

India's West Asia Outreach: High-Profile Diplomatic Dynamism

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India's diplomatic engagement with West Asia has gained fresh impetus in recent months. The evolving security situation in the region and India's growing economic and strategic engagement have led New Delhi to re-energise its relations with the West Asian region. A new 'Act West' dynamism has gathered momentum with high-profile visits taking place between heads of state, ministers and senior officials from India and major countries from the region. More than this apparent bonhomie in relations, there has been substantive improvement in political, economic, cultural, security and defence relations, with various countries of the region, with important deals and agreements being signed. This is commendable given the fine line Indian diplomacy has to tread, through an increasingly divisive and fractious extended neighbourhood.

Perhaps, the key to India's diplomatic success lies in its de-hyphenation of relations with countries locked in zero-sum rivalries and its focus on forging bilateral win-win relations with each country individually. By pursuing a highly balanced, non-partisan policy, India has to a great extent been able to protect and secure its growing stakes and vital interests in the region that range from energy, maritime trade, security and the safety of its 8 million-strong diaspora that sends back over \$40 billion in annual remittances.

Although India has been maintaining good relations with countries in the West Asian

region for a long time, some observers had earlier felt the need for a more proactive, high-profile engagement that could provide a new drive and direction to relations. With the coming of the Narendra Modi-led BJP government in 2014, India's relations with West Asia have clearly moved towards active diplomatic engagement with all the major players in the region, with the prime minister himself leading the initiative.

The Prime Minister's visit to the four countries in the region from February 9-13, 2018, is a clear example in this regard. This trip was bracketed between a six-day official visit by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to India in mid-January 2018 and the visit of Iranian President Hassan Rouhani's visit to Hyderabad and Delhi in mid-February. India also hosted the King of Jordan when he visited Delhi in late February, while preparations are on for the upcoming visit of King Salman bin Abulaziz of Saudi Arabia to India.

In addition to the Prime Minister's tour of West Asia, two Indian ministers visited Saudi Arabia in February this year. External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj was the guest of honour at the Janadriya Festival held near Riyadh, while Finance Minister Arun Jaitley met the Saudi King to enhance relations between the two countries. This high-profile diplomatic engagement is a clear reflection of the growing desire on part of India and the region to not only upgrade and re-vitalise the

bilateral engagement but also look at building new strategic partnerships.

PM's visit to Jordan and Palestine: Ambivalence on East Jerusalem

One of the highlights of the recent high-level engagements, was Prime Minister Narendra Modi's historic visit to Palestine on February 9, 2018, the first ever by an Indian prime minister. It is noteworthy that he earlier became the first Indian prime minister to have visited Israel in July last year. In fact, the prime minister's visit was construed by some analysts as a balancing act on part of India, given the fact that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had just paid a six-day official visit to India in mid-January this year. However, the Indian government has assiduously emphasized that it de-hyphenates its relations with Israel and Palestine, as it builds and strengthens relations with each side independent of the other, and so the timing of the two events is coincidental.

In Palestine, Prime Minister Modi was accorded a grand welcome and was awarded the 'Grand Collar of the State of Palestine' medal by Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. Describing Mr Modi as a "great guest", President Abbas said that Palestine sought to use India's stature on the international stage to facilitate the peace process with Israel. In his response, Prime Minister Modi reiterated India's support for a "sovereign, independent Palestine living in a peaceful environment and called for a dialogue to find a permanent solution to the crisis, but stopped short of referring to the Palestinian state having borders based on 1967 guidelines, and East Jerusalem as its capital. According to some observers, [former President Pranab Mukherjee in 2015 and former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in 2013](#), had supported an independent and sovereign state of Palestine

within the 1967 framework with East Jerusalem as its capital. However, India remained ambivalent in its statement about the East Jerusalem issue during this visit.

This approach reflects New Delhi's new approach. While Prime Minister Modi was silent on the issue of the East Jerusalem, he confirmed India's continued commitment and support to the Palestinian cause which has always been on top of its foreign policy agenda. [Both countries signed agreements worth US \\$50 million](#), which covered the building of a high-class hospital worth US\$30 million in Beit Suhur, a centre for empowering women worth \$5million and setting up of a new National Printing Press at Ramallah at a cost of US\$ 5 million. As part of its new initiative, India is currently building a Technology Park and has been involved in capacity-building programmes. Thus, the focus of this visit was mainly on developmental cooperation between the two countries without getting involved in the current regional complexities.

On his way to Palestine, the Prime Minister had a quick stopover in Jordan (February 9), where in his own words he had a "wonderful meeting" with King Abdullah II. For his part, the King described the meeting as the beginning of a new chapter in India-Jordan bilateral relations. Following the meeting, the Prime Minister travelled in a Jordanian army helicopter to Ramallah from Amman, which was escorted by the helicopters of the Israeli Air Force that controls the airspace above West Bank. This visit needs to be viewed in the context of Jordan's increasing importance for India in the context of new geopolitical developments in the region. As the custodian of the Holy Mosque in Jerusalem, it occupies a central place within the Israel-Palestine issue. In addition, Oman has a unique geographical position, sharing borders with Israel, Palestine, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Iraq.

Any development in its neighbouring countries is likely to have serious implications for Oman.

The visit of King Abdullah II to India on February 27, 2018 after Modi's short visit to Amman is reflective of Amman's growing significance for India and vice-a-versa. Both countries inked 12 agreements during King Abdullah's visit to India, providing a new impetus to bilateral relations, strengthening cooperation in the area of defence, counter-terrorism, cyber-security, health and medicine, Information Technology, education and training. Cultural ties and people-to-people cooperation were also given due attention to boost the overall [bilateral engagement between India and Jordan](#).

India-UAE Cooperation: Cementing a Strategic Partnership for the Future

After leaving Palestine, the Prime Minister visited the UAE on February 10, 2018, the only Indian leader to have visited the country twice during a term. This visit was a clear reflection of growing engagement between the two countries signified by the deep-rooted interest on part of the leadership of both countries to build a real strategic partnership for the future. The key areas of cooperation highlighted in the Joint Statement were mainly – combating extremism and countering terrorism, Security, Defence and Space, Trade, investment and civil aviation, Energy and climate change and boosting people-to-people and skill development cooperation.

During Mr Modi's meeting with the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, Sheikh Mohamed-bin Zayed-Al-Nahyan, the leaders reviewed the progress made in implementing the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Agreement between the two sides as well as the outcome of the second ministerial-level

India-UAE Strategic Dialogue held in Abu Dhabi in October 2017. The two sides also signed five MoUs over energy, railways, manpower and financial sectors. Both India and the UAE underlined that as pluralistic societies, they are [“credible models against the tendencies of extremism and radicalism”](#). They discussed the institutional mechanism of the security dialogue set up at the respective levels of the National Security Adviser and National Security Council aimed at enhancing cooperation in counter-terrorism operations, intelligence-sharing and capacity-building. They also welcomed the finalization of an MOU on cooperation in the exchange of financial intelligence related to money laundering, associated predicate offences and terrorist financing.

The main highlight of the meeting was an agreement that awarded a consortium of Indian oil companies a 10 percent stake in offshore oil concession. This step transforms the traditional buyer-seller relationship between the two countries to a long-term investor relationship. The concession will last 40 years (2018 to 2057), with 60 percent of the interest being retained by the UAE oil company ADNOC, while the remaining 30 percent being awarded to international oil companies, which includes the Indian consortium.

Prime Minister Modi also delivered the [keynote address on the subject ‘Technology for Development’](#) at the Sixth World Government Summit in Dubai, where India was invited as the Guest of Honour. On the side lines of the World Government Summit, Prime Minister Modi met with a select group of senior GCC CEOs and business leaders.

A critical analysis of India-UAE ties reflects the following trends:

- a) Growing understanding between the two sides about each other's importance in the regional and global context.
- b) Recognition that both countries are multicultural and pluralistic societies committed to promoting the values of tolerance, peace and inclusiveness while acknowledging the critical role an inter-faith dialogue could play in countering extremist ideology.
- c) Both sides have expressed a strong desire to fight extremism and terrorism in all forms. Most importantly "they reiterated their condemnation for efforts, including by states, to use religion to justify, support and sponsor terrorism against other countries, [or to use terrorism as instrument of state policy.](#)" This statement clearly highlights the common position which the leadership of both countries shares on extremism and terrorism, making both sides partners in fighting this global menace.
- d) Deepening of cooperation between the two countries in security, defence and space has been a significant feature of overall fruitful engagement. In the past three years, cooperation in defence and security has been expanded. This got a further fillip during Modi's visit to UAE.
- e) A clear commitment by both sides to craft a long-term strategy to take trade and investment cooperation to greater heights. This includes cementing future trade ties through diversifying non-oil trade.
- f) Creating greater synergy to realise the investment of \$75 billion by UAE in India's infrastructure development. Likewise UAE welcomed growing interest from Indian IT and technology companies in investing in the UAE. The positive outcome of the fifth meeting of the UAE-India High-Level Task Force on Investment held in January 2018 in Abu Dhabi, highlights the efforts being initiated by both governments to accelerate the process of cooperation.
- g) Emerging strategic engagement in the Energy sector by transforming the buyer-seller relationship into long-term focus on investment and joint ventures in petrochemical complexes, and cooperation in joint exploration in India, UAE including in third countries. Both countries are also moving towards greater cooperation in areas of green Energy and climate change within the framework of the United Nations.
- h) Finally, the signing of the MoU on Manpower during Modi's visit ensures the continued commitment towards the well-being and welfare of Indians living in the UAE. This "would streamline the process of manpower sourcing, benefit Indian workers and UAE employers alike, and foster the exchange of information between the two countries" [as noted in the joint statement.](#)

In the past three years, India-UAE ties have taken a great leap forward in a big way. There is great potential in economic, security, defence and energy sectors for future cooperation between the two countries. To realise this potential, it is extremely important to sustain the current momentum of engagement initiated by the leaders of both the countries.

A Fillip to India-Oman Relations

Prime Minister Modi's last destination on his tour of West Asia was to the Sultanate of Oman on February 11-12, 2018. Oman is a strategic partner of India; its strategic location and neutral foreign policy makes it an important country in the region. Oman has good relations with Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Prime Minister Modi's visit to Oman needs to be understood in the context of the strong ongoing defence and security cooperation between the two countries. The strategic aspect of this relationship got a further push during the visit. His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said personally received the Prime Minister at the Bait-al-Barakah Royal Palace and hosted a dinner in his honour. The two leaders expressed satisfaction at the ongoing bilateral security collaboration in the fields of counterterrorism, information-sharing and capacity-building.

Eight agreements were signed between India and Oman, covering areas like health, peaceful use of Outer Space, Tourism, civil and commercial matters and military, to give a fillip to bilateral cooperation. The key takeaway of the visit was the signing of a pact by the countries to extend dry docking and other facilities to Indian naval ships at Oman's Duqm Port. Access to Duqm could be viewed as part of New Delhi's maritime strategy to expand India's footprint in the Indian Ocean region. This access to the Omani port does significantly increase India's strategic positioning in the Indian Ocean. Media commentators view the move as a boost to India's strategy to counter Beijing in the Indian Ocean region. [However, it is noteworthy that China has already signed a deal in 2016 to invest \\$350 million in the Duqm Port Commercial Terminal and Operational Zone Development Project.](#)

During the visit, [the Indian Prime Minister urged Indian companies to invest in various sectors in the special economic zones of Oman,](#) including SEZs in Duqm, Sohar and Salalah. He offered India's partnership and cooperation in areas of priority, such as minerals and mining, manufacturing, logistics, infrastructure, tourism, agriculture and fisheries, IT and IT-enabled services, skills development and innovation. There is a huge potential for cooperation between the two countries which still remains untapped. While a beginning has been made, the need is to provide a continuous push to further intensify this strategic partnership between India and Oman.

The deft diplomacy of Prime Minister Modi during his four-day tour of the region has undoubtedly given a new direction to India's West Asia policy, which has moved from "look west" to "think" and now, "link west". Such high diplomatic activism of the Modi government with the region does offer India good leverage with important regional actors, offering New Delhi enhanced options at a time when navigating through the conflict-ridden region has become highly challenging.

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