

Beyond Gaza: India's Changing Middle East Policies

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Summary

Focused until now on the Indo-Pacific, the India-United States (US) strategic partnership is steadily expanding to cover the Middle East. The fifth round of the 'two plus two' dialogue in New Delhi in November 2023 highlighted the growing convergence of Indian and US interests in the Middle East. New Delhi, which historically maintained significant political distance in the past from the US in the region, appears ready to work closely with Washington.

The growing convergence of India and the United States' (US) perspectives on the Middle East is one of the main signals from the fifth iteration of the 'two plus two' meeting on 10 November 2023 in New Delhi. The defence and foreign ministers of the two countries [were unambiguous](#) in condemning Hamas terror, emphasising Israel's right to self-defence while observing the international laws of war, calling for humanitarian pauses, demanding the release of hostages held by Hamas and pressing for durable peace in Palestine.

The affirmation that New Delhi and Washington "stand with Israel against terrorism" underlines how close the two sides have come in the Middle East. India, in the past, was unwilling to condemn Palestinian terror against Israel even as it sought global support against Pakistan's cross-border terrorism. India has ended that double standard in responding to the current war in Gaza while reaffirming its strong commitment to Palestinian statehood.

India's external affairs minister, S Jaishankar, underlined the importance of taking a [consistent position](#) on international terrorism, stating, "We take a strong position on terrorism because we are big victims of terrorism. We will have no credibility if we say that when terrorism impacts us, it's very serious; when it happens to somebody else, it's not serious."

The annual joint meeting of the defence and foreign ministers from the two sides, which has taken place every year since 2018, except 2021, has become the [principal vehicle to review and advance](#) the India-US strategic partnership. Together, the four ministers – nudged by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in New Delhi and Presidents Donald Trump and Joe Biden in Washington – have dramatically expanded the canvas of cooperation and deepened the intensity of engagement on defence industrial collaboration, technology transfer, counter-terrorism and regional security.

Cooperation on Asian security issues has been a new element in the engagement between the two nations and provided a solid regional anchor for bilateral collaboration. In the early years after independence, Indian foreign policy positioned itself [in opposition to the US](#) in

Asia, especially on regional security issues. This trendline in India's regional policies endured well into the 21st century.

It is only in recent years that India's wariness about US dominance in Asia has yielded to greater engagement and cooperation. The principal reason for the change in India has been the assertiveness of a rising China. Even as Beijing sought to replace the US as the dominant leader of Asia, it presented new challenges to Indian security policymakers on its Himalayan frontiers that have seen a series of military crises in 2013, 2014, 2017 and 2020. The 2010s also saw the steady expansion of Chinese naval presence in the Indian Ocean and the special relationships with India's South Asian neighbours.

The 2017 crisis triggered a major shift in India's approach to China. Discarding the old preference for non-alignment, New Delhi stepped forward to deepen military ties with Washington. The new Indian steps included the elevation of the 'two plus two' dialogue to the ministerial level in 2018, the embrace of the Indo-Pacific geopolitical construct and the revival of the Quad.

As India and the US embarked on a cooperative strategy to address the China challenge, the conventional wisdom in New Delhi insisted India-US joint regional security efforts were limited to the Indo-Pacific region. India and the US might be on the same side to the east of the subcontinent, the argument went, but they will remain far apart to the west of the subcontinent. That proposition was overturned quite quickly as India and the US joined hands with Israel and the United Arab Emirates to form the [I2U2 grouping](#) in 2021.

At the G20 summit in September 2023, India, along with the US and Saudi Arabia, unveiled the ambition to build an [economic corridor](#) between the subcontinent and Europe. The fifth round of the 'two plus two' dialogue saw the further advancement of India-US cooperation in the Middle East. The [joint statement](#), issued at the end of the talk, welcomed "India's full membership of the multinational Combined Maritime Forces (CMF), headquartered in Bahrain."

India's decision to become a full member of the [38-nation CMF](#) that operates in the waters of the Arabian Sea and the Horn of Africa and is headed by an American Admiral. It seeks to protect maritime security across a vast body of water that hosts some of the world's busiest sea lines of communication. India's decision to stay apart from the CMF all these years was based on the ingrained impulse to act unilaterally rather than in a coalition. Pakistan's membership in the CMF, too, was a dampener coalition membership.

The past inhibitions have been discarded amidst the growing comfort level with the US' presence in India's neighbourhood. New Delhi no longer sees the Middle East through the Pakistan lens and has begun to appreciate its enormous stakes in regional security. Reflecting some of these changes is [India's participation for the first time](#) in the multinational Exercise Bright Star in Egypt in September 2023. This is a series of biennial military exercises led by Egypt and the US. More than 30 countries, including Pakistan, participated in the 2023 edition of the exercise.

Even as it looks beyond Pakistan and gets closer to the US in the Middle East, India continues to ramp up its independent bilateral partnerships with key countries in the region. New Delhi hopes that its bilateral, minilateral and multilateral engagement will help elevate India's stature and expand its role in the Middle East.

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