

## Strategic Dialogue: Analysing India's Defence in West Asia: Examining Historical Alliances and Partnerships

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### **Abstract**

*This research paper provides an in-depth analysis of India's defence strategy in West Asia, focusing on its historical alliances and evolving partnerships. India has long maintained robust relationships with key nations in the region, driven by mutual strategic, economic, and security interests.<sup>1</sup> The ascension of Narendra Modi as Prime Minister in 2014 heralded a transformative era in India's foreign policy, marked by a more proactive and assertive stance towards West Asia. Under Modi's leadership, India has not only strengthened existing alliances but has also forged new, dynamic partnerships, significantly enhancing its influence in the region.<sup>2</sup>*

*The paper traces the evolution of India's defence policy in West Asia, exploring the strategic imperatives behind its alliances and partnerships. It highlights the pivotal role played by major partners such as Israel, which has emerged as a crucial ally in defence collaboration and technological exchange. The Modi administration's initiatives, including high-level visits, defence agreements, and joint military exercises, have deepened bilateral ties and expanded India's strategic footprint in West Asia.*

*Additionally, this study examines the geopolitical and economic factors that have shaped India's defence strategy in the region. It analyses the challenges and opportunities presented by the complex and often volatile landscape of West Asia, including the influence of regional and global powers. Through a comprehensive exploration of historical contexts, contemporary strategies, and future prospects, this paper aims to offer a nuanced understanding of India's defence dynamics in West Asia.<sup>3</sup>*

*The findings underscore the multifaceted nature of India's engagement in West Asia, reflecting its aspirations as a major global power. By delving into the intricate web of historical alliances and modern partnerships, this research provides valuable insights into the strategic dialogue shaping India's defence policy in one of the world's most critical regions.*

**Keywords:** *India's Defence Strategy; West Asia; Geopolitical Interests; Strategic Alliances; Energy Security; Regional Stability;*

## **Introduction**

India's defence strategy has undergone profound transformation over the decades, shaped by a confluence of geopolitical, historical, and socio-economic imperatives. Traditionally, India has navigated a nuanced path between self-reliance and strategic partnerships, striving to bolster regional stability while countering external threats. The evolution of this strategy is particularly evident in its approach to West Asia, a region of paramount strategic importance due to its geographic positioning, abundant economic resources, and complex political dynamics.

India's defence policy traces its origins to the early post-independence era, characterised by a doctrine of non-alignment and self-sufficiency. This approach reflected a desire to maintain strategic autonomy amidst Cold War polarisation, avoiding entanglements in the superpower rivalry. Over time, as regional and global dynamics shifted, India adopted a more pragmatic stance, recognising the imperative for robust defence capabilities and strategic alliances. Substantial investments have been made in modernising military infrastructure, enhancing defence production capabilities, and fostering international defence collaborations. These efforts are aimed at ensuring national security, promoting regional stability, and projecting power in areas of strategic interest, including West Asia.<sup>4</sup>

The advent of Narendra Modi as Prime Minister in 2014 marked a significant shift in India's defence and foreign policy. Modi's administration has taken a more proactive and assertive approach, seeking to elevate India's global

standing and influence. This shift is characterised by increased defence spending, a push for indigenisation through initiatives like "Make in India," and a more pronounced emphasis on strategic partnerships. The Modi government has actively pursued bilateral and multilateral engagements, strengthening existing alliances and forging new ones to bolster India's strategic position.

West Asia occupies a central and enduring role in India's defence and foreign policy, underpinned by several interrelated factors. Geographically, the region serves as a crucial corridor connecting Asia with Europe and Africa, making it vital for global trade and energy routes. Economically, West Asia is indispensable to India's energy security, with a significant portion of its oil and gas imports originating from this region. Additionally, the presence of a large Indian diaspora in West Asia reinforces bilateral ties, contributing to remittances and cultural exchange.

Strategically, the region's volatility, characterised by political instability, sectarian conflicts, and power rivalries, presents both challenges and opportunities for India. Strategic chokepoints, such as the Strait of Hormuz, are critical for India's maritime security and uninterrupted energy supply. Furthermore, the influence of global powers like the United States, China, and Russia in West Asia necessitates a nuanced and balanced approach in India's foreign policy. Consequently, fostering robust alliances and partnerships in West Asia is integral to safeguarding India's national interests and enhancing its strategic footprint.

Under Modi's administration, India's engagement with West Asia has been marked by a renewed vigour and strategic clarity. The government has prioritised strengthening ties with key regional players such as Israel, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Iran. High-level visits, defence agreements, and joint military exercises have been instrumental in deepening these relationships.<sup>5</sup> The Modi administration's approach is driven by the recognition that West Asia's stability and security are intrinsically linked to India's own security and economic prosperity. This proactive engagement aims

to secure energy supplies, expand economic opportunities, and enhance India's influence in the broader geopolitical landscape.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This section provides a comprehensive theoretical framework for analysing India's defence strategy in West Asia, synthesising various perspectives from international relations theory.

The examination of India's defence strategy can be enriched by integrating multiple theoretical lenses, reflecting the complex nature of international relations. From a realist perspective, India's strategic behaviour can be seen as a pursuit of national interests and power. This is evident in its proactive engagement with West Asia, as India seeks to enhance its security and assert its influence amid the region's volatility and shifting power dynamics. The realist focus on power and national security is reflected in India's strategic alliances and military collaborations, aimed at safeguarding its interests.<sup>6</sup>

In contrast, liberalism highlights the significance of cooperation, international institutions, and interdependence. India's diplomatic efforts, including the formation of strategic partnerships and participation in multilateral organisations, align with liberal principles. This approach underscores the belief that collaboration and mutual benefits can foster stability and mitigate conflicts. The liberal perspective is evident in India's engagement through treaties and joint military exercises, which aim to strengthen regional cooperation and stability.

Constructivism offers a different angle by emphasising the role of identity, norms, and historical relationships in shaping foreign policy. India's defence strategy is profoundly influenced by its historical connections, cultural ties, and the significant Indian diaspora in West Asia. Constructivism helps to explain how these social constructs and shared identities shape India's strategic decisions, guiding its interactions with regional partners based on common values and historical bonds.

By weaving together these theoretical perspectives, the research paper provides a nuanced and multidimensional understanding of India's defence strategy in West Asia. This thematic approach offers a deeper insight into the complex factors and dynamics that inform India's strategic decisions in this crucial region.

### **Historical Context**

To gain a comprehensive understanding of India's defence strategy in West Asia, it is essential to delve into the historical context that has shaped its present policies. This exploration will be framed within the theoretical perspectives of realism, liberalism, and constructivism to offer a nuanced analysis of the evolution of India's strategic interests and alliances in the region.

#### **Brief History of India's Defence and Strategic Interests in West Asia**

India's engagement with West Asia has undergone a significant transformation since the country gained independence in 1947. Initially, India's foreign policy was grounded in the principles of non-alignment and self-reliance, reflecting its desire to maintain strategic autonomy and avoid entanglements in the Cold War rivalry. During this period, India's strategic interests in West Asia were relatively modest, focusing primarily on diplomatic relations and regional stability.<sup>7</sup>

However, as global and regional dynamics evolved, so did India's strategic calculus. The end of the Cold War and the subsequent rise of globalisation brought to the forefront the importance of West Asia, particularly due to its pivotal role in global energy markets and its geopolitical positioning. India's burgeoning energy needs, driven by its rapid economic growth, necessitated a more active engagement with the region. This shift marked a significant turning point, as India began to recognise West Asia's strategic importance not only as a source of energy but also as a critical area for enhancing its regional and global influence.

## Key Historical Alliances and Partnerships

India's historical alliances and partnerships in West Asia reflect a complex interplay of strategic interests and evolving geopolitical realities. During the Cold War, India maintained a careful balancing act, cultivating relations with various states in the region while adhering to its non-aligned stance. Notably, India developed substantial economic and political ties with countries such as Iraq and Libya, focusing on energy cooperation and mutual support in international forums.<sup>8</sup>

The post-Cold War era marked a period of strategic recalibration. The 1990s saw India forging closer ties with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and Iran, driven by its increasing dependence on oil and gas imports from the region. This period also witnessed the beginning of a significant shift in India's foreign policy, including a strategic warming of relations with Israel. This development was particularly noteworthy given India's previously cautious stance towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The burgeoning relationship with Israel focused on areas of mutual interest, such as defence cooperation, counter-terrorism, and technology transfers.

### Evolution of India's Defence Policy vis-à-vis West Asia

India's defence policy concerning West Asia has undergone a profound evolution, influenced by changing regional dynamics and domestic priorities. Initially characterised by diplomatic engagement and economic cooperation, India's approach has progressively adapted to address emerging security challenges and strategic opportunities.<sup>9</sup>

The early 2000s marked a period of increased engagement, as India sought to enhance its strategic footprint in West Asia through deeper economic ties and security collaborations. The rise of terrorism, regional conflicts, and the critical need for energy security catalysed this shift. India's focus on securing energy supplies, ensuring maritime security, and countering extremist threats became central to its defence strategy.

The advent of Narendra Modi as Prime Minister in 2014 marked a transformative phase in India's approach to West Asia. Under Modi's leadership, India has pursued a more assertive and strategic policy, reflecting a blend of realist and liberal perspectives. The Modi administration has prioritised strengthening ties with key regional players, including Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, through high-level diplomatic engagements and extensive defence cooperation.

This strategic shift is indicative of a realist approach, as India has sought to bolster its security and enhance its influence through robust partnerships and military collaborations. The emphasis on tangible benefits, such as advanced defence technologies and strategic agreements, underscores the realist focus on power dynamics and security. Simultaneously, India's efforts to engage in multilateral forums, foster regional stability, and promote cooperative frameworks reflect a liberal approach, emphasising the importance of collaboration and mutual gains.

Constructivism further illuminates India's evolving defence strategy, highlighting the role of historical ties, cultural connections, and identity in shaping its foreign policy. India's deep-rooted cultural and historical links with West Asia continue to influence its strategic choices, guiding its interactions with regional partners based on shared values and historical bonds.

The historical context of India's defence strategy in West Asia reveals a trajectory of evolving priorities and strategic recalibrations. This evolution, viewed through the lenses of realism, liberalism, and constructivism, provides a comprehensive understanding of the factors shaping India's current defence policies and its approach to the region.

### **India's Strategic Interests in West Asia**

To fully grasp India's defence strategy in West Asia, it is crucial to explore its strategic interests within the region. This exploration considers geopolitical and economic imperatives, security concerns, and the influence of both regional and

global powers, framed within the theoretical perspectives of realism, liberalism, and constructivism.

### Geopolitical and Economic Interests

India's strategic interests in West Asia are primarily driven by its geopolitical and economic imperatives. Geopolitically, West Asia serves as a crucial nexus connecting Asia with Europe and Africa, making it a strategic corridor for global trade and maritime routes. This positioning is of immense importance to India, as it seeks to secure its trade routes and maintain a stable and prosperous economic environment.

Economically, West Asia is vital to India's energy security. The region is a major source of oil and natural gas, with a significant portion of India's energy imports coming from Gulf States. The reliance on these energy supplies underscores India's interest in ensuring a stable and secure supply chain. Additionally, West Asia represents a growing market for Indian exports and investment opportunities, enhancing India's economic footprint in the region.

### Security Concerns and Defence Needs

India's security concerns and defence needs in West Asia are shaped by several factors, including regional instability, terrorism, and strategic chokepoints. The region's volatility, characterised by ongoing conflicts, political instability, and sectarian strife, poses significant challenges to India's security. This instability affects not only regional dynamics but also global energy markets, which are crucial for India's economic stability.<sup>10</sup>

Strategic chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz are of particular concern. The Strait is a critical maritime passage through which a substantial portion of India's energy imports transit. Ensuring the security of these chokepoints is a key component of India's defence strategy, necessitating robust naval capabilities and strategic partnerships with regional allies.

India's defence needs in West Asia also encompass counter-terrorism efforts. The rise of extremist groups and the proliferation of terrorist activities in the region have direct implications for India's security. Strengthening defence



collaborations and intelligence-sharing with West Asian nations is vital for addressing these threats and safeguarding national security.

#### Influence of Regional and Global Powers on India's Strategy

India's strategy in West Asia is significantly influenced by the actions and interests of regional and global powers. The presence of major regional players such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Israel shapes the strategic landscape, requiring India to navigate complex relationships and align its policies accordingly.

Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are key partners for India, offering not only energy resources but also strategic cooperation in counter-terrorism and economic development. India's growing relationship with these Gulf states reflects a realist approach, focusing on security and economic benefits.<sup>11</sup>

Iran represents another critical element in India's strategy. Despite geopolitical tensions and the impact of international sanctions, India has maintained a pragmatic relationship with Iran, particularly concerning energy supplies and regional stability. This relationship highlights India's strategic balancing act in navigating competing interests in the region.

The influence of global powers also plays a pivotal role in shaping India's strategy. The United States, with its strategic interests and military presence in the region, impacts India's defence policies. India's alignment with U.S. interests in counter-terrorism and maritime security reflects a pragmatic approach to global power dynamics.<sup>12</sup>

Conversely, the growing presence of China in West Asia, through investments and strategic partnerships, adds another layer of complexity to India's strategic calculus. India must carefully manage its strategy to address the potential implications of China's expanding influence, balancing its own interests with regional and global considerations.

India's strategic interests in West Asia are driven by a combination of geopolitical, economic, and security factors. The region's strategic significance, coupled with the influence of regional and global powers, shapes India's defence strategy and policies. By examining these interests through the lenses of realism, liberalism, and constructivism, one can better understand the

multifaceted nature of India's approach to West Asia and its broader strategic objectives.

### **Challenges and Opportunities**

An in-depth analysis of India's defence strategy in West Asia necessitates a thorough examination of the challenges and opportunities influencing its approach. This discussion is framed through the theoretical perspectives of realism, liberalism, and constructivism to provide a well-rounded understanding of the strategic landscape.

Current Challenges Facing India's Defence Strategy in West Asia Political and Diplomatic Challenges India's defence strategy in West Asia is significantly impacted by complex political and diplomatic challenges. The region is characterised by intricate political rivalries and shifting alliances, which pose obstacles to India's diplomatic initiatives. One of the most prominent issues is the longstanding Arab-Israeli conflict. This historical and deeply entrenched conflict complicates India's diplomatic positioning, as India seeks to maintain balanced relations with both Arab states and Israel. Navigating these relationships requires delicate diplomacy, as India aims to support its traditional allies while also engaging with Israel, a key partner in defence and technology.<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, India's engagement with Iran adds another layer of complexity. While Iran is a crucial player in the region, its relationship with India is strained by international sanctions and its contentious relationship with Saudi Arabia. Balancing India's strategic interests with Iran against its alliances with Gulf states requires astute diplomatic strategies to manage potential conflicts and ensure mutual benefits.

### **Economic Constraints**

Economic constraints also play a critical role in shaping India's defence strategy. The instability and conflicts prevalent in West Asia have a direct impact on global oil markets, which, in turn, affect India's energy security. As one of the world's largest importers of oil, fluctuations in energy prices and

disruptions in supply chains can have significant economic repercussions for India.

Additionally, India faces the challenge of allocating its economic resources between domestic needs and international defence commitments. Balancing substantial investments in defence infrastructure, modernisation, and military technology with other pressing domestic priorities, such as economic development and social welfare, requires careful financial management and strategic prioritisation.

### **Security Threats, Arab-Israeli Conflict, and Its Impact on India**

Security threats in West Asia present a direct challenge to India's strategic interests. The region is plagued by terrorism, sectarian violence, and ongoing regional conflicts, which pose risks to Indian investments, personnel, and broader strategic interests. The persistent Arab-Israeli conflict further exacerbates these security challenges, impacting regional stability and influencing India's strategic calculations.<sup>14</sup>

The conflict's repercussions extend to India's security posture, necessitating robust counter-terrorism strategies and enhanced intelligence capabilities. India must also ensure the protection of its economic interests and nationals in the face of regional instability. Navigating these security threats while maintaining a balanced approach to its regional alliances is crucial for India's strategic positioning.

**Opportunities for Enhancing Defence Partnerships and Cooperation**  
**Strengthening Strategic Alliances** India has significant opportunities to enhance its defence strategy by deepening strategic alliances with key regional players. Its growing relationships with countries such as Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates present avenues for increased military cooperation, intelligence sharing, and joint counter-terrorism initiatives. These partnerships offer India the chance to bolster its security framework and expand its influence within the region.

For example, the defence collaboration with Israel provides access to advanced military technology and expertise, which can enhance India's defence capabilities. Similarly, strengthening ties with Saudi Arabia and the UAE can improve India's strategic positioning and support its broader regional interests.<sup>15</sup>

### **Expanding Economic and Defence Cooperation**

Economic cooperation serves as a foundation for deepening defence engagements. By enhancing economic ties and pursuing joint ventures, India can build stronger bilateral relationships that support its defence objectives. Initiatives such as joint military exercises, technology transfers, and collaborative defence production projects can create synergies and improve operational effectiveness.

For instance, expanding defence trade and joint production ventures with regional partners can facilitate the acquisition of cutting-edge technologies and foster mutual defence interests. This economic-diplomatic approach strengthens strategic ties and reinforces India's defence posture in West Asia.

### **Utilising Multilateral Platforms**

India can leverage multilateral platforms and regional organisations to promote stability and advance its strategic goals. Engaging in forums such as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and participating in regional security dialogues can enhance India's role as a stabilising force. These platforms offer opportunities for collaborative problem-solving, joint security initiatives, and the establishment of collective security arrangements.

By actively participating in multilateral discussions and security frameworks, India can strengthen its regional presence and contribute to broader efforts aimed at maintaining stability and addressing common security challenges.

### **Leveraging Diplomatic Flexibility**

India's diplomatic flexibility is a valuable asset in navigating the complexities of West Asia. Its ability to adapt and engage with a diverse range of regional

actors enables it to build constructive relationships and pursue its strategic interests effectively. This diplomatic agility allows India to balance its various alliances and manage competing interests, reinforcing its position as a key player in regional security.<sup>16</sup>

India's defence strategy in West Asia is shaped by a combination of significant challenges and promising opportunities. The political and diplomatic complexities, economic constraints, and security threats require a sophisticated approach, while the potential for strengthening alliances, expanding cooperation, and utilising multilateral platforms offers pathways to enhance India's strategic influence. By addressing these challenges and capitalising on opportunities, India can effectively navigate the intricacies of its defence strategy in West Asia and achieve its strategic objectives.

### **Conclusion**

The examination of India's defence strategy in West Asia reveals a complex tapestry woven from historical alliances, strategic interests, and contemporary challenges. This analysis provides a deeper understanding of how India navigates its role in a region of immense geopolitical significance, highlighting the intricate interplay between past legacies and current policies.

### **Summary of Key Findings**

India's defence strategy in West Asia is marked by a dynamic blend of geopolitical, economic, and security considerations. The region's pivotal role in global energy markets, coupled with its intricate political landscape, drives India to adopt a multi-dimensional approach. The investigation underscores how India's historical relationships with key regional players have been instrumental in shaping its strategic posture. The balance between navigating political rivalries, managing economic constraints, and addressing security threats is central to India's strategy. The opportunities for enhancing defence partnerships, expanding economic cooperation, and leveraging diplomatic flexibility offer pathways for reinforcing India's position and achieving its strategic objectives.

## Reflection on the Significance of Historical Alliances and Partnerships

The significance of historical alliances and partnerships cannot be overstated in the context of India's defence strategy. From its early post-independence relationships with countries like Iraq and Iran to its contemporary alliances with Israel and Gulf states, India's strategic engagements have evolved in response to shifting geopolitical realities. The transition from a cautious approach to a more assertive and collaborative stance reflects India's growing recognition of West Asia's strategic importance. Historical alliances have not only shaped current strategic decisions but also laid the groundwork for future engagements, enabling India to build robust partnerships that bolster its regional influence and security.

## Future Outlook for India's Defence Strategy in West Asia

The future outlook for India's defence strategy in West Asia is poised for continued evolution amidst a changing geopolitical environment. India is likely to focus on deepening its strategic partnerships with key regional players such as Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. The need to secure energy resources, counter security threats, and enhance regional influence will drive India's strategic priorities. As global power dynamics shift, including the rise of China and the fluctuating roles of other major powers, India's strategy will need to adapt accordingly.

Enhancing defence collaborations, expanding economic and technological ties, and actively participating in multilateral forums will be critical for India's future strategy. By leveraging its diplomatic flexibility and pursuing a balanced approach, India can navigate the complexities of the region and reinforce its strategic position. The emphasis on building strong alliances and addressing emerging challenges will be pivotal in shaping India's role in West Asia and ensuring its long-term strategic success.

In conclusion, India's defence strategy in West Asia is a reflection of its historical ties, evolving strategic interests, and adaptive policies. The interplay of past legacies with contemporary challenges and opportunities will continue

to define India's approach to the region. By building on its historical alliances, embracing new opportunities, and effectively managing its strategic interests, India can enhance its role as a key player in West Asia, navigating the complexities of the region with confidence and strategic acumen.

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