



## **RAPORTEURS' REPORT**

### **5<sup>TH</sup> WEST ASIA CONFERENCE**

#### **India's Approach to West Asia: Trends, Challenges and Possibilities**

March 29-30, 2022

The MP-IDSA organised its 5th West Asia Conference on the theme '**India's Approach to West Asia: Trends, Challenges, and Possibilities**' on March 29–30, 2022. The two-day Conference, held in an online format, was inaugurated by **Ambassador Sujan R. Chinoy, Director General, MP-IDSA.**

#### **Welcome Remarks**



Amb. Chinoy began by welcoming the participants and speakers. He noted the West Asia Conference (WAC) is one of MP-IDSA's biennial flagship events that, during its last four editions, has emerged as an important forum discussing critical security and strategic issues facing the West Asia and North Africa (WANA) region. He outlined the themes discussed over the last four editions, including but not limited to, the changing geopolitical landscapes in the region, the impact of ideological and socio-political movements on regional and international stability and also global, regional and sub-regional responses to the changing geopolitical landscape.

Setting the wider context for deliberations, Amb. Chinoy underscored the importance of discussing China in the broader region of Indo-Pacific, a regional construct that goes beyond the limited concept of Asia Pacific and extends to the Gulf and Africa. He stated that Indo-Pacific is not only aspirational, but also accommodating of the broad challenges which connect the region, including terrorism, energy, territorial conflicts and maritime security. These developments, he noted, traverse the region, connecting the oceanic spaces, littoral states, and continental landmass.

Amb. Chinoy highlighted that in this interconnected world, regional dynamics have global implications. The Ukrainian conflict impacts all countries, including India, which has good relations

with Russia as well as Ukraine in the defence sector. In terms of key challenges for India, he noted that around 23,000 Indian students were residing in Ukraine when the hostilities broke out, whose evacuation remained a priority for India. He also acknowledged the role of countries such as Bahrain in facilitating the evacuation of Indian students from conflict zones.

He went on to note how the crisis in Ukraine and the sanctions imposed on Russia will impact economies, which were beginning to recover from the pandemic, and the effect an uncertain global climate has in terms of increase of defence budgets worldwide. Also that amid rising oil prices, energy security has become an enormous challenge for oil-importing countries such as India and others in Asia. He underscored that India's independent foreign policy was based on its national interests and priorities rather than bandwagoning with others and the reality of New Delhi's strategic autonomy in words and deeds

Amb. Chinoy referred to the war in Yemen, Houthis' targeting of vital installations in the UAE, and the Russian role in negotiations concerning the revival of the Iran nuclear deal to drive home the point that the region is undergoing a flux. Further, he noted that the transition from authoritarianism to participatory politics in the region has produced mixed results, from painful to inconclusive. The regional balance of power in West Asia has become uncertain.

Amb. Chinoy highlighted that due to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership, India's goodwill at the political level, and people-to-people exchanges, the "Look West" policy has evolved into an "Act West" policy. Additionally, he mentioned that uninterrupted energy supply and remittances are India's crucial links to the Gulf.

## Session One

### India and West Asia: Adapting to Changing Realities



The first session deliberated on "India and West Asia: Adapting to Changing Realities", and was chaired by **Ambassador Sujan R. Chinoy, Director General, MP-IDSA**. Amb. Chinoy delineated how the Ukrainian war has resulted in different kinds of fallouts on the issues of nuclear proliferation, development of ballistic missiles, disarmament, and the energy markets. Previously, the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council had affirmed to refrain from the use or the threat of use of nuclear weapons. However, recently, Russian President Vladimir Putin has placed his nuclear forces on high alert. A key negative message that emerges from the

Ukraine crisis is that those in possession of nuclear weapons are less likely to be invaded. The Chair noted that even as the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) oil producers enjoy renewed salience in the wake of the Ukrainian war, the Gulf countries will continue diversifying their economies, adjusting to the changing energy matrix worldwide and competition from other oil producers such as the United States.

**Dr. Ezzat Saad El Sayed (Director, Egyptian Council for Foreign Affairs, Cairo)**, the first speaker of the session, noted that Egypt and India's relations are based on their common political understanding developed over a long history of regular contacts and cooperation on bilateral, regional, and multilateral issues. Under President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, Egypt has understood the significance of strengthening its ties with India, a key emerging power and one of the economic poles in the evolving international order. He noted that the time has come to realise the high-level visits between the two countries that have been postponed due to the pandemic restrictions, especially, as India and Egypt will commemorate the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of diplomatic relations in August 2022.



There are growing trade and investment opportunities between India and Egypt. The private sector has a key role to play in driving the economic relationship forward. Emphasising the importance of a broad regional approach, he noted the formation of the Middle Eastern mini-QUAD, which relies on a functional approach bringing together the unique capabilities of different players. He highlighted that India and Egypt's bilateral trade, worth US\$ 6 billion in 2021, had seen an annual growth of 80 percent, and that an increase in Egyptian exports to India by 63 percent is also visible. India is only second to Turkey as the largest market for exporting Egyptian liquefied natural gas. Indian investments in Egypt amount to more than US\$ 3.5 billion distributed across various sectors such as higher education, communication technologies, renewable energy and healthcare, with 52 Indian companies currently operating in Egypt.

The speaker noted that bilateral cooperation in the defence sector has received substantial attention after the 2021 visit of Chief of Air Staff Air Chief Marshall V.R. Chaudhary to Cairo, where he held consultations with his Egyptian counterpart Field Marshall Mohammed Abbas Helmy. Subsequently, the Air Forces of the two countries held their first-ever joint exercise – Desert Warrior – which included air refuelling operations and joint sorties. Additionally, in November 2021, more than 10 Indian companies participated in the Egyptian Defence Expo, where the latest defence systems were on display. The growing defence cooperation shows the increasing trust and mutual understanding between the countries.

Dr. Sayed also explained that both, India and Egypt, had experienced robust cultural exchanges in continuation of centuries-old ties and that exchanging ideas is necessary for building a strong and sustainable bilateral relationship. He noted that Egypt's expanding solar-based electrification projects highlight the country's technical capability in renewable energy. Furthermore, he underscored India's development assistance to Egypt and the African continent – Cairo's textile vocational training centre provides training to 300 students annually and a pan-African project at Alexandria University provides tele-medicine. Indian developmental assistance also includes tele-education and a Centre of Excellence in Information Technology at Al-Azhar University, which would open avenues for increased cooperation between the two sides. He concluded by emphasising the need to strengthen bilateral political cooperation and economic partnership in the pharmaceutical, health, energy and textile industries.

**Ambassador Talmiz Ahmad (Former Ambassador of India to Saudi Arabia, UAE and Oman)** spoke on “**West Asia: New Challenges and Fresh Alignments in a Turbulent Regional Scenario**”. He discussed the turbulent situations within the region, emphasising on the conflicts in Syria and Yemen, the confrontation between Saudi Arabia and Iran, regular Israeli military attacks on Iranian assets, among other issues. He explained that Iran defends its regional interests through the influential presence of Shia militias in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon and extending support for various Palestinian groups. Turkey has emerged as an important player in the region. Although some would decry Turkey's actions as displaying neo-Ottoman attributes, it is driven by its security concerns, especially threats posed by Kurdish aspirations, which is why it has a military presence in Syria, Iraq, Qatar, Libya, and the Eastern Mediterranean. Notably, it has also displayed brinkmanship in its relations with the US and Russia.



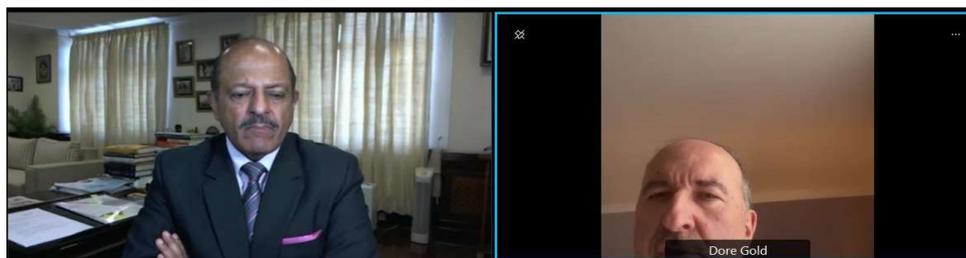
He stated that American foreign policy under Donald Trump was marked by an aggressive regional posture, sowed confrontation and frequently pushed the region to the brink of war. President Joe Biden was initially hostile towards Saudi Arabia, vowing to make it a pariah. He also followed a non-accommodative approach to Turkey's brinkmanship, which has relatively retained its strategic autonomy and not given Biden the satisfaction of toeing his line. On the other hand, even though President Biden was initially uncomfortable with Mr. Netanyahu due to the latter publicly castigating him along with President Obama for the nuclear deal with Iran, he backed Israeli efforts during the Gaza conflict due to the strong influence of Jewish lobbies in his country. Amb. Ahmad argued that the US continues to display a sense of fatigue in its engagement with the region and vice-versa.

He also underlined the American agenda of permanently crippling Russia as a strategic challenge, projecting President Biden as a resolute leader of the Western alliance against Russia and bringing back the European Union under the US control amid the Ukrainian crisis. However, he

emphasised that no other regional country, excluding Kuwait, supported the American positions and most refrained from sanctioning Russia. He emphasised unprecedented developments in the region, for instance, Saudi Arabia and the UAE refusing to entertain President Biden's call to increase their oil production even as they continued to receive calls from President Putin. Turkey, Qatar and Israel emerging as mediators during the Ukrainian war as taking up such roles accords them a degree of prestige. He also mentioned that the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action's (JCPOA) outcome remains uncertain due to American domestic compulsions, given the flak President Biden will receive from the Republicans and certain sections of the Democrats on potential removal of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) from the list of foreign terrorist organisations.

On the Middle East 'Quad', he noted that it must not be forgotten that two members, the UAE and Israel have close relations with China. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has significant presence in the region, and Beijing has long term strategic purpose in the region, even though it has not yet specifically articulated a security doctrine for the region. He noted that Beijing has consistently improved its knowledge capabilities, such as Arabic language skills among its diplomats, to deal with the region. Further, China's role in security and stability will be welcomed by the region. He noted that amidst the churn in the region visible in fresh alignments and the growing role of Russia, India's role can be best summarised as a "significant absent partner." India's approach towards the region continues to be bilateral and transactional. He stated that the time for bilateral relations is over, and that New Delhi should consider a region-wide approach, promoting collective security in the region, and bringing together countries that are estranged from each other.

**Amb. Dore Gold (President, Jerusalem Centre for Public Affairs, Jerusalem)** spoke on "**Why the Quad?**" and began by referring to Israel's growing engagement and normalisation with the region as a very positive development. Noting India's growing engagement with the region, he spoke about India's role as a great power and in maintaining regional stability dating back to World War I, when the Indian cavalry under the leadership of British General Edmund Allenby entered the gates of Jerusalem. India's role across the Middle East was huge during the time of the British Empire, notably in stabilising Mesopotamia and the agreements that the British Viceroy in India had with mini-states in the Persian Gulf. He expressed doubt about whether India would play a similar role, as in the past. In this vein, he noted the sense of responsibility that the Indian government feels towards protecting its multi-million strong diaspora in the Gulf region.



The speaker further elaborated on the difficult relationship between Iran and Israel. Statements from the Iranian leadership displayed what he called an "extremely hostile attitude" towards the state of Israel, therefore, Israel has to be prepared to deal with Iranian activities. He also referred

to Iran's nuclear programme and how the JCPOA does not address it adequately together with its support for insurgent groups, Shia militias active throughout the region. He noted that it was unfortunate that the finances made available after lifting sanctions on Iran in 2015 were used to fund insurgent organisations, leading to escalation of violence and a rise in numbers of organisations challenging the status quo. While Israel had to deal with Hamas and Hezbollah, the Saudis had to deal with huge escalation from Houthis attacking their civilian sites and Israel, while not having diplomatic relations with Riyadh, understands the security challenges it faces from Iranian-backed Houthis. The stabilisation of the region will therefore require a solution to the Iranian challenge. The speaker also asserted that the Iran supporting insurgent groups in Western Sahara, through its embassy in Algiers, drove the Moroccan participation in the Abraham Accords. Morocco, therefore, identified Iran as a source of instability in North Africa. He expressed hope to see a change in Iran's behaviour so as to create a new regional order. He concluded by noting that India's role in the region is growing to protect its own interests, and underscored the need for continuous dialogue to learn from each other about the risks to both countries' interests in the region.

### **Q&A Session**

The Q&A session revolved around themes, including but not limited to, the emergence of fresh alignments in the region, a shared threat perception of Iran shaping the normalisation of ties between Israel and the Arab world, the impact of the Ukrainian war on Egyptian foreign policy and trade, the growing Chinese footprint in the WANA region, and its impact on the regional order. The issue of Israel-Palestine was also raised, especially the critique by international institutions that Israel was practicing 'apartheid' against the Palestinians.

Before bringing the session to a close, the Chair emphasised India's balanced foreign policy towards the region, how humanitarian values and the oneness of humankind as embodied in the age-old Indian tenant of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* (the world is one family) also dictates that everyone can come together and pursue independent interests without harming the other's interests.

### **Key Takeaways**

- India's growing role in the region is determined by protection of its own interests and that its approach towards the region continues to be primarily bilateral and transactional.
- The 'Middle East Quad' comprising Israel, the US, India and the UAE is reflective of wider geopolitical flux in the region. But, it must be seen as conversations among close partners and in context of other such plurilateral conversations in the region.
- The recent momentum in India-Egypt defence cooperation is rooted in the long history and mutual trust that defines their bilateral relations.
- A shared perception of Iran as a destabilising actor among several states in West Asia and North Africa was the primary driver of their normalisation of ties and growing cooperation with Israel.

## Session Two

### Regional Geopolitics and Security in West Asia



The second session discussed the regional security environment by taking a multidimensional approach to the concept of security. The discussion covered various security challenges the region faces from climate change, weakening of states, conflicts and the proliferation of non-state actors (NSAs) in the region. There was also discussion on the rising profile of new actors and their vision of inter-state relations, especially trade routes and inter-regional dependence.

**Prof. Gulshan Dietl (Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi)** chaired the session titled “**Regional Geopolitics and Security in West Asia**”. In her introductory remarks, she shared insights on the concepts of geopolitics and security. Geopolitics is a blend of academic pursuit and policy science. Security is not a flat concept but rather a well-rounded 360 degree concept which includes military, energy, human, social and gender security. Stating that geopolitics and security are loaded concepts, she expressed optimism that the session would help examine the security of West Asia region through the prism of geopolitics.



**Dr. Andrey Kortunov (Director General, Russian International Affairs Council, Moscow)** in his talk shed light on the impact of current developments in Ukraine and on the long-term challenges to security of West Asia. Referring to the Russia-Ukraine conflict as a tragic moment in history, he underscored the repercussions it would have on global energy markets and food markets, the negative implications of proliferation of nuclear weapons and the future of strategic arms control. Stating that the pandemic had not altered the international system in a revolutionary way as predicted earlier by several analysts, Dr. Kortunov questioned the extent to which the Ukraine conflict would irreversibly change the international system, except that there is a new consolidation of the West, China is getting stronger and effects on some regional conflicts. On

the long-term trends likely to affect the security agenda of West Asia, he elaborated on the challenges posed by climate change, migration flows, energy revolution, growing demographic pressures, global transformation to Industry 4.0, growing digital divide, and the crisis of the state system in West Asia.



He noted that climate change implies increased deforestation, desertification, rising sea levels and fresh water deficit. The acceleration of climate change would affect migration flows out of West Asia and inter-regional migrations, especially to Europe posing problems of adaptation and integration of ethnic groups. Climate change has also increased the competition for resources such as water and food. In this backdrop, Dr. Kortunov opined that climate change is likely to produce social tensions in the region and new sources of political instability. He noted the slow pace of energy transformation in Asia, but opined that the long-term trend of energy revolution will continue, with countries in the region also likely to seek nuclear power plants creating additional challenges of nuclear proliferation. Energy transformation will eventually marginalise West Asia in the global economy and as the oil era comes to an end the region is likely to undergo dramatic changes in terms of its economic development and security. The global transformation to Industry 4.0 will present both opportunities and challenges owing to a likely slower pace in West Asia compared to other regions, with traditional sectors of the economy likely to suffer growing unemployment leading to pauperisation of large strata of societies, a growing digital divide and a rising unease about the region's place in the global economy. The rapid demographic pressures, especially the youth-dominated population will fuel rapid and uncontrolled urbanisation which in turn might lead to social fragmentation, inequality, create social groups vulnerable to political and religious radicalism and have serious environmental implications.

On the future of religion, he noted the broadening gap between secularism and political religion in the region, discrimination against religious minorities and especially forced migration of Christians from the region. He talked about the crisis of the state system in West Asia that will potentially see more authoritarian and even totalitarian regimes being in charge, which will end up following inefficient paternalistic development strategies and repressive political practices, with possibilities for regional conflicts and potential revolutions similar to Arab Spring.

He concluded by underlining the long term nature of effects of regional conflict, such as the problem of Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries, which will not only have effect on the political developments in these countries but will also complicate potential reconciliation between Syria and its neighbours.

**Prof. Mehmet Seyfettin Erol (President, Ankara Centre for Crisis and Policy Studies, Ankara)** in his presentation titled **“Middle East, Central Asia, South Asia Triangle and the New Spice Route in the Changing Geopolitics of West Asia”** enumerated the dimensions of West Asia geopolitics, importance of the peace process in the region and inter-regional cooperation. He stated that the global power struggle in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has brought geopolitics and security to the forefront and brings hybrid warfare to the fore.



The possibility of the western powers, which have been influential for last 350 years, losing their monopoly in the process of shaping the international system, brings Asian geopolitics to the fore in a multidimensional way. He described the wide geographical space from Europe to borders of China as 'Western Asia', where many actors are playing a decisive role in the construction of the international system between unipolarity and multipolarity. The conceptualisations of region, historically formed by dominant actors in the global system need revision as they can pose obstacles to resolving issues by not allowing proper discussion of countries' interests, demands and expectations. He noted the importance of promoting win-win based narratives with regional states and other geographies.

Prof. Erol underscored the importance of the West Asia, Central Asia and South Asia triangle in the new Eurasian geopolitics, which has historically been the natural route of power struggle. Despite these three regions being identified with concepts like instability, terrorism and underdevelopment, they are in fact strong candidates for regional and global peace, economic and cultural projects. In the face of security risks posed by new geopolitical uncertainty, the countries in the region have three options – partake in the West Asian power struggle, adopt an isolationist policy to achieve their national goals or to develop regional cooperation based on win-win projects which will seek to freeze conflicts among countries. Arguing that the most reasonable option was the third one, he presented two trade routes – Southern Sea Corridor based on the Indian Ocean geopolitics including Pakistan, from India to the UAE in the Gulf and from Middle East to North Africa. This line could also extend to different regions. The second line is the Middle East Corridor which includes India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Central Asia, Caspian Sea, Caucasus, Turkey and Europe. He opined that the concept of this new 'spice route' based on a win-win principle doesn't reject the practice of the past and facilitates common perspective among regional and non-regional actors. Prof. Erol cautioned that sea-routes cannot be viewed as separate from land-routes and vice versa.

Reflecting on the interconnectedness of the world where developments in one region affect another, he stated that all three regions play a different role in the global power struggle. Elucidating in extensive detail the interests and strategies of the regional and non-regional actors

towards regional geography, Prof. Erol remarked on the Belt and Road Initiative which has increased the geopolitical importance of West Asia; the growing trade and security relations of West Asia driven by Russia's efforts to seek new partners in the wake of the Ukraine crisis; India's weight in the international system; its rise and close ties with Central Asia; the mutual dependence between Central Asia and India to access sea routes and energy sources respectively; the military role played by the US in Afghanistan and West Asia; US withdrawal which caused geopolitical and security fluctuations in the region, the importance of Kashmir issue being resolved mutually between Pakistan and India and envisaging Afghanistan as a crossing point for regional projects.

Prof. Erol stressed on the importance of soft power over hard power as the most reasonable method which will contribute to resolution of conflicts in the region. In conclusion, he underscored the importance of dialogue and a cooperation-based approach in realising the new spice route.

**Mr. Goor Tsalalyachin (Executive Director, The Abba Eban Institute for International Diplomacy, Reichman University, Herziliya, Israel)** in his presentation titled "**Changing Times, Time to change**" focused on the implications of the Russia-Ukraine war and the looming Iranian nuclear deal. He opined that both these complex drivers had already placed many actors across the globe at a critical decision point. Recalling a visual metaphor which described the Cold War era as a world between the Russian Bear and US Eagle, he analysed that currently the metaphor has evolved into the American Eagle, Russian Bear and Chinese Dragon while facing the Iranian sword. He alluded to the cross domain implications of the Ukrainian war on security situation, energy security, economic warfare, conventional warfare and supply chain crisis.



Noting that the war in Ukraine has heightened superpower competition between Russia and US with some ramifications for China, Mr. Tsalalyachin opined that it has serious implications for Israel to manoeuvre politically between the three major powers, especially since Israel shares a border with Russia due to Russia's military presence in Syria. Remarking on the Iranian nuclear deal, he stated that the likely lifting of sanctions by the US has possible implications for a nuclear arms race in the region and beyond, and the erosion in the American credibility as a security guarantor might induce some regional countries to develop their own nuclear deterrence. The speaker analysed that one of the outcomes of these trends was frantic diplomacy in West Asia evident in the meetings, series of summits, new regional security frameworks and an emerging new Middle Eastern axis which includes Israel, UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, Egypt and Jordan, built around their shared concerns on Iran.

Expressing that other countries too were dealing with a similar paradox as the one facing Israel, that is between aligning with the US and coordinating with Russia, Mr. Tsalalyachin enumerated the choices that lie ahead for India as a democracy. Recalling that Iran's activities in the region pose security threats, he stated that India could make a smart decision to use its trade relations with Iran as leverage to make Iran comply with international norms. With this background, he outlined a decision-making matrix based on national security and a utility approach versus ones based on the moral compass of international norms and values. Reiterating that the attention and resources of the US would be drawn into Europe and Indo-Pacific regions in the future, Mr. Tsalalyachin suggested that actors in West Asia and in wider Asia needed to leverage their national power, economic diplomacy, intelligence and defence cooperation to expand existing frameworks of cooperation and perhaps even build new ones to deal with common concerns of maritime security, trilateral trade relations, shared issues such as food security, water desalination, cyber security and cyber defence. He concluded by emphasising that these measures would help the countries in the region to navigate the expected turbulence of the future.

**Dr. Muddassir Quamar (Associate Fellow, MP-IDSA, New Delhi)** shared his insights on the topic **“Non-State Actors and regional stability in West Asia”**. Describing the region to be in a constant state of flux, he remarked on the threats posed by the NSAs to the WANA region and on the inability of regional and extra regional actors to dominate the region. He stressed on the importance of systematically examining the role played by NSAs, their ambitions and capabilities due to the challenges they pose to state authority and regional security.



Dr. Quamar outlined the three categories of NSAs significant in WANA – transnational terrorist groups like Al Qaeda and Islamic State which have global appeal and Boko Haram, Al Shabaab and others that have a wide regional base; transnational ideological groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Kurdish movement; and finally, sub-national and national militants and insurgents like Hezbollah, Hamas, Houthi movement and their affiliates in different parts of the region. Analysing the environment for NSAs to gain influence, he pointed to the failure of states to fulfil their governance responsibilities. Stating that this has led common people to pledge loyalty to NSAs over the state, he brought out the various complexities of the issue including NSAs that are aligned with the state and armed NSAs like terrorist groups, militants and insurgents which are involved in organised crimes, drug trafficking and other illegal activities.

He assessed that the mayhem caused by all these NSAs has evoked reactionary and partisan responses from regional and extra regional actors based on their own assessments of national interests and bilateral ties. Additionally, NSAs do not have a sense of accountability or international/national scrutiny which adds to their advantage.

He concluded by reiterating the need for a greater understanding of the phenomenon of NSAs and their proliferation in the region; and the need for regional and external powers to discuss the threats posed by these NSAs so as to devise policies accordingly.

### **Q&A Session**

The panel presentations were followed by a lively Q&A session which brought out several inputs and perspectives on the implications of India, Israel, US and UAE Quad on the Israel-China relationship, challenges and opportunities faced by Russia in the energy sector, need for new security frameworks to manage the new security challenges of West Asia, revival of the JCPOA agreement and new multi-alignment between Israel and some Gulf States, mechanisms to accommodate Iranian concerns in the region, factors underlying the shifts in Turkish foreign policy and implications of the JCPOA for Russia. The region faces the challenge of engaging constructively with Iran and incentivising it to be a stakeholder in the region. Turkey prefers peaceful resolution of issues based on cooperation and a win-win approach. The success of JCPOA will be determined by the bilateral engagement between US and Iran rather than multilateral discussions.

### **Key Takeaways**

- Security is not a flat concept but a multifaceted one, and the states alone are not the reference object of security.
- In a testimony to the interconnected nature of security, Russia-Ukraine crisis has far reaching implications on the West Asian region in terms of energy security, economic stability, food security, supply-chain disruptions, proliferation of nuclear weapons and strategic arms race, to state a few.
- There has been an erosion of trust in the US credibility as a security provider among the West Asian actors, especially among the Gulf States, paving ground for fresh-alignments and growing cooperation among regional actors from beyond in Asia.
- There is a need for greater connectivity between West Asia, Central Asia and South Asia to deal with the security risks posed by new geopolitical uncertainties.
- It is important for regional and extra-regional powers to understand the serious threats posed by proliferation of non-state actors in the region and work together to devise relevant policies.

## Session Three

### Energy and Diaspora



The session examined how the pandemic and its fallout on economies created various challenges, for Indian migrants, while discussing the future trends of migration in the wake of changing policy frameworks and characters of economies in the Gulf States. The discussions also covered new avenues for cooperation between India and the Gulf States, as the latter diversified their economies away from hydrocarbon dependence. The session was chaired by **Dr. Meena Singh Roy** who highlighted that both energy and Indian diaspora remain as the key driving factors of India's engagement towards West Asia and shape India's approach towards the region

**Prof. S. Irudaya Rajan (Chairman, International Institute of Migration and Development, Thiruvananthapuram)** delivered his talk on the topic "**Challenges Facing Indian Migrant Workers in the Gulf During the COVID-19 Pandemic**". Prof. Rajan asserted that the COVID-19 pandemic has transformed migration patterns globally and that West Asia was not a unique case. Over 18 million Indians live around the world; and during the COVID-19 pandemic more than one-fourth of the Indians living in West Asia returned back to India via *Vande Bharat Mission*. However, pandemic-induced distress migration has created a novel category of 'return-migration' that is migrants who are determined to return back. Prof. Rajan highlighted that the main challenge that India faced during the COVID-19 pandemic was the non-availability of a proper migration database and suggested that following the global compact on migration India needs to invest in migration surveys and make a credible database on Indian migrants globally.



Prof. Rajan noted that as a number of migrants returned from the Gulf countries during the COVID-19 pandemic, this could be termed as 'distress return' and emphasised the lack of grievance mechanisms in the Gulf countries to address various issues that migrants faced because of their sudden and forced departure. In addition to the problem of reabsorption of these migrants upon their return to India, the stigma the returning migrants faced as suspected carriers of COVID-19 and how the long quarantines they had to undergo added to their financial and psychological woes. Prof. Rajan in his talk also highlighted that post-COVID there has been an increase in the cost of migration that needs to be addressed by the government. He also observed that in the aftermath of the pandemic there has been a change in the migration pattern from India, therefore the government needs to devise adequate mechanisms to facilitate orderly, safe and legal migration. He suggested that MP-IDSA, should also consider developing a database on Indian migration.

**Dr. N. Janardhan (Senior Research Fellow, Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy, Abu Dhabi)** made his presentation on the topic “**COVID Tests Resilience of ‘Common’ Gulf Indians**”. He stated that no matter what the crisis is, ordinary people all over the world show resilience in the face of crisis and that Indians in the Gulf have successfully overcome the COVID-19 pandemic. Giving an overview of the COVID situation in the region, he noted that all the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries accounted for 3.3 million COVID cases and reported 21,200 deaths due to the pandemic.



He observed that immigration to the Gulf was positively related to the state of economy in the region. It was the combination of economic slowdown, fluctuation in oil markets and the pandemic that forced countries to adopt cost-cutting measures impacting the whole range of migrants and expatriates. The GCC countries have taken aggressive measures to revive their economies and post-pandemic economic recovery will result in reverse migration, as was evident during the 2008

financial crisis which had resulted in temporary outmigration. He highlighted that due to the COVID pandemic, the UAE and Qatar witnessed an overall decrease of 13 percent in employment and 10 percent decrease in population. As the COVID situation has improved in recent months, a large number of Indians have been returning to the GCC countries. On the changing composition of Indian migrants in the GCC states, he noted that an increasing number of migrants are now coming from the northern states and that the proportion of other South Asian countries in labour migration to the Gulf is on the rise.

**Dr. P K Pradhan (Associate Fellow and Coordinator, West Asia Centre, MP-IDSA)** gave his presentation on the topic **“Indians in the Gulf during the pandemic: Analysing Response from India and the Regional Countries.”**



Dr. Pradhan mentioned that though India and the Gulf countries took adequate measures for the welfare of the Indian workers, still a large number of workers (particularly the blue-collar workers) were affected very severely by the pandemic. Prime Minister Narendra Modi reached out to the leaders of the Gulf countries and appealed to them to ensure the wellbeing of the Indian community; and in return he received assurances from them that the Indian community will be taken care of during the pandemic. India started the *Vande Bharat Mission* to bring back Indians from different parts of the world. The *Vande Bharat Mission* emerged as one of the world's largest peacetime repatriation missions ever undertaken in history. Further, Dr. Pradhan also talked about the Indian Government's initiative of Skilled Workers Arrival Database for Employment Support (SWADES) portal that aims to create a database of the people coming back from the Gulf.

Speaking on the responses from the Gulf countries, he stated that there were mixed reports coming from the Gulf region regarding the condition of the Indian migrants in the Gulf. But later, these countries offered amnesty to the people who had overstayed their visa and, in some cases, also offered to pay for their tickets to go home. The GCC countries also promised to provide medical facilities to everyone infected with the virus. He also stated that the pandemic hit at a time when the oil prices were low and the Gulf countries were prioritising the nationalisation of their work forces. The prolonged flight bans made many migrant workers feel that the Gulf countries are doing so deliberately in order to accommodate their local population in the job market which was hit hard by the pandemic.

Dr. Pradhan mentioned that the Indian government has reached out to various Gulf countries to establish air bubbles, ease visa restrictions and limit health and travel restrictions, to which all the Gulf countries have responded favourably. This has been possible due to India's successful

'COVID Diplomacy' and assistance provided to all the GCC countries in terms of medicines, medical professionals and other required equipment during the pandemic. India's cooperation in the health sector with all the GCC countries has emerged as an important aspect of bilateral cooperation.

**Dr. Abdulla Al Abbasi (Research Fellow, Bahrain Centre for Strategic, International and Energy Studies (Derasat), Manama)** spoke on "**Exploring the Future of India-Gulf Ties in the Power Sector.**" He highlighted the importance of power/electricity sector and mentioned that its potential is sometimes overlooked by countries due to extra importance given to the oil and gas sector. He noted that high electricity demand fuelled by growing population and increasing development in India and the Gulf countries, coupled with environmental commitments, will drive more investment in renewable energy sources and therefore more cooperation in the power sector.



He further mentioned that India has set for itself very ambitious renewable energy targets which were to be met by hydropower, wind and solar energy, options which are efficient, but are marred by several challenges related to storage, supply and demand and operational gaps depending on the geographical location where they are installed. These challenges could be overcome by developing cross-border electrical interconnections, including between all GCC countries and India. Appreciating Indian Prime Minister's initiative of 'One Sun, One World, One Grid', Dr. Abbasi mentioned that the GCC Interconnection Authority (GCCIA), has similar plans on power interconnectivity. He noted that interconnection between India and the GCC countries will reduce the economic cost of electricity production and will simultaneously enhance electricity trade between India and GCC. He mentioned that interconnection will also benefit each other in case of blackouts and would act as a power backup for countries.

Given India and the GCC have an average time zone difference of 2.30 hours, overlapping sunlight time between the two regions can result in effective utilisation of solar energy for power generation by transmission interconnection. There are regional geopolitical challenges between the neighbouring countries when it comes to implementation of power interconnectivity and he suggested that these need to be settled and understood in realistic terms and through diplomacy. He recommended that a high level advisory board could be established between India and the GCC countries with the responsibility to study various scenarios and the feasibility of transmission interconnectivity in the region. He also recommended setting up a regulatory and commercial committee to study the power market of India and the GCC countries for making regulatory frameworks to establish power and electricity interconnections.

**Dr. Vrushal Ghoble (Assistant Professor, Centre for West Asian Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi)** made a presentation on “**Geopolitical Shifts and West Asia’s Energy Equation with India: Analysing Economic and Strategic Gains and Losses.**” Dr. Ghoble mentioned that the West Asian region remains important for Asian oil consuming countries like India for reasons that have to do with its low oil production cost and geographical proximity. Due to ongoing geopolitical and geo-economic shifts, West Asian countries are moving towards diversification of energy resources. He mentioned that the return of old oil producers such as Iran, in the coming years might significantly impact oil markets.



Outlining India’s hydrocarbon policy, Dr. Ghoble mentioned that it is based on developing indigenous sources, maintaining balance by importing energy resources from different sources, developing strategic reserves to deal with supply deficit and enhancing stakes in overseas energy markets. Dr. Ghoble further highlighted that India’s strategic petroleum reserves are to the tune of 39 million barrels. He stated there has been overall increase in India’s oil and gas consumption from 2011 to 2019 and that a steep increase in oil prices has severe adverse consequences such that if oil price increases by ten per cent, wholesale inflation in the country rises by nearly one per cent. Lastly, Dr. Ghoble mentioned that it is important to have a stable oil price that would equally benefit the producing and the consuming countries. Mutually beneficial energy investments will be an important factor in countries’ relations. Further he also stressed that the diversification in energy supplies will also act as an important factor in a country’s energy policy approach.

### **Q&A Session**

Answering a question asked by Dr. Muddassir Quamar on the nationalisation of jobs and unemployment in the Gulf countries, Prof. Rajan mentioned that some employers in the Gulf countries also used COVID as a reason to get rid of some of the Indian workers working in the Gulf countries. Dr. H. Arokkiaraj mentioned that it is only the white collar jobs in the Gulf countries that are being nationalised for local people whereas most of the Indian workers are engaged in blue collar jobs in the Gulf countries. Commenting on the same question, Dr. N. Janardhan mentioned that the pattern of Indians going to the Gulf depends on the economic growth in the GCC countries. He said that though the local population of the Gulf countries has significantly increased in the previous years, still these countries will continue to attract people from India and other countries to work in the Gulf, as a result of increasing GDP and job opportunities.

Responding to a question by Dr. Jatin Kumar on steps taken by the Indian government to accommodate the skilled workforce that returned from the Gulf countries, Prof. Rajan stated that

the Indian government has started registering the names of such workforce but still more needs to be done in this situation.

To the question asked by Ms. Anandita Bhada on various factors responsible for the sudden rise in India's gas consumption, Dr. Vrushal Ghoble, responded that the shift towards cleaner and more efficient fuel was the key factor in this direction. He mentioned that this rise has been gradual and has been a result of India's approach of diversification of its energy sources.

To another question asked by Dr. Quamar on renewable and clean energy, Dr. Abbasi mentioned that we cannot completely replace hydrocarbon with renewable energy so we need to invest in both. He further mentioned that hydrocarbon plays a significant role in the economies of all the GCC countries and it is difficult to transform completely to renewable energy resources in the next 10 to 20 years.

### **Key Takeaways**

- The COVID-19 pandemic has transformed the migration pattern globally, leading to 're-migration', rising costs of labour migration and new challenges for governments to facilitate orderly, safe and legal migration.
- For India to be able to better protect the rights and interests of Indian migrants, it needs to invest in migration surveys and a credible migration database.
- The outmigration and immigration from the Gulf and South Asia is related to the state of the economies of the GCC countries and the pace of economic recovery will determine the return ratio of migrants back to the Gulf.
- The return of the Indian migrants from the Gulf during COVID-19 was not just as a result of the pandemic, but it was the combination of low oil prices and slowing economies, which led the GCC economies to adopt cost-cutting measures with implications for migrants and expatriates in a whole range of sectors.
- Amidst the changing energy matrix worldwide, India and the GCC states have numerous advantages to develop 'strong transmission interconnections' in their power sector.

## Session Four

### Strategic and Security Cooperation



The theme of the fourth session was “Strategic and Security Cooperation”. The session was chaired by **Prof. Shamir Hasan** (Aligarh Muslim University).

The chair started the session by saying that West Asia is an important region from the geostrategic point of view because it is at the centre of three continents – Africa, Europe and Asia. The region in recent times has been in turmoil because of the war in Yemen and the Israel-Palestine conflict. He further said that new alignments are being made and India has to some extent succeeded in penetrating the region economically and politically as it has better strategic relations with Israel and is building its relationships with the GCC countries.

**Dr. Joseph Kechichian (Senior Fellow, King Faisal Centre for Research and Islamic Studies, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia)** made his presentation on “**The Security of the Arab Gulf States and India’s Growing Security Ties with GCC Member States.**” He began by saying that the Arab countries in 1981 joined the GCC to defend themselves though they relied on their traditional western allies for security guarantees. In the aftermath of many wars and the recent shifts in US foreign policy, the GCC leaders have increasingly looked towards the Eastern powers, especially China, to replace the US. In the aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine the conservative Arab Gulf leaders are concerned about the global struggle for power. The current situation has necessitated expansion of bilateral and multilateral ties with other countries and that is where India can play an important role. India is well positioned to contribute to the stability of the region. The speaker then raised three concerns and offered a few suggestions.



Firstly, can India's security ties with the GCC countries go beyond energy ties? In other words, is the Gulf region merely a reliable partner for energy security? In 2020, India's trade with the GCC countries was estimated at around US\$ 90 billion which allows India some leverage within the GCC. In the same year, India's exports to the GCC countries were US\$ 28 billion and because of the pandemic there was a decline in bilateral trade between India and the GCC countries. The Indian demand for oil is also going to increase from 5 million barrels per day (mbpd) to around 8 mbpd by 2040. The demand for liquefied natural gas is also set to rise four times.

The far more critical issue is the desire to broaden bilateral and multilateral relations. Given India's strategic importance, one cannot stick to economic ties alone. It is important in terms of how best to counter the Iranian influence in the region. In this respect, Saudi Arabia is concerned about growing Iranian influence in South Asia especially India. Riyadh increased its diplomatic initiatives and invested heavily in what is known as a "systemic economic outreach." Riyadh wishes to spread its influence among India's Muslims which is an indication that non-economic issues can also drive India-GCC relations.

Secondly, the GCC societies' perception of India is also important. The GCC countries especially Saudi Arabia and UAE perceive Narendra Modi's security driven approach towards political Islam as being consistent with their own perspectives. The speaker also mentioned the remark of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman about Narendra Modi as an "elder brother" made during his visit to Delhi in 2019. Interestingly, Saudi Arabia and the UAE consider Islamist movements, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood as the biggest threats and this resonates well in India too. Some might assume that the GCC countries might prefer Pakistan over India on account of their religious identity and because of the role that Pakistan played in building of Gulf security institutions but Islamabad's refusal to be part of the Yemen war in 2015 affected GCC-Pakistan relations.

Thirdly, is India's increasing involvement perceived as an entanglement by those who focus on issues related to Islam. The fact is that the GCC leaders especially the GCC society looks with great interest to India. The speaker concluded by saying that the GCC and India are predestined to cooperate in every field.

**Dr. Hasan Al Hasan (Research Fellow for Middle East Policy, The International Institute for Strategic Studies, Manama)** spoke on "**India's Defence and Security Cooperation with the GCC States.**" He began by outlining the holistic GCC-India security relations which go beyond

energy, economic and diasporic notions of security. The speaker then focused on India-GCC defence cooperation. He said that it seems India is not very active when it comes to defence cooperation with the GCC countries because India has traditionally been fixated on its northern borders with China on the one side and Pakistan on the other. India-GCC defence cooperation can be traced back to the voyage of India's aircraft carrier INS Viraat to the Gulf in 1999. It sort of inaugurated the India-GCC defence cooperation.



There were multiple enablers of India-GCC defence cooperation, especially India's growing economy since the 1990s which in turn led to growth of India's naval and air capabilities, the improvement in India-US relations and deepening of India-GCC diplomatic relations. Apart from this there are various objectives of India's defence cooperation with the GCC countries, including countering piracy in the Gulf of Aden, security of energy trade, countering China's 'string of pearls' strategy, keeping an eye on Pakistan's activities in the sea and also diplomatically engaging the GCC and the US. Dr. Hasan then talked about the various bilateral exercises between India and the GCC countries such as Saudi Arabia and UAE. Besides, he also highlighted some arms deals such as the Bofors artillery shells deal with the UAE. The Caracal contract is also significant where the UAE's state-owned small arms firm will provide India 93000 close-quarter-battle carbines. There are also reports of the interest of Bahrain to acquire Arjun MK II Battle Tanks. The speaker also talked about some high level visits of Indian officials to the GCC countries that include visits by service chiefs and MoD officials. The first ever visit of Gen. Manoj Mukund Naravane, Chief of the Army Staff, to Saudi Arabia and Oman was a clear indication of the upward trajectory in India's defence engagement with GCC countries. The visits were followed by a series of joint exercises.

**Dr. Mandana Tisheyar (Allameh Tabataba'i University, Tehran)** during her presentation on **"Indo-Iran Relations: From Strategic Partnership to Paled Friendship"** began by invoking Jawaharlal Nehru's statement that no two other nations have historical ties as strong as India and Iran. But in the last two decades, the relationship between the two countries has deteriorated as bilateral political, economic and cultural relations have reached the lowest ebb. She then highlighted some unfinished projects between India and Iran, such as the peace pipeline project pursued by three countries since 1990s and left midway with India's withdrawal from the project in 2009; the International North-South Corridor which was pursued by India, Iran and Russia and was officially launched in September 2000 still remains a work in progress. She observed that initiatives for extensive economic cooperation between the two countries in the Chabahar port remain unfinished, notwithstanding the fact that Chabahar was the only place in Iran that was exempted from US sanctions. Further, bilateral trade also declined as Iran has almost been removed from India's oil basket.



She noted that India's vote against Iran's nuclear program at the IAEA also impacted diplomatic relations between the two nations. India's policy towards Kashmir and Indian Muslims in general has also added to the mistrust. India's extensive relations with Israel and Arab countries has pushed Iran towards China, with the two countries signing a US\$ 400 billion 25-year comprehensive strategic partnership agreement in March 2021, which she observed was not good news for India-Iran relations. She concluded by saying that the dichotomy with India, the GCC and Israel on one side and Iran, China and other Arab countries on the other side can only fuel a new Cold War in the Gulf region.

**Prof. P. R. Kumaraswamy (Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi)** made four important points in his presentation on **"India and WANA: Emerging Dynamics, Challenges and Opportunities"**. Differentiating between Trump and Biden administration's approaches towards the region, he said that the former was friendly towards Israel and hostile towards others, while the latter with its intention of being friendly with everybody has lost the plot. Secondly, he said that the key issues facing both policymakers and analysts alike are whether the revival of the nuclear deal with Iran, whenever that happens, will be better than the one signed in 2015. Can the new deal with Iran be irreversible? The international community is talking about the US' ability to pull out of the deal unilaterally but there should be a discussion about Iran given the deal talks about Uranium enrichment of 3.67 percent which Iran has already crossed. So the new deal can be better only if it is irreversible for both Iran as well as the US. Third, the US is unable to convince Saudi Arabia and other countries to increase oil output to rein-in prices and dissuade Saudi Arabia from using Yuan as the currency of transaction of oil therefore undermining the status of US Dollar. Fourth, the Ukraine crisis, though not directly related, raises some fundamental questions. The peaceful resolution of the dispute as demanded by the UN Charter is not going to be accepted by the great powers. Their willingness to do whatever suits their national interests establishes a very bad precedent for all the countries in the region and beyond. What the Ukraine crisis makes clear is the weakness of the US and that it is unable to stand-up for its allies. There are examples of Taiwan, Shah of Iran, Hosni Mubarak, Obama's failure to enforce the red line on Bashar Al Assad using chemical weapons in Syria and now Volodymyr Zelenskyy. These examples tell the Arab countries to what extent they can depend on United States for security guarantees.



For him, India needs to move beyond mere statements and declarations. The friendship needs to be demonstrated in action. India should position itself as a dependable partner of all major players which demands India to do certain uncomfortable things as India can't talk about its friendship with Israel and Saudi Arabia without talking about their concerns vis-à-vis Iran. Mere bilateralism will not work as regionalism is a trend today. Iran is a major challenge to India's foreign policy. No doubt Iran is an important country in the region, but at the same time, India should understand that Iran is also a very problematic country and countries in the region consider Iran as a hegemonic power and that is where Iran comes into conflict with India's relations with countries in the region.

### **Q&A Session**

The Q&A session included questions ranging from Saudi Arabia's internal reforms, factors driving India's growing defence and security cooperation with Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Oman, Iran's Look East policy with an attempt to avoid over reliance on China and India's policy of sharing the concerns of Arab states about Iran. Dr. Kechichian emphasised that India can play an important role in the Gulf region if it wants to lead and for that India needs to take a decision. To this Prof. Kumaraswamy responded by saying that India needs to transform itself into a reliable partner. In response to Dr. Pradhan's question about key drivers of GCC's defence cooperation with India, Dr. Hasan Al Hasan said that from the beginning of this century the Gulf countries have prioritised Asia as a new area for engagement as the US is no more considered as a security guarantor. About the GCC perspective on the Indo-Pacific, he said that closer India-US ties are not something that the GCC can object to. Probably they would want to see India becoming more involved in overall maritime security. On Dr. Mandana's remarks about India-Iran relations, he provided a contrasting perspective of how the GCC has seen India as being soft on Iran. Dr. Mandana in her remarks said that some countries are using the excuse of Iran when it comes to their engagement with India. Whereas in reality Iran can very well be part of any new regional arrangement. Keeping Iran out of regional cooperation is not a favourable option. She also reiterated that Iran is trying to maintain a balance in its relations with different great powers especially in Asia.

**Maj. Gen. (Dr.) Bipin Bakshi, Deputy Director General, MP-IDSA**, delivered the vote of thanks. He thanked the organisers, speakers and participants and noted that the deliberations over the last two days had been very fruitful; covering the evolving situation in West Asia and various facets of India's engagements with West Asia. He further noted that the sustained involvement from the highest levels of political leadership in fostering relations underscores the importance of West Asia for India. He observed that the conference has come at a time when in the region and

beyond, countries are facing unprecedented challenges which were discussed in last two days. Amid these challenges we are looking for multidimensional aspects of security which apart from conventional security issues may include energy security, maritime security and cyber security. At the end, on behalf of MP-IDSA, he proposed a vote of thanks to all who were part of the Conference including scholars associated with West Asia Centre and especially to eminent speakers who despite their busy schedules presented papers and enriched the discussions with their valuable insights.



### **Key takeaways**

- The GCC-India security relations go beyond energy and diaspora security and there is an interest from both sides in expanding defence relations.
- Iran has emerged as a major foreign policy challenge for India. While there are challenges to bilateral relations due to external factors, there is also the challenge of Iran increasingly being seen as a security threat by India's regional partners including the Gulf Arab states and Israel.
- Iran is willing to develop closer ties with India and sees India as part of its Look East policy to develop closer ties with major Asian powers as an alternative to economic isolation due to Western sanctions. Despite the Iranian perception of India's growing ties with the Gulf States and Israel at the expense of India-Iran relations, the Gulf States see New Delhi as being soft towards Iran.
- Amid changing regional and great-power geopolitics, India needs to enhance its engagement as a reliable partner for the key regional actors.

*This report has been prepared by Ms. Saman Ayesha Kidwai, Ms. Sindhu Dinesh, Mr. Bipandeep Sharma, Dr. Manzoor Ahmad, Research Analysts, MP-IDSA.*