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1 message

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YEAR THAT WAS FOR WEST ASIA  
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Over the years, India's relations with West Asian countries, especially the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, Israel, Iran and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) States, have transformed to strategic partnerships. Saudi Arabia, UAE and GCC hold importance primarily for India's energy security, bilateral trade, business and investments and as destination for Indian workers and professionals. Iran is an important energy and connectivity partner while Israel has emerged as a significant security and defence partner. Besides, the Gulf and West Asia holds significance for India's maritime trade and security, especially in the western Indian Ocean. Among other issues, the mutuality of threats from terrorism and radicalism has emerged as an important component of India's relations with its regional partners.

In 2021, India's bilateral cooperation with West Asia continued to expand. Among the most important domains where India and West Asian countries expanded their relations was health security. India has been at the forefront of fighting the COVID-19 pandemic and extended help to regional countries in early 2021 sharing expertise and emergency medical supplies. Virtual diplomacy helped India and Gulf countries overcome the disruptions caused by the COVID-19. The launch of 'Vaccine Maitri' programme by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in January 2021 helped India establish itself as the 'pharmacy of the world' delivering over 66 million doses of vaccines to 95 countries until May 2021. The regional countries were forthcoming in extending help when India faced unprecedented rise in the COVID-19 cases in mid-2021. India's ability to overcome the health challenge, and quickly vaccinate a large proportion of its population, further strengthened its position as global healthcare power.

India's relations with Saudi Arabia, UAE, GCC, Israel and Iran witnessed important developments in 2021. The UAE has emerged as an important partner with strong bilateral relations in multiple domains including defence, maritime security, trade, business and investments, healthcare as well as strategic cooperation in new areas such as space exploration. In September 2021, Prime Minister Modi held telephonic discussions with the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi Mohammed Bin Zayed Al-Nahyan and discussed various issues of mutual importance reviewing the comprehensive strategic partnership between the two countries.

Saudi Arabia is another important partner of India in West Asia. The bilateral ties between India and Saudi Arabia have transformed to comprehensive strategic partnership over the

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years. The two countries have developed strong cooperation in areas of mutual interest including energy security and in fighting terrorism and combating radicalism. Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan visited India in September 2021 and called on Prime Minister Modi and held wide-ranging talks with External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar for bolstering the bilateral relations in the commercial, strategic and security domains.

India's relations with Iran, a traditional partner in the West Asia region, continued to improve during 2021. In August, External Affairs Minister visited Tehran to attend the swearing in ceremony of President Ebrahim Raisi and extended the warm wishes from Prime Minister Modi and the Government of India on his election. New Delhi and Tehran are concerned over the developments and instability in Afghanistan and the security threat it poses to South-west Asia. The two sides have been exploring ways to forge partnerships through bilateral and multilateral talks discussing the crisis in Afghanistan.

Israel has emerged as one of India's most important international partners; and in 2021, the two sides continued to develop their strategic relations to newer areas including agriculture, science and technology, defence and security. Prime Minister Modi congratulated Prime Minister Naftali Bennet upon his election as the new Prime Minister of Israel in June

2021. In October, Dr. Jaishankar undertook a five-day visit to Israel and held wide-ranging talks to improve bilateral relations and discussed regional developments and issues of mutual interest. He also held a virtual quadrilateral meeting with his American, Israeli and Emirati counterparts setting in motion a new geo-economic initiative for India's relations with West Asia.

Oman, Qatar, Bahrain and Kuwait, besides Saudi Arabia and UAE, form the GCC. Indo-GCC relations too continued to improve during 2021 with the revival of talks on India-GCC Free Trade Agreement and continued improvement in relation in multiple domains including in maritime security, energy security and strategic investments. As 2021 comes to an end and the world looks forward to 2022; the Gulf and West Asia would remain an important region in India's foreign relations. While some challenges exist, there are new opportunities for India and West Asia to work towards global peace and prosperity.

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