

The Gulf as a channel of peace

This article is related to
General Studies-Paper-II
(International Relations)

Indian Express

Writer- C. Raja Mohan (Director, Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore)

5 Mar, 2019

"As West Asia develops strong economic bonds with India, it could become Delhi's ally in nudging Islamabad towards political moderation."

The idea that the Gulf countries might have some interest, let alone a role, in South Asian security would sound quite improbable for most Indian ears. Whatever that role might be, there is no mistaking the significant activism of the Gulf countries to help defuse the current tensions between India and Pakistan. Media reports, for example, suggest that Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) pressed Pakistan to release Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman who was downed after a dogfight in the air with Pakistan Air Force last week.

In the past, many parts of the Gulf and Middle East tended to act as Pakistan's strategic depth. For decades, shared religious identity and common approach to regional affairs gave Pakistan a political edge over India in the region. In recent years, though, Delhi has begun to correct that imbalance. As many Gulf countries, especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE, develop stronger economic and security bonds with India, they could become potential allies in nudging Pakistan towards political moderation and regional accommodation in the Subcontinent. The parlous state of its economy and dependence on financial bailouts from the UAE and Saudi Arabia has made Pakistan more amenable to such an outcome.

This is not some thing new. The security of the Indian Subcontinent and the Gulf region have always been inter-linked. The nature of that interdependence has, of course, varied over time and space. But independent India has tended to underestimate the importance of this strategic intimacy with the Gulf, thanks to Delhi's entrenched ideological approach to the Middle East.

In the colonial era, undivided India loomed large over the Gulf. During that era, the Raj offered security protection, a framework for commerce and some administrative support. The Gulf and other locations in the Middle East were critical links in the larger architecture of Great Britain's Imperial defence system in the eastern hemisphere centred on undivided India.

The armies of India had to embark on repeated expeditionary operations in the Gulf and the Middle East through the 19th and early 20th centuries. The Indian army played a key role in the Middle Eastern theatre in both the World Wars.

After Independence, India pulled out of any security role in the Gulf and the Middle East. Pakistan, however, joined the Anglo-American effort to replace the security vacuum created by the Indian withdrawal. It became a member of short-lived regional military alliance called the Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO). Its regional members included Pakistan, Iran, Iraq and Turkey. While India aligned with the nationalist and non-aligned governments like Egypt, Pakistan embraced conservative and pro-Western regimes.

While CENTO did not survive, it provided the basis for Pakistan's external and internal security cooperation with a number of countries in the Gulf region. Some of them like Jordan, Iran and Turkey backed Pakistan during its wars with India in 1965 and 1971. As the Arab nationalist regimes steadily weakened in relation to the regional conservatives, India steadily lost political ground to Pakistan in the 1970s.

Matters got worse in the 1980s as India remained silent on the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and the Gulf regimes joined Pakistan in promoting jihad against the Soviet Union. While India's energy and economic dependence on the Gulf grew, its political vulnerability was shockingly visible when Delhi's lone friend in the region, Saddam Hussein, invaded Kuwait and annexed it in 1990.

As key countries in the region rallied behind the US to roll back Saddam Hussein's aggression, India scrambled to evacuate thousands of expatriates from the region. More significantly, India seemed unable to navigate the rapidly changing Middle East with its old slogans.

The 1990s also saw Pakistan mobilise significant support within the Middle East, including at the OIC and other international forums, to castigate India's internal policies. The attack on the Babri Masjid and India's troubles in the Kashmir valley gave ample political ammunition to Pakistan.

Paradoxically, the nuclear tests by India and Pakistan in May 1998 and the Kargil crisis in the summer of 1999, opened the possibilities for restructuring South Asia's relations with the Gulf. The strategic dialogue between Jaswant Singh and the US Deputy Secretary Strobe Talbott during 1998-2000 opened an influential new channel to the Gulf. More important, the US mobilised Saudi Arabia during the Kargil War to encourage Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to accept the Indian demand to pull Pakistan's army back to the Line of Control. Sharif, fearful of the army chief Pervez Musharraf, wanted an American cover.

The influential Saudi ambassador in Washington, Bandar Bin Sultan, arranged a meeting for Sharif at the White House with President Bill Clinton on July 4, 1999. Prince Bandar received Sharif at the Dulles Airport and prepared him for the meeting next morning with Clinton. After he signed the controversial agreement (in Pakistan) to restore the Line of Control in accordance with the Simla Agreement, Prince Bandar had a Saudi Royal accompany a nervous Nawaz Sharif back home.

After Kargil, the NDA brought a new self-confidence and intensity to the engagement with the Gulf and the Middle East. That Jaswant Singh was the first Indian foreign minister to ever visit Saudi Arabia in late 2000 underlined how far Delhi and Riyadh had drifted in the decades before.

The bilateral relationship with Saudi Arabia that steadily improved in the UPA decade, acquired a fresh momentum under Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Two decades ago, Jaswant Singh sought to lift the Pakistan constraint on the bilateral relationship with Saudi Arabia. Today the House of Saud is becoming a valuable partner for Delhi in promoting regional security in the Sub-continent and beyond.

GS World Team...

Look west Policy

What is it?

- In recent times, India has tried to strengthen relations with West Asia as well as Europe and America.
- With countries like Iran, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Israel, Palestine, India has tried to establish close proximity. This policy of India is given the name of 'Look West Policy'.

Positive aspects of India's Look West Policy

- India has strengthened relations with Israel but has not allowed its relations with Palestine to worsen.
- Similarly, India has strong relations with Iran as well as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.
- The concerns of India and Western Asian countries are similar in relation to terrorism, energy security and global polarization.
- People to People contacts are increasing among India and West Asian countries. Indian cuisine and films are being liked in West Asian countries.
- A large number of Indian diasporas are residing in the West Asian countries. They not only propagate Indian culture, but also send huge amounts of remittances to India.

Negative aspects of India's Look West Policy

- Conflicts between the West Asian countries are continuing, which are not allowing India's policy to become more effective. For example, conditions like civil war in the Syria Yaman. Similarly, there is a difference between Iran and Saudi Arabia.
- Organizations such as the Arab League and the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) remain inactive.
- India's 'Look East Policy' has succeeded because in the east there is a strong organization like ASEAN. While there is no strong organization like ASEAN in West Asia, hence the success of India's "Look West Policy" is questionable.

Steps taken by India

- India should not engage in conflict with west Asian countries and should try to establish bilateral relations with each country.
- Efforts should be made to strengthen mutual relations with West Asian countries in the matter economic cooperation, people to people contact and information technology.

Expected Questions (Prelims Exams)

Expected Questions (Mains Exams)

1. Consider the following statements-

1. India's effort to develop intimacy with Saudi Arabia , UAE and Israel, etc. are considered as part of India's Look West Policy.
2. UAE, Saudi Arabia and State of Palestine are part of gulf countries.
3. The headquarter of The Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) is located in Ankare (Turkey). India is not its member.

Which of the above statement is/are correct?

- (a) Only 2
- (b) 1 and 3
- (c) 2 and 3
- (d) All of the above.

- Q. How the Look West Policy of India will control its neighbour and competitive country Pakistan? Discuss.**

(250 Words)

Note: Answer of Prelims Expected Question given on 4 Mar. is 1(a)

