

Redefining Engagement: India's Foreign Policy Toward West Asia in the Modi Era — Strategic Interests, Diplomatic Shifts, and Regional Dynamics

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Abstract:

The relationship between India and West Asia has experienced a paradigm shift in the recalibration of the relationship since 2014, under Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Breaking sharply with the older tradition of prudent non-alignment that has formed the basis of previous decades, New Delhi has chosen a multi-vector, interest-oriented strategy that builds up both alliances with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members, with Israel, with Iran, and with the rest of the Arab world. This paper discusses the major pillars of the policy of West Asia in the Modi era, which include: energy security, diaspora welfare, bilateral trade, strategic connectivity, and geopolitical balancing in terms of current events, including the India-UAE Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) of 2020. Based on authenticated trade, remittance, and diplomatic information, the paper posits that the West Asia policy of India is indicative of an emergent policy of strategic autonomy with selective involvement - a policy that favours economic interests and diaspora diplomacy, and cautiously signs to rival regional affiliations. The paper further evaluates how the BRICS chairmanship in India in 2026 has made its role in a fractured regional order more complicated and, at the same time, elevated the role of India in terms of mediation.

Keywords: India–West Asia relations, Modi foreign policy, Gulf Cooperation Council, strategic autonomy, IMEC, I2U2, India–Israel relations, Chabahar Port, Indian diaspora, BRICS 2026.

1. Introduction

India's foreign policy orientation toward West Asia — encompassing the Arabian Peninsula, the Levant, Iran, and Israel — has historically been shaped by a careful balancing of competing imperatives: energy dependence on Gulf oil exporters, the welfare of nearly nine million expatriate workers, the Palestinian cause as a moral-foreign policy touchstone, and the imperatives of Cold War non-alignment. This inherent calculus began to change in May 2014 with the accession of Narendra Modi to the premiership. Its transactional pragmatism, readiness to develop parallel relationships among longstanding hostile dyads, and the exploitation of the demographic and economic potential of India characterize the West Asia engagement of the Modi government.

Between 2014 and 2026, Prime Minister Modi visited the United Arab Emirates (2015, 2019, 2024), Saudi Arabia (2016, 2023), Israel (2017, 2026), Iran (2016), Oman (2018), Qatar (2023), and Palestine (2017), becoming the most widely travelled Indian leader in the subregion. These visits were accompanied by substantive institutional outcomes: the India–UAE CEPA (2022), the I2U2 quadrilateral grouping (2022), India's participation in the Abraham Accords-adjacent IMEC corridor (2023), and a deepening of defence and intelligence partnerships with Riyadh and Tel Aviv. At the same time, India continued its relations

with Tehran through the Chabahar Port Agreement and preserved the oil import relations that withstood the consecutive sanctions imposed by the West.

By early 2026, the West Asia policy of India will be tested as never before: the full-scale regional war with the US/Israeli military strikes against the nuclear infrastructure of Iran (initiated in June 2025), a Hormuz Strait navigational crisis that would cut Indian energy supplies, a divided BRICS that India leads, and domestic politics over whether the government is pro-Israel. The paper presents a detailed analytical description of these developments in their context of history and structure with the help of data tables provided by the authoritative sources.

2. Historical Background: Pre-Modi India-West Asia

The relationship between India and the Arab world is not a new one since independence. The Indian National Congress aligned itself with the Arab nationalist movements, and the newly independent India gave recognition to Arab states but not Israel until 1950, a move that was part of the Cold War politics and internal politics of the Muslim population. It did not become a fully diplomatic partner of Israel until 1992, when Prime Minister Narasimha Rao shaped India’s economic liberalization and a more practical re-evaluation of foreign priorities (Rao, M. K. P. 2018).

The Gulf emerged as a critical economic corridor from the 1970s oil boom, when large-scale Indian labour migration to Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the UAE transformed the bilateral relationship into one structured around remittances and worker welfare rather than high geopolitics. The Congress governments of Manmohan Singh (2004–2014) initiated a modest strategic upgrade — deepening ties with Saudi Arabia through the Riyadh Declaration (2010) and negotiating defence cooperation with the UAE — but West Asia remained, in the main, an economic constituency rather than a strategic priority.

3. Energy Security: The Petroleum Imperative

The most structurally compelling factor in the Indian engagement with the West Asian region is its reliance on the West Asian hydrocarbons. India consumes nearly 85 percent of its oil needs and is the third largest oil consumer in the world, with the Gulf and other West Asia contributing a larger portion of this consumption. The table below shows the crude oil importation by region of origin in India over the last few years.

Table 1: India's Crude Oil Imports by Source Region (%)

Source Region	Share FY2022–23 (%)	Share FY2023–24 (%)	Share FY2024–25 (Est. %)
Iraq	22.8	22.3	21.5
Saudi Arabia	17.6	15.9	15.2
Russia	16.5	34.1	35.0
United Arab Emirates	7.2	8.4	8.6
Kuwait	7.0	6.8	6.5
USA	8.1	5.3	4.8
Others (incl. Africa, GCC)	20.8	7.2	8.4

Sources: Petroleum Planning & Analysis Cell (PPAC), Ministry of Petroleum & Natural Gas, Government of India (2024, 2025); International Energy Agency (IEA), Oil Market Report (2025).

The dramatic surge in Russian crude imports post-2022 — from 16.5% in FY2022–23 to an estimated 35% in FY2024–25 — reflects India's opportunistic procurement of discounted Russian oil following

Western sanctions, a policy that generated friction with the Trump administration. Nevertheless, GCC states collectively account for over 55% of India's crude oil basket when all Gulf suppliers are aggregated. Such a structural dependence requires New Delhi to uphold steady relationships in an ever-shaken region in terms of geopolitical upheaval.

Military attacks by the US and Israel on Iranian nuclear targets in June 2025 and Iranian retaliation measures that partially blocked Strait of Hormuz transit routes in early 2026 caused severe panic in New Delhi regarding supply chain security. The diplomatic reaction of India, which was typified by the telephonic diplomacy of External Affairs Minister Jaishankar with both his Israeli and Iranian counterparts and the involvement of the Italian Foreign Minister Tajani in talks with IMEC-related options on infrastructure, highlighted that energy security is the non-negotiable foundation of the Indian West Asia calculus (The Diplomat, 2026; The Jerusalem Post, 2026)

4. Diaspora Diplomacy: The Gulf's Nine Million Indians

The six GCC states have a population of about nine million Indians working and living therein, which makes up almost half of the total population of 18.5 million Indians all over the world. This diaspora is more than an economic constituency, and it is a geopolitical asset, the well-being of which determines the moral vocabulary of the Indian West Asia diplomacy. The population is highly concentrated in the UAE (3.5 million), Saudi Arabia (2.5 million), Kuwait (1 million), Qatar (700,000), Oman (650,000), and Bahrain (350,000) (Ministry of External Affairs, 2024).

Table 2: Indian Diaspora in GCC Countries and Remittance Contribution

GCC Country	Estimated Indian Population (mn)	Share of Remittances to India (FY2023–24)
United Arab Emirates	3.50	19.2%
Saudi Arabia	2.50	6.7%
Kuwait	1.00	4.9%
Qatar	0.70	4.1%
Oman	0.65	3.0%
Bahrain	0.35	1.2%
Total GCC	~8.70	~37.9%

Sources: Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India (2024); Reserve Bank of India, Sixth Round of Remittances Survey 2023–24 (March 2025); Arab News (2025).

In FY2024-25, India recorded a record receipt of remittances at 135 billion, which is an increase of 14 percent over the previous year of 118.7 billion, and this will continue to make it the largest recipient of remittances in the world (Reserve Bank of India, 2025; DD News, 2025). Although the GCC lost its pre-eminent role in formal remittances, reducing to 37.9% in FY2023-24 in contrast to 46.7% in FY2016-17, as the high-skilled Indian professionals in North America and Europe emerged, the Gulf diaspora is the only most concentrated overseas Indian community, which has been contributing out of proportion to informal transfer channels. Diaspora welfare issues played a central role in the India's demands of safe passage of the nationals to the Gaza conflict (2023-2025) and Hormuz navigational crisis of 2026.

5. Bilateral Trade and Economic Partnerships

5.1 India UAE Relation: The CEPA Framework

In February 2022, the signing of the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) between India and the UAE was a landmark in the economic activity of the two countries, which became operational in May 2022. The CEPA was aimed at bilateral trade worth 100 billion by 2030, and all Indian products in value exported to the UAE were given tariff-free status. By FY2023-24, India-UAE bilateral trade had topped \$83 billion, with the United States being the only other country India trades with bigger than the United States.

The state visit of the UAE President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan to New Delhi in January 2026 produced a list of historic deals: a 10-year, 3 billion dollars liquid natural gas supply deal; a Letter of Intent on Strategic Defense Partnership Framework; space, technology, investment, and digital infrastructure MoUs. The visit created a goal of doubling bilateral trade to 200 billion dollars by the year 2032 (Middle East Forum, 2026). The Abu Dhabi Investment Authority (ADIA) further expanded its portfolio commitment in India, and the Unified Payments Interface (UPI) was expanded to support the transactions of the Indian expatriates in the UAE financial institutions.

5.2 India Saudi Arabia: Beyond Oil to Strategy

The India-Saudi Arabia relationship has been transformed into a multidimensional strategic relationship; it has developed into a non-hydrocarbon arrangement. During his second bilateral visit to the Kingdom in 2023, Prime Minister Modi was accompanied by the Saudi Arabia Investment Forums and Saudi Aramco and SABIC, committing to invest 50 billion in India's energy and petrochemical industry within the next decade. India also engaged Saudi Arabia in a high-level strategic dialogue on January 28, 2026, and reiterated its desire to strengthen its relationship despite the ongoing war in the West Asian region (Middle East Forum, 2026).

5.3 India-Israel: Technology and Security Convergence

Since the full diplomatic relations were established between India and Israel in 1992, this has formed one of the most substantive bilateral partnerships in West Asia. India is the second biggest trading partner of Israel in Asia after China, and the bilateral trade between the two countries has increased from 200 million dollars in 1992 to 6.5 billion dollars in 2024 (Ministry of External Affairs cited in Al Jazeera, 2026). In 2017, the first visit to Israel by an Indian PM was Modi's visit to the country in February 2017, and it was followed by a visit in February 2026, during which the leaders made further commitments in the areas of defence technology co-production, cybersecurity, drip irrigation, and AI cooperation. The I2U2 grouping (India, Israel, UAE, USA), launched in 2022, institutionalised a new quadrilateral connectivity architecture linking South Asian, West Asian, and North American partners.

Table 3: India's Bilateral Trade with Select West Asian Countries

Country	Bilateral Trade with India (USD bn)	Year	Key Sectors
United Arab Emirates	83.6	FY2023–24	Gems, petroleum, machinery, gold
Saudi Arabia	52.8	FY2023–24	Crude oil, petrochemicals, and agriculture
Iraq	21.4	FY2023–24	Crude oil (dominant)

Country	Bilateral Trade with India (USD bn)	Year	Key Sectors
Israel	6.5	CY2024	Defence, agri-tech, diamonds, pharma
Iran	1.8	FY2023–24	Chabahar transit, agriculture
Kuwait	10.2	FY2023–24	Crude oil, petroleum products
Qatar	15.7	FY2023–24	LNG, petroleum

Sources: Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Government of India (2024); Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India (2024); Al Jazeera (2026); PPAC (2025).

6. Strategic Connectivity: IMEC and the Chabahar Gambit

6.1 India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC)

The India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), announced on the sidelines of the G20 Leaders' Summit in New Delhi in September 2023, is the most ambitious of the connectivity projects of India in the West Asian theatre. The corridor proposes a multi-modal transport and digital infrastructure system, which will connect the western ports of India to the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Israel, then cross the Mediterranean and reach Europe. IMEC presents India as the hub of an alternative to the Belt and Road Initiative by China and squarely confronts the policies of the EU Global Gateway. The IMEC strategic salience had been renewed in an engagement between Italian Foreign Minister Tajani and External Affairs Minister Jaishankar in March 2026 on Hormuz-alternative routes (The Jerusalem Post, 2026).

6.2 Chabahar Port and the Iran Equation

The most complicated aspect of the West Asia portfolio of India is its ten-year-long investment into Chabahar Port, the deep-sea Iranian port that provides India with a land-access to Afghanistan and Central Asia. A 10-year operational agreement between the Port and the Maritime Organization of Iran and India Ports Global Limited, signed in May 2024, was the first to explicitly cut a US sanctions waiver on the port. Nevertheless, the June 2025 US-Israel strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities, along with the follow-up economic sanctions, had put the Chabahar arrangement under very high pressure. The port still remains in operation in India, where India has been balancing connectivity imperatives with the US pressure; publicly demanding dialogue and negotiations to resolve the Iran crisis (The Diplomat, 2026). India was asked by the urgent plea of Iran, as BRICS chair in 2026, to use its seat to demand a ceasefire, which was accepted in diplomatic language by Modi without giving explicit condemnation to the US-Israeli actions.

7. Diplomatic Balancing in a Broken Region: 2025-2026

The regional war has become the most significant challenge to the Modi era's West Asia policy in the Modi era. After the US and Israel jointly air and missile-attacked Iranian nuclear facilities in June 2025, a move that BRICS contemptuously decried as a breach of international law (The Diplomat, 2026), India was in a diplomatically perilous situation. India, as the chair of BRICS in 2026, will be pressured by both Iran and the UAE and Saudi Arabia to defy the harsh censure of US-Israel activities (Zee News, 2026; Chatham House, 2026).

The official policy of India has been that of restraint. Modi also showed his support for Israel's security issues when he visited Israel in February 2026 and, at the same time, made a phone call to the Iranian President, Pezeshkian, on March 21, 2026, insisting on freedom of navigation and criticizing the attack on critical infrastructure instead of blaming. India has neither made any announcement condemning the US-

Israeli military operations on Iran, but at the same time demanded a diplomatic solution (The Diplomat, 2026; CSR Journal, 2026). This was described as a compromised policy by the opposition leader, Rahul Gandhi, but senior Congress leaders such as Shashi Tharoor labelled it as responsible statecraft (Organiser, 2026).

The second India-Arab Conference took place in New Delhi on January 31, 2026, with the foreign ministers or senior representatives of all twenty-two Arab League countries present, which will make a great institutional deepening of the Indian involvement in the Arab world (Middle East Forum, 2026). Modi also held a meeting with the Palestinian leadership on the sidelines of the conference, restating a negotiated two-state solution as supported by India. These gestures were used to fine-tune the position of India when it comes to the relationship with the Arab world, without necessarily adversely affecting the India-Israel relationship.

Table 4: Key Milestones in India's West Asia Diplomacy under Modi (2022–2026)

Event / Development	Date	Significance for India's West Asia Policy
India–UAE CEPA Signed	February 2022	Bilateral trade target \$100 bn by 2030; tariff elimination on 97% of Indian exports
I2U2 Grouping Launched	July 2022	India–Israel–UAE–USA quadrilateral on food security, energy, infrastructure
IMEC Corridor Announced (G20 Summit)	September 2023	Multi-modal corridor from Indian ports through the Gulf and Israel to Europe
Chabahar 10-Year Agreement	May 2024	IPGL operates an Iranian deep-water port; a US sanctions waiver has been secured
Modi visits Saudi Arabia (bilateral)	2023	Saudi–India Investment Forum; \$50 bn energy sector pledge by Aramco/SABIC
UAE President Sheikh MBZ visits India	January 19, 2026	\$3 bn LNG deal, Strategic Defence Partnership LoI, trade target \$200 bn by 2032
2nd India–Arab Conference, New Delhi	January 31, 2026	All 22 Arab League states' senior representatives; strategic dialogue revival
India–Saudi Arabia Strategic Dialogue	January 28, 2026	Bilateral diplomacy deepened amid regional conflict
Modi visits Israel	February 2026	IMEC, I2U2 reaffirmed; defence co-production, AI, cybersecurity
India assumes BRICS Chairmanship	January 2026	Hosts BRICS FMs meeting (May) & summit (September 2026); mediating the Iran crisis
Modi–Pezeshkian call on the BRICS role	March 21, 2026	Iran urges India to call a ceasefire; India stresses navigation & diplomacy.

Sources: Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India; Middle East Forum (2026); The Diplomat (2026); Al Jazeera (2026); Zee News (2026).

8. Analytical Framework: Strategic Autonomy with Selective Engagement

The West Asia policy of Modi's India cannot fit into traditional IR paradigms. It is neither the lack of alignment of the Nehruvian age, which had an ideological engagement of anti-imperialism, nor the US model of alliance system. Instead, it exhibits characteristics of what Bajpai (2022) terms 'issue-based

multilateralism' combined with bilateral depth: New Delhi pursues deep bilateral relationships with states that would normally be considered adversarial to each other (Israel and Iran; Saudi Arabia and Qatar; UAE and Turkey), calibrated to specific issue-areas such as energy, defence technology, and connectivity.

The 'Link West' policy — Modi's conceptual update of the earlier 'Look West' orientation — prioritises proactive outreach, summit diplomacy, and institutional architecture-building over the older pattern of reactive crisis management. The 2026 crisis has, however, exposed the limitations of this approach. The neutrality of India, as examined in relation to the Iran war, has been criticized by the BRICS camp that supports Iran as well as by the constituencies in India that worry about the security of their diaspora in the Gulf. According to the January 2026 assessment of Chatham House, the fact that India did not attend the Pax Silica summit is in part an expression of bad blood in the India-US relationship and the dislike of Washington of the vagaries of Indian strategic autonomy (Chatham House, 2026). This implies that even autonomy is a cost in a polarised geopolitical environment.

The course of the West Asia policy in India will be determined by three structural factors: (i) how fast and in which direction the Iran war will go and what will it mean in terms of Hormuz transit and Chabahar operations; (ii) how the process of building the BRICS consensus will unfold under the chairmanship of India, specifically, the May 2026 meeting of the foreign ministers and the September 2026

9. India and the Palestinian Question: Continuity and Recalibration

The Indian posture towards the Palestinian issue has been recalibrated under Modi in a slow but unquestionable manner. India has preserved its official position of supporting Palestinian statehood and frequently reaffirms its policy of a negotiated two-state solution. Nevertheless, there is a quantum and moral urgency with which India publicly promotes Palestinian rights, and it has been substituted with an instrumentalist discourse of dialogue and stability. The voting records of India, which voted against or qualified at the resolutions of the UN General Assembly condemning Israeli activities in Gaza (2023/2025) was a change from decades of unanimous voting in favor of resolutions on Palestine. The Indian government had framed them as indicative of a kind of balanced approach - a characterisation strongly disputed by the opposition parties and the civil society groups.

The fact that New Delhi has maintained the Palestinian relationship as a diplomatic hedge, such that it has given it credibility with Arab interlocutors despite ongoing substantive strategic partnership with Israel, was evidenced by the fact that Modi has met with Palestinian leadership on the fringes of the January 2026 India–Arab Conference, and that he restated his support of the idea of dialogue and a negotiated resolution. The India case, therefore, can be seen as the example of what Pant and Joshi (2017) define as the balancing through ambiguity, i.e., the policy optionality through the resistance to definitive alignment.

10. Conclusion

India's foreign policy toward West Asia in the Modi era represents a qualitative transformation from the reactive, diaspora-welfare-centred engagement of earlier decades to a proactive, multi-vector strategy that encompasses energy security, strategic connectivity, defence cooperation, and institutional architecture-building. The India–UAE CEPA, the I2U2 grouping, the IMEC corridor, the deepening defence partnership with Israel, and the Chabahar agreement with Iran collectively constitute a portfolio that reflects India's growing strategic ambition and its capacity to sustain simultaneous partnerships across adversarial dyads.

Yet the escalating West Asia conflict of 2025–2026 has exposed the fault lines of this strategy. India's dependence on Gulf hydrocarbons, the vulnerability of nine million Indians in the region, and the competing demands of its BRICS chairmanship have circumscribed its manoeuvring space. The principle

of strategic autonomy and selective engagement, which is the guiding principle of Indian strategy, is flexible but lacks clarity. With the regional war being dragged on over time, the BRICS unity is going to break along pro-Iran and pro-Gulf lines. India will have the difficulty of maintaining its reputation as a good-faith intermediary when it lacks the necessary leverage in military or economic terms to impose the desired solution.

The West Asia policy of the Modi government has managed to put India on the map and has strengthened economic ties in the sub-region. Its second task is to transform diplomatic presence into real power on regional deliverables, especially in stabilizing energy supply, safeguarding diaspora interests, and the Chabahar corridor as the means of Eurasian connectivity. Whether India's 2026 BRICS chairmanship can serve as a vehicle for this ambition — or whether the Iranian crisis will fragment the grouping before meaningful consensus can be forged — will be a decisive test of Indian statecraft in the years ahead.

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