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## Link West Policy of India towards Peace and Development

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The Link West approach of India is now its key strategy to win Middle East and the Central Asia<sup>1</sup>. Indian foreign policy makers are in the view that India's interest in near West countries are intimately linked with its energy, security, trade, employment for Indians and remittances, which may bring peace and development in the region.

In an attempt to strengthen ties with India's near west neighbours, Indian government proposed its policy to compliment his Act East Policy. Although it is called Link West which gives it a bigger geographical connotation, it is mainly to focus on the West Asia<sup>2</sup>.

India's justifications for greater involvement with the Middle East and Central Asia stem from the fact that it already has close links with countries in that area. It is already involved with several projects in the region, such as the Farkhor Air Base in Tajikistan and the Chabahar Port facility in Iran. The one phase of Chabahar Port has already been operational. The port is likely to ramp up trade between India, Afghanistan and Iran in the wake of Pakistan denying transit access to New Delhi. The Chabahar Project located on the Gulf of Oman, only 85 km from China's Gawadar Port in Pakistan, is important for India as it will allow it to buy pass Pakistan in accessing Afghanistan and Central Asia.

Moreover, India is also in the good position of being trusted by all the major factions in the Middle East. At the same time, it has good relation with Iran, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Iraq and the Gulf States. There are particularly large Indian community in the Gulf States and the development of UAE as a major financial and cultural centre for South Asian is another factor that India should consider leveraging as it reaches out to the region. Keeping these facts in view, India should focus its effort and energies to its West, where it can still become a substantial player, rather than the East, where it will likely remain a minor player. It should continue its close relation with the East, but its strategic horizons dictate that it should focus on the Indian Ocean and the Middle East –Central Asia region.

Our main objective is to understand the implications of the Link West Policy of Prime Minister Narendra Modi led government in peace and development perspective in the region. As the NDA government is under great criticism at the domestic level for growing hatred among the various communities and specially atrocities on minorities and dalits. But India's policy on near west may have great impact to create peace in the region which may ultimately turn into development. To prove this hypothetical assumption, we have to understand that foreign policy is the international expression of a nation's most urgent aspiration. Aspiration is dynamic, evolving with a country's sense of itself and place in the world<sup>3</sup>. We should think over it seriously that if the present government is playing a negative role inside the country, its foreign policy may have some positive impact on the citizens of India in general and ultimately the majority community may realise the great importance of muslims in bringing development in the country. But the whole situation demands some pragmatic views of the Indian muslims in the era where national interest is the fundamental criteria for inter relationship among the different countries in the world.

**Political Scenario I.** Look at the scenario when Saudi Arabia can strengthen relation with Israel and allow his commercial flight to fly through his airspace<sup>4</sup> and the same time shutting the door for the people of Qatar. Why not India should have a good relation with Israel? Saudi Arabia and Israel have a shared view of the need to prevent Iran from securing a “Shiite crescent” across the region, he told the publication. “With President Trump there is an opportunity to build a new international coalition in the region. We need to carry out a large and inclusive strategic plan to stop Iranian danger. On the other hand the four Arab countries boycotted Qatar and added their more individuals including major group of Islamic Scholars to their terror blacklists. It should be recall that four Gulf countries cut ties with Qatar in June, accusing it of financing militants in Syria and allying with foe Iran<sup>5</sup>.”

**II.** It is amazing that Indian Muslims have a lot of problems at home, why they are so much emotional more than the Muslim countries on the issue of Jerusalem, Palestine or Rohingyas. Muslim constitute only 14.2 percent i.e., 172.2 million (2011 census) population in India, this may be more than the combined population of GCC, Iran and Iraq (171.3 million, as per World Bank report, 2016). But we should concentrate more on the grassroots domestic problems of the Muslims and their solution by empowering them from all respects. Before independence it may have justification that to save the Khilafat-e-Usmania of Turkey, even Muslim women of India at that time sold their jewellery for the cause, but the repetition of emotional policy doesn't suit today. Ofcourse we have right to equality, liberty as a fundamental rights, enshrined in the Indian Constitution and to demand for the protection of these rights should be the first priority. But so far as the international issues are concerned, this is the first and foremost **responsibility of the galaxy of 57 Muslim countries of the globe, or the world community or the UN along with India** to raise and protect the interest of the Muslims like others<sup>6</sup>. Indian Muslim should focus on their own problems and try to empower from all respects to save the interest of the Muslims as well as the country.

**III.** Only condemning the policy of the government cannot solve the problem within or outside. At this juncture where China is looking at for extending its \$57 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor to Afghanistan, as the China's plan was expressed by his foreign minister Yang Yi on December 27, 2017 during the talk with Salahuddin Rabbani, foreign minister of Afghanistan and Khawaja Asif of Pakistan at Beijing, the successful implementation of CPEC projects will serve as model for enhancing connectivity and cooperation through similar projects with neighbouring countries including Afghanistan ,Iran with Central and west Asia<sup>7</sup>. In this situation India has a great threat.

This may be China's strategy to counter the India's policy to develop Chabahar Port at Iran and inauguration of its first phase by Iranian President Hassan Rouhani on December 3, 2017. Minister of State Pon Radhakrishnan represented India at the inauguration of phase one of what is known as the Shahid Behisetti Port Chabahar . the minister also represented India in the second meeting of the India-Iran-Afghanistan ministerial level trilateral meeting on Chabahar Port development which is located on the Gulf of Oman, only 85km from China's Gawadar Port in Pakistan, is important for India at will allow to bypass Pakistan in accessing Afghanistan and Central Asia. The three sides agreed that an integrated development of connectivity infrastructure including ports, road and rail networks would open up greater opportunities for regional market access and contribute towards the economic integration and benefit of the three countries and their region. The port is likely to ramp up trade between India, Afghanistan and Iran in the wake of Pakistan denying transit access to New Delhi for trade with the two countries. This route will create alternative reliable access bypassing Pakistan<sup>8</sup>. This development shocked China and Pakistan. To counter India's dynamic and bold step China has a meeting with Pakistan and Afghanistan for extension of the CPEC to Afghanistan and also they have talk to Iran regarding this route.

**IV.** It should be recalled that the UPA government was voted against Iran in International Atomic Energy Agency and the present government is extending its cooperation to built Chabahar Port at Iran. Secondly, the most important points must be kept in mind that India voted against Israel in the United Nations on the Issue of Jerusalem. India's vote was a great disappointment for the Israel, these all policies and actions prove that every nation gives top priority to its national interest. The Indian Prime Minister first time visited Israel in July, 2017 and he had not a word to Palestine, which was condemn by many<sup>9</sup>. Now he has to visit Palestine too.

**V.** So far as the Middle East is concerned Prime Minister Narendra Modi has initiated many steps to strengthen bilateral relations. Modi was the first Indian Prime Minister to visit UAE in 35 years, a gap which is neither explicable nor excusable. This correction has helped make UAE an important strategic partner and a major investor in India. Even Saudi Arabia gave him its highest civilian awards. Equally it is impressive that India has maintained

relations across binaries. Better relation with UAE and Saudi Arabia have not come at the cost of traditional relations with Iran<sup>10</sup>.

**VI.** A 'Link West Policy' like India's famed 'Look East Policy' has often been spoken about, but there has not been a formal institutionalisation of the same.

This will need a concentrated focus – like the LEP – for the region, to formulate effective policies.

While trade is a significant component of this relationship, the essence of the LWP will be the multi-dimensionality of its character.

As much as India trades with the region, also important are the issues of security, culture, people-to-people linkages, and those of a wider geopolitical and geostrategic nature.

Some other factors which have great influence on India's tilt towards near west.

**Diaspora & Remittances:** The West Asian region is home to millions of non-resident Indians; and they were responsible for approximately half of the US\$79 billion worth of remittances that flowed into India in 2018 as per World Bank Report<sup>11</sup>.

However, the introduction of the Nitaqat laws in many Gulf countries has resulted in several thousands of these workers having to return to India.

While it is unfair to view the returnees as a liability, one cannot ignore the economic and social impact of this mass re-migration.

India is not prepared to assimilate all these people into its own economy just yet. Already, unemployment rates are high, and the economy is not doing well. Job creation will take a while, and until then, there will be some strain on the economy.

**Energy-** India, being a growing economy, is perpetually energy-hungry. West Asian nations are among the primary suppliers of oil and gas that keep the Indian economy running.

Stable and more improved relations between India and the region are key to securing and expanding on these sources.

**Projects** such as the Iran-Pakistan-India pipeline lay suspended due to several other reasons. However, proposed projects such as the Oman-India Pipeline, an undersea gas pipeline – that Iran too has expressed interest in – look promising. India's attempts at ensuring energy security therefore cannot bypass engagements with the region.

**Maritime security** - Be it trade or energy supply routes, or even national security, the significance of an effective maritime security infrastructure in the Indian Ocean – the maritime link connecting India with several of its key West Asian partners – is pivotal to ensuring safety, stability, and disaster-management for the region.

The Indian Ocean Region is a major geographical stretch through which a large chunk of the world's business is conducted.

Already, there is a constant threat of piracy in the western Indian Ocean. A concentrated policy will be needed to identify specific issues and areas of cooperation between India and West Asia, in order to ensure smooth and secure movement.

Furthermore, in recent times, there have been many debates on the concept of the 'Indo-Pacific' to boost connectivities between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. The two regions already have robust connectivities, but more can be done.

However, if this concept of the Indo-Pacific has to become a reality, there is a need for enhanced cooperation in various areas among the key players in each region, before connecting the regions.

Eventually, the LWP and the LEP can lay the foundations for the realisation of the 'Indo-Pacific'.

**National and regional security** - Any form of tumult in the West Asian region invariably has an impact on India and South Asia as a whole.

For strategic reasons, India seeks peace and political stability and security in the West Asian region – sentiments reciprocated by the countries of the region in their assessments towards West Asia as well as South Asia.

So far, India has been pragmatic in its policies towards the West Asian region –excellent examples of which are balancing its relationships with Palestine and Israel; and Saudi Arabia and Iran, among others.

However, there is more that needs to be done, and for that, there needs to be better, more polished and astute understanding of the region in our country – especially in the light of the impending US withdrawal from Afghanistan; the thawing in the US-Iran bilateral; the ongoing civil war in Syria and its implications; implementation of the Nitaqat policies in the Gulf countries; and the rising fundamentalism, especially in the franchisee-ing nature of terror networks, among others.

The essence of India's post independent foreign policy was conceptualised by our first Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. In the Constituent Assembly Debate on foreign policy he said **“Ultimately foreign policy is the outcome of economic policy**, and till that time, when India has properly evolved a economic policy, her foreign policy will be rather vague, rather inchoate”. Keeping in mind the Peninsula India surrounded by water on three sides, in March, 1958 Nehru Said “I Ponder over close links with the sea on how the sea has brought us together. From time immemorial the people of India have had very close connections with sea...” We cannot afford to be weak at sea... history has shown that whatever power controls the Indian Ocean has, in the first instance, India's sea bond trade at her mercy, and in the second India's very independent itself. This is the basic structure on which the fundamentals of our interaction with the Gulf/West Asian region is built upon.

### **This policy reveals in the following:**

**Trade** - The numbers on trade between India and the Gulf countries are impressive; with the UAE alone trade has hit the **\$50 billion** mark. The remittances sent by Indian labour migrants –**numbering 2.6 million in the UAE and more than 7 million in the Gulf have added to the economic relationship**. This relationship may be understood from the fact that the total value of trade with this region was more than \$5 billion in 1991 and \$12 billion in 2000<sup>12</sup>. This is \$120 billion in 2018-19<sup>13</sup>. But there are structural factors at play. Firstly, the desire of the US to cut down its global security role is timed with India's aspiration to play a greater role in the Indian Ocean. Secondly, the fall in the commodity prices the recent bump notwithstanding – has driven down the logic of diversification among oil-rich nation in west Asia. Thirdly, the rise of religious radicalism globally an India's ability to largely escape that ominous trend has underline the success of India's multi cultural social fabric. And lastly, in a world reeling under the long term negative effects of the financial crises, India is a remarkable anchor of stability as it continues to notch up high growth numbers.

**Investment**- India should consider itself as an attractive destination for investment of the Sovereign Wealth Funds owned by the GCC States. With Sovereign Wealth Funds of around US\$ 2.8 trillion (UAE US\$ 1,214.8 billion; Saudi Arabia US\$ 673.9 billion; Kuwait US\$ 592 billion; Qatar US\$ 256 billion; Bahrain US\$ 11.1 billion; Oman US\$ 6 billion – figures from the Sovereign Wealth Fund Institute); the GCC countries could be asked to participate in various initiatives of the Government of India as “Start Up India”, “Make in India”, “Smart City”, “Digital India” and “Clean India”. At the same time, the Government should convince its interlocutors of the attractiveness of the various steps taken by it to improve the Ease of Doing Business as also its efforts to simplify and rationalise existing rules and in relaxing FDI norms in key areas. Some apprehension had recently been expressed that due to the fall in oil prices, there had been a decrease in the inflow into the Sovereign Wealth Funds. India's policy reflected in the Aramco's proposed partnership with RIL and Saudi Arabia's plan to invest in India potentially worth US\$100 billion in the areas of energy, refinery, petro-chemicals, infrastructure, agriculture, minerals and mining<sup>14</sup>.

**Conclusion** - From this perspective we should not think that Modi has achieved this transformation singled handedly. It was during Manmohan Singh's tenure that King Abdullah Bin Abdul Aziz of Saudi Arabia was invited as the Republic Day chief guest, 2006. The Delhi declaration 2006 and Riyadh declaration 2010 tried to breathe life into the bilateral relationship. Atal Bihari Vajpayee hosted President Mohammad Khatami of Iran at the 2003 Republic Day, and it was during that visit that the plan for India's cooperation in building Chabahar Port in Iran first came up. And before all of them, P.V. Narshimha Rao has shattered the myth that India cannot open up to Israel without harming its relationship with Islamic countries in west Asia. These days New Delhi is building infrastructure in Iran while also sharing intelligence with Saudi Arabia. And while the UAE's cooperating with India in maritime security, Israel is selling arms to New Delhi. These all developments compelled me to think that Link West Policy of India may bring peace and accelerate development in this region.

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