

India's Balancing and Soft Power Strategy in West Asia and the Confrontation with New Challenges

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Abstract

India has maintained a policy of non-alignment since the Cold War era. It upholds this policy by rationalizing its dealings with various countries. However, after the post - cold war era, the situation has evolved considerably, and India has reestablished communication with worldwide regions. India's foreign policy has also altered, with the creation of diplomatic relations with countries in Western Asia. At the time of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's election as Prime Minister in 2014, Indian diplomatic contacts and interests in Western Asia were booming. Unlike in the past, the Indian government chose to execute a new "Link West" policy in 2015, giving priority to the Arab Gulf states, Jerusalem, and Tehran. However, relations with West Asian countries are being restructured. While restructuring relations with West Asian countries, India has developed a balanced approach to conflict resolution while adhering to its own policies and implementing soft power diplomacy in this region. In present, India faces challenges in this area as a result of multipolarity, the exit of Washington, and shifting priorities. In this article, the author will conduct in-depth examine to identify new challenges in the West Asian region.

Keywords: West Asia, Look West, soft-power diplomacy, COVID-19, islamophobia, new cold war.



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Introduction

India has developed a balanced approach to dispute resolution while adhering to its own regulations. Despite the conflict between Israel and Palestine, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, and Syria, India maintains diplomatic and economic relations with them. India maintains a "non-aligned" presence in West Asia, the cornerstone of its economic and diplomatic relations. Without adopting a policy of neutrality, it is a major challenge to keep away from the day-to-day conflicts in the Gulf region, which are not beneficial to India's new economic and security policy. After electing the Modi government, India has also taken concrete steps in relation to its energy policy and made changes in its foreign policy towards these countries. India was the third largest crude oil importing country in 2018-19.

Review of Literature

Traditionally, India has been dependent on West Asian countries for its energy supply. However, the share of India's energy supply from West Asian countries has fallen to 60 percent in 2019, the lowest level since 2015. (Economics Time, 2020). As per its new energy policy, India is now focusing on renewable energy sources like renewable energy, nuclear power, and indigenous ethanol fuels. (Bureau, 2018). Aside from energy policy, the Indian government pursued a "soft power" strategy in West Asia. In the past, the Manmohan Singh government and, more recently, the Modi government have continuously strived to maintain a balanced approach toward this region. The majority of the instability is concentrated in this region as a result of foreign involvement by powerful countries as well as internal Asian countries. However, this time around, the United States is withdrawing its soldiers from the region, which is predicted to result in more unforeseen clashes or attacks in the short term. Under such uncertain circumstances, Indian diplomats have strongly adhered to the policy of "non-interference" in internal affairs in the region. This was made clearer at the "IISS Manama Dialogue" in Bahrain (December 2017), where India's Minister of State for External Affairs J. Akbar defined India's relations with the Gulf countries as non-descriptive, non-intrusive, non-judgmental, and do not take sides in inter-regional disputes. Aside from that, India has other challenges in this sector, including US sanctions against Iran, growing Chinese influence, Pakistani unfavorable behavior, and many more. For a better understanding of India's position in West Asia, the article focuses on these questions: What is India's balancing and soft power policy in West Asia? Has India's policy diplomatically affected the West Asia region? What are the possible challenges for India in this area?

Objectives of the study

1. The purpose of the study is to determine how effective India's new "Soft power" policy is.
2. To better understand India's relationship with West Asian countries, this study aims to identify the facts that can either improve or diminish those ties.
3. The objective of the study is to determine what types of policy adjustments will be required in the future by policymakers.

Hypothesis

The key hypothesis in this article is that "India's political and diplomatic relations with West Asian countries have indeed expanded." Other hypotheses include: (1) India's "West Link policy" has been limited to a few countries. (2) India's traditional friendships in the region of West Asia are shifting. This hypothesis was investigated using secondary data by the author.

Research design

This work employs a content analysis method that makes use of available quantitative data from secondary sources to analyze India's discourse, particularly its new role in West Asia. This article first analyzes India's West Asian policy, then soft power policy, examines challenges, and draws conclusions. Regarding the current relations between India and West Asian countries, I found research material from a variety of sources, such as "research articles," "political authorities and academics' articles," "Indian government's press conference," "lectures, views and press releases of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs," "former Indian Ambassadors, and the delegation's authorized press release and views on the West Asian issues," "conference proceedings," "authorized national and international dialogue and events statement," "approved worldwide reports and statistical reviews," and news articles. This study is based on the descriptive method and critical discussion. I used a descriptive method for describing "India's soft power strategy" and a critical discussion approach to understand India's challenges in this region.

India's balancing energy policy with soft power dominance

Since the time of the Cold War, India has accepted the policy of non-alignment, keeping itself away from all conflicts and maintaining cooperative relations with all countries due to their economic problems. India maintains this policy in its foreign policy, either directly or indirectly, by streamlining its relations with various countries. While restructuring relations with West Asian countries, India has established a balanced policy on the matter of conflict while respecting its own policies. At present, the Modi government has also taken concrete steps in relation to its energy policy and made changes in its foreign policy towards these countries. Compared to West Asian countries globally, in 2014, the share of oil production in these countries was 33.5%. India imports oil and gas from countries in the Gulf region, such as Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Kuwait, according to its energy demand. India was the third largest crude oil importing country in 2018 and relied on imports of 82.8% of crude oil and 45.3% of natural gas and LNG. In total, India spent an estimated 8.81 lakh crore (\$120 billion) on crude oil imports in 2018–19. According to an official report, the rate at which India's oil consumption is increasing means that energy demand will more than double by 2040. (Iea, 2020)[1] Traditionally, India has been dependent on West Asian countries for its energy supply, but the share has come down to 60% in 2019, the lowest since 2015 (Energy World, 2020). As per its new energy policy, India is now focusing on renewable energy sources like solar. It aims to replace 67% of its oil imports, from a current value of 82% by 2022, with local exploration such as renewable energy, nuclear power, and indigenous ethanol fuels (Bureau, 2018). Presently, India is moving to reduce its dependency on West Asia by diversifying its oil supply sources. To try to expand crude sources and fulfill the present demands, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has bolstered ties with countries like Russia and the United States. As a result, the import of US oil to India increased to 4% of its overall consumption in 2019, whereas it was just 2.5% a year earlier (Economics Time, 2020).

At present, despite the conflict between Israel and Palestine, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, and Syria, India has maintained its economic and diplomatic relations with these countries. In the past, the Manmohan Singh government often remained silent in favor of or against any foreign intervention at the time of the Arab uprising in 2011 and abstained from any harsh rhetoric. In fact, being a temporary member of the United Nations Security Council, India withdrew the vote to impose a no-fly zone on Libya during the time of the Gaddafi regime. At the same time, the Manmohan Singh government consistently tried to maintain a balance and voted in favor of the sanctions, unequivocally opposing any attempt at regime change. (Burton, 2019).

Most of the unrest in this region persists due to mutual quarrels and external interference by West Asian countries. US forces are being withdrawn from the region, which is predicted to lead to more unforeseen clashes or attacks in the immediate future. In the face of such unpredictability, Indian diplomats have steadfastly stuck to the policy of "non-interference" in regional internal issues. (Nandy, 2020). For example, India's Minister of State for External Affairs, J. Akbar, emphasized that India's relations with the Gulf countries are non-descriptive, non-intrusive, non-judgmental, and don't take sides in interregional problems at the "IISS Manama Dialogue," which occurred in Bahrain in December 2017. Despite the fact that India does not manage a single country, it manages many West Asian countries. But Modi has remained influential in effecting complex and geopolitical change. For example, Israel and Palestine are carefully controlled by New Delhi's diplomacy. In the Israeli scenario, security cooperation and arms purchases are the primary factors for negotiating and exchanging between the two countries. Furthermore, the recent Modi policy to focus on cooperation in agriculture and water management has passed. Also, discussions on skill development and funding are equally prominent in meetings with Palestinian leaders. (Kumaraswamy, 2019). Another major turnover of events was during the Qatar crisis that appeared when nine countries, including Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain, took off all types of diplomatic ties with Qatar. India responded that the Qatar situation is an "internal matter of the GCC," as pointed out by a tweet by the External Affairs Minister, Sushma Swaraj. The Indian Ministry also made sufficient efforts to ensure smooth and uninterrupted travel, which included the beginning of additional flights and, subsequently, an Indian-Qatar express service for the shipment of food products and other essentials from India. The raging of Iraq's civil war opened new platforms in the north part of the country for a commitment with the Kurdish regional government. However, Yemen wants to distance itself from all groups. Without antagonizing any of the countries, at the regional level also, it was needed to engage with all sides, even without taking sides in the flaring tensions. (Moonakal, 2019). In short, India maintains a "non-aligned" presence in West Asia, the cornerstone of its own economic and diplomatic relations. Without adopting a policy of neutrality, it is a major challenge to keep away from the day-to-day conflicts in the Gulf region, which are not beneficial to India's new economic and security policy. In this regard, to implement its soft-power policy in a big way, India has signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Saudi Arabia, Oman, Jordan, Israel, Iran, the UAE, and other countries during the last few years. These MOUs also set up joint working groups for regular discussion covering collaborative issues such as medicine, medical science, health, education, solar energy, space science, food processing, and structural manufacturing[2]

Challenges

India and West Asian countries are taking all the necessary steps to strengthen mutual relations, which will be economically and diplomatically beneficial in the upcoming years. There are some essential internal and external limitations to developing these economic and diplomatic relations. Therefore, India is not able to fully utilize its potential. India's first internal challenge is the bureaucratic way of running Indian foreign policy on the national front, which is divided into various centers. In general, these divided centers are not able to function unanimously, often resulting in bilateral and international agreements not being fully implemented. The second internal challenge is that India is unable to attract foreign investors. Although India is one of the fastest emerging markets in the world, there is a large infrastructure gap. These gaps are due to manipulation of banking directives and guidelines, opaque infrastructural policies, delays in providing quick revenue for investment and policy instability, which have not been able to attract large Arab investors. The third internal challenge is that India has set a tough goal of growing its GDP to \$5 trillion by 2024. According to the Global Infrastructure Hub and Oxford Economics research, India will invest \$3.9 trillion in infrastructure by 2040, making its objective of 2024 improbable. (Sengupta, 2019) If India wants a \$5 trillion economy, it will have to focus on manufacturing. Although India is currently involved in global and regional value chains, it has not been able to significantly integrate them into its trading products. As a result, its share of overall company value is only 1%, compared to 9% in China. (Banga, 2016). Although India has taken necessary steps like industrial corridors, de-licensing and Make in India, these measures are not sufficient. Indian policymakers are not creating enough leading firms that connect supply products with value chains from the center to the ground level. Lack of financial facilities and skills, difficult customs procedures for investors, high and volatile taxes, and other negative factors prevent major companies from investing in India. If India wants to increase its

share of global value creation, it will need to build a strong global and regional supply chain. (Alexander, 2020) For this, India needs a demand and consumption-based market, rich use of intellectual property, intellectualization in the ratio of tax and investment, a deep network of scientific analysts, VC (venture capital) firms, flexible legal rulemaking, and an implementation system.

China's aggressive presence in West Asia

India's foreign policy in West Asia faces four major external threats, the first being China. The US exit from West Asia and the lack of a collective security structure to deal with growing conflicts has created a hole that other countries, particularly China, are trying to fill. Economically, China entered new markets to secure its energy needs and became a major partner in the Gulf countries' development. Following China's aggressive influence, India has entered the region with soft power. Currently, China does not intervene diplomatically or militarily in the region's conflicts, but that may change in the future. (Zhang, 2019.) If this happens in the near future, it will jeopardize India's security and regional interests.

India's disbalanced policy toward Iran

The second external challenge for India is to maintain its balanced relations with Iran and to deal with the Trump administration's sanctions (Kukreja, 2019). Traditionally, India has tried to maintain good relations with Iran on various issues. Iran defined India as a "proximate neighbor". Iran's geopolitical as well as strategic location, its long coastline along the Gulf of Mexico, and its influence over the Straits of Hormuz make it an important country in the region. (Pradhan, 2019). In recent years, the importance of India's relations with Iran can be understood in the context of the Chabahar Port, which, despite US sanctions, placed India at the forefront of its Gulf-nation policy. It is also considered a counter to the Gwadar port, which has been built in Pakistan by China. The Chabahar Port is strategically important for India because it serves as a gateway to Central Asia. (Hafeez, 2019) Through the Sino-Pakistan Economic Corridor (PEC) and the One Belt One Road (OBOR), China is steadily expanding its influence in Pakistan, West Asia, and Central Asia. (Manzoor, 2017) As a result, India requires Chabahar port in order to control China's growing economic growth and its commercial impact on the region. (Moonakal, 2020) Of course, India-Iran relations have been very beneficial for both countries, but now, due to the US sanctions, events are rapidly changing from Iran's point of view. In recent times, India has reduced its oil imports from Iran and voted against Iran on an International Atomic Energy Agency proposal. As a result, India-Iran economic relations have weakened, and trade has fallen sharply by 79.4%. India's imports from Iran declined by 90.3% (\$1.29 billion) in the period April - November 2019-20. India has zeroed out petroleum imports from Iran, reducing exports by 36% to \$2.23 billion. (Sen, 2020) This indicates that, overall, India needs to play a balanced role in West Asia with extreme caution, particularly towards Iran, to maintain its relationship in the region. Due to the unpredictable foreign policy and extreme statements of the US government, India could see its relationship with Iran from the American point of view in the coming years, which is not a good sign for India-Iran relations. (Wani, 2019)

Pakistan's geographical location

The third external challenge is that Pakistan has an effective presence in the region due to its "geopolitical access" to Central and West Asia. In fact, Pakistan's geographical location as well as India's "lack of trust" have weakened India's commercial interests in the region. For example, some major projects, like the Iran-India-Pakistan (IPI) and Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline projects, have either stalled or been abandoned. In addition, because of its Islamic identity, Pakistan has also created a strong political sphere of influence in Muslim West Asia and has manifested itself as a victimized and helpless country. Pakistan's diplomacy has always garnered more political support in this region than India's. (Pethiyagoda, 2017)

However, later, after India's strong ties with West Asia, the Gulf countries changed their policy towards Pakistan in South Asia. Actually, Pakistan supports terrorist activity in India and, at the same time, always maintains tension on the border. Presently, despite this Pakistani-narrative, the Gulf countries stand with India on international platforms against terrorism. For example, Pakistan has highlighted the plight of Muslims in India by revoking article 370 from Jammu and Kashmir, the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and now "Islamophobia". (Waikar, 2018) Pakistan tried to make the revocation of Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir an issue on international platforms, yet it failed in its narrative. Indeed, the Gulf countries did not support Pakistan's dogma and opted for a neutral policy. In fact, Saudi Arabia noted

that "it understands India's vision and actions in Jammu and Kashmir." Nonetheless, regarding CAA, Saudi Arabia and the UAE didn't show any negative reactions and handled their relations with India with maturity. However, unfortunately, merely Islamophobia is making an issue for India at the present time. Essentially, people-to-people harmony maintains positivity in the country's relationships. This appears to be a challenging situation for both sides. On one hand, Indian Muslims are isolated and insulted from the confrontational impact of Saudi-Wahhabi-centered global Islamic radicalism and the unconcerned behavior of the Indian government. The future looks depressing because of growing alienation among Muslims from the Indian state system, in the context of rising Hindu nationalism.(Chaudhury, 2020)

Territories with a high degree of uncertainty

The fourth external challenge is mainly due to the involvement of external forces and sometimes due to internal conflicts. India's fresh financial approach in the West Asia region is overwhelmed with instability. At various times in the region, powerful axes like America and Europe have dominated with varying degrees of success. To date, internal as well as external transformations, such as civil wars, political instability, religious extremism, sectarian rivalry, and secessionist movements, are making it an unpredictable and risky region. In fact, the regional dynamics of the region are rapidly changing. Heavyweight countries like Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iran are challenging each other's views and are divided on the basis of their deep-developed interests. At the same time, multilateral organizations and international players are also continuously involved in alternative conflicts in the region. With these conflicts over the past few years, the geopolitical dynamics of West Asia have been changing in an extraordinary manner. This situation can be extremely difficult for India at times. To avoid such a situation, India needs to formulate a concrete policy related to each country in West Asia that causes the least economic damage so that powerful countries like the USA, Saudi Arabia, and Russia will not be able to affect Indian interests in this region.

COVID-19 is creating havoc all over the world

The fifth external challenge is the COVID-19 epidemic, which emerged in January 2020 and has spread rapidly around the world. Because of this deadly virus, the whole world is facing unexpected challenges. In fact, most countries have ceased daily activities, resulting in all countries facing an economic crisis. In particular, West Asian countries are facing the biggest economic crisis in the last four decades, with a historic drop in oil prices due to the coronavirus epidemic. In fact, the oil-producing country will have to bear a deficit of more than \$230 billion in annual revenue by the end of this year. Remittances to India are expected to fall by 23% in 2020 as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. (Regional Economic Outlook,2020) Furthermore, Indian migrant workers are losing their jobs around the world, including in the West Asia region, because of the coronavirus pandemic. It is expected that Kuwait's expatriate population has more than halved to 30% of the total. (Bloomberg, 2020) Even so, each country is taking emergency steps to prevent an economic crisis. In the current scenario, a "new cold war" has begun between the United States and China. In fact, economic rivalry has been going on in these two countries for the past few years, which worsened during the COVID-19 epidemic and turned into the "new Cold War". Several West Asian countries with close ties to the United States have signed paramilitary and strategic agreements for collective security, while maintaining several economic agreements with China. After ending this pandemic, China's role in the region will be reconsidered, which may lead to the opening of a new opportunity for India. (Schindler, 2020) However, what new challenges will come up for India in the region will determine this in the future. Will India stick to its non-aligned strategy or abandon it? This is a major question in India's eyes.

Conclusion

During the administration of Manmohan Singh, the government created a "new West policy" regarding the West Asia region. The situation has altered, and on both sides, ties have been restored to their previous levels. Since 2014, the Modi government has implemented significant changes in foreign policy, including the establishment of diplomatic connections with the West Asian zone. As India is a rising political and economic power in global politics, West Asian countries have embraced India as a partner in their development. Following that, the Modi government periodically characterized India's new West Asian policy in terms of the concepts of "Link West," "Think West," and "Go West," among other things. As per its new energy policy, India is now focusing on renewable energy sources like solar. Traditionally, India has been dependent on West Asian countries for its energy supply, but the share has come down to 60% in 2019, the lowest since 2015. In recent months, India has expanded

connections with countries such as Russia and the United States in an effort to increase oil supply and meet current demand. As a result, India imported 4% of its total oil consumption from the United States in 2019, up from 2.5 percent the previous year. India is one of the world's fastest-growing emerging economies. As a result of India's rapid growth, a number of Indian enterprises are expanding their business operations around the world, especially in West Asian countries.

However, India has set a lofty target of increasing its GDP to \$5 trillion by 2024, which is no small feat. If India wants to grow its economy to \$5 trillion in size, it will have to concentrate on manufacturing. In spite of the fact that India is currently integrated into global and regional value chains, the country has not been able to successfully integrate them into its trading products. As a result, its share of overall company value is only 1%, compared to 9% in China. China is posing a significant challenge to India because it has expanded its presence in energy markets and established itself as a key partner in the Gulf's development. At the moment, China does not intervene diplomatically or militarily in the affairs of the region, but this may change in the future. This has the potential to jeopardize India's national security and regional interests. Relations between India and Iran have historically been extremely advantageous to both countries; but, as a result of US sanctions, the situation is rapidly deteriorating from Iran's perspective. This indicates that, in order to maintain its relationship with the region, India must play a balanced role in West Asia while exercising extreme caution, particularly towards Iran. Powerful axes such as the United States and Europe have dominated the region with varying degrees of success at various times throughout history. In reality, the regional dynamics of the region are changing at a breakneck pace right now. Heavyweight countries such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iran are taking one another to task over their respective positions. These battles have had a dramatic impact on the geopolitical dynamics of West Asia, which have changed in an unprecedented way. India may find it tough to deal with this situation at times. For each country in West Asia, India must devise a strategy that does the least amount of damage to its economy and diplomatic standing possible. In addition, Pakistan's "geopolitical accessibility" is a major problem for India. In fact, Pakistan's location and India's "lack of trust" have harmed India's regional trade interests. For example, certain significant projects, such as the Iran-India-Pakistan (IPI) and Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline projects, have either stalled or been abandoned. Now, because of COVID-19, the entire planet is now confronted with unexpected difficulties. As a result, nearly every country is in the midst of an economic depression. Among the most troubled countries in recent decades are those in West Asia. Ultimately, though, this will depend on what additional problems India faces in the region in the future. Is India going to remain with its non-alignment policy or will it change course? In India's view, this is a big issue.

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Footnotes

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