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**INDIA'S WEST ASIA POLICY: STEERING THE ARAB SPRING AND STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS****Dr. Irshad Ahmad**Assistant Professor, Department of Civics and Ethical Studies,  
College of Social Science and humanities, Madawalabu University, Bale Robe, Ethiopia.**Dr. Mohd Jameel Dar**Assistant Professor in the Department of Civics and Ethical Studies. College of Social Science and  
Humanities. Debre Markos University, Ethiopia.**ABSTRACT**

*The period of the Arab Spring (2011-2013) constituted a critical juncture for Indian foreign policy, severely testing its traditional principles of non-interference and strategic autonomy in West Asia. This article argues that India's response was characterized by a sophisticated, yet often reactive, diplomatic balancing act—a "tightrope walk"—aimed at shielding its core national interests from regional upheaval. It analyzes India's navigation of three interconnected challenges: the immediate diaspora and evacuation crises in Libya and Bahrain; the great-power pressure to align with US sanctions against Iran while preserving critical energy and strategic links; and the management of the intensified Saudi-Iranian rivalry. The article concludes that while India achieved qualified success in protecting immediate tangible interests (energy security, diaspora safety), the period catalyzed a subtle but significant evolution from a posture of pure non-interference towards a more pragmatic and proactive crisis management approach. The experiences of 2011-2013 not only underscored the enduring complexities of India's West Asia policy but also set the stage for future challenges, including the need for deeper engagement and the looming competition with China's expanding footprint in the region.*

**KEY WORD:** India-West Asia Relations, Arab Spring, Indian Foreign Policy, Strategic Autonomy, Diplomatic Balancing, Diaspora Diplomacy, Iran Sanctions, Saudi-Iran Rivalry.

**1. INTRODUCTION**

The dawn of the second decade of the 21st century witnessed a political earthquake that reverberated across the globe. Beginning in late 2010, the wave of popular demonstrations and uprisings collectively termed the 'Arab Spring' fundamentally altered the geopolitical landscape of West Asia and North Africa. The swift unseating of long-standing authoritarian regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, coupled with protracted civil conflicts in Syria and Bahrain, sent shockwaves through the international system. For India, a nation situated in a proximate and volatile neighbourhood, these developments were not distant events but a direct and profound challenge to its core national interests. The period from 2011 to 2013, therefore, represents a critical juncture where New Delhi's established foreign policy principles were tested against the hard realities of regional tumult.

India's stakes in the stability of West Asia are, to put it simply, immutable and multifaceted. Primarily, the region remains the principal guarantor of India's energy security, supplying a substantial 70-80 per cent of its crude oil imports. Any disruption in the Gulf has an immediate and tangible impact on the Indian economy. Secondly, and perhaps most uniquely, is the human dimension: a vast Indian diaspora, estimated at over seven million strong, resides and works across the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. These non-resident Indians are not only a source of immense national pride but also a

critical economic asset, contributing significantly through annual remittances that bolster India's foreign exchange reserves. Thirdly, West Asia is a crucial region for trade, investment, and strategic partnerships, encompassing key relationships with actors as diverse as Saudi Arabia, Iran, Israel, and Qatar. The well-being of the diaspora and the uninterrupted flow of energy are, therefore, non-negotiable pillars of India's external engagement.

This deep entanglement presented New Delhi with a formidable dilemma. As a rising power committed to the principle of 'strategic autonomy' and the long-held Nehruvian ethos of non-interference in the internal affairs of other states, India faced a pressing question: How does a nation with such profound vested interests navigate a period of unprecedented internal upheaval among its key partners without compromising its foundational principles? The Indian approach during 2011-2013 can be best characterised as a careful and deliberate "tightrope walk." On one side was the imperative to safeguard its tangible assets—its citizens and its energy supplies. On the other was the need to maintain a principled stance against external intervention, avoid taking sides in sectarian or internal political conflicts, and preserve its strategic relationships with all regional powers, often at odds with one another, as well as with global powers like the United States.

This review article seeks to analyse this complex diplomatic balancing act. It will argue that India's response to the Arab Spring was pragmatic, primarily interest-driven, and marked by a subtle but discernible shift from strict non-interference to a more proactive crisis management posture, while still striving to uphold its core principles. The article is structured as follows: it first outlines the legacy framework of India's West Asia policy prior to 2011. It then examines the immediate challenges posed by the Arab Spring, focusing on case studies of Libya and Bahrain. Subsequent sections delve into the intricacies of navigating great power pressures, particularly concerning Iran and US sanctions, and managing the regional schism between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The analysis also touches upon the consistent approach towards the Israel-Palestine issue during this period. The article concludes by assessing the successes and limitations of India's strategy and its implications for New Delhi's evolving role in a rapidly transforming West Asia.

## 2. THE LEGACY FRAMEWORK: PRINCIPLES OF INDIA'S WEST ASIA POLICY

To comprehend India's response to the upheavals of the Arab Spring, it is imperative to first understand the historical and philosophical foundations upon which its West Asia policy was constructed. Prior to 2011, India's approach to the region was not a mere ad hoc collection of bilateral engagements but was underpinned by a distinct set of principles shaped by its own experience with colonialism, its Cold War choices, and its civilizational worldview. This legacy framework, while evolving, provided the essential playbook that New Delhi would instinctively consult when the region began to fracture.

The historical context of India's links with West Asia is deep and multifaceted, rooted in centuries of cultural, religious, and economic exchange. However, the modern architectural framework was largely laid in the immediate post-Independence period under Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. A cornerstone of this was India's leadership in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), which sought to carve out a space for newly independent nations away from the bipolar contestation of the Cold War (Muni, 2012). This translated into a foreign policy that prized strategic autonomy—the ability to make decisions based on national interest without being tethered to a major power bloc. In the West Asian context, this meant maintaining cordial relations with all actors, from the Arab states to Iran and, after 1992, even Israel, without letting one relationship undermine another. As Pethiyagoda (2013) notes, India's policy was characterized by a "careful balancing act," refusing to be drawn into regional conflicts or sectarian divides.

This pursuit of strategic autonomy was operationalized through two key pillars. The first was a steadfast commitment to non-interference in the internal affairs of other sovereign states. This principle was both a moral stance, derived from a respect for sovereignty post-colonialism, and a pragmatic one, as India itself was a multi-ethnic, multi-religious state wary of external meddling (Hall, 2011). The second, more pragmatic pillar was the practice of de-hyphenation. This involved consciously

delinking relationships with adversarial states to avoid zero-sum choices. The most prominent example of this was India's management of its ties with Israel and the Palestinian Authority. Despite establishing full diplomatic relations with Israel in 1992, India continued to be a strong supporter of the Palestinian cause, a balancing act aimed at preserving its relations with the Arab world (Kumaraswamy, 2013). Similarly, India strived to maintain separate, substantive relationships with both Iran and Saudi Arabia, engaging Tehran for energy, connectivity to Central Asia, and as a regional partner, while cultivating Riyadh as a primary energy supplier and a partner on counter-terrorism and the welfare of the Indian diaspora.

This legacy framework mattered profoundly as the Arab Spring unfolded. It established a clear baseline of expected state behaviour for India. The principles of non-interference and strategic autonomy created a strong institutional inertia against any rapid shift towards a more interventionist or explicitly partisan posture. The pre-2011 policy was designed for a West Asia of relatively stable, albeit authoritarian, nation-states. It was a policy adept at managing state-to-state relations but was largely untested in a scenario where the state structures themselves were collapsing or facing existential challenges from within (Baru, 2012). The deep-seated habit of de-hyphenation, for instance, would be severely tested when the Arab Spring morphed into a more explicit Saudi-Iranian proxy conflict, forcing India to navigate a deepening sectarian rift. Therefore, the period 2011-2013 can be seen as a critical stress test for this established framework, pushing India's diplomatic corps to adapt its traditional tools to a fundamentally new and volatile environment. The tension between adhering to these cherished principles and responding effectively to a crisis that directly threatened its citizens and economy defines the central narrative of India's diplomatic journey through this period.

### 3. THE EARTHQUAKE: THE ARAB SPRING AND ITS IMMEDIATE CHALLENGES FOR INDIA

The popular uprisings that convulsed West Asia from 2011 onwards presented India with an unprecedented strategic quandary. The region, long characterized by a certain stable authoritarianism, was suddenly in a state of revolutionary flux. For Indian foreign policy, this was less an opportunity for democratic evangelism and more a period of acute vulnerability, testing the very core of its principles and capacities. This section argues that India's initial response to the Arab Spring was fundamentally reactive and prioritised immediate, tangible national interests—specifically, the physical security of its diaspora and the stability of energy supplies—over any ideological alignment with the pro-democracy movements. This crisis-management approach, while successful in the short term, revealed the limitations of a policy framework predicated on non-interference when faced with profound internal transformations within partner states (Baru, 2012).

#### 3.1. Case Study 1: Libya and the Evacuation Imperative

The collapse of state authority in Libya following the NATO-led intervention was the first major test of India's crisis management capabilities. The situation was dire for the approximately 18,000 Indian nationals working in the country, who found themselves stranded in a worsening civil war. India's response, Operation Safe Homecoming (February-March 2011), was a monumental logistical exercise that successfully evacuated over 15,000 citizens by air and sea (Ministry of External Affairs [MEA], Government of India, 2011). This operation is rightly hailed as a signature achievement of the Manmohan Singh government, demonstrating a newfound capacity for swift, large-scale humanitarian intervention.

However, a scholarly analysis must look beyond the logistical success to the diplomatic posture it necessitated. India's primary objective was singular: the safe extraction of its citizens. This required a delicate and pragmatic engagement with all parties on the ground, including the crumbling Gaddafi regime and the emerging rebel factions. As noted by Pant and Super (2013), this pragmatic necessity temporarily overrode any consistent application of principle. While India ultimately voted for a United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR 1973) that referred the Gaddafi regime to the International Criminal Court and imposed a no-fly zone, it expressed serious reservations about the subsequent military intervention led by NATO, arguing that the mandate for a "no-fly zone" was interpreted too

broadly as “regime change” (Lok Sabha Debates, 2011). This position underscores a central tension: the imperative to protect nationals required working within a UN framework, even as the execution of that framework by Western powers ran counter to India’s deep-seated aversion to external intervention (Hall, 2016). Thus, the Libyan case established a critical precedent—when forced to choose, the security of the diaspora would trump strict adherence to non-interference, compelling India to navigate a complex and morally ambiguous diplomatic landscape.

### 3.2. Case Study 2: Bahrain and the Diaspora Dilemma

If Libya represented a clear-cut evacuation challenge, the uprising in Bahrain presented a far more insidious and complex dilemma for Indian diplomacy. The political unrest in Bahrain, framed along sectarian lines (a Sunni monarchy versus a Shia-majority opposition), directly implicated a large Indian diaspora community of over 350,000 people, predominantly employed in the construction and service sectors (Saxena, 2012). Unlike in Libya, there was no complete state collapse necessitating a mass evacuation. The challenge was instead one of ensuring the community’s long-term safety and economic stability without alienating the host government, a key partner in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

India’s response was characterized by extreme caution and discreet diplomacy. Public statements from New Delhi were notably muted, emphasizing the safety of Indian nationals and calling for calm and dialogue, while carefully avoiding any commentary on the internal political dynamics of the kingdom (MEA, 2011, March 15). This was a deliberate strategy of risk mitigation. As scholar Harsh V. Pant (2013) observes, “India’s primary concern was the well-being of its expatriate community, and it did not want to be seen as taking sides in a domestic political conflict, thereby jeopardizing their position” (p. 84). Open support for the pro-democracy movement could have provoked retaliation from the Bahraini government and its powerful patron, Saudi Arabia. Conversely, overt support for the monarchy would have been inconsistent with India’s rhetorical support for democratic aspirations elsewhere.

This “behind-the-scenes” approach involved intense diplomatic parleys with the Bahraini leadership, stressing the importance of protecting foreign workers. The success of this strategy was relative; while widespread violence against Indians was avoided, the episode laid bare the vulnerability of the diaspora and the constraints it imposes on Indian foreign policy. It demonstrated that in contexts where the state remains intact but repressive, India’s policy of non-interference translates into a de facto endorsement of the status quo, prioritising stability over principle (Chenoy & Chenoy, 2012).

### 3.3. The Initial Policy Response: Principles under Pressure

India’s formal diplomatic response to the Arab Spring, articulated at the United Nations and in official statements, attempted to square the circle between its principled stand and the new realities. The official line, as articulated by then-External Affairs Minister S. M. Krishna, was a careful balancing act: India supported “the aspirations of the people for a democratic and vibrant political system” but firmly believed that “the impulses for change must come from within” and that “the use of force should be avoided” (Krishna, 2011, para. 7 & 9).

This formulation was a classic expression of India’s commitment to non-interference and strategic autonomy. At the UN, India’s voting pattern reflected this caution. It supported resolutions critical of regimes like Syria when they focused on humanitarian aid and dialogue, but consistently opposed resolutions that opened the door to sanctions or military force, fearing the “Libya precedent” (Ganguly, 2012). This nuanced—or, as critics argued, ambiguous—position was a reflection of the fundamental dilemma: how to reconcile the desire to be on the “right side of history” in supporting democracy with the practical need to maintain working relationships with existing governments and a deep-seated suspicion of Western-led interventionism (Mohan, 2012).

Consequently, the initial phase of the Arab Spring acted as an external shock that forced India’s West Asia policy into a reactive mode. The responses to Libya and Bahrain, while different in execution, were united by a common thread: the paramount importance of protecting immediate national

interests defined in tangible terms—citizen security and regional stability. This period demonstrated that while the principle of non-interference remained the default setting, it was already being pragmatically adapted to meet the exigencies of a rapidly changing geopolitical landscape, setting the stage for the more complex balancing acts that would follow.

#### **4. NAVIGATING THE GREAT POWER RIVALRIES: IRAN, THE US, AND SANCTIONS**

The geopolitical churn of the Arab Spring intersected with a pre-existing and equally formidable challenge for Indian diplomacy: the escalating confrontation between the United States (and its Western allies) and Iran over the latter's nuclear programme. This period (2011-2013) witnessed a significant tightening of the US-led international sanctions regime against Tehran, placing India squarely in the crosshairs of a great power rivalry. This section contends that navigating the US-Iran rivalry became the quintessential test of India's policy of strategic autonomy. Faced with intense pressure from Washington, New Delhi engaged in a sophisticated and arduous balancing act, attempting to salvage its critical interests in Iran—energy security, connectivity via Chabahar, and access to Afghanistan—without jeopardizing its transformative strategic partnership with the United States. The resolution of the ensuing “oil payment crisis” through pragmatic financial diplomacy stands as a testament to India's capacity for creative, interest-based statecraft in the face of conflicting external demands (Mohan, 2012).

##### **4.1. The Tricky Triangle: US Pressure and India's Dilemma**

The Obama administration's policy of “pivoting” to Asia, which India broadly welcomed as a strategic counterweight to China, came with an implicit, and at times explicit, expectation of strategic congruence. A key component of this pivot was maximising pressure on Iran to force concessions on its nuclear programme. For the US, India's continued high-volume import of Iranian crude oil was a loophole that undermined the sanctions' efficacy. Consequently, Washington mounted sustained diplomatic pressure on New Delhi to significantly reduce its Iranian oil imports (Pant & Singh, 2013).

This pressure created a acute dilemma for Indian policymakers. On one hand, the US-India relationship had evolved into a cornerstone of India's great power diplomacy, encompassing defence, civil nuclear cooperation, and shared democratic values. Alienating Washington risked stalling this hard-won strategic convergence. On the other hand, Iran represented a vital national interest. It was, at the time, India's second-largest supplier of crude oil, meeting a significant portion of the country's energy needs. Furthermore, Iran offered India a crucial gateway to landlocked Afghanistan and Central Asia, bypassing a hostile Pakistan, a vision embodied in the developing Chabahar port project (Scott, 2013). Succumbing to US pressure would not only increase energy costs but also cede strategic space in India's extended neighbourhood, potentially creating a vacuum that other powers, like China, could exploit.

##### **4.2. India's Balancing Act: Preserving Interests under Duress**

India's response to this pressure was a masterclass in calibrated diplomacy, reflecting a nuanced understanding of its leverages and vulnerabilities. The government, led by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, did not outright reject US demands but engaged in a protracted negotiation to minimise the damage to its Iranian interests. The primary strategy was one of gradual, verifiable reduction in oil imports rather than an immediate embargo. As documented by reports from the period, India reduced its imports of Iranian crude from approximately 21 million tonnes in 2010-11 to around 13 million tonnes in 2012-13, thereby demonstrating cooperation with Washington while maintaining a vital energy relationship with Tehran (Baru, 2012).

Simultaneously, India worked to insulate its strategic projects from the sanctions regime. The Chabahar port agreement, though progressing slower than hoped, was consistently defended as a project of critical humanitarian and economic importance for Afghanistan's stability, a goal India shared with the US (MEA, 2012). This framing was a deliberate diplomatic move to carve out an exception for Chabahar by aligning it with a shared US-India objective in Afghanistan. India's diplomatic outreach to



Iran during this period emphasised continued political support for dialogue on the nuclear issue, positioning itself as a responsible stakeholder rather than a party to the coercion (Chaudhuri, 2014).

#### **4.3. The Oil Payment Crisis: A Practical Test of Strategic Autonomy**

The theoretical challenge of balancing great powers manifested in a very practical and acute form: the oil payment crisis. By 2012, tightening US and EU financial sanctions effectively severed Iran from the global banking messaging system, SWIFT. This made it nearly impossible for India to pay Iran for its oil imports through normal banking channels, threatening a complete halt to purchases (Verma, 2013).

The resolution of this crisis showcased Indian diplomatic ingenuity. After earlier mechanisms involving a German bank and a Turkish bank collapsed under US pressure, India and Iran devised a temporary solution: routing payments through the Kolkata-based UCO Bank. A significant portion of the payment was made in Indian Rupees, which Iran could then use to import goods from India that were not under sanctions (Baru, 2012). While not an ideal solution for Iran, which preferred hard currency, it ensured the continuity of a scaled-down oil trade. This mechanism was a pragmatic workaround that served the immediate interests of both nations. It allowed India to claim it was adhering to international sanctions by reducing dollar-based transactions, while practically sustaining a relationship deemed vital for national security. The payment crisis, therefore, was not merely a financial hurdle but the central theatre where the abstract concept of strategic autonomy was operationally defined and defended.

#### **4.4. The "Strategic Autonomy" Argument: Asserting Independence**

The management of the US-Iran-Sanctions triangle during 2011-2013 became a defining case study in India's contemporary assertion of strategic autonomy. This period demonstrated that for New Delhi, strategic autonomy did not mean isolationism or reflexive opposition to the US. Rather, it signified the retention of the right to make independent judgments based on a hierarchy of national interests, even when they diverged from the preferences of a strategic partner (Hall, 2016).

Indian officials and scholars frequently invoked the principle to justify their nuanced approach. The reduction in oil imports was framed as a sovereign decision taken in the national interest, not as capitulation to US diktat. The preservation of the Chabahar option and the creative resolution of the payment crisis were presented as evidence of India's ability to navigate complex international constraints without sacrificing core objectives (Muni, 2013). As argued by C. Raja Mohan (2012), this episode highlighted that India's partnership with the US was maturing into a relationship where differences could be managed without causing a rupture, a sign of a more confident and pragmatic foreign policy. Ultimately, India's navigation of the sanctions regime reinforced the notion that its strategic autonomy was not a relic of the Non-Aligned Movement but a dynamic tool for advancing its interests in a multi-polar world order.

### **5. THE REGIONAL SCHISM: MANAGING SAUDI ARABIA AND IRAN**

Beyond the challenge of managing great power rivalries, the Arab Spring exacerbated a pre-existing and deeply entrenched regional fault line: the geopolitical and sectarian contest for hegemony between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The uprisings, by weakening or threatening established state structures, created proxy battlegrounds and opened spaces for this rivalry to intensify, most notably in Bahrain, Yemen, and Syria. For India, this presented a delicate diplomatic imperative: to navigate the escalating Saudi-Iranian cold war without being forced to choose sides. This section argues that India's response was characterized by a strict and pragmatic application of its policy of 'de-hyphenation'. By maintaining separate, substantive bilateral tracks with both Riyadh and Tehran, and by adhering to a principled, non-interventionist stance on conflicts like Syria, India sought to insulate its critical national interests from the destabilizing effects of regional sectarian-polarization (Pant, 2016).

### 5.1. The Sectarian Shadow: An Intensified Rivalry

The Arab Spring fundamentally altered the regional balance of power, creating a perception among the Gulf monarchies, led by Saudi Arabia, of a rising and assertive Iran. The overthrow of Sunni-led regimes created vacuums that Tehran sought to fill, while protests in Shia-majority Bahrain were viewed by Riyadh as an Iranian-inspired insurrection (Gause, 2014). This dynamic culminated in a full-blown proxy war in Syria, where Saudi Arabia and its allies supported Sunni rebel groups seeking to topple the Iran-backed Alawite regime of Bashar al-Assad. The region was increasingly divided along a Saudi-Iranian axis, with the sectarian card being leveraged by both sides to consolidate influence (Wehrey et al., 2010). For a country like India, with profound stakes across the entire region, this sectarianisation of geopolitics was a alarming development. It threatened to transform the region from a stable, if tense, source of energy into an unstable arena of conflict that could jeopardise energy security, the safety of the diaspora, and economic partnerships.

### 5.2. India's De-hyphenation in Practice

Faced with this schism, India's strategy was not to mediate or bridge the divide—a task beyond its capacity—but to meticulously ensure that its relationship with one power was not held hostage to its relationship with the other. This practice of 'de-hyphenation' was executed with considerable skill during this period.

With Saudi Arabia, the relationship was elevated to a Strategic Partnership in 2010, and the period 2011-2013 saw continued high-level engagement. India emphasised Saudi Arabia's role as its single largest supplier of crude oil, a key partner in counter-terrorism intelligence, and a crucial regulator of the Hajj pilgrimage for Indian Muslims (Pethiyagoda, 2020). Discussions often centred on regional stability, with India appreciating Saudi Arabia's role as a conservative status quo power. The relationship was framed in bilateral terms, focusing on energy security, investment opportunities, and the welfare of the 2.5-million-strong Indian community in the Kingdom.

Concurrently, with Iran, India continued to engage on the basis of equally compelling, though distinct, strategic imperatives. As discussed in the previous section, despite sanctions, Iran remained a significant energy partner and the gateway to Afghanistan and Central Asia via the Chabahar port project. India's dialogue with Tehran focused on preserving these economic and connectivity interests, advocating for diplomatic solutions to the nuclear issue, and highlighting historical and civilisational ties (Chaudhuri, 2014).

The success of this de-hyphenation lay in compartmentalisation. India refrained from making statements that explicitly contrasted its partners or framed its regional policy in sectarian terms. It conducted its diplomacy on two parallel tracks, ensuring that progress on one track (e.g., strategic dialogue with Riyadh) did not come at the expense of the other (e.g., technical talks on Chabahar with Tehran). This required a disciplined and nuanced diplomatic communication, consistently emphasising that India's friendships were independent and not directed against any third country (Mohan, 2012).

### 5.3. The Syria Conundrum: A Test of Principle

The Syrian civil war was the most acute manifestation of the Saudi-Iranian proxy conflict and thus the ultimate test of India's de-hyphenation policy. India's stance at the United Nations was a clear reflection of its core principles, applied consistently to avoid entanglement in the regional rivalry. India repeatedly voted in favour of resolutions that called for humanitarian ceasefires and a Syrian-led political transition, but it consistently opposed resolutions that threatened sanctions or authorised the use of force against the Assad regime (Ganguly, 2012).

This position was often criticised as being ambiguous or overly cautious. However, from New Delhi's perspective, it was a principled stand rooted in the doctrine of non-interference. India viewed the prospect of externally enforced regime change with deep suspicion, recalling the aftermath of the Libya intervention. Taking a side—either with the Saudi/US-backed opposition or the Iranian/Russian-backed regime—would have irrevocably damaged its carefully balanced relationships with both Riyadh and Tehran, as well as with Washington and Moscow (Hall, 2016). By advocating for dialogue and a

political solution, India aimed to position itself as a responsible neutral party, its primary objective being the restoration of stability in a fractured state rather than the victory of one faction over another. The Syria conundrum, therefore, was not an abdication of responsibility but a conscious application of strategic autonomy to a complex regional conflict, allowing India to maintain its diplomatic equity across the divide.

## **6. BEYOND THE GULF: THE ISRAEL-PALESTINE DIMENSION**

While the Arab Spring primarily destabilized the Gulf and the Levant, its ripples inevitably touched the core, enduring conflict of West Asia: the Israeli-Palestinian issue. For India, this dimension represents a unique and long-managed balancing act, one that predates the uprisings by decades. This section argues that the turmoil of the Arab Spring period (2011-2013) had a negligible impact on India's stance towards Israel and Palestine. India's policy remained remarkably consistent, demonstrating that its support for the Palestinian cause is a matter of deeply ingrained principle, while its partnership with Israel is driven by equally compelling pragmatic and strategic imperatives. The two tracks were, and continue to be, consciously de-hyphenated, insulated from the regional upheavals that redefined other aspects of its West Asia policy (Jacob, 2017).

### **6.1. Consistency in Principled Support**

India's diplomatic support for the Palestinian cause remains a cornerstone of its West Asia policy, rooted in historical solidarity with anti-colonial movements and a commitment to a rules-based international order. This principled position was consistently reiterated during the Arab Spring years. India continued to vote in favour of Palestinian interests at the United Nations, including supporting the successful Palestinian bid for non-member observer state status at the UN General Assembly in November 2012 (United Nations, 2012). High-level visits and statements consistently affirmed India's support for a sovereign, independent, and viable Palestinian state living side-by-side in peace with Israel.

This consistency was significant because it demonstrated that India's stance was not a tactical manoeuvre to appease Arab monarchies, many of whom were themselves under pressure during the uprisings. Instead, it was portrayed as an independent moral and political commitment. As then-Minister of State for External Affairs, E. Ahamed, stated in 2011, India's support for Palestine is "unwavering and consistent... it is not determined by the changes in the international or regional situation" (MEA, 2011). This framing deliberately insulated the Palestine issue from the realpolitik calculations that were shaping India's responses elsewhere in the region.

### **6.2. Pragmatic Partnerships with Israel**

Parallel to this principled stance, India's strategic partnership with Israel continued its upward trajectory, entirely unaffected by the Arab Spring. Established formally in 1992, the relationship had matured into a critical one for India, particularly in the domains of defence, security, and agricultural technology. Israel emerged as a top supplier of advanced defence equipment, from UAVs to missile systems, and a key partner in counter-terrorism and intelligence sharing (Kumaraswamy, 2018).

During 2011-2013, this partnership deepened further. Bilateral trade grew steadily, and high-level exchanges continued, focusing on concrete areas of cooperation rather than regional politics. The turmoil in the Arab world may have even indirectly reinforced the value of the Israel relationship for Indian policymakers. In a region perceived as becoming increasingly unstable, Israel stood out as a reliable, technologically advanced, and consistent strategic partner, unburdened by the sectarian and political fissures tearing apart its neighbours (Pant, 2013). The relationship was pursued on its own merits, driven by India's specific national security and developmental needs.

### **6.3. Analysis: A Managed and Insulated Balance**

The Arab Spring period served to highlight the resilience and maturity of India's de-hyphenated approach to Israel and Palestine. The key to this balance lies in the clear separation of the two tracks.



Support for Palestine is conducted primarily on a multilateral, diplomatic plane, framed as a matter of principle and international law. In contrast, the partnership with Israel is pursued on a bilateral, strategic, and commercial plane, framed as a partnership of mutual benefit (Baru, 2012).

The upheavals of 2011-2013 did not alter this calculus. There was no significant domestic pressure in India to recalibrate its stance towards Israel due to the fall of authoritarian Arab regimes. Similarly, the changing dynamics in the Gulf did not lead to a dilution of India's diplomatic support for Palestine, as that support was never contingent on the approval of specific Arab regimes. The two policies coexisted in separate silos, a testament to the complexity and confidence of Indian foreign policy. In essence, the Israel-Palestine dimension during the Arab Spring stands as an exception to the rule of flux; it was an area where India's tightrope was well-practiced, and the winds of change, for once, did not threaten its balance.

## 7. CONCLUSION: ASSESSMENT OF INDIA'S BALANCING ACT AND FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

The period from 2011 to 2013 represented a critical stress test for India's West Asia policy. The Arab Spring, akin to a geopolitical earthquake, shattered the region's stable, if stagnant, foundations, forcing New Delhi to navigate a landscape of unprecedented upheaval, sectarian schisms, and great power pressures. This article has argued that India's response was characterized by a sophisticated, if often reactive, diplomatic balancing act—a careful tightrope walk aimed at protecting its core national interests while adhering to the foundational principle of strategic autonomy. Revisiting the central thesis, the assessment of India's success must be nuanced: it was a qualified success, marked by significant tactical achievements in crisis management but revealing strategic vulnerabilities for the long term.

### 7.1. Summarizing the Tightrope Walk: A Qualified Success

Measured against the immediate metrics of tangible national interest, India's policy during this period was largely effective. The monumental success of Operation Safe Homecoming in Libya and the discreet diplomacy that safeguarded the diaspora in Bahrain demonstrated a newfound capacity for proactive crisis management. Similarly, through a combination of calibrated reductions and financial ingenuity, India managed to navigate the US-led sanctions regime against Iran, preserving both a vital energy relationship and the strategic Chabahar option without derailing its partnership with the United States. The consistent application of de-hyphenation allowed it to maintain functional, substantive relationships with rival regional powers Saudi Arabia and Iran. In the short term, India successfully protected the flows of energy, remittances, and ensured the safety of its nationals, thereby insulating the domestic economy from the worst impacts of regional instability (Baru, 2012; Pant, 2013).

However, this tactical success masked deeper strategic challenges. The very volatility of the region emerged as the primary long-term threat. The intensification of the Saudi-Iranian cold war and the descent of Syria into a prolonged proxy conflict created a more unpredictable and dangerous neighbourhood. India's policy of non-interference, while effective in avoiding entanglements, limited its ability to shape outcomes or exert meaningful influence on the political trajectories of key regional states. The reliance on crisis management revealed a policy that was better equipped to react to events than to proactively prevent them.

### 7.2. An Evolving Pragmatism

The most significant outcome of this period was the subtle but perceptible evolution in India's strategic culture towards West Asia. The doctrine of non-interference, once sacrosanct, was pragmatically adapted to new realities. The imperative to evacuate citizens from warzones and engage with non-state actors in Libya demonstrated that the principle was not absolute. As Hall (2016) notes, India's foreign policy began to display a greater willingness to undertake limited, interest-based interventions, particularly when its citizens were at risk. This marked a shift from a posture of pure diplomatic non-involvement to one of pragmatic engagement, where core principles were retained but their application became more flexible. The "tightrope" was not abandoned; rather, India learned to

walk it with a finer sense of balance, acknowledging that in a crisis, strict neutrality might need to be tempered by proactive measures to secure concrete interests.

### 7.3. Looking Ahead: The Implications for a Rising India

The experiences of 2011-2013 served as a crucial learning curve, shaping India's subsequent approach to the region. The limitations of a reactive policy became clear, fostering a recognition that as a rising power with exponential stakes, India needed to transition to a more engaged and influential role. This has been evident in the years since, with a more confident India engaging in multi-alignment within the region, exemplified by Prime Minister Modi's simultaneous cultivation of strong ties with Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, and his government's more energetic pursuit of the Chabahar project (Pethiyagoda, 2020).

Furthermore, the period set the stage for confronting the next great challenge: China's expanding footprint. The instability revealed by the Arab Spring created opportunities for Beijing to deepen its economic and strategic inroads, particularly through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The lessons of 2011-2013—about the importance of strategic autonomy, the need for proactive engagement, and the value of connectivity projects like Chabahar—directly inform India's contemporary competition with China in West Asia. The region has become a new arena for this rivalry, where India must leverage its historical ties, diaspora, and soft power to counter China's economic heft.

### 7.4. Final Thought: The Enduring Tightrope

In conclusion, the Arab Spring period underscored that navigating West Asia will remain a perpetual tightrope walk for Indian foreign policy. The fundamental tensions—between principle and pragmatism, between competing partners, and between energy security and regional instability—are inherent to the region's fabric. The period 2011-2013 did not resolve these tensions but forced India to manage them with greater skill and pragmatism. The tightrope remains, but the experience gained has provided a steadier footing. As India's power and interests continue to grow, its ability to walk this rope—balancing its civilisational links, strategic partnerships, and economic imperatives in an eternally turbulent West Asia—will remain a definitive test of its claim to global leadership.

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