

INDIA'S GEOPOLITICAL INTERESTS ARE IN CLOSE ALIGNMENT WITH MODERATE ARAB CENTRE

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India's Foreign Policy evolution and changes

The geopolitical realignment in the Middle East, marked by last week's agreement on the normalisation of relations between the United Arab Emirates and Israel, intersects with the equally significant reorientation of the Subcontinent's relationship with the region. As Pakistan rediscovers its tradition of aligning with non-Arab powers, India must renew its defence of Arab sovereignty.

If India welcomed the decision by Abu Dhabi and Tel Aviv, Pakistan was ambivalent and merely "noted" the move and its foreign office pointed to the "far-reaching" (negative) implications. On the face of it, the difference in the Indian and Pakistani statements can be explained by the fact that Delhi has diplomatic ties with Israel and Islamabad does not. But there is a lot more to this story.

Under Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#), the engagement with the Arab Gulf has become deeper. The last six years have also coincided with a significant deterioration of Pakistan's relations with the region, especially with the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Pakistan has been angry with UAE's invitation to India to address the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation in early 2019 and the reluctance of Saudi Arabia to convene a meeting to condemn Indian actions in Kashmir last August. Pakistan's foreign minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi threatened earlier this month to convene a meeting of foreign ministers of Islamic nations, outside of the OIC, to attack India's Kashmir policy. As an angry Saudi Arabia called back part of its generous recent loan to Pakistan and threatened to suspend the credit facility for oil purchases, army chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa rushed in to pick up the pieces. He is in Riyadh this week to smooth things over.

Opinion | [For India, costs of neglecting new Arabian business are far higher than a lost railway contract in Iran](#)

Some in Pakistan dismiss the remarks as intemperate and attribute it to Qureshi's well-known habit of grandstanding. The problem appears deeper. It might be recalled that Prime Minister [Imran Khan](#) was all set to attend last December's meeting of the Islamic leaders called by the then Prime Minister of Malaysia, Mahathir Mohamad and backed by the Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Khan pulled out only at the last minute amidst reported pressure from Saudi Arabia.

Here is the essence of the emerging contradiction between Saudi Arabia and the UAE on the one hand and Pakistan on the other. Saudis and Emiratis see sharpening existential threats to their kingdoms from both the Sunni Muslim brotherhood backed by Turkey and Shiite Iran's regional expansionism. On the other hand, Imran Khan appears to be dreaming of a new regional alliance with Turkey and Iran. Pakistan is also betting that a rising [China](#) and an assertive Russia will both support this new geopolitical formation as part of their own efforts to oust America from the Middle East.

The idea of such an alliance was publicly articulated by Iran's ambassador to Pakistan earlier this year and found much political resonance in Islamabad. On the face of it, the idea runs counter to Delhi's conventional wisdom that Pakistan and Gulf Arabs are joined at the hip. But the idea of a non-Arab alliance, backed by outside powers, has some lineage in Pakistan's

foreign policy. Pakistan enthusiastically embraced the Baghdad Pact that the British stitched together with Iran, Iraq and Turkey in 1955.

Editorial | [The Chabahar project is important for India's regional goals, and for its relations with Iran](#)

The Pact had to be renamed CENTO (Central Treaty Organisation) once Iraq, the only Arab member, walked out in 1958. Turkey, Iran and Pakistan formed an economic adjunct to the CENTO called the RCD (Regional Cooperation for Development). Both were wound up in 1979 soon after Iran's Islamic Revolution.

But it was not easy to kill the idea of a non-Arab alliance. Iran, Turkey and Pakistan gathered again to form the Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO) in 1985 and after the collapse of the Soviet Union, they brought in the newly independent Central Asian Republics.

For Turkey and Iran, the new non-Arab alliance backed by Russia and China is an instrument to advance their role in the Arab world at the expense of the Saudis. Erdogan dreams of restoring the Ottoman domination over the Arab world. The Muslim Brotherhood is its chosen instrument. Iran, which wants to wrest the mantle of Islamic leadership from Saudi Arabia, leverages the Shia population across the Arab states. Both Turkey and Iran now intervene with impunity in the internal affairs of the Arab world. Two other states have joined this Great Game. Malaysia's Mahathir fancied himself as a leader of the Islamic world. Arab Qatar, which is locked in a fraternal fight with the Saudis and the Emiratis, wants to carve out an outsized role for itself in the Middle East.

It is no secret that Russians would like to bring the US down a notch or two in the Middle East. Beijing will be happy to let the Russians, Turks, and Iranians be the anti-American vanguard, while consolidating China's economic influence in the region. But why does Islamabad want to join the alliance against Saudi Arabia and the UAE that have lent so much economic assistance to Pakistan over the decades.

Opinion | [India should monitor ties between China and Iran, but must guard against hasty conclusions](#)

Islamabad is probably betting that America is on its way out of the Middle East, and that its all-weather strategic partnership with a rising China would give Pakistan new leverage in the changing Middle East. In the interim, the threat to align with Turkey and Iran serves as an instrument to put pressure on the Saudis and Emiratis. Whatever might be the finesse that General Bajwa might come up with, Delhi must go back to the deepest source of regional policy — unflinching support for Arab sovereignty. That, in turn, expresses itself in five principles.

First, resist the temptation of telling the Arabs what is good for them. Support their efforts to reconcile with non-Arab neighbours, including Israel, Turkey and Iran. Second, oppose foreign interventions in the Arab world. In the past, those came from the West and Israel. Today, most Arabs see the greatest threat to their security from Turkish and Iranian interventions. Third, extend support to Arab economic integration, intra-Arab political reconciliation and the strengthening of regional institutions.

Fourth, recognise that India's geopolitical interests are in close alignment with those in the moderate Arab Centre — including Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Oman. Fifth, India can't be passive amidst the unfolding geopolitical realignment in West Asia. Some members of the incipient alliance — Turkey, Malaysia and China — have been the most vocal in challenging India's territorial sovereignty in Kashmir. The Qatar-based Al Jazeera spews more poison

against India than Pakistani media outlets. Standing up for Arab sovereignty and opposing the forces of regional destabilisation must be at the very heart of India's new engagement with the Middle East.

This article first appeared in the print edition on August 18, 2020 under the title 'India, Pakistan and Arab sovereignty'. The writer is Director, Institute of South Asian Studies, National University of Singapore and contributing editor on international affairs for [The Indian Express](#)

Opinion | [Ebrahim Alkazi's legacy bears testimony to cultural links between Saudi Arabia, India](#)

The Indian Express is now on Telegram. Click [here to join our channel \(@indianexpress\)](#) and stay updated with the latest headlines

END

Downloaded from [crackIAS.com](#)

© **Zuccess App** by crackIAS.com