2017). However, Islamic extremism, terrorism, and maritime piracy are some of the growing threats and concerns for both India and the Gulf countries. Besides these, rising criminal activities, money laundering, and illegal



### Priti

Visiting Researcher,  
Center for International  
Studies,  
Inha University,  
South Korea

arms trade between the two regions cannot be ruled out. Based on all the above facts, therefore, it was highly required for India to change its oil policy in West Asia. Until now, India has managed broader ties to keep all of its diverse relationships on a positive track with a definite upswing. Present time there is a rising expectation among representatives that India will ultimately become a worldwide strategic power.

**Objective of the study**

The following objectives were outlined for this study:

1. To study of the overall trade status between India and Middle East with sharing of each country's contribution
2. To investigate the differences in economic outcomes before and after the Modi administration.
3. To study of compression and imbalance trade flows, and at the same time try to find out reasons and solutions.

**Hypothesis**

Key hypothesis for this article is that "India's relations with West Asian countries have indeed expanded, but it has not been tailored to the desires and availability of opportunities". Other hypotheses include: (1) India's "West Link policy" has been limited to a few countries. (2) India's New West Asia policy has not had any positive impact on economic relations. Author examined this hypothesis based on Secondary data.

**Methodology for study**

To analyze India's discourse, particularly its new role, towards the West Asia policy, this work adopts a content analysis method, using available qualitative and quantitative data from secondary sources. This article firstly analyzes India's West Asian policy and its efforts, after that examines economic relations between Indian and West Asian countries, India's energy policy, soft power policy, challenges, and conclusions. On the current relation between India and West Asian countries, I found several research articles/perspectives. However, to the best of my knowledge, an in-depth study on the relation between India and all West Asian countries on a single platform is still not available in literature. The available literature on this topic mainly focuses on how India changes its policy towards the West Asia region, however, what the result outcomes are based on data, is still lacking.

In this article I provided in-depth data collected from 'research articles', 'political specialists and intellectual's articles,' 'authorized International reports and Statistical Reviews', and news articles. For the data presentation, we are using different pictorial methods like line diagrams, and histograms.. The data is also classified into tables and graphs, which were further analyzed by percentage share, growth, etc.

**Inflorescence of India's West Asian Policy**

India's relation with West Asia has a fascinating history, indeed, the oldest maritime trade relationship in the world, which continues till today. In fact, India has strong ties to the West Asian region, including historical and cultural connections, which is beneficial for the regional economy. On September 7, 1946, as Vice Chairman of External Affairs of Governor General's Executive Council, Nehru declared that "We propose, as far as possible, to keep away from the power politics of groups aligned against one another ... far too long have we of Asia been petitioners in Western courts and chancelleries .... We do not intend to be the playthings of others" (Tarling, 2014). This statement in itself indicates that India believed in international ethics in relations, however, the scenario changed rapidly and revolved during the cold war era. During the Cold War, India's West Asian policy was nothing more than neutrality, principles, and moral terms. In addition, Saudi Arabia remained a well-wisher of Pakistan, mostly in strategic matters, because of its Muslim country identity. Whenever there was a dispute between India and Pakistan in the past, Saudi Arabia always supported Pakistan in the Kashmir conflict. Even during the 1971 India-Pakistan war, Saudi Arabia embraced Pakistan, bypassing India (Mudiam, 1994).

By 1970, Iraq had become India's dearest and closest friend in West Asia. Along with providing military training to the Iraqi Air Force, India also undertook several new projects in Iraq. The Palestinian issue was also at the forefront of Indian diplomacy due to which India-Israel relations remained predominantly hostile. Indeed, In the NAM (Non-Aligned Movement) subsequently established itself as

a major platform that gave prominence to Palestine over Israel and sought to isolate Israel internationally (Abhyankar, 2012). This situation ended in 1989 when major developments started taking place inside and outside the country, which led to India's policy change towards Israel and Palestine. After the end of the Cold War, India left its national, moral, and ideological policy behind, prioritizing its foreign policy over energy, economic and security policy.

During the first term of the United Progressive Alliance of India (UPA), the government, for some time, accepted West Asia as its primary policy and took initiatives on its behalf. After adopting the "Look West policy" in 2005, several significant changes have taken place in India's relation with the Gulf region. That was clear in the statement of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh while announcing the new policy, He mentioned that "The Gulf region, like South-East and South Asia, is part of our natural economic hinterland. We must pursue closer economic relations with all our neighbors in our wider Asian neighborhood. India has successfully pursued a 'Look East' policy to come closer to the countries of South-East Asia. We must come closer to our western neighbors in the Gulf" (Launches, 2005).[1]

As per the importance of West Asia for India's energy security, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh mentioned a "Look West" policy. Moving ahead, the impression of implementation of the "Look West" policy arose again during the second term of UPA. Since 2005, India has increased its participation in the stability of the Gulf. In this area, the old traditional ties were expanded by extending the present, security, and defense cooperation. It also has a 'strategic partnership' with West Asian countries on key issues such as cyber security, counterterrorism, organized crime, money laundering, human trafficking, and anti-piracy.

**The rapid change in the "Look West" policy and developed a "Think West" agenda (2014 to present time**

The last few years, India has changed its policy towards the Gulf countries, due to which the region has been called the "extended neighborhood" of India (Scott, 2009). Initial and major changes in India's foreign policy were observed between April 2014 and July 2015. West Asian countries accepting these changes with open arms, have given importance to India as an emerging political and economic power in world politics. In fact, many of the challenges facing the West Asian countries and India are similar, which are multilaterally linked to each other's interests (Hall, 2016). Along with accelerating economic development, extremism, terrorism, protection of citizens, and maintaining their sovereignty are some of the problems that remain a challenge before India and Gulf countries. In April 2015, former Secretary Anil Wadhwa, senior diplomat in-charge of the West Asian region, was entrusted with a major responsibility in the region to take steps, according to India's new government's policy. He reiterated oil and gas supply lines and Indian interests in the Persian Gulf, and emphasized the need to strengthen economic and security relations (Chaudhury, 2019). Subsequently, the Modi government defined India's new West Asian policy from time to time with the ideas of "Link West" (Pethiyagoda, 2017), "Think West" (Ministry of External Affairs, 2015), "Go West" (Kumar, 2017). India officially announced its "Look West" or "Link West" policy in August 2015 when the United Arab Emirates was on an official state visit to India (Pradhan, 2011). In contrast to the image of Hindu-nationalism, the Modi government started establishing new relations with Muslim countries and, bypassing the old custom, chose a policy which was the latest invention of this government.

Over the past six years, Narendra Modi visited back-to-back almost all of the important areas of Indian interest and regional strongholds. In fact, approximately 22-23 high-level official visits have been organized between India and Western countries. Modi was the first Indian Prime Minister to visit the UAE in the past 34 years, Iran in 15 years, and Israel ever. These visits not only reduced regional tensions and conflicts but also maintained working but fast-developing bilateral ties. During these visits, India made several agreements with Saudi Arabia, Israel, UAE, Iran, Qatar, Oman, and other West countries. In fact, he made some important agreements, resulting in Indian government gained: 'strategic partnership, renewable energy, security cooperation' with Saudi Arabia; 'defense partnerships and agricultural, technological' with Israel; 'agriculture and allied sectors, comprehensive strategic partnership, cooperation in the field of defense industry, agreement on oil Storage and management' with

UAE. Along this, the Indian government came to the defense of India–Iran oil trade and the Chabahar investments, amidst American pressure.

Other regional players like Qatar, Oman, Turkey, Jordan, even Syria and Palestine also benefited from the Modi government's expansion of its regional outreach (Ministry of External Affairs). There are around 25 regions identified by the Government of India, which have the potential to pave the way for India to become a superpower globally. The government has issued separate branches for areas of such capacity, which cover information technology, automobile, pharma, aviation, ports, welfare, tourism, hospitality, and railways. Modi, while addressing the country and the world, clarified that India has three main factors that will take India to the highest level of development in the coming times. These are the three main factors - India's democratic value, trained youth population, and strong demand with increasing population. According to him "If there is any country in the world where these three things exist, it is India".

Between 2018 to 2019, Prime Minister Narendra Modi was honored with 'King Abdul-Aziz Sash Award' Saudi Arabia in April 2016, 'Grand Collar of the State of Palestine' in February 2018, 'Order of Zayed' UAE's highest civilian award in August 2019, and 'The King Hamad Order of the Renaissance' Bahrain in August 2019 (Mishra, 2019). This reflects the Gulf countries interest in India. Over the years, Gulf countries have tried to restructure their economies and diversify to create non-oil-based revenue sources as the economies of these countries are primarily based on revenue from oil.

The biggest problem of these countries is that as the price of oil falls, it directly affects their economy. For example, the Gulf countries are currently the most affected countries at the time of the COVID-19 epidemic. To avoid such problems, these countries are bringing different schemes for their economies. Gulf region's governments have recognized the social and economic benefits that are going to bring by digital change and have developed ambitious plans and strategies. Many plan and vision have been already taken place, for examples, Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 (Vision 2020,)[1], Smart Dubai, National Transformation Plan 2020 (which covers the digital space), Qatar's Connect 2020 ICT Policy, and Oman's digital strategy (e-Oman) (Preparing for the digital era, 2016).

Currently, India is also implementing ambitious projects like "Make in India" to boost its economy, which are built based on determining the quality of infrastructure (Gulhane, 2016). India needs huge funds for these projects, which can be obtained from heavy foreign investment. To achieve this objective, India has attracted countries like Saudi Arabia to invest here to develop wind energy projects, Indian oil companies, and petrochemical industries. In addition, according to an agreement, Saudi Arabia and UAE are jointly setting up the largest Greenfield refinery in the Indian state of Maharashtra. These two Gulf countries have shown readiness to invest in the fields of petrochemical, infrastructure, minerals, refining and mining in India. DP World Dubai, another company approved to invest in the \$ 10 billion Mumbai-Pune Hyperloop project for construction in 2019. At the same time, Indian companies are also increasing their participation in West Asian countries in the fields of roads and highways, medical equipment, information and communication technology, stadiums, ports, food processing, gas pipelines, entertainment, and electricity, especially renewable energy. Currently, India's investment in all these areas has reached about \$ 5 billion (Upadhyay, 2019). Other than this, during Modi's UAE visit in August 2015, these two countries ensured investment reached a target of \$ 75 billion for rapid expansion of infrastructure (Ministry of External Affairs, (India), 2018)." For such a purpose, the National Infrastructure Investment Fund (NIIF) was established in 2015. The NIIF is a state-controlled body designed for foreign investment of \$ 500 million with a minimum capital of which India has set an investment target of about \$ 5-10 billion in the coming years (Growing Economic Relations, 2018, pp 80-81).

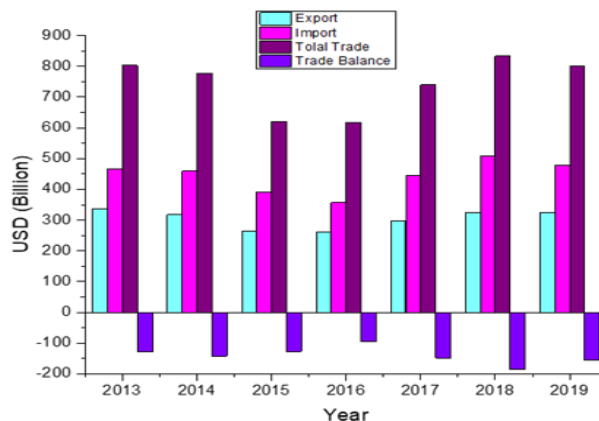
India is encouraging start-ups, in which skilled citizens of India are creating a new record every day. India is one of the fastest growing start-ups in the world and comes in third place, after the US and UK. It is anticipated that India's start-ups will reach 15,000 numbers by 2020, largely digitizing the financial services, banking, insurance, and communications sectors. In addition, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain have revealed interest in working with India's start-up sector

and exploring new opportunities, particularly, as India's IT sector struggles with layoffs (Singh, 2019).

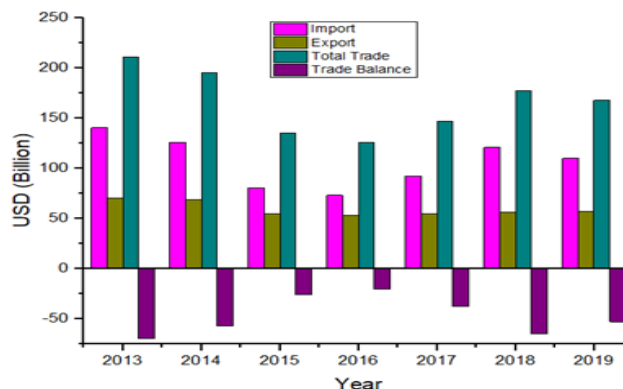
**Indian trade and investment with West Asian countries**

India adopted liberalization in 1991 and changed its foreign trade policy and deeply re-established its trade relations with world countries. In course of time, the Government of India introduced several innovative trade policies, expanding the scope of trade, which is currently transforming the entire trade structure and recognizing India as an emerging global economic power (Govindani, 2020). Over time, there have been changes in India's traditional trading partner countries and trade regions. Since the coming of the Modi government in 2014, a relevant and progressive change has been forced in India's foreign policy and trade policy. Parallel, unprecedented changes are being seen between the India and West Asia countries. In the above section, the indefatigable efforts of the Government of India and West Asian countries for strategic partnership, trade and investment have been analyzed in detail. This part of the article is being analyzed along with the facts about how effective these efforts have been on the ground and financially how many changes have been produced in the last 6 years. For this purpose, the author is using quantitative data related to Indo-West Asian trade and investment.

**Indian foreign trade from 2013 to 2019  
(Figure A)**



**Indo-West Asian trade from 2013 to 2019  
(Figure B)**



**Sources: ITC Trade map (ITC Trade map)**

There are two figures above: figure A and figure B. Figure A shows overall Indian foreign trade and figure B depicts Indian trade with all West Asian countries. According to Figure A, from 2013 to 2019, Indian all over foreign trade average is near to 800 billion. According to the diagram there is no sufficient growth in foreign trade within seven years. In 2015 and 2016, respectively, it was reduced to 657 and 714 billion. With this, the Indian trade balance has reached to -147, -185, -155 billion respectively in 2017, 2018 and 2019, which shows a deficiency for Indian trade than previous years. On the other hand, from figure B, it is clear

that India's trade with West Asian countries has decreased in the last seven years. In the period of 2013 to 2019, the highest trade was in 2013 and 2014, which fell to 30 -35% in 2015 and 2016. Although the trade has started to increase again from 2017, it is not as high as it was in 2013 and 2014 (see table-1).

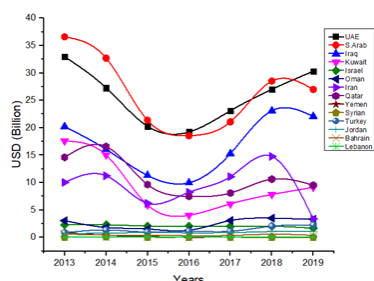
**Table-1**  
**Indian trade with west Asian countries with respect**  
**the overall trade in percentage.**

Year	Total India's Trade in USD (Billions)	India's Trade With West Asian Countries in USD (Billions)	West Asian Countries' trade % in India's Trade	Import % from West Asian Countries	Export % in West Asian Countries
2013	802.65	211.24	26.32%	17.51%	8.81%
2014	776.91	195.34	25.14%	16.25%	8.89%
2015	654.68	135.70	20.71%	12.33%	8.38%
2016	617.65	126.23	20.44%	11.86%	8.58%
2017	739.71	146.96	19.86%	12.48%	7.38%
2018	833.27	177.37	21.27%	14.53%	6.74%
2019	811.13	167.80	20.69%	13.59%	7.10%

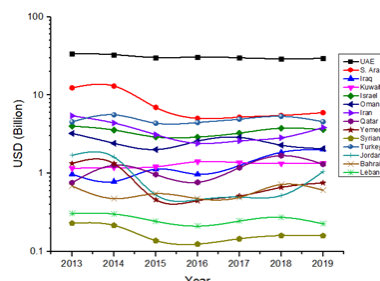
Sources: ITC Trade map

If we look at the contribution of the West Asian countries with respect to the overall trade of India, it was 26.13 % in 2013, which contains 17.51 % of import and 8.81 % of export. The total trade with west Asian countries decreased to 19.86 % in 2017 and shows an increasing behavior from 2017 to 2019; however, it is still 20.69 %. For clarity, a comparison table has been inserted above.

(Figure A)



(Figure B)



Sources: ITC Trade map (ITC Trade map)

Reserve bank of India, annual report 2018 (Reserve bank of India, 2019) In order to understand the trade from all of the West Asian countries more deeply, the economic data related to each country are shown in above figures. Figure A shows India's import from West Asian countries and figure B is depicting export in West Asian countries. According to figure A, during 2013-2019, U.A.E., Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran, Kuwait, and Qatar are the major exporting countries of India.

U.A.E. and Saudi Arabia are the largest exporting countries for India with an average of ~30 to 38 billion \$ during. Further, India imports ~10 to 20 billion \$ from Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, and Qatar every year individually. Similarly, India imports between 3 and 6 billion \$ from Israel, Oman, and Turkey. Whereas the imports from the other countries like Yemen, Syrian, Jordan, and others remain below one billion \$. This statistical data provides that from the starting era of Modi's government, the economic relations decay rapidly, indeed falling to around average of 30 % during 2015 to 2016. In fact, this decay was around 70 % with Kuwait and 50 % with Iran and Iraq. An expectation was the case of Israel, which somehow sustained its import to India. On the other hand, from 2015 onwards, the relation between west Asian countries and India was progressively extending their regimes from the economic (i.e., oil and gas driven) relation by including strategic and political relations. In fact, several meetings and dialogues took place between the main government offices/diplomats of these countries and focus was sustained to enlarge strategic and political relations, which in turn reflected the economic benefits. Indeed, the import starts to increase after 2016 to onwards; for example, the import from U.A.E. was 19.23 billion \$ in 2016 which increases to 30.30 billion \$ in 2019. Similarly, the import from Saudi Arabia increases from 18.55 to 27 billion \$ from 2016 to 2019. However, the import from U.A.E. and Saudi Arabia is still below the import values of 2013, which were 32.96 and 36.59 billion \$, respectively. In contrast, the import from Kuwait did not show any notable increasing nature and sustained to 9.13 billion \$ until 2019, which is around 50 % less in comparison to the import value of 2013 (17.59 billion \$). Including all other countries, the import from Iran increased rapidly from 2016 to 2018 from 8.25 to 14.77 billion \$, which was even high with respect to the import value of 2013 (10.03 billion \$). However, the import decreased sharply again in 2019 and reached 3.37 billion \$. This sharp decay is surely related to the American sanction to Iran and therefore, India imports around zero value of the gasoline products from Iran.

Now according to Figure B above, it is evident that our trade value is highly negative for most of the west Asian countries, excluding the U.A.E and Israel. The nominal decrease in the export value from the U.A.E. (from 33.98 to 29.53 billion \$), Israel (from 4.01 to 3.60 billion \$), Kuwait (from 1.15 to 1.34 billion \$) from 2013 to 2019 was noticed and even did not change significantly in 2016. In addition, the export from Saudi Arabia was 12.35 billion \$ in 2013, which decreased to 5.04 billion \$ in 2016 and sustained until 2019, reflecting a decrease of around 60 % from the 2013 export value. Likewise, the export from Iran was 5.43 billion \$ in 2013, which decreases to 2.41 billion \$ in 2016 and increases to 3.85 billion \$ in 2019; however, it is still 30 % less with respect to the export value of 2013. In contrast, the export values of Qatar and Iraq increased progressively from 0.75 to 1.30 and 0.97 to 2.01 billion \$ from 2013 to 2019, respectively, which is around 50 % increment.

Now if we look at the import from Manmohan's government, it was 140.51 billion \$ in 2013 from west Asian countries, which reduced continuously after Modi's government came in power and total was reached to 154.08 billion \$ within 2015 and 2016. In addition, the export was 70.73 billion \$ in 2013, which also decreased within the period of 2015 and 2016 and total export during these two years decreased to 107.84 billion \$. This scenario indicates that the import decreases to 48-50 % whereas the decrease in export was only around 20 %. It is worth mentioning here that one of the largest import/export countries was U.A.E., which contributes 29 % of overall trade from west Asian countries, remaining sustained during 2013 to 2019. Therefore, the decreases in the import/export are largely from the remaining other countries; for example, the import/export from Saudi Arabia was decreased 50% and even more. Since the main factor behind the trade between West Asian countries and India is governed by gasoline, and therefore, this continuous decreasing trade, especially imports, forces indirectly to the west Asian countries to have a broad relation with India, indeed, beyond the gasoline-based trade. Fortunately, this matches well with the Indian "link west policy" and in turn Indian diplomacy to put the pressure on Pakistan gets successes. In fact, India retracts the article 370 in 2019, which offers special powers to the state of Jammu and Kashmir. However, none of the west Asian countries oppose it and even support indirectly, for the

first time, by mentioning that it is India's internal matter, which reflects Indian diplomacy on its "link west policy".

### Conclusion

Presently, the Government of India remains arguably more active, practical, and confident than before. As a result, 'Look West' has been changed to 'Act Link' and 'Act West Policy', with defense and security cooperation emerging as the main pillars. Although comparing the Indian economy to the countries of the world, in terms of per capita purchasing power (PPP), today India is the third largest economy in the world. Not only this, but India is also the world's largest remittance recipient with total assets of \$ 83.1 billion in 2019. If we talk about India and West Asian country's economic relations then current trade value shows that India's total trade from West Asian countries in 2013 was 26.32%, after decreasing it is 20.69% in 2019. By analyzing all the data related to the economy, some important facts have come out during the Modi Government's tenure. When the Modi government came to power, it rapidly reduced its economic relations with West Asian countries. The author reached the conclusion that due to such a huge economic loss, the presidents of these countries started negotiations and political-strategic agreements. It would not be an exaggeration to say that according to the efforts of the Modi government, the areas of relations have expanded but they could not get much economic benefit to each other. Economic trade still has not reached the level of the previous government.

The Government of India also made a lot of efforts regarding investments but could not increase investments from other countries except UAE. However, since 2016, investments coming to India from UAE have decreased, which is 60% less in 2019 (compared to 2016). Only Iraq is the country from which India has increased imports, primarily because of US restrictions, India has to stop buying oil from Iran. In conclusion, it would be fair to say that even in working in new perspectives like 'Think West,' 'Link West,' there have been practically no more encouraging results in the relations between India and West Asian countries. Just as the consolidation of only economic relations cannot be achieved politically and strategically benefits, similarly the expansion of only strategic relations is not in the superlative interest of the country.

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**End notes**

1. Indian academicians prefer to use the term West Asia and not the Middle East. The term the Middle East may have made some geographical sense for British colonialists ruling from London, but that has lost relevance following the disappearance of the British Empire after World War II. In fact, the term the Middle East outside its vague colonial context does not specify the geographical region it refers to. The term the Middle East originated with the British Foreign Office in the 19th century. The British divided the world from their country's vantage point by coining terms like the Near East (the area closest to the United Kingdom), the Far East (which was east of British India), and the Middle East (which was between British India and the Near East). Even American naval strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan used the term the Middle East in 1902 to designate the area between Arabia and India. But with the collapse of the British Empire, the term lost its relevance.
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