



INDIA AND THE MIDDLE EAST

SHASHANK JOSHI

Shashank Joshi is a Senior Research Fellow of the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) in London, and a PhD Candidate in the Department of Government, Harvard University. He specialises in the international politics of South Asia and the Middle East. Email: shashj@gmail.com

When Narendra Modi was elected Indian Prime Minister in May 2014, his government faced a long and daunting list of national security challenges: the US drawdown from Afghanistan, escalating militancy along the Line of Control with Pakistan, and Chinese incursions into disputed border areas amid a growing military imbalance between the two neighbours. Yet his first foreign crisis emerged out of left field. Within weeks of Modi's inauguration, the resurgent Iraqi jihadists of the Islamic State (IS) seized 40 Indian construction workers in Mosul and 46 Indian nurses in Tikrit, producing one of India's worst-ever hostage crises.

Like so many times in the past, ripples from a crisis 2,000 miles away were acutely felt in New Delhi. In 1990, India had to evacuate over 176,000 Indian nationals from the region during the First Gulf War in over 500 flights, an operation that surpassed the Berlin Airlift and is remembered by Indians as “the biggest ever air evacuation in history”, and that came shortly before a severe balance of payments crisis.¹ Twenty years on, and not for the first time since the Arab Awakenings, it once more faced the prospect of a mass evacuation from turbulence it could neither prevent nor influence, but which threatened the lives of Indian citizens and the state of India's economy.

This article traces the outlines of India's engagement with the Middle East, focusing on security-related aspects of that engagement. First, it argues that India's approach towards the Middle East has undergone less transformation than that seen in Indian policy towards other key regions, notably the United States and Asia. Second, it describes how India has responded to recent, and older, episodes of political disorder in the region, and what patterns might be identified from these. Third, it traces aspects of India's relationships with Iran and Saudi Arabia, an

exercise that brings some of those patterns into sharper relief. Fourth, and finally, the paper concludes by asking how India might orient itself in the region in the future.

India's curious relationship with the Middle East starts with nomenclature. Why, confused observers have asked, does India uniquely call the region 'West Asia', as though the arc of unsettled territory from Istanbul to Tehran were merely an appendage of the subcontinent itself? After all, even the greatest Indian empires of history never really stretched much beyond South-Eastern Iran, let alone to the Levant. But if the terminology is taken to be aspirational, suggestive of an Indian attempt to leapfrog the stagnant economic pools of Pakistan and Afghanistan and connect to the vibrant entrepôts of the Persian Gulf, then there is an evident torpor about Indian policy.

India's Asia-focussed Look East policy and the US-India rapprochement of the last decade transformed the terms of India's engagement with the world's respectively rising and declining powers.² India's relationships with Washington and its allies have progressed beyond recognition. An observer from the 1970s or '80s would express disbelief at the idea of an Indian frigate commander saying, "we are keen on learning NATO-compliant procedures and codes", as occurred at the US-hosted 'Rim of the Pacific' (RIMPAC) maritime exercises in July 2014, or the notion that Japan would sell amphibious military aircraft to India, as it is poised to do.³

By contrast, New Delhi's posture in the Middle East has remained broadly unchanged, in its assumptions, focal points, and patterns, over many decades – though not entirely so. Its hallmarks are reactivity and incrementalism. Some would characterise it as death by communiqué. Yet India's objective interests in the region are substantial and growing. As India's then Foreign Minister Salman Khurshid noted at the Manama Dialogue in 2013,⁴ the Persian Gulf alone is India's largest trading partner, a source of two-thirds of India's oil and gas, and home to 7 million Indians who provide approximately half of the country's inward remittances.⁵ Indeed, the Gulf is a more important trading partner to India than the 28 nations of the European Union combined.⁶ At root, the stability of the Middle East is of greater importance to India than that of even East Asia.

Indian policymakers would argue that they have secured these interests through a decades-old strategy of balance, which continues to serve

them well. This strategy has involved three critical balancing acts, each of which has involved considerable dexterity. The first is the balance between India's relationships with Riyadh and Tehran, even as their sectarian-strategic proxy war has ravaged the region. The second is the balance between the competing demands of Washington and Tehran, each of which is pivotal in the space to India's north (in East Asia) and west (in Central Asia and the Persian Gulf) respectively, even as a nuclear dispute has forced India off the fence on several occasions. The third is the balance between India's longstanding support for the Palestinian cause and its flourishing defence relationship with Israel, a state that India only recognised in 1992.⁷

In practice, each of these three choices has been progressively resolved largely 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,⁸ 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. But India's ability to retain that balance and consequent flexibility is being diminished by structural changes in the region.

One dynamic, above all, has characterised the Middle East over the past decade: the breakdown of the status quo, the appearance of vacuums, and competition to fill them.⁹ The first vacuum was created by the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and subsequent ones by the parallel mass political and military mobilisations of (mostly) Arab peoples in 2011 and beyond. The first rupture shattered Iraq's Sunni-dominated political order and empowered Iraq's long-suppressed Shia majority.¹⁰ It thereby 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 in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria and Bahrain, were more uneven in their effect. They weakened America, Iran and Saudi Arabia in different places (for instance: in Egypt, Syria and Bahrain respectively), strained some traditional alliances (that between Washington and Riyadh) and catalysed others (that between Tehran and Damascus).

The resultant disequilibrium produced no victor, but mutual vulnerability and intense competition – above all in the Levant. Regional strategic interaction became *negative-sum*, whereby each actor was convinced that change was occurring at its expense and that it, alone, was acting

defensively. 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 at the same time as its 'core' leadership diminished in significance.¹¹ This process had begun by 2003, accelerated after 2011, and culminated in the declaration of a caliphate in Syria and Iraq by the Islamic State (IS), successor to Al Qaida in Iraq (AQI).¹² Historic nuclear agreements between a US-led bloc of world powers and Iran in November 2013 and again in April 2015 were portrayed as a rupture to these ruptures, a harbinger of a return to the US-Iran axis of the 1970s, but it represents no more than a truce – and a tenuous one at that – in one strand of this tapestry.

India has watched this flux with consternation, but at arm's length. Indian foreign policy has been marked by a generalised, if uneven, opposition to foreign military intervention, especially – though not exclusively – outside the ambit of the UN.¹³ This should be understood in the broader context of India's putative – though uneven – 'strategic restraint'.¹⁴ In the Middle East, this opposition has taken multiple forms.

In 1991, India opposed the US-led coalition's war to expel Saddam Hussein from Kuwait, despite its UN authorisation. India's ambassador to Iraq at the time has argued that "the US wanted Iraq to invade Kuwait" on the basis that "the US had been wanting for years to have a military presence in Saudi Arabia and an Iraqi invasion of Kuwait would compel Riyadh to agree to a large US military presence on its soil".¹⁵ The evidence does not support this view, but it fits with the scepticism of US intentions and outsider-driven narrative described later in this paper. At the same time, India did briefly and 'discreetly' allow the USA to use refuelling facilities in Mumbai, Madras, and Agra – some of which were used to convey lethal aid to Iraq – but these were withdrawn after "massive domestic political uproar" which threatened the stability of the government.¹⁶ In the course of the domestic debate, the Congress Party accused the government of "having betrayed a close friend like Iraq, and neglecting the cause of Palestinians", and making India a "tool" and "ally" of the USA. The negative associations of these terms in the Indian debate are telling.¹⁷

This ambivalence was once more on display a decade later. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government in 2003 briefly considered the possibility of deploying its Sixth Infantry Division to northern Iraq, a contingent that would have been the second largest in the country behind that of the USA, but eventually dismissed this possibility in the absence of a

supportive UN resolution.¹⁸ Although New Delhi was eager to advance the US-India relationship, it would not do so at the cost of its traditional commitment to multilateralism and what India's then prime minister called "an honest non-aligned policy".¹⁹

The subsequent Congress Party-led government vociferously opposed NATO's 2011 intervention in Libya against the regime of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, which unfolded during the Indian presidency of the UN Security Council. At the beginning of the crisis, India voted for a UN resolution imposing travel bans, asset freezes and an International Criminal Court (ICC) referral on the Libyan government.²⁰ But it later abstained from the crucial vote on UN resolution 1973 that authorised the use of force, affirming that Libyan repression was "an internal affair", and cleaving closely to Russian and Chinese positions. India's Permanent Representative to the UN at the time, Hardeep Singh Puri, went as far as to argue that "the pro-interventionist powers did not ever try to bring about a peaceful end to the crisis in Libya".²¹ As Ian Hall notes, "left-leaning media outlets [and] government-linked think tanks ... all cast doubt on the motives, merits and likely consequences of intervention".²² Hall also argues, however, that "the greatly curious aspect of the Indian debate about Libya during the course of 2011, however, is that very little of it was actually concentrated upon the principle of R2P [Responsibility to Protect]. Instead of discussing its merits or otherwise, most Indian commentators chose instead to 'tilt at windmills', whether their particular target was Western 'neo-colonialism' or India's great power ambitions".²³

India has also viewed subsequent uprisings in Syria, Bahrain and elsewhere with disquiet. New Delhi voted against UN resolutions in February and July 2012 – both vetoed by Russia and China – that called for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to step down.²⁴ But it later abstained from a harsher resolution in July 2013, arguing that its provisions could "be interpreted as effecting regime change by sleight of hand", and strongly opposed the US-proposed punitive missile strikes against Syria in 2013.²⁵ Indeed, at the time of writing, India's Ministry of External Affairs continues to assert on its website that "India and Syria enjoy friendly political relations based on historic and civilizational ties".²⁶

In these cases, India's anti-interventionism is inseparable from the nature of the domestic uprisings that created openings for foreign intervention in the first place. What explains this wariness of opposition forces? In part, it stems from the direct impact on its own interests, such as the loss of

Syrian oil fields, and the detrimental effect of regional instability on global energy markets and, in turn, on the already parlous state of the Indian economy. The Indian government heavily subsidises both public-sector domestic oil companies and consumer oil products, and is therefore heavily exposed to adverse shifts in price – particularly if the rupee is falling relative to the dollar. To understand the fiscal burden that this can impose, consider that India spent a staggering 1.75 per cent of GDP on compensation for oil marketing companies in fiscal year 2012–2013 and 1.4 per cent of GDP on overall fuel subsidies since 2008.²⁷ Subsidies routinely suck up over a tenth of the budget. Given that Indian grand strategy is centred on economic growth above all, expensive energy strikes at the very core of Indian interests.

But these economic interests cut in multiple directions. The 1991 refuelling controversy described above is a useful example: the Gulf War coincided with an economic crisis within India, including a balance of payments crisis, compelling Delhi to seek assistance from the IMF. One Indian account speculates that “it would have been unwise on its part to antagonise the U. S. by opposing its Gulf policy, as the U. S. had a major role in the formulation of policies and decisions of the IMF”.²⁸ These cross-cutting concerns would later be evident in the trade-offs involved in India’s relationships with Iran and the USA, each offering a different and potentially incompatible mixture of economic incentives and distinctiveness (see below).

India’s exposure to the region is also more direct. For instance, India had 18,000 citizens in Libya, as well as extensive bilateral trade interests and energy-sector investments.²⁹ At the time of the Egyptian revolution against Hosni Mubarak, India had \$3 billion invested in 45 different projects.³⁰ Iraq hosted 10,000 Indians before the intensified violence of 2014.³¹ Migrant workers are particularly significant, because India is the world’s top recipient of inward remittances. It received \$69 billion in 2012, the highest amount, \$15 billion, coming from the UAE (compared to only \$11 billion from Indians in the USA), over \$8 billion from Saudi Arabia, and \$30 billion from the Persian Gulf overall.³² Instability threatens those flows, and the impact, being concentrated on a small number of states, is politically consequential. Just three southern Indian states – Kerala, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu – account for 60 per cent of such inward flows.³³

However, New Delhi’s concerns pertain as much to national security as to finance. Indian policymakers have interpreted these events – notably the

civil war in 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.³⁴ In an apparent contemporary echo to that episode, Saudi Arabia has reportedly sought the assistance of Pakistani special forces in training two Syrian rebel brigades and providing shoulder-launched anti-aircraft missiles (there is no evidence that Islamabad has complied).³⁵

In truth, the Afghan analogy obscures as much as it reveals. There has unfolded 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 which 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.³⁶ Although Saudi Arabia appears to have taken a more aggressive approach over the first six months of 2015, aided by a rapprochement with Qatar and Turkey, these nuances tend to be lost in Indian assessments, which tend to view American and Saudi Arabian policies as lying at the root of instability in the Middle East. As Suhasini Haider, diplomatic editor of the respected Indian newspaper *The Hindu*, puts it: “each of the countries today at the centre of the world’s concerns over extremism is in fact a country that has seen direct or indirect western intervention, not western absence”.³⁷

Although India has provided only modest support to the regime in Damascus in the form of an acknowledged line of credit, the diagnosis of its political elite, as expressed by serving and retired government officials and in newspaper comment articles, largely 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, India’s large Muslim community has been mostly absent.³⁸ But Indian policymakers have always tended to view Sunni political Islam as a global, interconnected phenomenon whose ripples will invariably reach Indian shores. The veteran Indian national security reporter Praveen Swami wrote at the beginning of the Arab Awakenings that Washington was “seeking a rapprochement with the global Islamist movement”, a course that he warned

“threatens to compound the tragic consequences America’s anti-communist crusade had for the lives of millions across the world”.³⁹ This also explains Indians’ 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.

Taking this together, we can distil India’s view down to three core ideas: the primacy of foreign actors in instigating political change in the Middle East; the primacy of the USA and the USA’s Sunni-majority allies amongst those actors; and the close and malign relationship between political Islam and transnational Islamist terrorism, including in India. These three core ideas can, in extremis, result in conspiratorial, anti-American, or so-called ‘anti-imperialist’ modes of interpreting Middle Eastern events. Hence the apparent continuity of India’s approach to the region from the Cold War to the present, and Salman Khurshid’s argument, in 2013 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”.⁴⁰ This is language that echoes the self-serving claims of Arab rulers invoking traditional and historical legitimacy in the face of unprecedented popular restiveness. Indeed, the Gulf’s traditional European allies often defend their autocratic partners in precisely the same terms. So long as those rulers can use their wealth, repressive capacity and, in some cases, the international palatability of their political opponents to mute that restiveness, India’s position is sound but, like that of the USA 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 unsuccessful 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.⁴¹ 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 able to be more diplomatically assertive against Tripoli thanks to these rapid evacuations. Within the past decade, Indian naval doctrine has included the Persian Gulf in its ‘primary’ area of maritime interest.⁴² But it is unclear what this means

in practice, and whether it actually furnishes Indian diplomats with new options. 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. In 2008, President Assad and President Mahmoud Abbas of the Palestinian National Authority both raised the issue of Indian intervention in the Middle East Peace Process, but apart from the appointment of an obscure ‘special envoy’ between 2005 and 2009 this has resulted in vanishingly little activity.⁴³ In 1991, within two days of the outbreak of the Gulf War, India did propose a peace initiative involving a ceasefire and the time-bound withdrawal of Iraqi forces from Kuwait. India’s foreign minister was sent to Belgrade and his deputy to Zimbabwe, Algeria and Jordan – but this flurry of diplomacy came to nothing.⁴⁴ 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*).⁴⁵ But, by the middle of the 1990s, India and Iran found common cause in their support for the anti-Taliban militias of the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan.⁴⁶ In 1998, Iran had massed troops against the Taliban in response to the murder of its diplomats in northern Afghanistan.⁴⁷ The following year, India was angry at the Taliban’s role in a hostage crisis that resulted from a hijacked Indian aircraft landing in Kandahar.⁴⁸ This is, of course, a re-emergence of the classical congruity of interests between two states that share a common neighbour, Pakistan, but no border of their own.

India’s attraction to Iran also reflects the counterpoint to Islamabad’s posture in the Gulf. Pakistan has historically maintained an extensive military presence in the rival Sunni-majority monarchies of the greater Gulf. Pakistan assisted the Royal Saudi Air Force to build and pilot its first jet fighters in the 1960s, and Pakistani personnel flew Saudi aircraft

during a Yemeni cross-border war in 1969.⁴⁹ In subsequent decades, as many as 15,000 Pakistani troops were stationed in northern Saudi Arabia.⁵⁰ In 1986, Pakistan's Saudi presence comprised one division (roughly 13,000 troops), two armoured and two artillery brigades (approximately 10,000 troops), along with naval and air force personnel.⁵¹ Pakistan has also provided assistance to Saudi allies. 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.⁵²

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. The US scholar Stephen Tankel has argued that it was pressure from both Riyadh and Islamabad that caused Lashkar-e-Taiba to distance itself from Al Qaida around 2003, indicating a degree of proximity that Indian security officials understandably find disturbing.⁵³ Indian writers frequently bemoan the impact of Saudi-sponsored Wahhabi teachings. In 2011 police officers in Jammu and Kashmir warned that Saudi-funded mosques and madrassas were a major contributor to radicalisation in the restive Muslim-majority state, and in June 2014 India's domestic intelligence agency, the Intelligence Bureau (IB), warned of thousands of Saudi Arabian preachers giving extremist sermons across India.⁵⁴

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. Indeed, Indian officials were only roused to interest in 2014 after over 6,000 Indian Shia Muslims, in some cases with clerical ties to Iran, reportedly sought to fight in defence of holy sites in Iraq.⁵⁵ Although India insists on its preference for multilateral solutions over unilateral interventions, and for the inviolability of sovereignty, its officials and analysts rarely criticise Iran for its own unilateral, covert operations across the region.

This is often attributed to what Indian journalist C. Raja Mohan has called a lingering "third worldism" in Indian foreign policy, an artefact of that trio of beliefs described above and a lingering reflex from the Cold War.⁵⁶ This may be correct, but we should note that it also reflects the 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 counterterrorism 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.⁵⁷ As one study notes, “Saudi authorities have conveyed to their Indian counterparts that while they may be prepared to extradite Indian nationals to India, they wouldn’t necessarily act against Pakistan nationals wanted for terrorist acts in India”.⁵⁸ New Delhi has been alarmed in the past at the way in which terrorists targeting India have lived relatively openly in the Gulf, and particularly in the UAE. In the past decade, this seems to have improved. Indian officials now claim “tremendous cooperation” since the Mumbai attacks of 2008, as evidenced by the extradition of Yasin Bhatkal, the liaison between the Indian Mujahedeen (IM) and Al Qaida, from Abu Dhabi in August 2013.⁵⁹ But Pakistan’s strong relationship with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members, intensified since the Arab Spring, leaves lingering distrust.

India’s balancing act between Iran and the GCC has been further complicated in the past decade as the nuclear dispute between Iran and the West has escalated, eventually to the UN Security Council. New Delhi felt compelled to vote against Iran at the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), in the face of considerable domestic opposition, and, later, to comply with far-reaching US sanctions that covered third-country transactions with Iran.⁶⁰ Merely buying Iranian oil then became a hugely convoluted process.⁶¹ 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, international law and ultimately the USA is more so.

The net result of this wrangling is that Iran, once India’s second largest source of crude oil, has fallen to seventh place, behind even Venezuela, despite the favourable configuration of Indian refineries for Iranian supplies. In the first five months of 2014, India cut Iranian oil imports by more than 40 per cent – with imports in May down by over 12 per

cent compared to the previous year.⁶² Misunderstandings are also creeping into the relationship. In 2013, Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) interdicted an Indian ship carrying oil from Iraq and demanded half a million dollars for its release.⁶³ The dispute required India's foreign minister to take up the issue with President Rouhani himself. In a well-oiled bilateral relationship, such issues do not rise to those heights.⁶⁴ 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),⁶⁵ or slowed to a crawl, like development of Iran's Chabahar port, which once promised to circumvent Pakistan and connect India to Afghanistan and Central Asia beyond.⁶⁶

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 USA 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.⁶⁷ Moreover, Iran has also provided low-level support to the Taliban over the past decade, a fact understood but rarely acknowledged in South Block.⁶⁸ Rouhani's arrival has not displaced those in the IRGC who extended that support, and Iran – like China – has been considerably more open to the notion of a negotiated settlement with the Taliban than India itself.⁶⁹

That Iran was the only regional power, Pakistan included, to have opposed the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) between the USA and Afghanistan, an accord that was to govern the presence of US troops there after 2014, and therefore had great import for India's regional security environment, was telling.⁷⁰ Indian officials, somewhat incoherently, publicly urged that Iran's interests be taken into account in the BSA, in an effort to publicly demonstrate India's even-handedness, but this posturing could only last so long as Iran eventually showed flexibility on the agreement.⁷¹ If Tehran had remained opposed, New Delhi would have sided with Washington. Concrete Indo-Iranian cooperation in Afghanistan therefore faces more obstacles than is sometimes assumed. In the final instance, the BSA was signed by the government that belatedly succeeded that of President Karzai.

More broadly, if the twice-extended interim deal agreed between the world powers and Iran in November 2013, the Joint Plan of Action, does harden into a longer-term agreement by its July 2015 deadline,

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 the legal perspective of compliance with sanction.⁷² But the scale and severity of issues still dividing the USA and Iran, ranging from Lebanon to Syria to Yemen, mean that India will continue to find that its relationship with the USA, ultimately deeper and more consequential to Indian foreign policy, presents awkward trade-offs.

Many Indian thinkers share the ubiquitous view that the USA, 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.⁷³ Indian perspectives tend to underplay the fact that the USA retains not just 20,000 troops in the Middle East, and air and naval superiority over all regional adversaries put together, but also a network of alliances and bases that enable it to vastly ramp up its presence during a crisis. 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. The GCC is institutionally dysfunctional, and its smaller members recoil at Saudi hegemony.

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 for India lies in carefully assessing the fragility of the status quo, rather than simply the risk of changes away from it. For instance, to the extent that India seeks an inclusive Syrian peace, its alignment with Russian and Iranian policy has yielded few results. In Egypt, too, Indian analysts underestimate the long-term problems that the post-Brotherhood military-dominated regime 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.

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.⁷⁴ But even if such things were reformed, it is harder to see what a coherent 'Look West' policy, to match the 'Look East' policy of the 1990s, 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. India will therefore find it more challenging to build local partnerships, as it has been doing in East and South East Asia, in part because India has little experience of dealing with non-state local partners outside South Asia. India's policy is unlikely to experience any major shifts, even as the region faces extraordinary turbulence.

NOTES

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