

LOOKING AT THE LARGER PICTURE

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

Foreign policy decisions should not be made in a huff. However, India's recent decision to put off Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Turkey scheduled for later this year contradicts this fundamental principle of policymaking. Apparently, New Delhi decided to do so to express its displeasure over Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's United Nations General Assembly speech in September in which he criticised the Indian government's move to remove the special status accorded to Jammu and Kashmir by diluting Article 370.

This decision is not only a sign of knee-jerk diplomacy but also demonstrates a lack of familiarity with Turkey's historical record on Kashmir. Turkey has traditionally had close relations with Pakistan going back to their common membership of the Central Treaty Organization and the Regional Cooperation for Development. Ankara has almost always endorsed Pakistan's position on Kashmir. Both are also members of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, which in its resolutions has traditionally supported Pakistan on this issue. Furthermore, Turkey has not been alone in criticising the Indian government's move. It should also be noted that as its economic relations with India had grown, Turkey had moderated its support for Pakistan until New Delhi's move in Jammu and Kashmir.

New Delhi should learn to isolate contentious issues and not let them dictate the overall tenor of bilateral relations especially in the case of the two pivotal powers in West Asia — Turkey and Iran. The Arab world is in a shambles. Several Arab states have either failed or are in chaos with governments only in tenuous control of their territories. Even the largest of them, Egypt, has been unable to dig itself out of the morass it has landed in following the abortive Arab Spring and the return of a military dictatorship harsher than the Mubarak regime. In fact, Egypt had abnegated its leadership role in the Arab world decades ago and has been dependent on American aid and sustenance to keep itself afloat.

Saudi Arabia has turned out to be a colossus with feet of clay. While it sits atop a huge reservoir of exportable oil, its antediluvian political system is demonstrating increasing fragility. Until a few years ago it showed some semblance of stability because its political system was underpinned by a consensus within the extended ruling family. The regime's base has radically narrowed with the ascension of Mohammad bin Salman, who has concentrated political power in his hands. He subsequently arrested and humiliated other members of the House of Saud, thus alienating much of the rest of the Saudi clan. His high-handed policies towards the erstwhile ruling elite and his increasingly adventurist foreign policy, as in Yemen, which the Saudi economy and military are unable to sustain, has increasingly discredited the personalised character of his rule. One should not be surprised if, sooner rather than later, a coup supported by several princes takes place in Saudi Arabia, putting an end to the incumbent's despotic rule and possibly plunging the kingdom into chaos.

Riyadh's response to the latest Iranian-supported attack on its oil facilities clearly showed the kingdom's complete dependence on the U.S. When U.S. President Trump refused to oblige, Crown Prince Salman pleaded with the Iraqi and Pakistani Prime Ministers to mediate between Riyadh and Tehran to prevent a repetition of such incidents.

This leaves Turkey and Iran, in addition to Israel, as the only serious players in West Asia. Both Ankara and Tehran have the technological capacity to attain nuclear weapons capability that will add to their clout in the region. It will be unwise for India to alienate one or both in a pique over isolated incidents. Such incidents ought to be quarantined so as not to affect India's overall

relationship with the two pivotal powers in the region.

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