

UNDER MODI, INDIA HAS SHED ITS TRADITIONAL DEFENSIVENESS TOWARDS THE MIDDLE EAST

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Speculation continues about Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#)'s travel plans to Abu Dhabi this weekend at the very peak of the election campaign. If he chooses to be present at the shilanyas ceremony for a temple in Abu Dhabi, Modi might also receive the Zayed Medal that the United Arab Emirates has awarded him recently.

Whether he travels to Abu Dhabi or joins the temple ceremony by a video link, the event caps the transformation of India's engagement with the Middle East. Under Modi, India has shed its traditional defensiveness towards the region. The Middle East, in turn, has responded with great enthusiasm to India's new pragmatism.

That brings us to a paradox. The significant expansion of India's engagement with the Muslim neighbourhood comes at a time when religious nationalism has sharpened domestic political divisions. While the ruling party has been accused of fomenting Hindu majoritarianism, some of the more important diplomatic successes of the Modi government have been with Muslim countries. Within the Subcontinent, Afghanistan and Bangladesh see India as a valuable partner and their engagement with India has gained a strong foundation. Both Kabul and Dhaka have better relations with Delhi than with Islamabad. The Organisation of Islamic Cooperation invited India's Minister for External Affairs, Sushma Swaraj to address a meeting of its foreign ministers in the face of Pakistan's strong objections.

India's relations with Sunni Arab states like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have never been better than today. At the same time, the last four years have seen progress in implementing strategic projects like the Chabahar port in Shia Iran. Modi has also brought out India's longstanding partnership with Israel from behind the veil. There have been few objections from the Arab or Muslim world.

One would think Pakistan would be the last government that wants welcome Modi's return to power. But as Prime Minister [Imran Khan](#) put it, a strong government under Modi may be more credible interlocutor than a weak coalition government.

While [Manmohan Singh](#) could not convince the Congress party of the wisdom of him travelling to Pakistan during his decade-long tenure as PM, Modi was prepared to show up in Lahore on a few hours notice at the end of 2015. That the relationship has gone nowhere is another story. But the pertinent point is the impression that Modi is confident enough to wage either war or peace.

The key to Modi's success in the Muslim neighbourhood has been the decision to focus on India's national self-interest rather than religion. When he came to Delhi in 2014, Modi found the relations with Bangladesh at a difficult juncture. The Manmohan Singh government had negotiated the important agreement on resolving the land boundary dispute with Bangladesh in 2011. But the Congress could not get it ratified in the Parliament.

To his credit, Modi persuaded the [BJP](#) units in Assam and Bengal to stop opposing the agreement and got it ratified by the Parliament. He was also quick to accept an award of the international tribunal on the maritime boundary dispute with Dhaka. It was certainly possible to quibble over the technical details of an award that went largely in favour of Bangladesh.

Contrast this with Modi's difficulties with Nepal, the world's only Hindu nation that Modi likes to call "devabhumi" — the land of the gods. Yet, Modi's tenure saw the tensions between the two countries spike.

There is no doubt that most countries love to demonstrate solidarity with other states and peoples on the basis of shared political values, common religious faith or ethnic kinship. Yet, this empathy is more often than not discarded when a government has to choose between national interest and external solidarity. There is no better example than Pakistan's muted voice on China's current controversial treatment of the Muslim population in the Xinjiang province. For Islamabad, the logic of strategic partnership with Beijing is far more compelling than the declared commitment to take up Muslim causes around the world.

In the Middle East, the fear of Iran's expansionism and potential hegemony has driven Saudi Arabia and the UAE into political collaboration with the Jewish state of Israel. Much in the manner that communist ideology was not strong enough to bind Soviet Union and China in the 1960s and 1970s, religion has never been a sticky enough glue for Muslim majority nations.

While the proposition that national interest trumps all else appears self-evident, it was not easy for Independent India to operate on that premise. The partition of the Subcontinent and Pakistan's claim to speak in the name of Islam and its relentless efforts to mobilise the Islamic world in its favour on disputes with India complicated Indian diplomacy. It has been a rather long learning curve for Delhi to separate presumed transcendental religious solidarity and the logic of national self-interest in engaging the Middle East.

Complicating the Pakistan factor outside has been Delhi's concern about the reaction of its large Muslim population at home on foreign policy issues, especially those relating to the Middle East. The idea that India's relationship with Israel or the United States matters more to the Indian Muslims than securing their rights as citizens has always been a political myth of Lutyens' Delhi.

In the end, what matters in foreign policy is not the colour of national ideology or the flag of its faith. Internal coherence and the capacity for practical give and take are the factors that count. Diversity, along multiple axes, has been India's greatest structural vulnerability. Anything that deepens those faultlines will inevitably undermine, over the longer term, Delhi's ability to effectively engage the world.

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