



India's New Look West Asia Policy

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The omission of West Asia and North Africa (WANA) in President Pranab Mukherjee's address during the joint session of Parliament after the BJP came to power caused some apprehensions and anxieties among the diplomatic corps in the capital city of Delhi. But there is a scope to decipher it differently that Indo-Arab relations are so deep-rooted that Indian establishment might have taken it for granted that the region would be an indissoluble part of Indian foreign policy irrespective of its non-mention in the Presidential address.

To some, the omission of the WANA from the Presidential address seems to be a suggestive of India's changing priorities in forging the diplomatic ties with different regions of the world but one should be astute enough that no where foreign policy changes overnight because such a change requires a long term evolution. No doubt, this seemingly shift in priority was well reflected in the invitations of the heads of the SAARC states in the swearing-in-ceremony of Prime Minister-elect Mr. Narendra Modi. Unlike the present, the WANA region not earlier than two decades ago used to be one of the central themes of Indian foreign policy. What makes this estrangement further inexplicable is the time when the region is passing through one of the most turbulent phases in recent history. In the last four years, the region has witnessed unparalleled changes throwing the entire landscape in a complete chaos turning the vital region into a hotspot of the global conflict.

Following the political uprising in the Arab world, what at its inception was called the “Arab Spring”; the region has undergone an intense phase of political instability and radicalisation coupled with the rise of sectarian and ethnic politics, regional rivalry and the subsequent mushrooming of religious fanatic organisations and terrorism. International community and in particular the West harbours some apprehension about the rise of Islamist forces in Egypt and Tunisia, ascendancy of tribal politics in Yemen and Libya and sectarian divide and bloodshed in Syria and Iraq and the emergence of the regional cold war- politics between Shiite-inspired Iran and Salafi-influenced Saudi Arabia.

The contextual evolution and subsequent reinforcement of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has become another source of disquiet and worry, posing an imminent threat to the global peace and security. The emergence of the ISIS as a new destabilising force amidst other multiple players in the region appears to be challenging an already fragile territorial arrangement. Moreover, the ISIS as an ideology has the potential to distract bulk of youths from across the world and India is not immune to it. There are media reports that few Indian Muslim youths too have left the country in order to join the group. There are several ISIS websites carrying the exhortative materials in Urdu, Tamil and other Indian languages and their implications cannot be overlooked.

One cannot deny the long history of Indian political and economic engagement with the region because of its urge for third-world solidarity among the newly liberated nations and reliance on the oil of the Gulf region which fulfils its seventy percent energy requirements and not to mention the bulk of trade is conducted through the Suez Canal. In the financial year that ended in March 2013, remittance from GCC to India rose to US \$ 24.93 billion from \$ 16.43 billion in 2011. GCC is continuing to grow in stature as a major remittance source to India and around 6.5 millions Indian expatriates are employed in various sectors.

A few commentators have observed that India never remained so oblivious in the past to the developments taking place in the region. The gradual abandonment of West Asia in the foreign policy lexicon can be seen in the aftermath of the end of the cold war and emergence of

unilateral global order. It was during the post-cold war era when Indian started inching towards US-led- world system and forged a close strategic alliance for variety of strategic and political reasons with Israel which had remained “not-the-priority” for more than four decades. The estrangement with the region further deepened in the post 9/11 era when India chose to remain silent on the matters related to West Asia. This seem-so-change was reflected during the last tenure of Mr. Manmohan Singh as the Prime Minister of India. He made only one bilateral visit to Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Oman, which does not match India’s strategic interests. He travelled just once to Iran and Egypt to attend the NAM summit, despite its economic vitality, cultural and physical proximity and shared security concerns.

India’s hands-off policy was further reflected during turbulent phase in the region when it was seen to be following the dictum “silence is gold”. On matters of conflicts in Syria, Libya and Iraq, India preferably remained on the sideline and at best chose to be the emulator of China and Russia rather than the competitor. On Syria, India’s stance kept on oscillating between voting with the US and the EU in the UN and opposing them when they insisted on the removal of President Bashar al Assad.

In case of Libya, India initially went along with Russia and China to abstain on the UN vote invoking the Right to Protect but later remained silent against the US and the EU when they turned the UN mandate into an order for removal of Col. Muammar Qadhafi of Libya .

What makes the situation more complex and puzzling for India in the region is a new apprehensions among the West Asian regimes about the prospects of a potential majoritarian policy under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and confrontational policy with Pakistan which enjoys greater leverage in the Muslim world. The prospect of further alienation and neglect of the region in favour of Israel in the Indian foreign policy is another source of worry.

The current situations in the region throw a series of challenge as well as offers a set of opportunities for India where it could exert its influence and play an important role in shaping a multi-lateral world order. The region is fraught with large number of crises with far-reaching

implications and India as an aspirant power and economic giant cannot afford to be a mute observer. Given the unpredictable trajectory, it would not be prudent for the Indian establishment

to assume that India is far-removed from its ill-effects. There are few long term and short term policy option for India in the current situations.

Long Term Policy Options:

- **Prioritising the Region:** One cannot deny the political, economic, cultural and strategic potential of the region for India and India must prioritise its policy accordingly as the global peace and economic prosperity depends on the tranquillity in the region. India should expand the canvass of its foreign policy and move beyond the prism of oil and remittances. India should make a policy pronouncement on “Look West Policy” on the line of Look East Policy . This policy should be supplemented with more proactive Indian involvement in various sectors in the region.
- **Political Efficacy:** There is a need to understand the palatial efficacy of today’s global politics and India needs to deepen the political contacts with the region given the fast changing scenarios. It is time for India to engage more politically with the region and a series of high-level visits on the part of the Indian government to the region should be made in order to enhance its political image and allay the apprehensions about India’s neglect of the region. Two countries which are vital for India’s energy interest are Iran and Saudi Arabia and India should engage with both of them accordingly.
- **Soft Power Promotion:** No doubt, India has earned its soft power stature in recent years among the global community and Indian education system has made some inroad there. Apart from this, India can devise a mechanism to promote its films, sports and music in the region which would be of great assets to establish India’s soft power status which in long term might constitute the component of Indian diplomacy. It is a well-known fact that Indian films are very much revered in Arab-African counties like Morocco and Egypt and India needs to promote this in a more robust manner but meanwhile this activism should be coupled with political engagement gradually, if not to assert, but to make its presence felt as a responsible global power.

- **Counter Terrorism Cooperation:** In recent years, India has succeeded in mobilising the alliances in the region in its fight against terrorism and so, India should try in a more vigorous manner and opt for a deep strategic engagement to muster the supports of its political class to fight the terrorism. India succeeded in seeking the extradition from Saudi Arabia of the few-wanted terror suspects in several blast cases. However, too much of media exposure to these strategic cooperative endeavours should be avoided.
- **Recognise the Contestation for the Regional leadership:** India must take note of the growing Shiite-Sunni and sectarian divide in West Asia to achieve the leadership role. Both sides, Saudi Arabia and Iran, are aspirants for the regional hegemony and the sectarian card is the major political plank for both sides. India needs not to delve into this sectarian crisis because India itself is a home to substantial number of communities and casts which do not enjoy the harmonious relations among themselves. There are reports of growing Shiite –Sunni animosity in different cities of India and government must adopt a cohesive approach and evolve a mechanism to prevent the after-effects of the sectarian and ethnic rivalry in the region. Moreover, India should not opt for any overboard endorsement of any side in this cleavage because both have their roots in religious extremism.
- **Prepare for Domestication of the Employment in the Arab Countries:** Arab Spring has ushered into a new unpleasant situations for India. The political uprising in the region has caused the rulers in the Gulf to go for domestication of the employment to subdue the potential threat to their regime which is very likely to have its negative impacts on the Indians who is indissoluble part of their economic structure. Indian establishment should condition its new economic policy in very much concurrence with the after-effects of this new policy which might cause the displacement of white-caller Indian workers who would subsequently fall back on the Indian job market. There is a lot of Indians in government sector of Saudi Arabia in addition to low-& middle-level job in the private

sectors. Saudi Arabia has already begun its arabization policy of extending jobs to its own citizens and has increased the quota for the domestic employees. India needs to

evolve a stand-by plan for those who might come back after the gradual implementation of the scheme of the “Nitaqat”: domestication of Arab job markets.

- **Commitment to a balanced approach between Israel and the other Nation of the Region:** New government must commit itself to the deep strategic ties with Israel but it should devise its policy vis-a-vis the region in such a way that a cross commitment could be ensured from both Israel and the other Arab countries that relation with one side would not affect its relation with other nations of the region and the only criteria would be the respect of the interests of all. Indian government should move cautiously while dealing with the sensitive issues in the region and strategic alliance with Israel should not prevent India from adherence to its decades-old political commitment towards the cause of Palestine.
- **Conducive Entrepreneurship Environment:** New regime in India must convey in all non-ambiguous tone that India is open to business with all in the region. India also needs to allay the fears of some sections of traders that political underpinning of the new dispensation would not be a hindrance in way of its transparent and robust business, trade and investments. It is time for India to move beyond the traditional buyer-seller relationship and forge a comprehensive relationship with the region encompassing all the sectors. At the top of all, there should be an additional effort on part of the new government to remove the traditional red-tapism and create a hassle-free environment which so far remains the biggest obstacle in the enhancement of trade volume between the two sides.
- **A Balance and Pragmatic Approach:** India needs to opt for policy of pragmatism in its approach in forging its relationship with all the actors in the region. India buys oil from Iran, defence equipment from Israel and has six million expatriates in the Gulf. India

requires good marketing, good PR, and more strategic ties to bring region closer to its interest through media projection.

Short Term Policy Options:

- **Managing the Big Powers:** India must be cognisant of the facts about the involvement of big players like China, Russia and US in the present turmoil of the West Asia. India must be at the guard of its own strategic and economic interest amidst the over-economic involvement of the big players like China and should not endorse all the policies of all the players.
- **India must talk to both the regional powers:** There is growing perception that Arab Spring has transformed into an Arab-Persian cold war. India should either maintain equi-distance from both the factions or enter into a dialogue with both the sides: Iran and Saudi Arabia. The two countries being the regional powers are crucially important for India and the strategic and economic relevance of them cannot be undermined.
- **Fight against ISIS:** India is concerned about the danger posed by the rise of the ISIS and must extend all supports against the ISIS. If there is an opportunity, India should support the resolution at the UN Security Council which might condemn the atrocities committed by it. This is an occasion when moral, national and humanitarian principles converge. India should be cognisant of the growing overlap between the real oppositions or rebel groups and the terrorist groups in several countries passing through the transitions. India should not take any stance in haste while expressing solidarity with the democratic voices in the region.

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