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# THE MODI GOVERNMENT AND INDIAN FOREIGN POLICY WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO WEST ASIA

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**Abstract:** Since the Modi Government has come into power at the Centre in 2014, the global visibility of India has significantly improved. PM Modi's marathon abroad visits and skillful diplomacy in the international affairs has brought India in the rank of leading power of the globe; one indicator of this emerging trend is the kind of attention India is receiving today in the various capitals of the world particularly in the west. Three features underlie PM Modi's diplomacy in global affairs: First, heralding the principle of India First in conducting bilateral or multilateral relationship in international politics. Second, generating hope in the international community particularly in the west about India's leading role and commitment towards upholding democratic global order at a time when China is increasingly seen to pose a threat to the democratic international order. Third, upholding and promoting multi polar vision of the global order. Its on the basis of these principles Modi Government has been successful in promoting India as a safe destination of global investment and bringing India at the forefront of fighting global terrorism.

In this perspective, most successful diplomacy of Modi Government can be seen in its dynamic relationship with countries of West Asia particularly the Gulf. The Government has skillfully utilized discourse of Indian Diaspora and drew the attention of Gulf countries for investing in India while giving hope that India can play significant role in providing security to the Gulf region.

This paper will reflect the changes in Indian Foreign policy with reference to West Asian countries after 2014.

**Keywords:** Gulf, India, PM Modi, West Asia.

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**Introduction: India as Rising Global Power:** The Modi government has attracted the considerable attention in the global affairs. There is an increasing global recognition of India's assertive role in the international affairs. This has led to the development of Modi's doctrine in foreign policy. What are the features of this doctrine? Does the Modi's doctrine differ from the fundamental structure of India's Non- Aligned Policy? This paper broadly deals with the orientation of Indian foreign policy under the Modi government with special reference to West Asia and argues that the Modi doctrine's broadly operates within the foundational structure and principles of non-alignment; albeit in more realist manner and has been successful in protecting and securing India's interest first. This policy is most visible and evident in the region of West Asia, particularly in relations with GCC, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Israel.

**The Modi Doctrine and Non- Alignment:** One of the distinctive contributions of the Modi doctrine is that it has made the Indian foreign policy more realistic, active and assertive with a view to usher into multipolar global order. In this context the non-participation of Indian Prime Minister, Mr Narendra Modi, in the 17th Summit Meeting of the NAM at Margarita Island, Venezuela, 13-18<sup>th</sup> September 2016 has been mistakenly perceived by the critics as growing irrelevance of NAM, India's declining commitment to NAM and an attempt on the part of the Modi government to dissociate himself from a 'Congress legacy' and its 'anti- Western tone' in order to make himself more acceptable in the western hemisphere.

In fact Modi only changed the tenor and thrust of Non Aligned policy without changing its basic principles. The Modi government continued the Indian tradition of keeping itself away from any kind of military alliance, while strengthening the political alliances and economic cooperation across the North and South. Thus unlike Jawaharlal Nehru, PM Modi has actively mobilized the global public opinion and raised India's voice in the international forums for legitimate inclusion of India in the future revamp UN Security Council. Further, India forged multiple informal grouping to push the agenda of reform of UN Security Council. Thus beyond BRICS and G20, India is strongly cultivating its ties with various regional forums such as G-4 (India, Brazil, Germany and Japan), G8 +5 ((Brazil, China, India, Mexico, and South Africa), ASEAN, SCO, (Shanghai Cooperation Organization), IBSA (India, Brazil and South Africa) and USA-BASIC (Brazil, South Africa, India

and China), G-6 (Australia, Brazil, India, Japan, the United States and the European Union).

The major global power has begun to lean towards accommodating India in the global power structure keeping in view of India's rising economic and political profile in the world affairs. India holds 6<sup>th</sup> position within G-20 at the level of GDP. Once characterized as 'Hindu Rate of Growth', today India's economy has grown from a \$333 billion economy in 1994 to \$2 trillion economy. Along with China, India has been dubbed as 'Asian Drivers of Global Changes'. This could become possible, in part, due to Modi's hectic abroad visit which in turn changed the global perception about India, brought global investment, motivated the Indian diaspora community to invest in India, moved India up in the global scale of ease of doing business and new Delhi witnessed the frantic visit of global leaders from US, China, UAE, France, Germany, Russia and others.

**India's Engagement in West Asia:** India's engagement with the region began to increase and solidify in the early 1990s due to a multitude of factors: the end of the Cold War, the disintegration of Soviet Union, India's growing demand for oil and gas due to its accelerated economic development and propensity to acquire great power status fuelled by aggressive economic and political nationalism. This set of objectives drew India closer to the United Arab Emirates (U.A.E.), the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the Islamic Republic of Iran, and Israel — the very same countries around which Indian foreign policy in the region revolves today. Gradually, these countries, along with the United States, have become crucial in realizing India's great power aspirations, as evidenced by the increasing frequency of visits of Indian leaders to these destinations — visits reciprocated by their counterparts.

Thus, Saudi Arabia not only offset the loss of supply of hydrocarbon products from the erstwhile Soviet Union but also met the Indian market's increasing demand. In fact, Saudi Arabia gradually emerged as India's top supplier of crude oil (20 percent) until 2015,<sup>1</sup> when it was marginally overtaken by Nigeria, as well as an important source of remittances (\$8 billion). Israel quickly made inroads into the Indian defense sector, initially as a supplier of spare parts for the mostly Soviet-made Indian defense-related products and later as the third-largest arms supplier (after Russia and the U.S.) to the Indian defense industry.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, within the Indian strategic community, Israel is increasingly regarded not just as a "strategic defense partner" but as a "model of counter-terrorism" whose lessons and experiences could be applied to the fight against cross-border terrorism in Kashmir. Modi became the first Indian Prime Minister to visit Israel, which led to further consolidation of ties between the two.

Iran, too, occupies an important position in India's strategic thinking, and for several reasons. First, Iran is a significant source of crude oil, accounting for 6 percent of India's oil imports in 2015.<sup>3</sup> Second, Iran borders the Strait of Hormuz through which a fifth of the world's seaborne oil passes. Third, Iran is poised to become India's "gateway" to Central Asia, Europe and Russia as a result of the completion of first phase of construction of the ports at Chabahar and Bandar Abbas and the International North-South Transportation Corridor (INSTC). Fourth, Iran is a valuable ally in the fight against the Taliban in Afghanistan. Finally, Iran is an emerging regional power with wide-ranging influence in West Asia that could contribute to regional stability. It is for these reasons that India worked assiduously to sustain its relationship with Iran in the face of pressure by the U.S., Israel and the G.C.C. countries regarding the Iranian nuclear program.<sup>4</sup>

However, it is the G.C.C. countries, particularly in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, which have come to occupy an increasingly important "political space" in Indian strategic thinking. The Gulf Arab states provide 50 percent of Indian crude oil and 85 percent of its natural gas requirements. Collectively, the G.C.C. countries have emerged as India's largest trade partner. Bilateral trade with the G.C.C. countries reached \$150 billion in 2016;<sup>5</sup> trade with the U.A.E. and Saudi Arabia accounted for \$60 billion and \$39 billion, respectively.<sup>6</sup> In addition, the 7-8 million Indian expatriate workers in the G.C.C. countries generate more than \$30 billion in remittances.<sup>7</sup> India is also seeking to tap the G.C.C. countries' sovereign wealth funds (SWFs) for its domestic investment and infrastructural development.

Meanwhile, the combination of several developments has spurred Gulf countries to look to the East, principally to China and India, to enhance their security, attract investment and export hydrocarbon products: the post-9/11 "trust deficit" and concern among the Gulf governments regarding the safety of their investments in the West; the development of shale oil in the United States and the latter's steadily declining oil and gas imports from the Gulf; and the U.S.'s diminishing political influence in the region; and the rising economies of Asia. India, therefore, sees a strong convergence of interest with the Gulf Arab countries. "Food-energy security" is one of several additional areas of convergence between India and G.C.C. countries, given the fact

that G.C.C. countries import 80 percent of their rice and 60 percent of other food commodities from India.<sup>8</sup>

**In Lieu of Conclusion: India's Two Pathways towards West Asia:** Ensuring the stability and security of the Persian Gulf region, including the protection of the large Indian expatriate community, in the context of persistent conflict and violence across the region has emerged as the top priority of Indian foreign policy toward West Asia in recent years. It is important to note here that high oil prices in the early 1990s, the cost of evacuation of the more than 100,000 Indian workers following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, and the consequent drastic fall in remittances were the three principal reasons that caused Indian foreign reserves to plummet, and that forced the political leadership to mortgage the country's gold, approach the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for loans and embark on liberal economic reform.<sup>9</sup>

The high degree of political unpredictability and deteriorating security environment in the region, along with the growing possibility of the reduction, if not withdrawal of the American security role in the region, has led India to follow two simultaneous, but not necessarily contradictory, paths in conducting its relations with West Asia. One path is marked by the continuation of India's traditional diplomatic line of "non-interference" in the internal affairs of its counterparts in the region, coupled with a "wait and watch" posture that is punctuated by condemnations of terrorism and sectarian violence and appeals to regional stakeholders to pursue negotiated settlements of disputes.

The other path is marked by the deepening of India's security ties with its Gulf Arab partners, including in the area of counter-terrorism, along with exploring the possibility of an alternative multilateral Asian security framework for the Gulf involving important stakeholders such as China, Japan and South Korea. This latter approach has led the Indian government to invest in overseas oil and gas fields (i.e., mainly in Sudan, Syria, Iran, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Russia),<sup>10</sup> to undertake a massive modernization of the Indian navy, including development of a maritime doctrine<sup>11</sup> with a view to protecting sea lanes of communication (SLOCs) in the Indian Ocean as well as to prevent China from dominating the Indian Ocean; to conduct joint naval exercises with the U.S., U.K., France, China and Gulf countries; and to conclude a series of bilateral defense and strategic agreements with all of the G.C.C. states. In addition, under the Modi government, India's counter-terrorism policy has been expanded in an effort to isolate and expose Pakistan's policy of terrorism globally, including in West Asia. Saudi Arabia and the U.A.E. have responded positively to the Indian authorities' request for the extradition of suspected terrorists.<sup>12</sup>

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