

ISRAEL AND THE CHANGING ALIGNMENTS IN WEST ASIA: IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA

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INTRODUCTION

West Asia has been a region fraught with rivalry and conflict for centuries. The region enjoys a unique geopolitical and geo-strategic positioning at the crossroads of the three continents: Asia, Africa and Europe. Additionally, the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea have become the strategic maritime trade routes through which the world's trade passes. The region is rich in hydrocarbon resources making it more vulnerable and prone to conflict. At the same time, this sense of vulnerability is intensified in this region where history acts as a determinant of geopolitical contestations, as we envisage the nature of modifying relationships and increasingly liquescent alliances between traditional arch rivals. In such a scenario, it becomes challenging to understand and analyse the dominant strategies in the region, where not only the political and religious factors and the regional or non-state actors affect the regional political scenario, but also the external actors compete for regional hegemony. In such a vulnerable and volatile West Asian region, it becomes imperative to examine Israel's role of becoming a military power and an actor capable of fulfilling the needs of other regional counterparts to diversify their economy. For the past few years, Israel has been involved

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in establishing back-channel ties with few Arab nations. However, the Arab nations have been cautious in keeping these relationships under wrap so as not to get embroiled in the Israeli-Palestinian conflicts. This has not been the case with Israel, on the other hand. It cannot be overlooked that militarily, Israel is one of the most powerful nations in the West Asian region. But the normalising of relations between the Arab nations and Israel has definitely overhauled the geopolitical and regional political associations in the West Asian region, necessitating a thorough examination and study of the subject. This article will look

into various aspects related to Israel's changing regional politics with the nations of this region and analyse the reasons for this change. Some scenarios will also be examined in context of India's evolving relations with Israel and the two Arab nations.

In the past, the major players in the West Asian region have been the Arab nations. However, the situation has reversed now with the non-Arab nations, i.e. Iran, Israel and Turkey taking centre stage in the regional politics and to some extent dictating the regional agenda. At the same time, religion, particularly various shades of Islam, has emerged as an important facet of this regional politics. Therefore, there ensues a bitter struggle for regional hegemony between the ancient regional powers like Saudi Arabia and Iran and non-Arab nations like Israel and Turkey. The struggle is also associated with the non-state actors active in the region. With all three actors and their historical, geopolitical and ideological roots, a confrontation in West Asia unfolds, which has turned this region into a political theatre for other key global players.¹ Moreover, in the scenario after the Arab Spring (2011) these

1. Zvi Magen, "The Changing Middle East", *Expert Opinion-Valdai Discussion Club*, February 13, 2020, at <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/the-changing-middle-east/>. Accessed on January 13, 2021.

previous associations and positions of the nations in this region became redundant, to be replaced by the sectarian division between Shi'as and Sunnis. In the midst of all of this, Israel has established itself as a significant non-Arab nation in the region, with military and technological prowess, as well as strategic capabilities that surpass every other country in the region.

One of the most significant developments in this regard is the signing of the Abraham accords between Israel and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), followed by Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco regularising relations with Israel. This agreement clearly indicates the geopolitical shift in the West Asian

regional and security politics. Of course, there have been a number of factors and aspects associated with this agreement that affect all the players involved as well as other nations in this region, both now or in the future. Simultaneously, Israel's quest to normalise relations with its Arab neighbours without compromising its position on the Palestinian issue has been an ideal scenario for Israel. One of the most important factors of this whole process is the continued American presence and support, which is clearly playing a crucial role in bringing its Arab allies to the table for this negotiation as well as holding arms sales as an incentive. It played a significant role in pushing the Arab nations to establish diplomatic ties and strengthening security links with Israel. This happened at a time when the US was gearing up for the presidential elections. The reason behind the Arab nations' approval of the American plan was that the US is considered to be an unreliable ally of the Gulf Arab nations against Tehran.

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The signing of the Abraham accords also evinces the culmination of the Arab ideological rejection of recognising and making peace with Israel as mentioned in the Khartoum Declaration of 1967. It also clearly indicates the Palestinians' receding veto power over Israel's role in forging and managing relationships in the West Asian neighbourhood for the last seven decades. At the same time, it also erodes the Israeli visions and ideas related to its foreign and regional policy since its creation. The signing of this agreement also reinforces the American influence over its key allies in the region, while also reversing the trend set by the previous American President Trump and his policies to reduce the US military engagement in the region. Apparently, it looks like the winning streak with the best realpolitik at play. However, the nature and scope of the repercussions and the full extent of this, remain unknown. Another important question concerning this agreement is also related to Israel's longstanding refusal to sell sophisticated military weaponry to Arab nations, which also includes F-35 planes and advanced drone sales to the UAE. At the same time, the hype created around the formal declaration of the Abraham accords has been a diversion for the parties of this agreement, especially Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, who is in a quandary due to the domestic political crisis.

Hence, the agreement in all its aspects is beginning to resemble West Asian regional politics with a number of international, regional and personal issues riding on it. These range from relatively trivial issues of Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu's legal troubles, to greater geostrategic issues, such as the regional defence attitude in the face of Iran's persistent missile threat to Israel and other Arab nations. Quite visibly, the domestic and global risks are usually entwined in the politics of the West Asian region, and this was even more noticeable during the US presidential election season in the United States.² Much like most of the nations of this region, Israel too has no specific regional and foreign policy and acts according to its domestic politics. Furthermore, these accords add another

2. Tova Norlen and Tamir Sinai, "The Abraham Accords: Paradigm Shift or Realpolitik?", *George C. Marshall European Centre for Security Studies*, no. 64, October 20, 2020, at <https://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/security-insights/abraham-accords-paradigm-shift-or-realpolitik>. Accessed on January 17, 2020.

facet to the view that foreign policy can most definitely serve both the domestic and personal priorities.³

ISRAELI FOREIGN POLICY IN THE REGION

A number of factors have influenced the evolution of Israel's foreign and regional policy since the Jewish state was established 70 years ago. The initial years, after the creation of the state, witnessed a number of wars involving the Arab. During those early years, Israeli foreign policy followed the 'periphery doctrine'⁴ forging alliances with Iran, Turkey and the Iraqi Kurds—primarily the non-Arab states and the ethnic groups in the region. The strong and long association between Israel and the US began after the year 1967. Prior to it, Israel had forged strategic partnerships with the erstwhile Soviet Union followed by the United Kingdom (UK) and France. However, following the Iranian Revolution (1979), when the Iranian leadership shifted from monarchy to theocracy, Israel's peripheral policy almost lost its validity. Following the Iranian Revolution, came the catastrophic failure of the Israeli relationship with the Lebanese Maronites in 1982-83. However, as against all this, the peace process with Egypt began in 1977. This also indicates the commencement of Israel's peace talks with its Sunni Arab neighbours, clearly demonstrating the success of the peripheral doctrine. Egypt's arrival at the negotiations scene actually led Israel to demonstrate to the Arab world that any siege of the Jewish state would eventually fully justify Israel's strategy of aligning with the peripheral nations of the West Asian region, and that Israel could fully survive a prolonged siege by linking with these peripheral nations.⁵ Here, it is important to note that the fundamental strategic goal

3. Ibid.

4. Periphery Doctrine—in the initial years of its creation, Israel adopted the "periphery doctrine". This can be defined as first Israeli Prime Minister David Ben Gurion's attempt to form an alliance with non-Arab Islamic nations in the West Asian region as a counter-balance to the Arab nations. The foremost among these non-Arab nations were Turkey and Iran. Both these nations had a favourable orientation towards the West.

5. Yossi Alpher, "Israeli Regional Strategies: Balancing the Arab Core, the New Periphery, and Great Powers", *IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook*, 2017, at https://www.iemed.org/observatori/arees-danalisi/arxiu-adjunts/anuari/med.2017/previews/IEMed_Medyearbook2017_Israel_Regional_Strategies_Yossi_Alpher.pdf. Accessed on January 17, 2020.

of Israeli regional strategy has been to achieve recognition and peace with the Arab world. Following peace with Egypt, a connection with Jordan was established. This was followed by the disintegration of the Soviet Union, and eventually Israel expanded its diplomatic relations with India, China and Russia. Furthermore, the significant expansion of Israel's international diplomatic and commercial influence, as well as the active integration of Israel's robust post-industrial economy into world trade have all contributed to Israel's inclusion in the list of the industrialised and militarily stable nations globally.⁶ In fact, this has been successful enough for the Arab world to start looking towards Israel for defence and strategic cooperation.

The grounds for the adoption of the periphery doctrine in Israeli foreign policy can be traced back to a number of causes. First, it meant establishing the strategic partnership with the non-Arab and American allies in the West Asian North African region like Turkey, Iran and Ethiopia. This was also extended to the religious and ethnic minorities like Maronites in Lebanon and the Kurds. All these helped Israel gain influence in the region in the initial years of its formation. Second, this foreign policy tactic helped the Jewish state to counterbalance the diplomatic and economic boycott by the Arab nations. Third, this strategy helped Israel to maintain its strategic balance-of-power against the rising anti-Israel Pan-Arabism in the region. So, it can be safely said that this doctrine was adopted as an essential strategy to deal with the resentment and aggressive unison of the Arabs against Israel. Simultaneously, another fundamental aspect in the Israeli security vision is the belief that ultimate security can only be achieved by establishing peace with the Arab world. Above and beyond, Israel maintained an unwavering strategic alliance with the global players like the erstwhile Soviet Union, France and the US, depending on the time and circumstances. All these factors show that Israel's 'periphery doctrine' actually became a means for the survival of the nascent Jewish state, which was engaged in an ongoing armed struggle with the Arab nations in the region. Still, the fact that cannot be dismissed is that Israel's quest since its creation has been related to two specific goals as

6. Ibid.

part of its foreign policy—peace and security. The correlation between these factors cannot be ruled out. It was believed by the then leaders of Israel that peace for Israel will be unattainable if it is a weak nation or perceived to be so. At the same time, Yitzhak Shamir, a former Israeli Foreign Minister, indicated in the 1980s that “... future direction of events in the region can be played by forces and influences outside the region.”⁷ In the contemporary flux scenario in the West Asian regional politics, his assessment of the role of external players in the regional politics and the significance of peace and security in the Israeli foreign and security policy still stands relevant and correct. Peace is the crucial factor for Israel’s survival and sustenance, and Israel’s determination to achieve it is permanently placed on the world map. Furthermore, security is a vital guarantee of the viability and maintenance of peace.⁸ Together, these two objectives provided the much-needed aspect that was both relevant and necessary for bringing peace and stability in the region. He also indicated that normalisation of the relations between Israel and the Arab nations can be the only way to achieve peace in the West Asian region. In the contemporary West Asian scenario, the above arguments still hold true, emphasising Israel’s urgent need to normalise its relations with the Arab neighbours.

Besides this, the global and regional conditions continue to transform. With the non-traditional security threats actually posing a hazard in the West Asian region, also related to the issues such as climate change, the increasing prospects of economic failure, regime instability and refugee inflow from the volatile nations of West Asia to other parts of the world could be consequential for Israeli security. Added to this is the increasing threat from the proliferation of cyber threats, which will make advanced nations more prone to such threats and attack, and Israel is one of the few in the region to be targeted. These factors, actually forced Israel to forge new alliances for intelligence and information sharing in the region. At the domestic level, the Abraham Accords could also help in enhancing the Israeli Prime

7. Yitzhak Shamir, “Israel’s Role in a Changing Middle East”, *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 60, no. 4 (Spring), 1982, pp. 789-801.

8. *Ibid.*

One of the key causes bringing Israel and the Arab world together is the US, which is effectively pressuring all of its regional allies to unite against the purported rising threat of Iran.

Minister Netanyahu's image at home, who is facing a difficult situation over the alleged corruption accusations. Besides, the decrease in his domestic popularity has been due to his mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic.⁹ Furthermore, the increasing threat of resurgent Iran and non-state actors in the region has forced both Israel and the Arab nations to look towards each other to counter these emerging threats. The following section will discuss and elaborate on the regional security and political scenario that influenced Israel's foreign and regional policies.

THE REGIONAL THEATRE

There are various significant factors in the West Asian region that have contributed to the change in the foreign policy scenario of Israel. The first and the foremost being the rise of Iran following the Iranian nuclear deal, which led to apprehensions in both Israel and the Arab world, eventually leading to a slim but imperative convergence of mutual interests between the Jewish state and the Arab world. Added to this is the persisting conflict between Israel and Palestine. The situation of no-solution had eventually led a number of Arab states to follow their own interests and desires. At the same time, there is the issue of foreign powers.

One of the key causes bringing Israel and the Arab world together is the US, which is effectively pressuring all of its regional allies to unite against the purported rising threat of Iran. Of course, this agenda is achieved through America's arms sales.¹⁰ Meanwhile, Israeli Prime Minister

9. Maha El Dahan, Jeffrey Heller and Steve Holland, "Israel, UAE to Normalize Relations in Shift in Mideast Politics; West Bank Annexations on Hold", *Reuters*, August 13, 2020, at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-emirates-trump-idUSKCN25926W>. Accessed on January 20, 2021.

10. Aaron David Miller, "How Israel and the Arab World are Making Peace without a Peace Deal", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, May 27, 2020, at <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/05/27/how-israel-and-arab-world-are-making-peace-without-peace-deal-pub-81918>. Accessed on January 20, 2021.

Benjamin Netanyahu's regional outreach to the Arab world can be considered to be a part of his broader campaign to project Israel's positive political profile at the global level. In comparison to its condition prior to independence, Israel has gained tremendous diplomatic recognition in the world community due to its military capabilities and technological breakthroughs. In the West Asian region, Israeli Prime Minister's outreach is intended to establish that Israel can do business with key Arab states without compromising the Palestinian issue, as well as, mobilise Arab support in its favour against Iran. Here it is important to mention that apart from the regional bigwig, i.e. Saudi Arabia, the medium powers of the region such as Oman, Kuwait and Qatar have welcomed this rapprochement. It clearly shows that these Arab nations desire to strengthen ties with Israel based on their strategic, economic and commercial considerations.¹¹

At the same time, Saudi Arabia and the UAE's rhetoric against Iran has actually emerged as a tenacious test to their national security. In their struggle to contain Iran's regional ambitions, they have visualised the technologically advanced Jewish nation as an influential partner. The signing of the Iranian nuclear deal in 2015 actually brought Israel and the Arab world together. The mutual resentment of Israel and the Arab world towards the Iranian nuclear deal was reeling with the perception that through this deal Washington was trying to justify and endorse Iran as a potential regional player.¹² Of course, Saudi Arabia and the UAE's interests in constraining Iran's increasing

11. Aaron David Miller, "Explainer: Where do Arab States Stand on Normalizing Israel ties?", *Al-Jazeera*, September 22, 2020, at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/9/22/explainer-where-do-arab-states-stand-on-normalising-israel-ties>. Accessed on January 24, 2021.

12. Sannia Abdullah, "Iran Nuclear Deal: Implications for Regional Security", *Journal of Political Studies*, vol. 22, issue 2, 2015, pp. 475-93.

influence and to ensure that it never goes nuclear concur with Israel's wishes. Therefore, these three nations emerged as the severest critics of the nuclear deal signed between P5+1 countries and Iran. Therefore, former US President Trump's decision to walk out of the deal was eagerly welcomed by them.¹³ Another issue which got distracted due to this rapprochement was the Palestinian cause. The Palestinian struggle was previously the one subject that the Arab countries openly backed. However, it seems to have been abandoned in favour of a more pragmatic geopolitics of interests in the region. This also indicates that, even though the verbal support for the Palestine cause still remains, the leaders of the significant players of the region, i.e. Saudi Arabia and the UAE, now consider Iran as a much bigger threat than Israel. Since the Iranian revolution in 1979, Iran has been trying to increase its regional influence by consolidating its position in the region's Shi'ite population whether in Iraq, Syria, Yemen or through the Hezbollah in Lebanon.¹⁴ Moreover, it will be correct to say that one of the reasons for this idea of Arab-Israeli rapprochement to gain traction lies in the perception of common threat.

Historically speaking, unlike the two Arab-Israeli peace agreements which happened in the past between Israel, Egypt and Jordan, the Palestinian issue does not figure prominently in the Abraham Accords. When the peace agreement was signed between Egypt and Israel, Israel agreed to return the Sinai region back to Egypt. The framework agreement between the two countries also assured the institution of an autonomous self-governing authority in the West Bank and Gaza region. It also called for the comprehensive implementation of the UNSC Resolution 242, which called for Israel's withdrawal from the occupied territories.¹⁵ After Israel

13. Seema Guha, "Israel-UAE Peace Deal: The Changing Dynamics of Arab Politics", *Outlook India*, August 27, 2020, at <https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/world-news-changing-dynamics-of-arab-politics/359389>. Accessed on January 24, 2021.

14. *Ibid.*

15. Stanly Johny, "The Hindu Explains: Why has the Israel-UAE Pact Unsettled Palestine and Iran", *The Hindu*, August 16, 2020, at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/the-hindu-explains-why-has-the-israel-uae-pact-unsettled-palestine-and-iran/article32364470.ece>. Accessed on January 25, 2021.

agreed to the formation of the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and Gaza, the Israeli-Jordanian peace deal was formalised. However, in case of the UAE-Israel deal there were no significant privileges that were promised to the Palestinian state. This has understandably upset the Palestinians, who referred to the UAE's decision as "treason".¹⁶ At the same time, it is possible that Israel has a hidden agenda to build leverage in order to pressure the Palestinians and bring them to the negotiating table. On the other hand, the Arab nations get to play the Israeli card for all it's worth. Definitely, the role of the US in this scenario has completely altered the course of geopolitics in the West Asian region. The following section will elaborate on the role of the external players in the slowly changing course of the regional politics in West Asia.

Certainly, the Palestinian issue has been eclipsed by the other emerging geopolitical issues in the West Asian region, which is in a state of severe turmoil. However, this trend might seem temporary as the venerable persistence of the Palestinian issue has remained the top priority for not only the regional leaders but also external players. Therefore, this situation of the overshadowed Palestinian cause is circumstantial and can be reversed if situations change.¹⁷ In fact, it would not be wrong to say that the Arab association with the Palestinian issue and the antagonism towards Israel are intensely intertwined into the cultural and political scenario of the society. It could become difficult for the Arab nations to abandon this decades-old stance without harming their regional integrity and authority. Moreover, this also gives a chance to nations like Iran and para-state forces like Hezbollah in the region to solidify their position with the Palestine. This could run counter to the Arab nations' actions of associating with Israel as a force against Iran in the region, including allying with their domestic opponents, especially radical Sunni Islamists, several liberals and pan-Arabist enthusiasts. So,

16. Ibid.

17. Omar H. Rahman, "What's Behind the Relationship Between Israel and Arab Gulf States", *Brookings*, January 28, 2019, at <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/01/28/whats-behind-the-relationship-between-israel-and-arab-gulf-states/>. Accessed on January 26, 2021.

there are chances that the change in regional political scenario in the West Asian region might push the Arab world closer to Palestine again and away from Israel although this is unlikely in the near future. At the same time, given the turmoil generated by the Arab Spring upheavals in 2011, it is critical for Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu and other Arab leaders to strengthen their position in domestic politics. Moreover, the association between the Arab world and Israel could have favourable repercussions for the region in looking for peace and stability; however, it seems hard to predict the long-term gains and whether they will be beneficial or not. In the short-term, the situation augured well for former Prime Minister Netanyahu, who stood to gain more from this accord and the future associations with the Arab world. Definitely, the Palestinians lose the crucial point of leverage concerning Israel and could find themselves more isolated than ever before. And the Arab nations gain a precarious alliance with Israel, with almost negligible chances of getting too much in return that they do not already have by default.¹⁸

THE INTERNATIONAL THEATRE

The Abraham Accords can be considered to be the first peace treaty between Israel and an Arab world that has happened since 1994. It can have profound, perdurable implications for both Israel and the Arab nations, as well as for the US. Definitely, this accord will go down in history as the legacy of the leaders of Israel, the UAE and Bahrain. However, few significant aspects stand out: one, sales of sophisticated American weaponry to the UAE and Bahrain might antagonize Israel in the long-run as it might lose its qualitative military edge in the region courtesy the US; two, the UAE and Bahrain have a history of suppressing dissent and critical public opinion. At the same time, there have been indications that this agreement was not well received domestically in both the UAE and Bahrain, as compared to its positive reception in Israel. This can also

18. Omar H. Rahman, "What's Behind the Relationship Between Israel and Arab Gulf States", *Brookings*, January 28, 2019, at <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/01/28/whats-behind-the-relationship-between-israel-and-arab-gulf-states/>. Accessed on January 26, 2021.

be gauged from the fact that both UAE and Bahrain did not send their heads of state or government to sign the deals with Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu.¹⁹ Three, the signing of this agreement with Bahrain has raised the plausibility of Saudi Arabia normalising relations with Israel—a prize victory for Israel’s foreign policy and diplomacy. It is important to mention here that Bahrain’s Sunni monarchy is closely allied with Saudi Arabia.²⁰ Four, the Trump administration believed that as more Arab nations normalise relations with Israel, pressure on the Palestinians to return to the negotiation table, which has been at a standstill for more than a decade, will increase.²¹ Five, the Abraham accords were hailed as the genius marketing move of the Trump administration to gain a favourable position in the presidential elections at home. With this he aimed to achieve infallible victory that he initiated a peace process in the region that desperately needs it, as well as leave an everlasting legacy during his Presidential reign.²² Unlike many other directives issued by former President Trump that have been rescinded by newly elected US President Joe Biden, there is a chance that this agreement will remain in place. It is undeniable that with this agreement, Donald Trump defied bipartisan convention in his policymaking in the West Asian region. However, where on one hand, some scholars are also arguing that he upturned stagnant conventional wisdom that rewarded enemies while gruelling allies; on the other hand, some argue that he harmed American interests in the West Asian region, wherein the US abandoned its long-standing commitments in the region.²³ Alternatively, it can also be argued that Donald Trump set the stage for

19. Deb Reichmann, Mathew Lee and Jonathan Lemire, “Israel Signs Pacts with 2 Arab States: A ‘New’ Mideast?”, *AP News*, September 16, 2020, at <https://apnews.com/article/7544b322a254e1693e387d83d9d8b>. Accessed on January 26, 2021.

20. Joseph Krauss, “Trump’s Mideast Deals Tout ‘Peace’ where there was Never War”, *AP News*, September 14, 2020, at <https://apnews.com/article/peace-process-israel-iran-united-arab-emirates-jerusalem-c87ca011c2cd4321d587e9684dfb84e1>. Accessed on January 26, 2021.

21. *Ibid.*

22. Dalia al-Aqidi, “The Trump Legacy that can Never be Erased,” *Arab News*, January 1, 2021, at <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1785506>. Accessed on January 28, 2021.

23. Lazar Berman, “‘Erratic’ or ‘Strategic Clarity’: What to make of Trump’s Middle East legacy?”, *The Times of Israel*, January 23, 2021, at <https://www.timesofisrael.com/erratic-or-strategic-clarity-what-to-make-of-trumps-middle-east-legacy/>. Accessed on January 28, 2021.

China plays a very proactive role in the region while preserving friendly relations with nations that are rivals of one another. In such a scenario, the easing of tensions in the region as countries become more friendly with one another will definitely help Chinese businesses as well as its ambitious Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI).

chronological withdrawal from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. However, it is still unclear whether the Biden administration will continue on the same path. It has unquestionably altered the West Asian region forever, even if this change is not permanent.²⁴ Donald Trump's uncanny, pro-Israel policy has definitely isolated the Palestinian Authority and rendered America incapable to act as 'an unbiased mediator.' However, the UAE's normalisation of ties with Israel is unlikely to offer much more. There are many scholars who contend that Trump administration's aim with this agreement was not to achieve actual peace, but rather

to apply pressure on the UAE to coerce the Emiratis and Saudis to reduce their efforts in Yemen supported by the US. There are chances that as long as the sale of American weaponry is happening in the UAE, it can exert maximum pressure on the UAE and its other allies in the region.²⁵

China: In the past decade, China has increased its penetration both economically and strategically into the West Asian region. China is the primary trading partner for a number of nations in this region. In fact, it will be correct to say that China plays a very proactive role in the region while preserving friendly relations with nations that are rivals of one another. In such a scenario, the easing of tensions in the region as countries become more friendly with one another will definitely help Chinese businesses as well as its ambitious Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI) with respect to this region. The Arab Spring (2011) drastically

24. Ibid.

25. Ishaan Tharoor, "The Mirage of Trump's 'Peace' Deals", *The Washington Post*, September 15, 2020, at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2020/09/15/trump-deals-bahrain-uae-kosovo-serbia/>. Accessed on January 28, 2021.

imperilled Chinese investments in the West Asian region as well as risked the lives of many Chinese expatriates in the region. With the continuing unrest in the region following the Arab Spring uprisings, Beijing remained vigilant of the wave of civil unrest engulfing the whole WANA region. However, Beijing chose a more hands-on approach to its relationships in the region. It can be said that Beijing's decision seems to have worked in its favour.²⁶

Beijing seems to be in no rush to either act quickly to refute this American-supported normalisation accords or to act swiftly or boldly in relation to this accord. There are chances that Beijing is also trying to assess the implications of this agreement.

Since coming to power, Chinese President Xi Jinping decided to renew Beijing's role in the West Asian region in order to consolidate its position in domestic politics. The Chinese grand strategy in the form of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) plays a significant role in this. While the majority of Chinese scholars, policymakers and leaders agree with President Xi's idea, there is still no consensus on the progression and scope of Chinese action. For China, this is like a catch-22 situation in which peace and stability are prerequisites due to its deep economic interests in the region. However, the lack of these prerequisites is in a way posing a dilemma for Chinese policy vis-à-vis this region. In this case, the Abraham Accords is one such example. On the one hand, Beijing welcomed this step of normalisation as a means to foster peace and stability in the region. On the other hand, the role of the US in achieving this peace, stability and normalisation can become detrimental to the Chinese influence in the West Asian region. The rhetorical requirement of easing of tensions between Israel and Palestine as a basis of achieving peace and stability in West Asia has weakened a little in the regional politics. So, in other words, if Beijing chooses to accept and appreciate the US vision for the region,

26. Gedaliah Afterman and Theresa Hoffman, "China is the Middle East's Rising Power: Israel must Tread Carefully", *Haaretz*, December 29, 2020, at <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/premium-china-is-the-middle-east-s-rising-power-israel-must-tread-carefully-1.9406048>. Accessed on January 29, 2021.

it could damage its geopolitical interests; if it rejects it, there are chances that it could endanger the stability Beijing needs for economic growth.²⁷

However, Beijing seems to be in no rush to either act quickly to refute this American-supported normalisation accords or to act swiftly or boldly in relation to this accord. There are chances that Beijing is also trying to assess the implications of this agreement, as is the case globally. At the same time, there is a likelihood that Beijing will strive hard to lessen any apparent risk that this normalisation of relations between Israel, the UAE and Bahrain poses to Beijing's regional designs. At the same time, it will also try to seek the full advantage of potential opportunities that these accords can offer.²⁸

Russia: Almost similar to Chinese policies in the West Asian region, the Russian foreign policy vis-à-vis West Asia can be characterised as that of balancing and managing between rival nations and adversaries in the region. Aforementioned pragmatism was mainly associated with two particular reasons: one to counter the Western position in the West Asian region, and two, to strengthen Moscow's own staggering economic, commercial and strategic relations in the region. In fact, notwithstanding the good relations which Moscow maintains with both Israel and the UAE, it has very cautiously reacted to the Abraham accords. Moscow has time and again clearly emphasised that West Asian stability mostly depends on resolving the 'Palestinian problem'. This much-anticipated reaction was also linked to the maintenance of relations with Iran. At the same time, the increasing tensions between the US and Iran had further strengthened the relations between Moscow and Tehran in the past four years since Donald Trump became the US President.²⁹ Even though the leadership in Moscow had

27. Tuvia Gering, "China's View of the Abraham Accords", *The Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security (JISS)*, October 20, 2020, at <https://jiss.org.il/en/gering-chinas-view-of-the-abraham-accords/>. Accessed on January 29, 2021.

28. Giorgio Cafiero and Daniel Wagner, "China and the Abraham Accords Peace Agreement", *Middle East Institute*, September 22, 2020, at <https://www.mei.edu/publications/china-and-abraham-accords-peace-agreement>. Accessed on January 30, 2021.

29. Diana Galeeva, "Russia in the Middle East in 2021: Learning from 2020", January 21, 2021, at <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2021/01/21/russia-in-the-middle-east-in-2021-learning-from-2020/>. Accessed on February 10, 2021.

officially welcomed the Abraham accords, the country's leaders were keen to avoid any overreaction that could jeopardise Moscow's positive relations with Palestine and Iran. As in the case of China, similarly for Russia also, this agreement could act as a catch-22 situation. Wherein, the normalisation of relations between Israel and the Arab nations may provide Russia with opportunities to enhance its influence in the West Asian region. At the same time, this agreement can also be damaging for Moscow's improving relations with a number of West Asian nations due to the consolidation of power and position of the US in this region.³⁰

As previously mentioned, the plausible detrimental effect of the Abraham accords might be a losing deal for Moscow. In the past few years, Russia has clearly demonstrated that it will support allies in the West Asian region. Russia is trying hard to supply these friendly nations such as Syria, Iran and Turkey with special weaponry that can tip the balance in the region. However, the Russian dominance in West Asian region is clearly threatened by the political manifestation of sectarian rivalry in the region creating additional complications for Russia. Clearly, this sectarian rift is working against Russia's regional balancing in relation to Saudi Arabia and Iran. It must be noted that for all the external players in the region it can be crucial in order to stabilise the oil markets from which Russia also derives a huge share of government revenue, as well as maintaining cordial relations with Iran as an ally in the region. Moscow's efforts in West Asia are aimed at securing points that could provide it to achieve its foreign policy goals. Even though these actions have not been fruitful as per the aspirations of Russia.³¹

30. Giorgio Cafiero and Daniel Wagner, "Do normalisation deals with Israel help or hinder Russia's 'return' to the Middle East?" *The New Arab*, October 26, 2020, at <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/indepth/2020/10/6/normalisation-with-israel-russias-delicate-balancing-act>. Accessed on February 10, 2021.

31. Joseph V. Micallef, "These are the Winners and Losers from the Abraham Accords", October 7, 2020, at <https://www.military.com/daily-news/opinions/2020/10/07/these-are-winners-and-losers-abraham-accords.html>. Accessed on February 10, 2021.

IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA

When Israel's relations with Egypt and Jordan were established in the past, it had little impact on India. However, the situation is much different now. India now has multifaceted relations with a number of West Asian nations due to enhanced trade and strategic relations as well as the presence of almost 8 million strong Indian diaspora in the region. Almost two-thirds of hydrocarbon trade between India and this region eventually led to a change in regional dynamics affecting India. Geopolitically, India has welcomed the establishment of diplomatic relations between Israel, UAE and Bahrain, as Israel and the UAE are the strategic partners of India. This will undoubtedly help in easing New Delhi's balancing act in the region.

It should be noted that India's strategic relations with Israel are far stronger and more robust.

The basis of this relationship is defence trade which is mutual for both the nations, i.e. India's aim related to military modernisation and Israel's comparative advantage in commercialising its arms industries. However, this relation is not limited to defence but encompasses trade, agriculture, technology, innovation, water and space and science. In the past five years, sales have historically exceeded to more than US\$ 1 billion, making India a key partner of Israel in terms of defence sales and growing strategic partnership. India has signed deals for Barak 8 missiles worth US\$ 2.5 billion and surface-to-air missiles worth US\$ 1.3 billion in 2017 and 2018, respectively. Israel is also associated with India in developing the Hermes 900 medium altitude long-endurance UAV in India. Besides this, India and Israel have been involved in a number of joint development programmes for developing various air defence and communications systems for Indian armed forces, as well as setting up of an Indian ecosystem for the indigenous production and development of the same. All these aspects indicate that the strategic partnership between India and Israel is growing, given India's significant military presence in the South Asian region. But, at the same time, India will have to be on its guard to monitor and even pre-empt any threat to its interests in the West Asian region. Furthermore,

New Delhi will also have to be cautious about any economic effect of the Israel-GCC collaboration in the West Asian region that might adversely affect India's trade with this region.³² Another pertinent issue is that of security relations, which is also one of the crucial areas where New Delhi desires to play a significant role and which can be enhanced by the newly established diplomatic ties between Israel and the two Arab nations. The strategic partnership between the India and Israel actually also expands into the areas of counterterrorism, money laundering, cyber security, organised crime, human trafficking and anti-piracy. So, it becomes imperative for India to tread carefully.

Defence and strategic relations between India and UAE have clearly taken off. In recent years, the UAE has participated in a number of defence and military a number of defence and military exercises with India. India has also benefited from UAE real-time intelligence. India and UAE hold an Annual Defence Dialogue to discuss the issues related to security and defence cooperation between the two countries. This bilateral defence co-operation has been further strengthened in the field of defence training and regular exchange programmes. Following the visits of leaders from both sides to the other nation, cooperation in the field of defence, security and energy has also shown a positive impact. Shared economic visions and geopolitical outlooks have stimulated the two sides to seek to expand cooperation across multiple domains.

In such a scenario, as Israel and the UAE seek to expand their bilateral trade, it may benefit India in the future, especially as India and the UAE are looking forward to build on the sectors of investment, tourism, direct flights, security, telecommunications, technology, energy, healthcare, culture and the environment. This aligns with New Delhi's desires to further strengthen its presence in the West Asian region, which is often also referred to as our "extended neighbourhood." In the changing geopolitical and strategic landscape of the region, what India can do best is to maintain

32. Mahesh Sachdev, "India and the Abraham Accords", *The Hindu*, September 22, 2020, at <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/india-and-the-abraham-accords/article32662790.ece>. Accessed on February 10, 2021.

its non-descriptive, non-intrusive and non-judgemental attitude towards its strategic partners.³³

CONCLUSION

It will be correct to say that the Abraham accords do not in any way correspond to the overall peace agreement in the West Asian region. However, at the same time, it is not an agreement that can be ignored easily. In fact, it can be regarded as a significant diplomatic achievement that has undeniably changed the course of foreign and regional policies of a number of nations. The agreement has the ability to affect the region in case other Gulf Arab nations follow the UAE and Bahrain's lead in normalising relations with Israel. One can say that, if implemented with caution and ability, this agreement contains elements that can help in achieving stability in the region and ending its widespread conflicts. Moreover, the agreement could advance the changes that are already taking place in the region. Saudi Arabia and its allies in the region visualise their interests being fulfilled when aligned with that of the American and Israeli interests in the region, as well as the Arab support to the Palestinian cause. In the past few years, the Arab support for Palestine has dwindled as compared to previous years. This is largely because national interests have taken precedence over regional politics. At the same time, in such a scenario, Turkey and Iran have emerged as the strong supporters of the Palestinian issue in the wider WANA region. There is a tripolar contest already at work in the region with the UA, China and Russia being the major external players. In fact, this normalisation of relations could exacerbate a split in the future.

Scholars have repeatedly stated that it is impossible to achieve peace and stability in the turbulent West Asian region and it is only possible with a mutually accepted peace agreement between Israel and Palestine, an agreement with Iran to end its nuclear weapons development program and

33. Mahesh Sachdev, "The Abraham Accord between Israel and the UAE is a boon for India", *India Global Business*, August 18, 2020, as <https://www.indiaglobalbusiness.com/geopolitics/israel/the-abraham-accord-between-israel-and-the-uae-is-a-boon-for-india>. Accessed on February 11, 2021.

other destabilising policies in the region, and from the full normalisation of relations between Israel and the Arab world. However, it is neither easy nor an impossible feat to achieve, rather, it is a very difficult task. In a way it can be said that the Abraham Accords can be seen as the formulation and adoption of the reverse periphery doctrine by Israel, as well as a dramatic shift in alliances. The accords have provided a plausible opportunity for Israel to align with the Sunni Arab nations against its previous allies—the periphery nations, namely Turkey and Iran. In all of this, Israel’s qualitative military edge plays in its favour. It can be said that the agreement might be seen as one of the ways in which the nations of West Asian region will align against their mutual enemy, i.e. Iran. So, in all of this, Iran’s continued support for regional proxies, radical groups and returning to nuclear activities after the American withdrawal from Iran nuclear deal could be the most significant factor in forming these new alliances and alignments. However, it remains to be seen how this geostrategic shift will affect the region in the future.