



INDIA'S MULTIPOLAR COMMITMENT

With a modern diplomatic history going back to Gandhi and Nehru, India views its role in the Middle East as a supporter of multiple powers. But how long can India's commitment to a multipolar Middle East continue?

By Kabir Taneja

In the early 1990s, India was at an impasse. The economy was nearing bankruptcy and New Delhi was staring down the barrel of defaulting on loans provided by the International Monetary Fund and other international agencies. The government of then-Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao and Finance Minister Manmohan Singh was preparing to dip into the country's gold reserve to pay the debt. The situation forced a play of hand, with Rao and Singh orchestrating an opening up of the economy to global markets, moving away from the traditional socialist leanings of the state, and doubling down that consumerism and big trade would bail the nation out.

Fast forward into the 2000s and India's economy was booming on the back of its services sector led by the Information and Technology (IT) revolution. The success of economic liberalization ten or fifteen years after Rao's and Singh's opening of the economy had fundamentally altered India, and by association the domestic politics of the country. These changes were directly reflected in almost every aspect of governance, which of course included foreign policy. As India grew, its economic might was capable of giving it a stronger standing in global politics, adding more teeth to vital arteries that govern issues of global trade, security, counterterrorism, and the creation of a just and even playing field with democracy remaining the core political ideology.

Yet in some ways, India's resulting newfound soft power in global affairs is at odds with what came before. In the early decades after Indian independence from Britain, the post-colonial foreign policy of India was an idealistic outreach to the world based on mutual coexistence. By the early 2000s, these ideals had started to

◀ Syria's Foreign Minister Walid Muallem and his Indian counterpart Sushma Swaraj ahead of their meeting at Hyderabad House in New Delhi, Jan. 12, 2016. *Adnan Abidi/Reuters*

change given the country's economic growth and the geopolitical aspirations of its people as more than 1.2 billion people demanded both better economic benefits and greater respect from traditional global powers.

Following India's independence from British rule in 1947, the first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, handled the nation's foreign affairs until his death in 1964. At the time, the Middle East was an immensely important region for post-independence India and initially relations between India and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region had little to do with trade or oil, but instead consensus building in a world polarized between two competing blocs, the Soviet East and the United States's West. The counterbalance that Nehru supported was the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), a third bloc that maintained autonomy by not picking sides between Washington or Moscow.

NAM was the result of the "Initiative of Five," a moniker given to the founding fathers of the movement, namely Nehru; Josip Broz Tito of Yugoslavia; Sukarno, the first serving president of Indonesia; Kwame Nkrumah, the first prime minister and president of independent Ghana; and finally, Gamal Abdel Nasser, the second president of Egypt. The NAM grouping was formalized in 1956, with the term "non-aligned movement" only making an appearance in 1976 as the Cold War

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peaked, and countries such as India remained committed to dodging pressures to officially take sides between the communists and the capitalists.

While it can be argued that with 127 members today (120 active and seven observing), NAM has lost its way with too many voices, yet the ideals and ideations of NAM have persevered insofar as India's approach to the Middle East is concerned. From having good relations with Nasser to going against the larger narratives surrounding Saddam Hussein's Iraq during the First Gulf War, New Delhi displayed its idea of "strategic autonomy." Interestingly this term, strategic autonomy, did not command space in the lexicon of international studies till the idea of NAM 2.0 developed in India's twenty-first century foreign policy.

Strategic autonomy says that a nation will maintain an independent foreign policy posture while focusing on its core strategic goals. In this case India's primary strategic goal is economic. NAM 2.0 is itself a reinvention of NAM, taking the NAM ideals of Nasser and Nehru and rebranding them using the concept of strategic autonomy to help India shape and lead a stable, multipolar world order in the future.

As India's economy grows so too does its geopolitical clout, which has forced Indian policy thinkers to reimagine India's foreign policy. NAM was an outdated model; however, its core concept, that of not taking sides, has worked in favor of India around the world and especially in the Middle East. New developments in migration, the global economy, and global security have pushed India to develop a different approach to the world, that is, the concept of "strategic autonomy." While still is too fresh a concept to have an exact definition for, over the next years as India develops its place in the world, strategic autonomy will grow in import as India's place in the new global order solidifies. India's reimagining of its foreign policy relationship vis-à-vis strategic autonomy is seen clearest in India's relations with the Middle East.

Birth of NAM 2.0

Analysts often ask why India does not play larger roles in global disputes. New Delhi has often come close to answering such questions directly, specifically regarding the Middle East. In 2003, then-Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee warded off rumors that within his administration that were supporters of the call made by George W. Bush for India to send troops to Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein. The Bush administration was expecting India to send up to seventeen thousand troops to be deployed around the Kurdish region of Mosul, the second-largest city of Iraq, today better known as the place from where Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, the emir of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), used the Great Mosque of Al-Nuri to announce the so-called Islamic State, or the launch of the caliphate.

At the time there was, perhaps surprisingly when we look back, much public support for the idea of sending Indian troops into Iraq. Noted analysts such as C Raja Mohan and Sanjay Baru wrote in favor of such a deployment. In a piece titled "India's decision time on Iraq" published in May 2003 in the prominent *The Hindu* newspaper, Mohan argued that an Indian deployment in northern Iraq would "signal to the world that New Delhi has finally broken out of the traditionally limiting political confines of the subcontinent." However, after weighing the pros and cons, Vajpayee took a decision not to send the Indian military to join the United States and Britain in being part of the "war on terror." Had Vajpayee gotten India involved in Iraq, it would have been a departure from India's traditional non-interventionist and non-aligned posture and would have derailed one of the most successful diplomatic balancing acts undertaken by a state in the Middle East region. This diplomatic status quo that Vajpayee managed to protect was responsible for the successful evacuation of more than 110,000 Indians during the First Gulf War via the Jordanian capital Amman.

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Over ten years before Vajpayee's support of neutrality, another example of India's positioning itself as a supporter of a multipolar political order in the

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Middle East was when New Delhi in January 1992 established official diplomatic relations with Israel. At the time this was a long-overdue policy correction that had been held hostage to an obsolete outlook toward the Israel–Palestine issue by Indian foreign policy. The formalization of ties with Israel—which already in 1992 had been developing strongly despite a lack of formal diplomatic outreach—gave New Delhi a third pole of power to navigate in the region, a pole

whose very existence was cause for much of the region's turmoil.

As such, India continues to this day to walk a tightrope in its diplomacy with the MENA region. This tightrope walking is not for the faint-of-heart, as managing full diplomatic relations with the contesting three poles of power in the region—namely Saudi Arabia, Iran and Israel—can be challenging. All the same, the outcomes of such political maneuvering have been largely rewarding for New Delhi. Today, India thoughtfully engages with Middle Eastern actors while at the same time maintaining distance from regional fractures and conflicts, all of which has allowed India to have not just cordial relations across the region, but also fledging trade and migration.

NAM 2.0 Growing Pains

While relations with Israel are relatively new, ties with the Gulf are deeply entrenched in Indian society. The Indian citizens in the region—largely concentrated in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Qatar—are responsible for a majority of the over \$60 billion in remittances sent into the Indian economy annually. This makes the Gulf region indirectly integrated into the Indian economy and society, which in turn makes the Persian Gulf a prime region of interest for New Delhi's foreign policy.

One of the main hindrances to India setting up diplomatic relations with one of the region's leading powers, Israel, was New Delhi's longstanding stance on Palestine. Through Nehru's consensus on NAM and India's NAM partners, New Delhi for many years provided a safe diplomatic and often personal space for the Palestinian cause. This support often went beyond the call of duty as India backed the Palestinians against both interventionist Western policies and heavy-handedness toward the West Bank by the Israeli state. In fact, erstwhile leader and chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) Yasser Arafat made numerous visits to India during his life, often using the Indian capital as a second home.

The comfort and safety Arafat found in the land of *ahmisavadi* (or pacifist) Mahatma Gandhi was made possible by the views of Gandhi himself. Regarding the Palestine–Israel conundrum, Gandhi wrote in an op-ed published in November 1938 that “My sympathies are all with the Jews, but my sympathy does not blind me to the requirements of justice. The cry for the national home for the Jews does not make much appeal to me. Why should they not, like other peoples of the Earth, make that country their home where they’re born and where they earn their livelihood? Surely it would be a crime against humanity to reduce the proud Arabs so that Palestine can be restored to the Jews partly or wholly as their national home.”

This approach toward Palestine kept Israel–India ties from coming to fruition even after official diplomatic relations were achieved in 1992. The historic import of the Palestinian cause to Arab leaders and partners cannot be underscored enough. Some Arab nations used the Palestine issue to make a case for pan-Arab nationalism, with the likes of Egypt’s Nasser leading the charge both as part of the Gulf unity approach and as a founding ideologue of NAM. As such, Nehru’s outreach toward the Arab World vis-à-vis Nasser and NAM in the 1950s and 1960s informed and continues to inform India’s reactions to today’s geopolitics and today’s conflicts with Israel, in the region, and the greater world.

To that end, the Indian stance on the Syrian civil war has been for a dialogue-based end to hostilities between the various warring sides. In January 2014, India’s then-minister of external affairs Salman Khurshid represented India at the Geneva II conference, now a fossil of the

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multiple failed attempts by the global community to bring a consensus between the various interest groups in Syria. Nonetheless, Khurshid’s words on Syria are informative to better understand India’s relationship with the Middle East. Khurshid said, “India has important stakes in the Syrian conflict. It shares deep historical and civilizational bonds with the wider West Asia and Gulf region. We have substantial interests in the field of trade and investment, diaspora, remittances, energy, and security. Any spillover from the Syrian conflict has the potential of impacting negatively on our larger interests.” Behind Khurshid’s stoic and balancing diplomatic language lingered a fear of protecting millions of Indians if the destabilizing outcomes of the Arab Spring were to spread to other parts of the Middle East.

Despite the narrative of dialogue, New Delhi subtly supported the legitimacy of Bashar Al-Assad’s regime in Damascus, continuing diplomatic ties throughout the conflict and being one of the few countries to keep its embassy operational. High-level delegation visits from Syria to India continued, with the Indian Minister of State for External Affairs Shri M.J. Akbar visiting Damascus in 2016

and Syria's Grand Mufti Ahmed Adib Hassoun, the highest Islamic authority in Syria, visiting New Delhi a year later.

India's support for the Al-Assad regime came from three main arguments. First, New Delhi believed that unplanned, disorganized, and reckless decapitation of regimes in the region would look like what happened in Libya following the execution of former Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi. The result of such uprisings was that MENA countries could be—in the view of New Delhi—left at the mercy of warring tribal groups and affiliates of global jihadist organizations such as Al-Qaeda and even ISIS. Secondly, India and Syria had a long history of good relations. India had good relations with the Al-Assad family, beginning with Bashar Al-Assad's father and former president of Syria Hafez Al-Assad, who served as the head of the Syrian state from 1971 until his death in 2000. Even before the Al-Assad family came to power, relations between India and Syria were strong. When Nehru visited Syria in 1957 and then again in 1960, he was welcomed in Damascus by then-Syrian leader Shukri Al-Quwatli along with tens of thousands of people at the airport chanting, "Welcome to the hero of world peace" and "Long live the leader of Asia."

These good relations have continued. Earlier this year, India's then-secretary East at the Ministry of External Affairs, Anil Wadhwa, had said that the "Indian position on Russia's military intervention to help to the Syrian regime was to halt the advances of the Islamic State," in effect throwing weight behind Moscow's policies in the region. Yet, interestingly there does appear to be some conflict among ruling circles in New Delhi over India's relationship with Syria. While there may be soft support for the Al-Assad state and the Russian support of Al-Assad, there is also conflict as was illustrated when the Indian External Affairs Ministry itself issued a statement saying that "there could be no military solution to this conflict."

Earlier in 2016, Syria's Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Walid Muallem visited New Delhi in his capacity as the country's foreign minister

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to hold talks with Swaraj and National Security Advisor Ajit Doval. Both sides found common ground regarding their poor relationship with the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). The OIC has criticized India over its alleged human rights violations in Kashmir and the body also suspended Syria in 2012 for Al-Assad's suppression of the Syrian uprising. Goodwill between the two states was on display in 2017 when India held a cultural week in Damascus,

Aleppo, and Homs. This feeling of cultural amity has continued into 2018 as well, with Syria's Higher Education Minister Atef Naddaf's trip to India in April

securing one thousand scholarships for Syrian students to study in India. Seeing India as a friend, the Syrian envoy in New Delhi in 2018 Riad Kamel Abbas backed India in Kashmir, justifying India's actions as fighting the "first step of terrorism" and stressing that India should be able to act in Kashmir as India sees fit. Such backing on the Kashmir issue in the international community is viewed as critical by India in its attempts to build a consensus against Pakistan.

It is valuable to note that New Delhi has made next to no statements on issues relating to Iran's role in the Syrian crisis including U.S. and Saudi concerns over Tehran's alleged strategy of Shia expansionism, its sheltering of Al-Qaeda operatives, and so on. The recent visits to India by Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif and Iran's President Hassan Rouhani have coincided with increased bilateral and strategic cooperation between India and Saudi Arabia, UAE, and other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). India's strong relations across the Persian Gulf only continue to improve. For example, it would have been unfathomable to imagine an Indian Air Force fleet conducting a staging visit to Saudi Arabia in 2015 or the UAE deporting terror suspects wanted by New Delhi at regular intervals over the past two years.

In the Interest of Nationals

Interestingly, in the Middle East, Indian political and economic interests sometimes collide with the interests of its own nationals living in the MENA region. Today 7.5 million Indian immigrants live across the Middle East and have been pivotal in, for example, the building of Dubai and the construction industries of Saudi Arabia as well as the oil industries of Iran and the water irrigation systems in Egypt. As such, the reality remains that even as India prospers economically from relations with the region, one of its main mandates remains protecting the 7.5 million-person Indian diaspora scattered around possibly the most volatile region on Earth.

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One of the prime examples of Indian diplomacy of having good relations with all the poles of power in the region was exemplified during the start of the Yemen crisis, when New Delhi evacuated more than four thousand people, including foreigners, from Yemen by both sea and air. This was India's second-largest such evacuation from the region, following the massive evacuation during the first Gulf War.

During the Yemen crisis, India, operating via Sanaa's airport, managed to create windows for relief flights by talking to both the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels and the Saudi-led Arab coalition to maintain hours of ceasefire for the relief

flights to operate. In simple words, New Delhi managed to convince both Houthis and the Saudis to halt hostilities for it to get its people out. It is safe to say that not many countries would have been able to orchestrate such an effort.

The fact that today Saudi Arabia and Iran are competing in a voracious manner for supremacy in the region also provides a good example of how India manages good relations with both Riyadh and Tehran without either, at least publicly, questioning India about its relationship with the other side. Both Iran and Saudi Arabia view India as an important partner, specifically today when it is one of the world's fastest-growing economies. In Iran, India has initiated major developmental investments such as the massive Farzad B gas field and the Chabahar port project, which is liberally seen as a strategic home run for New Delhi as Chabahar port is pivotal to the International North South Transportation Corridor connecting India to Eurasia and giving landlocked Afghanistan access to new trading routes. Interestingly, Chabahar looks to free Kabul's overbearing reliance on the Pakistani port of Karachi.

Amidst all this, Israel is still a relatively new comer. However, it also offers the most direct and no-strings-attached relationship among the other two poles of power. Under the current Indian government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his nationalist pro-Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), India finds many commonalities with Israel and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's approach toward combating terrorism from Hamas, Hezbollah, and others. However, as noted, India has not waded into Israel's claims of Iranian transgressions in Syria and the threat of Shia militias capturing territory in Syria. Even with an increase of \$1 billion annually in Indo-Israel defense ties and a recent visit by Netanyahu to India and Modi to Israel, India's idea of strategic autonomy remains prominent and visible.

The Future of NAM 2.0

As India's economic and political clout grows, so too will its diplomacy aims and requirements. Despite the ideas supporting strategic autonomy, it may

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become harder than ever before for New Delhi to remain neutral in international politics. While not taking sides in conflicts has served Indian foreign policy well until today, such fence-sitting is contrary to India's vision of becoming an economic and political heavyweight in the international arena. No country has ever become a power without upsetting other powers. As such, the fear of being caught on the wrong side of history should not wholly dictate India's

foreign policy goals in the future. Ultimately these foreign policy goals must align with India's ambitions of being a world superpower.

While the role of the more than 7.5 million Indians living in the MENA region is still undoubtedly one driving factor of Indian diplomatic engagement in the larger Middle East region, it is the Indian economy that is coming out as the main catalyst of expanding relationships between the Middle East and the subcontinent. The future of the Gulf economies and perhaps even their security architectures will look toward India, and it is inevitable that New Delhi's emerging strategic autonomy foreign policy initiative will remold India's existing balance between the three poles of Saudi–Iranian–Israeli power. A new day then is dawning, and India's NAM 2.0 foreign policy will seek a more result-oriented posture in the Middle East's politics, society, and most importantly, economy. ©