

India and the Shifting Sands of the Gulf Region

C Raja Mohan and Nazneen Mohsina

India's External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj visited Qatar and Kuwait amid deepening internal divisions and changing international relations in the Gulf. India has been skilfully navigating the shifting political sand as its dependence on the Gulf for its energy needs, internal and external security and welfare of its diaspora grows. Nonetheless, India will need to develop capabilities to influence the political outcomes in the region and cope with the changing dynamics there.

The first ever visit by an Indian foreign minister to Qatar and Kuwait in late October 2018 came amidst rapidly shifting political sands of the Gulf. Sushma Swaraj's visit to Qatar and Kuwait [highlighted India's traditional concerns in the Gulf](#) – energy security and the welfare of the large Indian diaspora in the region. Her visit must also be seen as part of a new political effort to insulate India's relations with the Gulf from the deepening internal divisions and changing international relations of the region.

Independent India's foreign policy discourse has tended to frame the politics of the region in rather simplistic terms; that the Middle East is defined by two main contradictions – one between the imperialist West and the people of the Middle East, and the other between Israel and the Arabs. New Delhi's grand narrative could not accommodate the intra-Arab and intra-Muslim conflicts in the Middle East. When it was confronted with crises like the Iran-Iraq war and the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait in 1990s, Indian diplomacy was paralysed.

Today, India is a little more adept at coping with the conflicts in the region. India's growing dependence on the Gulf for oil, the size of its diaspora there and the region's impact on India's internal and external security have nudged New Delhi slowly, but certainly, towards greater pragmatism.

New Delhi is currently trying to cope with a number of conflicts across the region. These include a proxy war between a section of the Sunni Arab states and Iran that has enveloped Yemen, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq; the growing rivalry between Turkey and Saudi Arabia, the tensions between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, and the continuing struggle of the 35 million Kurds spread across the region for a homeland of their own.

Meanwhile, Russia has reinserted itself into the Middle East and has emerged as a key player in transforming the civil war in Syria. Having ensured the survival of the Bashar Hafez al-Assad government in Damascus, Moscow has taken the lead role in shaping political outcomes in Syria. This has put Moscow at odds with Washington's traditional dominance over the Middle East.

Furthermore, the economic, diplomatic and political influence of a rising China has inevitably grown over the last decade. While it has let Moscow take the lead on political

issues, Beijing has begun to quietly consolidate its economic weight and open the doors for strategic influence. Chinese presence in the region is marked by China's [first](#) ever foreign military base in Djibouti.

India's default bias towards the Russian and Chinese positions on global issues, including those relating to the Middle East, in forums like the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, has often put it at odds with its Western partners, especially the United States (US). The Iran question has long been a major bone of contention in Delhi's engagement with Washington.

India's recent approach towards the Middle East of engaging all sides in the region has received both admiration and admonition. Many observers of Indian foreign policy are surprised by the fact that India enjoys good relations with Israel, Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Iran all at the same time when many of them are at daggers drawn against each other. India has also sought to limit the impact of US-Iran conflict and US-Russia tensions in the Middle East on its engagement with the region.

At home, critics have argued that Prime Minister Narendra Modi's special warmth towards Israel is an abandonment of India's traditional solidarity with the Arabs. Many of India's friends in the US have been dismayed by India's persistent effort to maintain a special relationship with Iran and pointed to the dangers of getting caught in the cross-fire between Washington and Tehran.

However, India's decision to engage all sides appear to be paying off. New Delhi seems to have found a way to cut a deal with Washington on avoiding Iran sanctions. On Syria, there seems to be an active conversation between Russia and the West on ending the brutal civil war there. For many Sunni Arab regimes, fighting Iran has become more important than backing the Palestinian struggle against Israel. This has created the basis for both tacit and explicit cooperation between Israel and some of the Arab governments. The Donald Trump administration, meanwhile, is trying to limit Saudi conflicts with Turkey and Qatar. It is also using the Jamal Khashoggi [murder](#) crisis to get the Saudis to back a new plan between Israel and Palestine.

This is a very different and dynamic Middle East than the one India has known. New Delhi's new pragmatism has certainly allowed India to deal with the turbulence in the Gulf. However, New Delhi cannot forever avoid taking positions on the issues dividing the region. It also will need to transcend the current temptation to be nice to all sides and develop capabilities to influence the political outcomes in the region.

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Professor C Raja Mohan is Director of the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore (NUS). He can be contacted at isascrm@nus.edu.sg. Ms Nazneen Mohshina is a Research Assistant at ISAS. She can be contacted at nazneen@nus.edu.sg. The authors bear full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.