

# Looking West

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TO outside observers, India's insistence on idiosyncratic nomenclature for the Middle East is a source of confusion. Why, they ask, should it be 'West Asia', as though the swathe of territory from Istanbul to Tehran were merely an appendage of the subcontinent itself? Even the greatest Indian empires never really stretched much beyond southeastern Iran. Yet, if the terminology is taken to be aspirational, suggestive of an Indian push to leap the Hindu Kush, there is an evident torpor about Indian policy. Even as a US-India rapprochement and the Look East policy transformed India's engagement with the extant and future centres of power, New Delhi's posture in the Middle East has been marked by passivity and incrementalism—amounting, some would say, to death by communique.

Yet, as Indian Foreign Minister Salman Khurshid noted in 2013, the Persian Gulf as a region is India's largest trading partner, a source of two-thirds of India's oil and gas, and home to seven million Indians who provide approximately half of the country's inward remittances.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, Indian policymakers can boast that they have

pulled off three critical balancing acts, each of which has involved considerable dexterity: balancing India's relationship with Riyadh and Tehran, even as their sectarian-strategic proxy war has ravaged the region; balancing the competing demands of Washington and Tehran, each of which is pivotal in the space to India's North and West respectively; and balancing India's long-standing support for the Palestinian cause with a flourishing relationship with Israel. In practice, these choices have been progressively resolved in favour of one side or another—in favour of Tehran in the first instance, Washington in the second, and Tel Aviv in the third. But India's achievement has been to successfully maintain the appearance of a fine balance, and thereby preserve a freedom of manoeuvre not easily available to other actors jostling in that crowded space.

One dynamic, above all, has characterized the Middle East over the past decade: the breakdown of the status quo, the appearance of vacuums, and competition to fill them.<sup>2</sup> The first

1. Salman Khurshid, Middle East Security and Non-Proliferation, Manama Dialogue 2013, Fifth Plenary Session, 8 December 2013.

vacuum was created by the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and subsequent ones by the parallel mass mobilizations of Arab peoples in 2011 and beyond.

The first rupture shattered Iraq's Sunni-dominated political order. It swelled Iranian prestige and influence at the expense of a Saudi-led bloc concentrated in the Gulf but including Egypt and Jordan, and amplified an older dispute over Iran's nuclear programme. The latter ruptures, including an assortment of revolutions, coups, and civil wars, were more uneven in their effect. They weakened America, Iran, and Saudi Arabia in different places (for instance in Egypt, Syria, and Bahrain respectively) and put traditional alliances to the test. This disequilibrium produced no victor, but mutual vulnerability and intense competition—above all in the Levant. And, much as nature abhors a vacuum, Al Qaida's centre of gravity concurrently shifted westward from Pakistan to North Africa, Yemen, Syria, and Iraq. A historic nuclear agreement between the US and Iran in November 2013 was portrayed as a rupture to these ruptures, a harbinger of a return to the US-Iran axis of the 1970s, but in truth it represents no more than a truce—and a tenuous one at that—in one strand of this tapestry.

India has watched this flux at arms length. The BJP-led government in 2003 briefly considered the possibility of deploying troops to Iraq, but eventually dismissed this possibility.<sup>3</sup> Its Congress-led successor opposed NATO's 2011 intervention in Libya against the regime of Colonel Muammar

2. Shashank Joshi, 'The Arab World to 2020', in Douglas Alexander and Ian Kearns (eds.), *Influencing Tomorrow: Future Challenges for British Foreign Policy*. Guardian Books, London, 2013, pp. 94-96.

3. Rudra Chaudhuri, *Forged in Crisis: India and the United States Since 1947*. Hurst, 2013, Part III.

Gaddafi which unfolded during the Indian presidency of the UN Security Council, with India's Permanent Representative to the UN at the time, Hardeep Singh Puri, arguing that 'the pro-interventionist powers did not ever try to bring about a peaceful end to the crisis in Libya'.<sup>4</sup> India has also viewed subsequent uprisings in Syria, Bahrain and elsewhere with disquiet.

In part, India's wariness of opposition forces stems from the direct impact on its own interests, such as the loss of Syrian oilfields, and the detrimental effect of regional instability on global energy markets and, in turn, on the already parlous state of the Indian economy. But Indian policymakers have also interpreted these events—notably Syria—through the lens of the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan in the 1980s, the US-funded and Pakistan-led effort to support the armed opposition there, and the subsequent growth and spread of transnational jihadism. In a contemporary twist, Saudi Arabia has reportedly sought the assistance of Pakistani special forces in training two Syrian rebel brigades.<sup>5</sup> In truth, the Afghan analogy obscures as much as it reveals: an internal debate within Riyadh, between the Interior Ministry on the one hand and the intelligence service on the other, over the risks of supporting Syrian rebels has resulted in a firm ban on Saudi nationals travelling to Syria, greater caution in the types of groups enjoying Saudi support, and even the removal of the activist Prince Bandar bin Sultan from the kingdom's Saudi dossier. These nuances tend to be lost in Indian assessments.

4. Vijay Prashad, 'Syria, Libya and Security Council', *Frontline*, 10-23 March 2012.

5. Yezid Sayigh, 'Unifying Syria's Rebels: Saudi Arabia Joins the Fray', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 28 October 2013.

Although India has provided only modest support to the regime in Damascus in the form of an acknowledged line of credit, its diagnosis accords with that of Moscow or Tehran: an authoritarian but secular regime has come under attack from regressive fundamentalists armed and funded from abroad, and the result will be long-term disorder, spreading extremism, or both. Unlike Europe, which has seen the unprecedented flow of thousands of its Muslim citizens to the Syrian battlefields, Indian Muslims have been absent. But Indian policymakers have always tended to view political Islam as a global, interconnected phenomenon whose ripples will invariably reach Indian shores. This also explains their alarm at the electoral rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt after 2012, and their relief at the Brotherhood's precipitous defeat in 2013 at the hands of the Egyptian Army reprising a Pakistani script.

Salman Khurshid has insisted that while India is 'in favour of democratic pluralism,' it is 'up to the people of the region to decide the pace and the means to achieve those goals, keeping in mind their traditions and history', language that echoes the self-serving claims of Gulf rulers invoking traditional and historical legitimacy in the face of unprecedented popular restiveness. So long as those rulers can use their wealth, repressive capacity and, in some cases, the sheer unpleasantness of their political opponents to mute that restiveness, India's position is sound but, like that of the US and Europe in the region, also brittle.

Despite its anxieties, India has found itself with few usable levers, unwilling or unable to use what meagre influence it had over the regime of Bashar al-Assad at the Geneva II peace talks held in early 2014, and largely bereft of meaningful contacts

in the Syrian opposition. Indian interests may therefore be engaged, but as Salman Khurshid's speech at the conference revealed, its policy instruments appear confined to the rhetorical.<sup>6</sup> A similar dynamic was evident in Libya: although India was better placed to withdraw its citizens from Libya in 2011 than it was during the First Gulf War two decades previously, partly thanks to greatly increased naval capabilities, it was still struggling to keep up with western countries, who were more diplomatically assertive against Tripoli. As in so many areas of Indian foreign policy, ambition outstrips capacity.

The one resource that India does possess with certainty – its good offices – it is deeply hesitant to use. Whereas Turkey revels in the pomp of mediation, India sees advantage in obscurity: why invite global scrutiny of India's position on a sectarian civil war when success is improbable and India's stakes so low?

These regional currents, which continue to wash over Syria, have also buffeted India's ties with Iran. For all the talk of civilizational ties, the Indo-Iranian relationship has never been uncomplicated. During the 1971 Indo-Pakistan war, for instance, India complained to West Germany over the sale of fighter aircraft to Iran that it worried would end up in Pakistan; Pakistan indeed later sought to invoke a secret agreement by which Iran would undertake the air defence of Karachi (in the event, Tehran rejected the *casus foederis*).<sup>7</sup> But, by the middle of the 1990s, India and Iran found common cause in their support for the anti-

6. External Affairs Minister's Statement at the International Conference on Syria (Geneva-II), Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 22 January 2014.

7. Srinath Raghavan, *1971: A Global History of the Creation of Bangladesh*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2013, pp. 246, 231.

Taliban militias of the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan – in part a re-emergence of the classical Kautilyan congruity of interests between two states that share a common neighbour, Pakistan, but no border.

India's attraction to Iran also represents the counterpoint to Islamabad's posture in the Gulf. Pakistan has historically maintained an extensive military presence in the rival Sunni majority and Sunni-led monarchies of the greater Gulf, including the deployment of an entire division and two armoured and artillery brigades in Saudi Arabia during the 1980s. It was famously a young Brigadier Zia ul-Haq who was ordered to deploy his training mission against Palestinian guerrillas during Jordan's Black September in 1970, and during the unrest of 2011, Pakistan was a reliable contributor of forces to those countries, like Bahrain, violently suppressing Shia-majority protests.<sup>8</sup>

And although in 2006 Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah conducted his first visit to India since 1955, India has been deeply sceptical of funding from the kingdom, official and private, for Sunni extremist groups in Pakistan and elsewhere. Stephen Tankel has argued that it was pressure from both Riyadh and Islamabad that induced Lashkar-e-Taiba to distance itself from Al Qaida around 2003, indicating a degree of proximity that Indian security officials understandably find disturbing.<sup>9</sup> Indian policymakers, to the chagrin of US officials, have conversely shown little concern for Iranian funding of militants in Afghanistan, Lebanon, Iraq, and even Pakistan.

8. Olivier Roy, 'Islam and Foreign Policy: Central Asia and the Arab-Persian World', in Christophe Jaffrelot (ed.), *A History of Pakistan and its Origins*. Anthem, 2004, pp. 134-135.

9. Stephen Tankel, 'Pakistan's Sticky Wicket: The India-Saudi Link', *Foreign Policy*, 30 July 2012.

Although this is often attributed to a lingering 'third worldism' in Indian foreign policy,<sup>10</sup> it more probably reflects nothing more than the perceived balance of threat: Hezbollah has little interest in India, notwithstanding allegations of its involvement in a 2012 assassination attempt on an Israeli diplomat in New Delhi, whereas its Sunni counterparts cast a much wider net. Although New Delhi has long sought deeper counter-terrorism cooperation from Saudi Arabia, with a few exceptions – such as the extradition of the Lashkar-e-Taiba suspect Zabiuddin Ansari in 2012 – it has rarely received satisfaction.

Yet, as the nuclear dispute between Iran and the West escalated after 2002, eventually to the UN Security Council, India felt compelled to vote against Iran at the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and, later, to comply with far-reaching US sanctions that covered third country transactions with Iran. Merely buying Iranian oil then became a hugely convoluted process.<sup>11</sup> India first sought to pay through a Turkish bank, but that conduit was severed in February 2013. India then paid over \$5 billion into an Iranian account in a Kolkata bank, funds that Iran could not easily repatriate, but firmly refused Iranian suggestions that its state banks might open branches in Delhi or – as suggested by President Hassan Rouhani's administration, which rejected full payment in rupees – that India pay through an opaque Omani intermediary. India's revealed preference is clear: Iran is important, but India's commitment to financial transparency regimes, inter-

10. C. Raja Mohan, 'India and the Middle East: Delhi Begins a Re-think', *The Indian Express*, 7 December 2013.

11. Kabir Taneja, 'Iran for Dummies', *Pragati: The Indian National Interest Review*, 13 December 2013.

national law, and ultimately the US is more so.

The net result of this wrangling is that Iran, once India's second largest source of crude oil, has fallen to eighth place, behind even Venezuela, despite the favourable configuration of Indian refineries for Iranian supplies. Misunderstandings are also creeping into the relationship. In 2013, Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) interdicted an Indian ship carrying oil from Iraq, requiring India's foreign minister to take up the issue with President Rouhani himself. In a well oiled bilateral relationship, such issues do not assume such significance. Other Indo-Iranian agreements have either collapsed entirely, like Iran's offer to India to co-develop the Farzad-B gas field (where sheer Indian lethargy, an altogether too familiar factor, played a role), or slowed to a crawl, like development of Iran's Chabahar port which once promised to circumvent Pakistan and connect India to Afghanistan, Central Asia and beyond.

While New Delhi continues to see Iran as a natural ally in post-2014 Afghanistan after the drawdown of NATO forces, the circumstances are different to the 1990s: the US is likely to remain engaged to a greater extent, and India itself has broadened its relationships within Afghanistan beyond those ethnic groups with which it was once allied alongside Iran and Russia. Moreover, Iran has also provided low-level support to the Taliban over the past decade, a fact understood but rarely acknowledged in South Block. Rouhani's arrival has not displaced those in the IRGC who extended that support, and India should not assume that those setting Iran's Afghanistan policy – the revolutionary generals, not the Rafsanjani and Khatami-era diplomats with American PhDs – will allow their

antipathy to the Taliban to overwhelm their mistrust of the US.

That Iran is the only regional power, Pakistan included, to oppose the Bilateral Security Agreement between the US and Afghanistan – an accord that would govern the presence of US troops there after 2014, and therefore has great import for India's regional security environment – is telling and troubling.<sup>12</sup> Indian officials have, somewhat incoherently, publicly urged that Iran's interests be taken into account in the BSA, in an effort to overtly demonstrate India's evenhandedness, but this posturing can only last so long as Iran eventually shows flexibility on the agreement.<sup>13</sup> Were Tehran to remain opposed, New Delhi would certainly side with Washington. Actual Indo-Iranian cooperation in Afghanistan therefore faces more obstacles than is sometimes assumed.

More broadly, if the interim deal agreed between the six world powers and Iran in November 2013, the 'Joint Plan of Action', does harden into a longer-term agreement, one that defuses the nuclear issue as a source of US-Iran tension, then India might well find that it has more latitude to engage with Iran, at least from a legal perspective.<sup>14</sup> But the scale and severity of issues still dividing Washington and Tehran, ranging from Lebanon to Syria to Yemen to Iraq, means that India will continue to find that its relationship with the US, ultimately deeper and

more consequential to Indian foreign policy, presents awkward trade-offs.

It is a truism that the US, pushed by the exhaustion of war and pulled by the lure of shale gas and consequent energy independence, is retrenching from the Middle East – abandoning allies and leaving, in its wake, a vacuum that might dwarf any of those created in the past decade.<sup>15</sup> Yet, this is a spurious reading, overlooking the 20,000 US troops deployed in the region and a thick and steady flow of US arms sales.

It will be a generation before any other power acquires a comparable position in the region; the question of a Chinese, let alone Indian, aircraft carrier in the Gulf is a distant irrelevance. Russia's role, prominent in the tumult of 2013, is ephemeral and confined to small pockets (that the US-Russian agreement to eliminate the chemical weapons of Syria, a key Russian ally, could be presented as a brilliant Russian victory is testament to the Kremlin's public diplomacy rather than any objective Russian gain). The Gulf Cooperation Council is in institutional shambles, and its smaller members recoil at Saudi hegemony. The death of US regional primacy has been greatly overstated.

But those lesser vacuums remain unfilled, and the challenge for Indian policy is to demonstrate the flexibility to protect and advance Indian interests even as fixed, fast-frozen assumptions melt away. One challenge lies in carefully assessing the fragility of the status quo, rather than simply the risk of changes away from it. To the extent that India seeks an inclusive Syrian peace, its alignment with Russian and Iranian policy has yielded few results.

15. For two recent versions of this argument, see Stephen Sestanovich, 'The Price of Pulling Back From the World', *The New York Times*, 9 February 2014, and Niall Ferguson, 'America's Global Retreat', *The Wall Street Journal*, 21 February 2014.

12. Kate Clark, Christine Roehrs, and Obaid Ali, 'Shocks in a Lacklustre Speech: President Karzai Addresses the Jirga', *Afghan Analysts Network*, 21 November 2013.

13. Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, 'India to Impress Hamid Karzai Before US-Afghan BSA', *The Economic Times*, 6 December 2013.

14. Shashank Joshi, 'Iran and the Geneva Agreement: A Footnote to History or a Turning Point?' *RUSI Journal* 159(1), February/March 2014, p. 64.

In Egypt, too, Indian analysts underestimate the long-term problems that the post-Brotherhood junta is generating. Here, the Afghan analogy again misleads: Indian policymakers are prone to exaggerating the foreign origins of protest movements or rebellions, thereby underestimating the indigenous forces at work. Even as India expands defence agreements with the Arab monarchies, it should ensure that it engages with the beleaguered opposition under the surface.

A second challenge is institutional. As C. Raja Mohan has noted, India's Ministry of External Affairs places Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan into one division, the Arab countries into a second, and the rest of the Middle East and North Africa into a third.<sup>16</sup> But even if such things were reformed, it is harder to see what a coherent Look West *policy* would entail. India's engagement with East Asia in the two decades between 1992 and 2012 proceeded along relatively fixed, predictable lines (first economic, then defence) and involved stable regimes. But in the Middle East, alignments and polities themselves are proving more fluid. In this environment, a diverse alliance portfolio, encompassing traditional power centres but also new, influential, and even unsavoury actors *within* states – for example, Islamist groups, protest movements, armed factions, and other extra-regional powers – is required.

And whereas to look East was to look, in the final instance, at China, Indian policymakers looking to the West will find no single focal point, positive or negative. What is important is that India be nimble in exploiting opportunities, as it has been in East Asia in the past few years, eclectic in its partners, and resilient in the face of regional turbulence of the greatest magnitude since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.

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16. C. Raja Mohan, *op. cit.*