

As India seeks to pursue a multi-dimensional engagement with West Asia, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's latest visit to the region has merely underscored its growing salience in the Indian foreign policy matrix. While much focus is often given to India's 'Act East' policy, India's 'Look West' policy too is evolving rapidly. This is Mr. Modi's fifth visit to West Asia in the last three and a half years and sustained high-level engagements have ensured that India's voice is becoming an important one in a region that is witnessing major power rivalries playing out.

Mr. Modi's Palestine visit — and the first visit by an Indian Prime Minister — coming just weeks after Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's high profile visit to India, has been being looked at with significant interest. Underlining India's credentials as a "very respected country in the international arena", Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas had called for a potential Indian role in the West Asian peace process. "We believe in the importance of a possible Indian role... to reach a final agreement based on international consensus and resolutions," he had suggested before Mr. Modi's visit, but the Prime Minister decided to steer clear of this as the complexities of the region were evident in the very manner of his landing at the Palestinian Authority's presidential headquarters in Ramallah.

In line with New Delhi's policy of trying to build capacity of Palestine, India signed six agreements worth around \$50 million with the Palestinian Authority that include setting up of a super speciality hospital in Beit Sahur, a centre for empowering women, procurement of equipment and machinery for the National Printing Press and significant investment in the education section. Mr. Abbas also conferred the 'Grand Collar of the State of Palestine' on Mr. Modi in recognition of his key contribution in promoting ties between India and Palestine. Though Mr. Modi said, "India hopes for Palestine to soon emerge a sovereign and independent country in a peaceful atmosphere", he dropped any mention of a "united" and "viable" Palestine in his remarks, in a departure from past practice. His shift is as much about changing realities on the ground as it is about New Delhi's evolving priorities.

India's robust engagements with the Arab Gulf states are a part of this dynamic, with Mr. Modi visiting the United Arab Emirates (UAE) for the second time in the last three years. Trade and economic ties are becoming central to the India-UAE relationship. A landmark pact awarding a consortium of Indian oil companies a 10% stake in offshore oil concession will be the first Indian investment in the UAE's upstream oil sector, transforming a traditional buyer-seller relationship into a long-term investor relationship with stakes in each other's strategic sectors. There was also an MoU aimed at institutionalising the collaborative administration of contractual employment of Indian workers. In their joint statement, the two countries "reiterated their condemnation for efforts, including by states, to use religion to justify, support and sponsor terrorism against other countries, or to use terrorism as instrument of state policy." There is also growing convergence between the two countries on tackling terrorism.

Oman has been a long-standing partner of India in West Asia, where Indians constitute the largest expatriate community. With the Indian Ocean becoming a priority focus area for New Delhi, Oman's significance is likely to grow. China's expanding footprint in the Indian Ocean Region has alerted India to the possibility of strengthening security ties with littoral states. India is likely to step up its military presence in Oman. Naval cooperation has already been gaining momentum with Muscat giving berthing rights to Indian naval vessels to fight piracy in the Gulf of Aden. Regular naval exercises have now become the norm.

India and Oman have not only made military cooperation more expansive during the Modi visit but also made an attempt to take the relationship to other domains: by enhancing cooperation in the field of health, tourism and peaceful uses of outer space.

Given the nature of West Asian polities, with sultans and monarchs still holding sway, the Prime Minister's personal diplomacy has indeed had a significant impact in galvanising bilateral relations. But bureaucratic inertia in New Delhi continues to hamper India's outreach. India's engagement with West Asia should now focus on delivering on its commitments and strengthening its presence as an economic and security partner. This will be crucial as traditional powers such as the U.S. and Russia are jostling militarily, even as America's stakes in the region decline by the day. China and India, as two emerging powers, are yet to articulate a clear road map for the region. While India is still stuck in the age-old debates of Israel-Arab rivalry, West Asia has moved on. Growing rivalry between the Sunni Arabs and Shia Iran is reshaping old relationships and India will have to be more pragmatic in its approach towards the region. The Prime Minister's visit has underlined this new reality for India.

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