



Picking sides in West Asia

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India could find it difficult to maintain a 'balancing' approach between different West Asian powers

- Over the past few years, the course of India's relations with Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) suggests that under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India finally appears to be moving away from its traditional "balancing" approach to West Asia.

Regional realities

- Since the 1990-91 Gulf War, India has officially adopted a "balancing" approach to West Asia, which some view as a legacy of non-alignment.
- Although this approach has allowed India to eschew involvement in regional disputes and de-hyphenate relations with regional rivals including Iran, Israel and Saudi Arabia, the policy has also constrained India's ability to press its geopolitical interests in the region.
- The campaign by Saudi Arabia and the UAE to curtail the influence of political Islamist groups also draws them closer to India.
- During visit to New Delhi, the Saudi Crown Prince hinted at the attack by vowing to "cooperate in every way, including intelligence sharing".

Defence and energy needs

- Meanwhile, India's defence and security partnership with Israel has already proven useful to its security and military modernisation drive.
- Due to its technological sophistication and warm relations, Israel has become one of India's top suppliers of military technology.
- Economically, the ability of Saudi Arabia and the UAE to mobilise investments despite low oil prices is a huge asset in their relations with India.

Iran's stake

- In contrast, Iran's support for Islamist militancy, not least by

transferring advanced missile technology to Islamist groups and militias in Lebanon and Syria, has led to an increase in tensions with Israel, which responded by conducting air strikes against Iranian targets on Syrian soil in January.

- Although the simultaneous attacks that claimed the lives of 27 members of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps and 40 members of India's Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) are likely to bring India and Iran closer together against Pakistan, it is doubtful that the occasion would generate much momentum in bilateral relations.
- From an economic perspective, U.S. sanctions have turned Iran into an unreliable economic partner.
- Despite obtaining a six-month waiver from the U.S. in November on energy imports from Iran, India is shoring up plans to find alternative sources as the waiver reaches its term.
- However, India's tilt towards Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE is not a risk-free move.
- Iran continues to exercise much influence in West Asia and can help shape events in Afghanistan by shoring up the Taliban against the U.S.
- Moreover, Iran's Chabahar port represents a strategic investment for India which hopes to use the facility to connect with the International North-South Transit Corridor (INSTC) that extends to Central Asia and to bypass Pakistan en route to Afghanistan.
- Yet, as tensions rise in West Asia, Israel, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have coalesced more closely against Iran under the U.S.-sponsored Middle East Security Alliance (MESA).
- Amid competing demands from West Asian powers for India to take sides, India might find it difficult to maintain a "balancing" approach even if it wanted to.
- Having practically abandoned a "balancing" approach, the Modi government has, in effect, placed its bets on Israel and the Gulf monarchies, relegating relations with Iran to the side.