



SADF COMMENT

Opportunity for India to mediate Israel-Iran rivalry

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ABSTRACT

The article takes up the idea of India playing a peacemaker role to the ongoing Israel-Iran rivalry. First, it highlights the new developments that India has engaged with Iran and Israel on bilateral terms at the highest political level. Then it raises the question what is at present driving India to tread in these directions. Further, it elucidates the holistic importance of the Middle East region, wherein both the rivalling states are territorially located, for India. Finally, it talks about the situational need for India to mediate between the two rivalling states for increasing its prevalence within South Asia and for gaining worldwide acceptance as a power to be reckoned with.

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Recent turnarounds

“Your conference is most ideally timed. It is an occasion to recall and renew our centuries old association ...India and Iran are two civilizations that celebrates the meeting of two great cultures. Our two countries and two cultures think alike.”- Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi said this while addressing the inauguration of the International Conference on Retrospect and Prospect of India-Iran relations, in Tehran on May 23, 2016.

There were an array of Memorandum-of-Understandings (MoUs) signed and agreements made between India and Iran under the Joint Statement “Civilisational Connect, Contemporary Context” during this visit of the Indian Prime Minister to Iran. One prominent MoU among them which needs mention is the bilateral contract to develop and operationalize the Chabahar Port, which was signed between IPGPL (India Ports Global Private Limited) and Arya Banader of Iran. This project is being termed by the Indian side as of strategic importance that will act as an alternative to the Chinese financed Gwadar port in Pakistan for land transit to Central Asian countries.

Narendra Modi previously met Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly on September 28, 2014. The two leaders discussed cooperation in areas ranging from agriculture and water management to defence and cyber-security. It is a well known fact that both share of them a personal rapport, and address each other ‘my friend’. The Jerusalem Post reported Netanyahu told Modi that the "sky is the limit" for relations between the two countries. Modi is scheduled to make an official visit to Israel in the near-future, although the exact date for that is not yet decided. This will make him the first ever Indian Prime Minister to visit the country.

The aforesaid developments reflect how India at present is trying to tread on a delicate path of balancing its bilateral relations with two dialectic actors, Israel and Iran. India knows it needs to further build upon its historic partnership with Iran as the country now comes out of the international sanctions regime. While at the same time, it knows it cannot afford to debilitate its strategic partnership with Israel at the face of prevailing

turbulence- perpetuated by Islamic terrorist organizations across the Middle East- which holds potential to spill-over in South Asia.

Big Question

A big question of the hour is whether India is trying to cozy up with Iran for it knows the Persian civilisation is re-experiencing a zenith after an epoch? Or, whether this is a foreign policy strategy on India's part to substantiate its regional and global influence by adeptly engaging with two enemy actors in the strategically most important region of the world- i.e. the Middle East.

The question calls for rational and objective analysis for India under Modi is shunting from the trajectory, which it was placed under the Congress party rule for most of the 60 years after its independence. Today, as a matter of fact, Modi government is pursuing realist strategies that further the country's national interests. Following it is examined the veiled dynamics of Modi's foreign policy strategy for engaging with Israel and Iran while vying for their maximizing its national interests.

Middle-East: plethora of political-strategic-economic interests for India

According to the International Energy Agency, India imports 70% of its crude oil from the Gulf and 85% of its natural gas from Qatar. However, the Middle East is more than just oil to India. The region serves an array of interests for the country, like employs large number of both skilled and unskilled Indian workforce, channels back enormous amount of foreign remittances coming from Indian expats, provides businesses opportunities at all levels- ranging from the level of common-men to governments from both sides - in almost all known sectors. Furthermore, there are prospective deals in the pipeline. Recently, India's Oil Minister Dharmendra Pradhan while speaking to Economic Times said that India is presently at an advanced stage of discussion with the Middle East countries regarding Indian firms holding stakes in oil and gas fields in the region while companies from the Gulf investing in oil and gas infrastructure, refineries and petrochemicals within India.

Hence, India has energy, human and economic security at stake in the region. Any unprecedented incident, like the early Arab Spring that witnessed the rise of democratic forces or the post Arab Spring that is witnessing proliferation of Islamic terrorist organizations, which debilitate the order in the region is viewed by the Indian authorities with suspicion and fear. It is seen, in the recent past India has largely remained agnostic on almost all internal developments in the region.

Today India under Modi's leadership is attempting to strengthen its relationships with its neighbouring states and those located nearby but not adjoining its territories, especially the Central Asian states, South East states and the states in the Middle East. It will be difficult for India to remain alienated from the several recent developments that is re-shaping the strategic scenario in the volatile Middle East. In-fact, it is already coming under pressure to act in a more pro-active way to adapt into the new reality while also protecting its national interests.

Hereby particularly important is the question- how India manages its relationship with Israel and Iran. On one hand, India needs Israeli high-tech military armaments to stay militarily abreast with its adversaries on its neighbourhood. On the other hand, India needs Iran as a strategic partner to outmanoeuvre the Sino-Pak strategic land encirclement while also ensure external supply of oil to cope with its acute fossil energy shortage. India is placed in a situation whereby it cannot exclude one by openly siding with the other and needs to engage with both the rivalling states without seriously offending either.

India's prospects for regional dominance and global reckon

India under the current National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government –comprising of the right-leaning Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) that secured majority people's mandate in the 2014 national election- has been able to raise its stature at the international level vis-à-vis the preceding 10 years rule of the Congress led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government. The 'Modi-Doval doctrine', which India is seemingly pursuing at present, takes up a hardline military approach- termed as "effective deterrence"- vis-à-vis its enemy

actors. Some of its recent military actions, like Indian Special Forces crossed into Myanmar to attack Naga-Manipuri rebel camps in June last year, *Indian foreign intelligence agencies increased covert support to Baloch separatists of late*, and so on, reflect India is attempting to increase its regional hegemony.

The world is currently witnessing major real-politik developments. There are formation of re-alignment of strategic partnerships among great powers and regional powers (like Sino-Russo alliance). There is emergence of new non-state actors that are steadfastly attempting to bring down the Westphalia state-system (like ISIS). Further, non-traditional security issues are now gaining prominence at the state and system level (like global climate change). Under such a landscape of whirlpool of forces and processes contesting for securing their respective self-interests, it will be difficult for a pacifist Indic civilization (i.e. India) to assert itself as a power to be globally reckoned with. This will call for a great deal of valour, strategic planning and meticulous execution on part of the Indian authorities, which in-turn will have to have full support of the country's populace and local private business conglomerates.

India will face surprises while treading on a pathway of balancing its relationship with Israel and Iran. What if Iranian backed all-out assistance to the Assad regime falters to the military and ideological might of ISIS? What if Russia-China alliance finds a new strategic partner in Pakistan? Hereby India should either restraint itself from getting usurped into the global power-play and uphold its traditional non-aligned foreign policy strategy. Or, India should without any further delay actively get involved in the issues of international significance- including in the Israel-Iran rivalry as a conflict mediator. Acting reluctant or not acting in this regard will be self-defeating for India's reinvigorated foreign policy thrust under Prime Minister Modi. Assuming if India is able to prudently mediate between the two major rivals, this will then further its own national interests as well as lessen the prevailing violence in the Middle East region.

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