



## India and the World

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### **India balances partnerships and interests as war erupts in West Asia**

New Delhi has made far-reaching diplomatic investments over the last ten years in the region referred to in India as West Asia. Prime Minister Modi has visited the United Arab Emirates six times since 2014 and Saudi Arabia twice – and India has also hosted Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman for two state visits. India has strategic partnerships with both Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the latter with whom India has also signed an comprehensive economic partnership agreement that opens up investment and free trade. Modi was, in addition, the first Indian PM ever to visit Israel, back in 2017. New Delhi's high-level interactions with Teheran, on the other hand, are less frequent today than before, and economic cooperation has plateaued.

Indian diplomatic and commercial activities in West Asia predated but have increasingly been enhanced by the United States' facilitation of engagements between select members of the Gulf Cooperation Council and Israel. Various agreements instrumental in deepening Indian engagement in the region include: The US-brokered Abraham Accords involving Bahrain, Israel, Morocco, Sudan, and the UAE; the minilateral India-Israel-UAE-US grouping (I2U2); and the India-Middle East-Europe-Economic Corridor (IMEEC). India's cooperation with the region is now largely centered on connectivity in various forms, diasporas, energy, and export- and import-oriented defence industry initiatives. Israel's rise as a trusted defence partner to India – it now ranks as India's third-largest supplier – is remarkable given that the two countries established full diplomatic relations only in 1992. There are archival materials that show, however, that Israel sent India ammunition during the 1971 Bangladesh War, even though the two countries did not yet have diplomatic relations.

As India's regional footprint is enlarged, New Delhi's response to the hostilities that erupted after Hamas attack on Israel on October 7 will be followed closely by regional and global partners alike. New Delhi now has strategic interests in a geography where political distrust between actors runs deep even as their economic future is becoming increasingly interconnected. Yet India's diplomatic signaling regarding the war and its consequences has an audience beyond the region. Given the strong sentiments that exist in many parts of the post-colonial world with regards to the question of Palestine's future, India's positioning will also be watched closely in the wider so-called Global South.

Given the many different interests and partnership in West Asia India must now relate to and to some extent balance, New Delhi's messaging during the evolving situation has been multilayered. In the immediate aftermath of Hamas attack on Israel, India supported Israel's right to defend itself against terrorism. New Delhi connected its support for Israel to condemnations of acts of terrorism in general in consistency with India's ongoing attempts to mobilise international support for measures against terrorism. However, as the situation in Gaza deteriorated following Israel's invasion, New Delhi began to stress India's backing of a peaceful resolution to the Palestinian question and support for a two-state solution. While India along with, for example, most Nordic countries, abstained from a vote in the UN General Assembly on October 26 that called for a humanitarian truce without condemning Hamas, New Delhi has since then called for de-escalation, encouraged humanitarian pauses, and sent medical aid and disaster relief materials for Gaza via the El-Arish Airport in Egypt.

Adding to the layers of supporting Israel's right to respond while connecting back to India's established position on a negotiated settlement for Palestine, New Delhi must also relate to the fact that it now has stakes in the economic interconnected future of the region. New Delhi's thinking currently seems to be that, if contained to Gaza, the war will complicate yet not derail the underlying regional geoeconomic logic of further integration of the GCC, and between select Gulf countries and Israel. A continued or even widened conflict, however, would obviously present long term challenges to future regional and interregional cooperation.

India has sought to balance its counter-terror intelligence partnerships and its economic interests in the Gulf with its defence and security relationship with Israel. This balancing act will be complicated if the Gulf states are forced to take a stronger stance against the Israeli establishment than they have so far taken during the Hamas war. It would also rule out the possibility of large-scale connectivity partnerships that run through Israel to the Mediterranean. In this context, it will be necessary to watch if IMEEC implementation timelines are met, and if the investment needed – for example, in railway interconnections in Jordan and northern Saudi Arabia – actually begins to flow. New Delhi conceptualised IMEEC partly as a replacement for its earlier plan for a land route to Europe: a “north-south corridor” via Iran and the Russian Federation. Another alternative being pressed on New Delhi is Turkey's plan for a land corridor from a port in Iraq's Basra Province to Istanbul. A loss of the “peace dividend” in West Asia might cause India to look again at these alternatives.



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