

INDIAN ENGAGEMENT IN THE MIDDLE EAST: *A Strategic Shift in a Transforming World*

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Abstract

This research paper looks at India's changing relationship with the Middle East countries. It contends that India's policy toward the region has evolved from primarily transactional, energy- and diaspora-driven relations to a multifaceted strategic partnership encompassing energy security, trade and investment, defense and security cooperation, maritime collaboration, and diplomatic balancing among rival regional powers. Drawing on official Indian government publications, think-tank analyses, contemporaneous press reporting, and secondary literature, the paper maps India's bilateral trajectories with major Middle Eastern actors (the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Iran, Qatar, and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in general), identifies strategic shift drivers, and provides a content analysis of policy instruments, outcomes, and contradictions. According to the study, India's Middle East posture through 2023 was characterized by pragmatic hedging: stronger security and defence ties with Israel and Gulf states, deep economic and investment ties with the UAE and Saudi Arabia, continued (if selective) engagement with Iran via Chabahar and energy links, and multifaceted diplomacy aimed at protecting energy supplies, remittance inflows, and strategic autonomy. The paper closes with policy recommendations for consolidating gains while managing competing regional tensions.

Key Words: Energy Security, Diaspora Diplomacy, Defense Cooperation, West Asia Policy, India's Foreign Policy, Economic Interdependence, Cultural Diplomacy, Emerging Powers, Strategic Autonomy

Introduction

India's engagement with the Middle East has undergone a profound transformation, evolving from a historically non-aligned, ideologically driven stance to a pragmatic, multi-dimensional strategy that reflects its rising global ambitions. The Middle East, a region critical for its energy resources, strategic maritime routes, and economic opportunities, holds immense significance for India's security and growth. As the global order becomes increasingly multipolar and the Middle East navigates its own geopolitical and economic transitions, India's role as an emerging power in this complex landscape demands systematic analysis.

Historically, India's Middle East policy was rooted in anti-colonial solidarity and non-alignment, fostering goodwill with Arab states and Palestine while maintaining distance from great-power rivalries. However, the early 21st century marked a shift toward pragmatism, driven by India's growing energy needs, economic aspirations, and security concerns. By the early 2020s, Gulf countries had become among India's largest trading partners, with the UAE and Saudi Arabia alone accounting for significant shares of oil imports, investments, and remittances from India's sizable diaspora. Concurrently, India's deepening ties with Israel, particularly in defense and technology, and its continued engagement with Iran through projects like Chabahar port, highlight a nuanced balancing act. This multi-alignment approach allows India to navigate competing regional loyalties while responding to intensifying great-power competition involving the United States, China, and Russia.

The strategic shift in India's Middle East policy is evident across multiple domains: energy security, trade and investment, labor and remittances, defense cooperation, maritime connectivity, and diplomacy on regional conflicts. Initiatives like the Chabahar port and emerging corridor projects underscore India's ambition to secure supply chains and counterbalance China's regional influence. Yet, this approach is not without challenges, as India must manage contradictions arising from its simultaneous engagements with rival actors and address vulnerabilities in maritime security and supply-chain resilience. The region's volatility, marked by sectarian tensions and geopolitical rivalries, further complicates India's strategy.

This article seeks to provide a comprehensive analysis of India's Middle East engagement, synthesizing its economic, security, and diplomatic dimensions. By drawing on official Indian government sources, reputable media, and think-tank analyses, it examines the instruments—state visits, strategic partnerships, and trade agreements—that drive India's policy. The study aims to illuminate the strategic logic behind India's approach and offer evidence-based policy recommendations to refine its role in a transforming Middle East, contributing to scholarly and policy discussions on India's rise as a global actor in a dynamic geopolitical landscape.

Need for the Study

A systematic analysis of India's engagement with the Middle East is essential for several reasons. India's security priorities have shifted, emphasizing maritime security in the Arabian Sea and Gulf of Oman, supply-chain resilience, and counter-terrorism cooperation, necessitating a deeper understanding for policymakers and scholars. The Gulf countries, particularly the UAE and Saudi Arabia, have emerged as major trading and investment partners by the early 2020s, and?

rity dynamics also feature prominently. Ganguly and Pardesi (2019) underscore India's maritime security priorities in the Arabian Sea and Gulf of Oman, driven by piracy threats and supply-chain vulnerabilities. The Chabahar port project, analyzed by Roy (2021), exemplifies India's strategic push for connectivity and countering China's regional influence. However, India's simultaneous engagement with Iran and Israel, while sustaining goodwill with Palestine, creates diplomatic challenges, as discussed by Basrur (2022), who highlights New Delhi's nuanced diplomacy amid great-power competition involving the US, China, and Russia.

Despite rich analyses, gaps remain. Literature often focuses on bilateral ties or specific domains like energy or security, with less attention to the interplay of economic, security, and diplomatic strategies. Additionally, few studies provide actionable policy recommendations for India's evolving role in a multipolar Middle East. This paper addresses these gaps by synthesizing India's multi-faceted engagement, examining trade, security, and diplomacy holistically, and offering evidence-based insights to refine India's strategic approach in a transforming regional landscape.

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative content analysis approach, complemented by descriptive statistics from official trade and diplomatic releases where applicable. It involves collecting official bilateral briefs and releases from the Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) and Indian diplomatic missions for partner countries such as India-UAE and India-Saudi Arabia. Reputable media sources like Reuters and AP, along with think-tank commentary from IISS and ORF, are used to contextualize and corroborate official narratives and capture developments with significant policy implications. Content is coded into thematic areas including energy, trade/investment, labor/remittances, security/defense, maritime connectivity, and diplomatic practice, with each theme analyzed for policy instruments, outcomes, and contradictions. Bilateral country portraits for the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Iran, and Qatar are prepared, highlighting major milestones and synthesizing the strategic logic behind each relationship.

Limitations: The study relies primarily on open-source materials available. Certain domains (e.g., classified defence agreements, detailed security cooperation) are subject to secrecy and thus analysed through official statements and credible secondary reporting only.

India's Strategic Drivers in the Middle East

India's engagement with the Middle East is driven by multiple strategic imperatives. Energy security remains central, with the Gulf supplying a significant portion of India's crude oil imports, necessitating sustained ties with Gulf monarchies. Beyond oil, strategic discussions have expanded to include refining, petrochemicals, sovereign wealth fund investments, and partnerships in strategic petroleum reserves, formalized through summit diplomacy and strategic partnership councils, particularly with the UAE and Saudi Arabia. The presence of millions of Indian nationals in the Gulf, remitting substantial sums that support household incomes and foreign exchange reserves, shapes India's policy, evident in labor agreements, consular outreach, and crisis diplomacy during regional conflicts and the COVID-19 pandemic. These remittances create political incentives for stable, cooperative relations with Gulf hosts. Economically, ties have evolved into multi-dimensional partnerships, with trade volumes surging—especially with the UAE as a top partner—and Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 opening avenues for Indian investments in infrastructure, technology, and food security. Defense and security cooperation have deepened, notably with Israel in defense procurement and technology, and with GCC states in maritime security, counterterrorism, and intelligence sharing. Naval diplomacy, including port calls, joint exercises, and anti-piracy efforts, reflects India's focus on securing sea-lines of communication in the Arabian Sea and Gulf of Oman, with think-tank analyses noting increased security collaboration. Underpinning these efforts is India's pursuit of strategic autonomy, which guides its multi-alignment approach. By cultivating ties with diverse actors like Israel, Gulf monarchies, and Iran—while sustaining connectivity projects like Chabahar—India balances competing interests without entanglement in regional rivalries. This pragmatic strategy enables India to advance its economic, security, and diplomatic goals in a transforming Middle East.

Country Case Studies

United Arab Emirates (UAE)

India-UAE ties deepened rapidly into a strategic partnership by the early 2020s. Trade volumes ballooned—India-UAE trade reached levels that placed the UAE among India's top trading partners in 2022–23. The two countries expanded cooperation in energy, investments, and technology, and signed multiple MoUs across commerce, culture, and defence.

The UAE's economic diversification, its sovereign investment appetite, and its growing geopolitical weight made it a prime partner for India's outward investment strategy and supply-chain goals. Official Indian bilateral summaries document the breadth of MoUs and trade figures, reflecting institutionalized cooperation.

Strategic features:

- High trade volume and rapid growth in 2021–23.
- UAE investments in India and joint ventures across energy, infrastructure, and digital sectors.
- Security collaboration: port calls, intelligence sharing, and counterterrorism cooperation (publicly described in bilateral statements).

Saudi Arabia

The India–Saudi relationship entered a new phase in the late 2010s and consolidated through the 2020s. State visits—Prime Minister Modi's visit to Riyadh in 2016 and high-level reciprocal engagements—lifted cooperation beyond energy to include investment, food security, and strategic dialogues. The establishment and upgrading of strategic partnership councils aimed to institutionalize dialogue on defence, energy, and infrastructure. Saudi interest in Indian markets and India's search for reliable energy and investment partners aligned strategically. Post-G20 diplomacy in 2023 further reflected mutual priorities in trade, investment and security.

Strategic features:

- A Strategic Partnership Council and numerous MoUs across sectors.
- Increasing Saudi investments and joint projects tied to Saudi Vision 2030 priorities.

Israel

India–Israel ties, once constrained by decades of India's tilt toward Arab states, deepened considerably after formal diplomatic relations in 1992. Defence and security cooperation became a hallmark—Israel supplied advanced military hardware, intelligence cooperation, and joint R&D projects. By the early 2020s, Israel had become a major defence technology partner, working with Indian agencies on UAVs, surveillance systems, and cyber security initiatives. Economic ties and technological partnerships (agritech, water management, start-up collaboration) complemented defence cooperation. Official trade figures show deepening economic exchange.

Strategic features:

- Significant defence procurement and technology collaboration.
- Broader cooperation in innovation, agriculture, and civil technologies

Iran

India–Iran engagement remained complex and selective. Key landmark has been India's long-standing involvement in the Chabahar port project—intended to provide an overland access route to Afghanistan and Central Asia, bypassing Pakistan. However, U.S. sanctions intermittently complicated deeper Indian economic commitments. Despite such constraints, India maintained diplomatic engagement and pursued limited cooperation on connectivity and energy. By 2023, there were indications of efforts to crystallize longer-term arrangements on Chabahar, even as geopolitical pressures persisted. Reuters reporting in 2024 (referenced for context in official documents up to 2023) indicated India's interest in a long-term Chabahar arrangement, reflecting continuing strategic value assigned to the project.

Strategic features:

- Chabahar as a connectivity and geostrategic priority for India.
- Constraints posed by sanctions and regional rivalry, leading to cautious engagement.

Qatar

Qatar's strategic importance to India centers on energy (LNG supplies), investments, and a significant Indian expatriate population. Bilateral ties expanded in the 2010s with energy contracts, labour and consular arrangements, and infrastructure cooperation. Doha's mediation role in regional crises sometimes provided diplomatic space for New Delhi to advance interests while avoiding frontal choices. (For example, Qatar remained an important energy partner and venue for commercial ties.

Content analysis

Content analysis to examine the instruments India used in its Middle East engagement, the outcomes they generated, and the inherent contradictions. India leveraged frequent high-level visits by the prime minister and heads of state, alongside establishing strategic partnership councils, such as the India–Saudi strategic partnership council and the India–UAE comprehensive strategic partnership, to institutionalize ties, with official bilateral briefs detailing MoUs and cooperation areas. Economic statecraft included MoUs, investment deals, and trade pacts, facilitating sovereign wealth fund credit lines and encouraging Gulf investments into Indian infrastructure and start-ups, with the UAE and Saudi Arabia as key partners.

Defense and security cooperation encompassed procurement, joint exercises, intelligence sharing, and maritime collaboration, with India acquiring systems and engaging in technology collaboration, particularly with Israel, while Gulf partners expanded security ties as maritime security allies. Connectivity initiatives involved investments in ports like Chabahar and proposals for rail-and-port corridors linking India to the Middle East and Europe, positioned as alternatives to geopolitically sensitive routes through Pakistan. Diaspora and labor policies, including bilateral labor agreements and consular diplomacy, ensured worker protection and remittance flows, serving as critical soft power and material stakes in India's regional strategy. The analysis highlights the outcomes of these instruments in strengthening economic, security, and diplomatic ties, while noting contradictions, such as balancing relations with rival actors like Israel and Iran, which complicates India's multi-alignment approach in a volatile region.

Out Comes Observed

India's engagement with the Middle East yielded significant outcomes across multiple domains, accompanied by notable challenges. Trade with the UAE and Saudi Arabia surged, with the UAE emerging as one of India's top trading partners, supported by investment pledges and MoUs across various sectors, as documented in official Indian government releases. Defense procurement from Israel and expanding naval cooperation with Gulf states bolstered India's security presence in the western Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea, enhancing maritime domain awareness and joint anti-piracy and counterterrorism efforts. The Chabahar port project remained strategically vital but faced limitations due to sanctions and financial constraints, while proposals for rail-and-port corridors linking India to the Middle East and Europe, discussed in diplomatic communiqués around G20 engagements, reflected ambitious connectivity goals but encountered implementation hurdles. Diplomatically, India maintained a neutralist stance, balancing cooperation with Israel and Gulf states while sustaining engagement with Iran and supporting Palestinian development. This hedging approach enabled India to maximize regional benefits but demanded careful diplomatic navigation to manage tensions arising from aligning with competing actors in a geopolitically complex region.

Contradictions and Challenges

- **Balancing Israel and Iran:** Deepening defence and intelligence ties with Israel risked complicating India's engagement with Iran. Chabahar and Central Asian connectivity desires sometimes clashed with geopolitical realities (sanctions, regional rivalries).
- **Dependence and Vulnerability:** Heavy energy dependence on the Gulf exposes India to supply shocks and political risks. While diversification and strategic petroleum reserves were policy responses, the structural dependence persisted.
- **Implementation Gaps:** Many MoUs and grand corridor proposals require lengthy implementation, substantial financing, and intergovernmental coordination; the gap between diplomatic announcements and on-ground execution remained a constraint.
- **Diaspora Governance Strains:** Protecting the welfare of Indian expatriates during regional crises (e.g., conflicts, pandemics) requires robust consular apparatus and labour protections—areas where existing systems were sometimes stretched

Findings

1. **From Transactional to Strategic:** India's policy up to 2023 shows a clear shift from transactional engagement (energy and labour) to strategic partnerships—especially with the UAE and Saudi Arabia—reflecting deeper institutionalization and long-term investment thinking.
2. **Security–Economic Nexus:** Defence and security cooperation increasingly dovetailed with economic ties, indicating a convergence of India's economic and strategic interests in the region (e.g., Israeli defence tech aiding India's security modernization; UAE/Saudi investment supporting Indian infrastructure).
3. **Connectivity as Policy Priority but Hard to Execute:** Connectivity projects like Chabahar captured strategic imagination but faced practical obstacles (sanctions, financing), limiting their transformative potential during the period analysed.
4. **Hedging and Strategic Autonomy:** India successfully managed to deepen ties with several competing actors without fully aligning with any single regional bloc, preserving strategic autonomy while enlarging its strategic footprint. However, this required delicate diplomatic balancing and constant recalibration.

Policy Recommendations

1. **Institutionalize Multi-Track Partnerships:** Convert MoUs into operational frameworks with clear timelines and joint oversight bodies to bridge the implementation gap in corridor and investment projects (e.g., an India-GCC infrastructure task force). Evidence shows many agreements remained at the announcement stage; institutional mechanisms can accelerate delivery.

2. Strategic Energy Diversification: While maintaining Gulf ties, India should accelerate diversification (LNG, renewables partnerships, strategic petroleum reserves, and investments in upstream projects) to reduce vulnerability to supply shocks. The economic data up to 2023 underscores Gulf centrality but also risk.
3. Operationalize Maritime Security Cooperation: Strengthen naval interoperability, information-sharing, and joint logistics with friendly Gulf navies to protect sea lines of communication. The trend of increasing maritime cooperation justifies deeper institutional investments.
4. Protect Diaspora Welfare Proactively: Expand consular capacity and labour MOUs to ensure worker protections and crisis response capabilities, given the centrality of remittances to India's economy. Official statements emphasize diaspora centrality; policy should reflect that centrality operationally.
5. Calibrated Iran Policy with Contingency Planning: Sustain engagement with Iran on areas of mutual interest (e.g., Chabahar) while building contingencies to manage sanctions-related risks—enhancing multilateral backup mechanisms and insurance arrangements for projects sensitive to sanction regimes. Reuters reporting on Chabahar highlights both opportunity and constraint.
6. Leverage Technology & Start-up Synergies: Deepen ties with Israel, UAE and Saudi Arabia on innovation, water technologies, healthcare, and climate tech—areas with high mutual payoff beyond defence. Bilateral exchanges already point to these complementarities.

Conclusion

India's engagement with the Middle East underwent a significant strategic deepening: from energy and labour-centric transactions to institutionalized strategic partnerships integrating commerce, investment, defence and connectivity. High-level diplomacy—manifest in strategic councils, state visits and MoUs—translated into expanded trade with the UAE, stronger strategic ties with Saudi Arabia, intensified defence and technology cooperation with Israel, and continued yet constrained engagement with Iran on connectivity. India's diplomatic posture was marked by pragmatic hedging and an emphasis on strategic autonomy—an approach that allowed New Delhi to broaden its options without surrendering freedom of manoeuvre.

However, the transition from diplomatic announcements to tangible implementation remained uneven; projects like Chabahar showcased strategic intent but encountered implementation headwinds. Similarly, the interlocking of economic and security interests created both opportunities and management challenges—especially regarding balancing ties with Israel and Iran, and protecting energy and diaspora interests in an unstable region. For Indian policymakers, the imperative is to consolidate institutional mechanisms that convert strategic rhetoric into deliverable outcomes, deepen energy diversification, and strengthen maritime and diaspora resilience. Careful, calibrated diplomacy that preserves strategic autonomy while cultivating deeper bilateral and multilateral partnerships will be vital as India navigates the Middle East's fast-shifting strategic landscape.

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