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INDIA'S STRATEGIC AUTONOMY IN A TURBULENT WEST ASIA: ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF THE ISRAEL–IRAN CONFLICT ON INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY AND THE GLOBAL SOUTH

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ABSTRACT

The ongoing Israel–Iran conflict has emerged as a significant geopolitical challenge with far-reaching implications for regional stability, global energy markets, and international security. As a major stakeholder in West Asia, India faces the complex task of safeguarding its strategic, economic, and diplomatic interests while maintaining balanced relations with Israel, Iran, the Gulf states, and the United States. Against this backdrop, the present study examines the impact of the Israel–Iran conflict on India's foreign policy and evaluates its implications for the Global South through the lens of strategic autonomy. The study adopts a qualitative and analytical approach based on secondary sources, including government reports, policy documents, scholarly literature, and contemporary geopolitical analyses. Drawing upon the concepts of Strategic Autonomy and Neoclassical Realism, the article analyzes India's diplomatic responses, energy security concerns, trade interests, and regional strategic calculations.

The study argues that the conflict poses significant challenges to India's energy security, economic stability, and regional connectivity initiatives. At the same time, it highlights India's efforts to pursue a balanced and pragmatic foreign policy that avoids alignment with competing regional blocs. The article further contends that prolonged instability in West Asia could adversely affect several Global South countries through rising energy costs, supply-chain disruptions, and economic uncertainty.

The study concludes that India's policy of strategic autonomy remains central to navigating the evolving geopolitical landscape of West Asia. Strengthening diplomatic engagement, diversifying energy sources, and promoting multilateral cooperation will be critical for protecting India's interests and enhancing its leadership role within the Global South.

Keywords: Strategic Autonomy, India's Foreign Policy, Israel–Iran Conflict, West Asia, Global South, Energy Security, Neoclassical Realism.

1. INTRODUCTION

West Asia occupies a crucial position in international politics due to its strategic location, vast energy resources, and significant role in global trade and security. Political instability in the region often has far-reaching consequences for international markets, energy supplies, and geopolitical stability. In recent years, the escalating tensions between Israel and Iran have emerged as a major challenge to regional peace and security, generating concerns about disruptions to maritime trade routes, energy markets, and broader geopolitical dynamics. For India, developments in West Asia are of considerable strategic importance. The region is a major source of India's energy imports and hosts a large Indian diaspora. India also maintains strong diplomatic and economic relations with key regional actors, including Israel, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. Consequently, any escalation of conflict in the region directly affects India's energy security, trade interests, and foreign policy priorities.

India's response to regional crises has largely been guided by the principle of strategic autonomy, which emphasizes independent decision-making and issue-based cooperation. This approach has enabled India to maintain balanced relations with multiple actors despite competing geopolitical interests. The ongoing Israel–Iran conflict therefore represents a significant test of India's ability to protect its national interests while preserving diplomatic flexibility.

The implications of the conflict extend beyond India and affect the broader Global South. Many developing countries remain highly dependent on energy imports from West Asia and are vulnerable to rising oil prices, supply-chain disruptions, and economic instability. These challenges have important consequences for economic growth, inflation management, and development planning across the developing world.

Against this backdrop, the present study examines the impact of the Israel–Iran conflict on India's foreign policy and its implications for the Global South. It seeks to analyze India's strategic response to regional instability and assess the broader geopolitical and economic consequences of the conflict in an increasingly multipolar international order.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The concept of strategic autonomy has attracted renewed scholarly attention in recent years. Malone (2011) argues that strategic autonomy remains a fundamental principle of India's foreign policy, enabling the country to pursue independent decision-making while engaging with multiple power centres. Rajagopalan (2020) further contends that strategic autonomy has evolved from its Cold War origins into a flexible framework suited to an increasingly multipolar world.

Studies on India's engagement with West Asia highlight the growing strategic importance of the region. Pant and Joshi (2017) observe that India's interests in West Asia extend beyond energy security to include trade, connectivity, defence cooperation, and diaspora welfare. More recently, Suri (2024) argues that initiatives such as the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) have significantly enhanced the strategic value of West Asia in India's foreign policy.

The Israel–Iran rivalry has been extensively examined in contemporary international relations literature. Ehteshami (2018) identifies the rivalry as a major source of instability in West Asia, influencing regional security dynamics and external interventions. According to Vaez and Sadjadpour (2023), recurring military confrontations and proxy conflicts between Israel and Iran have increased uncertainty in energy markets and heightened geopolitical risks across the region.

Recent scholarship has also focused on the impact of regional conflicts on developing countries. Acharya (2018) argues that emerging powers and developing nations are increasingly seeking greater strategic space within a changing international order. Similarly, Chatham House (2024) reports that geopolitical crises in West Asia disproportionately affect Global South countries through rising energy prices, inflationary pressures, and disruptions to global supply chains.

The literature on Global South diplomacy has expanded considerably following India's presidency of the G20. Mullen and Ganguly (2023) contend that India has positioned itself as an important voice of the Global South by advocating inclusive development, multilateral cooperation, and reforms in global governance institutions. However, scholars also note that sustaining such leadership requires India to effectively balance competing geopolitical interests.

Contemporary foreign policy analyses emphasize India's strategy of diplomatic balancing. Rej (2024) argues that India has successfully maintained relations with Israel, Iran, the Gulf states, Russia, and the United States through a policy of issue-based engagement. This approach is increasingly viewed as a practical manifestation of strategic autonomy in a multipolar international system.

Despite the growing literature on strategic autonomy, West Asian geopolitics, and Global South diplomacy, limited scholarly attention has been devoted to examining the ongoing Israel–Iran conflict as a contemporary test of India's strategic autonomy. The combined implications of the conflict for India's foreign policy, energy security, and Global South leadership remain insufficiently explored, thereby necessitating further academic inquiry.

3. RESEARCH GAP

Existing studies have extensively examined India's relations with Israel and Iran, strategic autonomy, and the geopolitical dynamics of West Asia. Similarly, a growing body of literature has analyzed energy security and India's expanding role within the Global South. However, relatively limited scholarly attention has been devoted to examining the ongoing Israel–Iran conflict as a contemporary test of India's strategic autonomy. Furthermore, most existing studies analyze the conflict primarily from a regional security perspective, with limited focus on its broader implications for India's foreign policy choices and the interests of the Global South. The interconnected dimensions of energy security, diplomatic balancing, economic stability, and Global South leadership remain insufficiently explored in an integrated framework.

Therefore, the present study seeks to fill this gap by examining how the Israel–Iran conflict influences India's foreign policy strategy and assessing its wider implications for developing countries within the Global South.

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

4.1 Strategic Autonomy

Strategic Autonomy has emerged as a central principle of India's foreign policy in the post-Cold War era. Rooted in the legacy of non-alignment, the concept refers to a state's ability to pursue independent foreign policy decisions without being constrained by formal alliances or external pressures. In contemporary international relations, strategic autonomy does not imply isolationism; rather, it enables states to engage with multiple actors while safeguarding national interests.

India's approach to West Asia reflects this principle. Over the years, India has cultivated strong diplomatic and economic relations with Israel, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates despite competing regional rivalries. The policy of strategic autonomy allows India to maintain balanced relations with these actors while avoiding alignment with any particular bloc. The ongoing Israel–Iran conflict presents a

critical test of this approach, as India seeks to protect its energy security, economic interests, and regional partnerships without compromising diplomatic flexibility.

From the perspective of strategic autonomy, India's response to the conflict can be understood as an effort to balance competing interests through dialogue, diplomatic engagement, and issue-based cooperation. The concept therefore provides a useful framework for analyzing India's foreign policy choices in a complex regional environment.

4.2 Neoclassical Realism

Neoclassical Realism is a contemporary theory of international relations that explains foreign policy by combining systemic pressures with domestic factors. Unlike classical realism, which focuses primarily on power and national interest, neoclassical realism argues that state responses to external challenges are influenced by leadership perceptions, domestic political considerations, economic capabilities, and strategic priorities.

The theory is particularly relevant for understanding India's response to the Israel–Iran conflict. While the regional balance of power and security concerns create external pressures, India's foreign policy decisions are also shaped by domestic energy requirements, economic interests, diaspora considerations, and broader geopolitical objectives. These internal and external factors collectively influence India's diplomatic behaviour.

Neoclassical Realism further suggests that states pursue pragmatic policies designed to maximize national interests under changing international conditions. India's efforts to maintain relations with Israel, Iran, the Gulf states, and major global powers simultaneously reflect such pragmatic calculations. The theory therefore helps explain how India seeks to navigate regional instability while preserving strategic autonomy and advancing its long-term interests.

Together, Strategic Autonomy and Neoclassical Realism provide an appropriate analytical framework for examining India's foreign policy response to the Israel–Iran conflict and its implications for the Global South.

5. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The present study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. How does the Israel–Iran conflict affect India's strategic interests in West Asia?
2. What challenges does the conflict pose to India's policy of strategic autonomy?
3. What are the implications of the conflict for India's energy security, trade, and regional diplomacy?
4. How does the conflict affect the economic and strategic interests of the Global South?
5. What policy options are available to India for balancing regional stability, national interests, and Global South leadership?

METHODOLOGY

The present study adopts a qualitative and analytical research design to examine the impact of the Israel–Iran conflict on India's foreign policy and its implications for the Global South. The study is primarily based on secondary sources of data, including scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports, government publications, official statements, reports of international organizations, and contemporary analyses from reputed research institutions.

The study employs a descriptive and interpretative approach to analyze the evolving geopolitical dynamics of West Asia and their implications for India. Particular attention is given to issues relating to strategic autonomy, energy security, diplomatic balancing, regional stability, and Global South cooperation. The theoretical perspectives of Strategic Autonomy and Neoclassical Realism are utilized as analytical frameworks to interpret India's foreign policy responses to the conflict.

The period of analysis covers recent developments in the Israel–Iran conflict and their geopolitical consequences, with a focus on contemporary developments from 2023 to 2026. The study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities confronting India in an increasingly complex and multipolar international environment.

7. THE ISRAEL–IRAN CONFLICT: BACKGROUND AND CONTEMPORARY DYNAMICS

The rivalry between Israel and Iran is one of the most significant sources of instability in contemporary West Asian politics. Although the two countries maintained cordial relations before the 1979 Iranian Revolution, their relationship deteriorated significantly thereafter due to ideological, political, and strategic differences. Iran's opposition to Israel and its support for anti-Israel groups have contributed to a prolonged period of hostility between the two states.

Over the years, the conflict has extended beyond direct diplomatic confrontation and has increasingly involved proxy actors, cyber operations, intelligence activities, and regional security competition. Israel views Iran's nuclear programme and regional influence as major security concerns, while Iran perceives Israel's military capabilities and strategic alliances as threats to its national interests. Recent escalations have intensified regional tensions and raised concerns regarding the possibility of a wider conflict involving external powers. The conflict has significant implications for maritime security, international trade routes, and global energy markets, particularly given the strategic importance of the Strait of Hormuz and other critical transit corridors in the region.

The growing instability has generated concerns among major powers and developing countries alike. Rising geopolitical tensions have contributed to volatility in energy prices, disruptions in supply chains, and increased uncertainty in international markets. These developments have important consequences not only for West Asia but also for countries that depend heavily on the region for energy supplies and economic engagement.

Against this backdrop, the Israel–Iran conflict has emerged as a critical geopolitical challenge with implications extending far beyond the Middle East. The evolving regional environment necessitates careful diplomatic responses from countries such as India, which maintain significant political, economic, and strategic interests in the region.

8. IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA

8.1 Energy Security

Energy security remains one of India's foremost concerns in the context of the Israel–Iran conflict. India imports a significant portion of its crude oil requirements from West Asia, making regional stability crucial for its energy needs. Any escalation of hostilities in the region can disrupt energy supplies, increase transportation costs, and contribute to volatility in global oil prices. Rising energy prices may adversely affect India's economic growth, inflation management, and fiscal stability. Consequently, the conflict highlights the importance of diversifying energy sources and strengthening strategic petroleum reserves to reduce vulnerability to external shocks.

8.2 Trade and Connectivity

The Israel–Iran conflict also poses challenges to India's trade and connectivity interests in West Asia. The region serves as an important corridor for India's trade with Europe, Africa, and other international markets. Escalating tensions can disrupt maritime transportation routes and increase logistical costs. Furthermore, regional instability may affect major connectivity initiatives involving India, including trade corridors and infrastructure projects aimed at enhancing economic integration. Sustained instability could therefore undermine India's efforts to expand regional economic cooperation and connectivity.

8.3 Indian Diaspora and Security Concerns

West Asia hosts one of the largest overseas Indian communities, contributing significantly to remittances and economic engagement. Any deterioration in regional security conditions may create risks for the safety and welfare of Indian citizens residing in the region. Large-scale conflict could necessitate evacuation operations and impose additional diplomatic and logistical challenges for the Government of India. Protecting the interests of the Indian diaspora remains an important component of India's foreign policy in West Asia.

8.4 Diplomatic Balancing and Strategic Interests

The conflict presents a complex diplomatic challenge for India. Over the years, India has developed strong relations with Israel in areas such as defence, technology, and innovation, while simultaneously maintaining constructive engagement with Iran in matters relating to energy security, connectivity, and regional stability. In addition, India enjoys close partnerships with major Gulf countries and the United States. Balancing these diverse relationships requires a careful and pragmatic diplomatic approach.

India's response to the conflict has largely reflected its commitment to strategic autonomy. Rather than aligning with any particular side, India has emphasized dialogue, de-escalation, and peaceful resolution of disputes. This approach enables India to safeguard its national interests while preserving constructive relations with multiple regional actors.

Overall, the Israel–Iran conflict poses significant economic, strategic, and diplomatic challenges for India. At the same time, it underscores the continuing relevance of strategic autonomy as a guiding principle of Indian foreign policy in an increasingly uncertain international environment.

9. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE GLOBAL SOUTH

The Israel–Iran conflict has implications that extend beyond West Asia and directly affect many countries of the Global South. Most developing nations depend heavily on imported energy and are therefore highly vulnerable to fluctuations in global oil and gas prices. Any disruption in energy supplies or increase in transportation costs can place additional pressure on developing economies already facing fiscal and developmental challenges.

One of the most immediate consequences of the conflict is the rise in energy prices. Higher fuel costs often contribute to inflation, increase production expenses, and reduce government capacity to invest in social welfare and development programmes. For many countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, such economic pressures can adversely affect growth and poverty reduction efforts.

The conflict also has implications for global trade and supply chains. Instability in key maritime routes and transportation corridors may disrupt the movement of goods and increase logistical costs. Developing

countries that rely on international trade for economic growth are particularly vulnerable to such disruptions.

From a geopolitical perspective, the conflict highlights the challenges faced by Global South countries in navigating an increasingly complex international environment. Many developing nations seek to avoid alignment with competing power blocs while protecting their national interests. In this regard, India's policy of strategic autonomy offers an important example of diplomatic balancing and pragmatic engagement.

Furthermore, the conflict underscores the need for greater cooperation among Global South countries in areas such as energy security, economic resilience, and multilateral diplomacy. Strengthening South-South cooperation can help developing nations collectively address the challenges arising from regional conflicts and global uncertainties.

Overall, the Israel–Iran conflict serves as a reminder that geopolitical instability in one region can have significant economic and strategic consequences for developing countries worldwide. It also reinforces the importance of cooperative approaches to ensuring stability, sustainable development, and inclusive global governance.

10. INDIA'S STRATEGIC RESPONSE

10.1 Diplomatic Balancing

India's response to the Israel–Iran conflict has been characterized by diplomatic balancing and strategic restraint. Rather than aligning with any particular side, India has emphasized dialogue, de-escalation, and peaceful resolution of disputes. This approach enables India to maintain constructive relations with Israel, Iran, the Gulf states, and major global powers while safeguarding its national interests.

10.2 Preserving Strategic Autonomy

The conflict highlights the continued relevance of strategic autonomy in Indian foreign policy. By avoiding exclusive alignment with competing regional blocs, India retains the flexibility to pursue independent decisions based on national interests. Strategic autonomy allows India to engage with diverse partners and respond effectively to changing geopolitical circumstances.

10.3 Strengthening Energy and Economic Resilience

The uncertainty created by the conflict underscores the importance of reducing dependence on any single region for energy supplies. India can enhance its energy security through diversification of import sources, expansion of renewable energy initiatives, and strengthening of strategic petroleum reserves. Such measures would reduce vulnerability to external shocks and improve long-term economic resilience.

10.4 Enhancing Multilateral Engagement

India can utilize regional and multilateral forums to promote dialogue, conflict resolution, and cooperative security arrangements. Active engagement through organizations such as the United Nations, G20, BRICS, and other international platforms can strengthen India's role as a responsible stakeholder in global affairs. Such engagement also reinforces India's position as a leading voice of the Global South.

10.5 Future Policy Options

In the evolving geopolitical environment, India must continue to pursue a balanced and pragmatic foreign policy. Strengthening diplomatic engagement with all stakeholders, promoting regional stability, protecting diaspora interests, and enhancing economic resilience should remain key priorities. A combination of strategic autonomy, diplomatic flexibility, and multilateral cooperation will enable India to effectively navigate the challenges arising from regional conflicts.

Overall, India's response to the Israel–Iran conflict reflects a careful balance between national interests and international responsibilities. The policy of strategic autonomy remains a valuable framework for managing geopolitical uncertainties while advancing India's long-term strategic objectives.

11. CONCLUSION

The Israel–Iran conflict represents one of the most significant geopolitical challenges confronting West Asia and the wider international community. Beyond its regional dimensions, the conflict has important implications for global energy markets, trade routes, economic stability, and international security. As a country with substantial strategic, economic, and diplomatic interests in West Asia, India faces the complex task of safeguarding its national interests while maintaining balanced relations with multiple regional actors.

The study demonstrates that the conflict poses significant challenges to India's energy security, trade and connectivity initiatives, diaspora welfare, and broader foreign policy objectives. At the same time, the conflict highlights the importance of strategic autonomy as a guiding principle of Indian foreign policy. By maintaining diplomatic flexibility and avoiding exclusive alignment with competing regional blocs, India has sought to balance its relations with Israel, Iran, the Gulf states, and major global powers.

The analysis further reveals that the consequences of the conflict extend beyond India and affect the broader Global South. Rising energy prices, supply-chain disruptions, inflationary pressures, and economic uncertainty pose serious challenges for developing countries. In this context, greater cooperation among Global South nations and stronger multilateral engagement are essential for addressing common vulnerabilities.

The study concludes that India's policy of strategic autonomy remains well suited to navigating the complexities of an evolving multipolar world. Strengthening energy diversification, enhancing economic resilience, promoting diplomatic engagement, and supporting peaceful conflict resolution will be crucial for protecting India's interests and reinforcing its leadership role within the Global South. As geopolitical competition intensifies, India's ability to combine strategic flexibility with principled diplomacy will remain a key determinant of its regional and global influence.

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