

Post-Event Report
India's Role in West- Asia Roundtable Conference
3rd September 2015
India International Centre

Following the renewed political and public discourse regarding India-West Asia relations compounded by the recent visit of the Indian Prime Minister to the UAE, the Oval Observer Foundation organized a Roundtable Conference on the 3rd of September 2015 on 'India's Role in West- Asia ' at the India International Centre, New Delhi (India). The conference focused on the strategic importance of West Asia for India while raising doubts about the great power status of India in this multipolar world. The underlying theme of the session focused on whether India is ready to undertake the responsibility of being a Great Power?

Mr. Sanmit Ahuja, Vice Chairman of Oval Observer Foundation, chaired the conference. He highlighted the goals and vision of the Foundation and briefed the audience about the work being undertaken by the Foundation in various spheres aimed at political and socio-economic development. With respect to the Foundation's West Asia project, Mr. Ahuja highlighted the regional importance of West Asia for India not just for security concerns, but also for larger economic, social and political interests. Mr. Ahuja ended his opening statement by questioning whether a South-South dialogue is possible and what role India plays in it.

The Secretary (East), Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Government of India (GOI), Mr Anil Wadhwa's [keynote speech](#) in the beginning of the conference was read out to the audience. The speech equally voiced the strategic importance of West Asia for India and considered the region a part of India's extended neighbourhood. Accommodating the challenges that West Asia faces today, the Secretary called out for a multi pronged approach by the Indian government to tackle pressing issues. The speech mentioned that in context of the recent rise of ISIS in the region and the simmering sectarian conflict, a military solution should be discouraged. Rather with a concerted political effort, humanitarian assistance, counter terrorism and intelligence sharing, India would be able to engage with West Asia and other international players more effectively. The speech also highlighted India's limitations in foreign policy engagement that should not be mistaken as political passivity, but India's ideological bias on "old order neutrality". The concluding remarks in the Secretary's speech pointed out the daunting challenges that lie for India in pursuit of its vital interests in West Asia.

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The key points highlighting India's foreign policy approach towards West Asia can be summarized as:

- India supports a UN backed, Syrian led comprehensive political settlement that takes into account the aspirations of the Syrian people. Military solution is not the answer for the Syrian crisis.
- India will continue to maintain a consistent policy on Israel-Palestine. India's policy extends strong support to the Palestine cause, however without hurting its bilateral relationship with Israel. India has pledged US \$ 4 million at the Cairo International Conference on Gaza Reconstruction in October 2014 and have honoured its commitment in January 2015.
- India is of the opinion that the only solution to the IS can be through a larger political approach requiring a consolidated rather than fragmented perspective, including intelligence sharing, counter terrorism, cyber space cooperation. In view of the situation of the region, new areas of defence and security cooperation have emerged. Specific measures for strengthening institutional security mechanisms can include: greater naval presence in the region, regular participation in Shared Awareness and Deconfliction (SHADE) meetings; stronger regional cooperation through naval assets in the Strait of Hormuz and Red Sea for protection of maritime trade.
- India has welcomed the successful conclusion of negotiations on the Iranian nuclear issue and is optimistic that the agreement would lead to a permanent resolution of a long standing issue.
- In terms of external players in the region, India believes that US, still remains an important player for regional stability owing to its economic capability and sustainability.

Former Ambassador, Mr. Ishrat Aziz, was the first panellist to speak at the session. He highlighted the historical, geopolitical and geostrategic importance of West Asia to India. Both historically and geopolitically, West Asia has been of primary significance to India because all India's sea-lanes, air corridors to the West are through this region. Mr. Aziz pointed out India's dependency on the region for energy resources. In economic terms, Mr. Aziz quite prudently pointed out, that the small Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries have been reeling under insecurity for the simple reason that they are small in size that prevents them from attaining economic diversification, which is essentially why these countries seek greater cooperation with larger countries. From this reasoning, comes the validity that India becomes a natural partner for West Asia for economic and security reasons. The concluding remarks ended on a very clear note that India, in order to emerge as a global player, must grow at 10 per cent in the coming years and West Asia as a region is indispensable for the achievement.

The highlights of Mr Aziz's observations were:

- The region, especially Gulf should be considered of vital importance to India, next to its immediate neighbourhood, South Asia.

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- The welfare of the sizeable Indian diaspora living in the region should not be looked as charity but investment by India. The contribution made by the 7 million strong Indian diasporais attached to the prosperity of 21 million people in India, therefore significant efforts are expected for the welfare of the expatriate population.
- India remains a favourable state for the larger West Asia and North Africa region as it has been able to maintain a cordial relation with almost all the countries. However India's job becomes difficult with the changing global equations and the emerging sectarian conflicts in the region. The prominent concept of the 'Shia-Sunni' divide, that is often quoted in newspapers and journals, which citing it as problem in West Asia offers a rather simplistic explanation for conflicts in the region. The divide rather emanates from the divide between Iran and the other regional powers that has not found a solution till date. Thus the region is not only reeling under a sectarian conflict but is also subject to strategic confrontation between competing interests.
- Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) concluded between Iran and P5+1 has become a reality today and India must take this opportunity to develop stronger ties with Iran and the region.
- India must strengthen its economic ties with the region backed by strategic goals.

Professor P.R Kumaraswamy, Faculty member, School of International Studies, JNU, was next on the panel. The start off point for Professor Kumaraswamy was the recent visit by the Hon'ble PM Narendra Modi to the United Arab Emirates. Analysing P.M. Modi's move, he suggested that Modi is far from being a "wooly eyed idealist". He said, "On the contrary he is a hard core realist, who is focussed on building a robust Indian economy and steering India towards achieving a Great power status." Therefore, he is of the opinion India under Modi is about to see a strategic and more focussed relation with Israel in the coming years, in spite of its historical support to the Palestinian cause. Notwithstanding Indian sympathy with Palestine, India can gain more with its partnership in Israel. However, he added that this partnership is not going to be based solely on security and military cooperation, but a "non-glamorous" one. He stated that The strategic ties will be effectively based on agriculture, irrigation, waste management, though a non-glamorous one, will serve India with its immediate needs. On concluding his note, Professor Kumaraswamy also pointed out the "Elephant in the room", highlighting the daunting challenge for India to balance a triangular relationship of Iran-India-Saudi Arabia amidst pressing issues such as the resurgence of Islamic extremism, energy and security of expatriates; and cautioned that India would have to tread very carefully lest there could be severe ramifications on the domestic front.

In essence the key points made by Professor Kumaraswamy were:

- Considering P.M. Modi's strategic visit to UAE, can we say UAE is going to be India's next Singapore? In other words, Could UAE act as the platform for greater engagement with the larger West Asia and North Africa division?
- Stand-alone foreign visits of the current government forms a crucial strategic endeavour, unlike past Indian governments where focus was too many regions but none got a concerted

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focus. Modi's visit to Israel has been predicted to be a stand-alone visit too and this is going to yield significant strategic benefit for India.

- In spite of having strong ideological bias towards the Palestinian cause, which appeared prudent during the cold war era, India must espouse *RealPolitik* and look towards forging stronger ties with Israel for larger international gains.

Next in line to address the conference was Mr Satbir Singh, Joint Secretary (West Asia & North Africa), and Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Government of India (GOI). Mr. Singh brought a different picture to the floor. He conceptualized India's evolving strategy in West Asia- where does India place West Asia as a region in the 21st century? Mr Singh commented that with the changing energy basket West Asia does not provide a significant regional weightage and from that perspective, India is not currently looking at the region as a vital interest zone. Having said that, Mr. Singh mentioned India remains interested in strengthening economic linkages with the region but not at the cost of getting involved proactively in other issues that affect the region. Since the region remains deeply mired in conflicts primarily due to the "internal" factors, currently no state has the power to change the systemic balance. However, the security and welfare of the people i.e. the Indian diaspora remains a key concern for the Government of India. Mr. Singh concluded his remarks by hinting change in perspective of India's foreign policy towards this region, which would be based on exploring the contours of economic engagement but will steer clear of getting actively involved in conflicts.

At the end of arguments, observations and recommendations provided by the esteemed panellists, what followed was a lively discussion comprising of multiple comments and queries. The foreign Ambassadors and diplomats who were in attendance at the conference especially from Iraq, Egypt and Tunisia brought their concerns to the table, regarding India's silenced approach in this region and urged India to undertake a more proactive stance. H.E. Ahmed Berwari, Ambassador of Iraq to India, while sharing the situation back home because of repeated attacks by ISIS, commented on India's limited role and involvement.

He commended India's efforts in evacuating its citizens, but suggested that India ought to have extended greater help to the region considering the historic economic and civilizational ties that India shares with Iraq. Professor Kumaraswamy responded to the concerns of the Iraqi Ambassador by highlighting India's limitations which preclude it from achieving a great power status and that such expectations from India are not realistic. However, H.E. Hatem Tageldin, Ambassador of Egypt, in response to Professor Kumaraswamy comment on great power expectation and strategic ties with Israel, commented that Palestine remained a key issue for Egypt even during the Arab spring and it played an important role in brokering a ceasefire, thus it is not a question of capability rather a question of willingness to engage. H.E. Tarek Azouz, Ambassador of Tunisia to India, also responded to Professor Kumaraswamy's statement by stressing that India has a moral duty to support the Palestinian cause and shouldn't just look at relations in the region from an economic and strategic standpoint. Thus, the diplomats from the Arab region, through their utterances, urged India to adopt a more proactive than a reactive policy in the region.

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Mr. Satbir Singh disagreed with Professor Kumaraswamy on the issue of India's capabilities stating that this was the view of an academic and not the Indian government. He further underlined India's interest motivated strategy in West Asia. He mentioned that while India's capability factor is not a question, it would undertake its due responsibility when it coincides with its larger interests and prefers to maintain a studied silence given the current scenario. Mr Singh also pointed out various instances when India has actively engaged in recent issues that showcases its strength- for example the Indian Navy operations against the Somali pirates and rescue operations in Yemen. Mr. Aziz however analysed India's great power status from a balanced view underscoring the principle of 'punching according to one's own weight'. He rather focused on the dearth of methodological exploration in studying policy issues. He observed that the beauty of policy-making is to optimize one's own resources and an honest discussion on the same could easily mitigate conflict and lead to better engagement. On this point, Kumaraswamy pointed out India's policies are extremely sound but it fails to articulate the same effectively. He mentioned further that India as a rising power cannot afford amity with everyone but must take a more proactive role to strengthen ties with its strategic partners. A delegate present in the conference brought out an important point on the lack of institutionalization and capacity building measures that slacks India's role as a global power. He emphasized on the need for more Track II initiatives on the part of India, which promotes a healthy exchange of views between India and her strategic partners.

Mr Sanmit Ahuja concluded the vibrant session by reiterating the importance India's larger role in the West Asian region in the coming years and recommended that India and West Asian countries should engage with each other on different levels more regularly in order to achieve workable solution for seemingly intractable problems and build robust models for mutual economic development. A forum that could engage in conversations on India delving deeper into its economic interaction with West Asia was one of the key outcomes of the Roundtable discussion.

The Foundation, as part of its West Asia project, will be conducting another roundtable session in October, 2015, which will be focused on deepening economic linkages between India and the larger West Asia and North Africa region with the objective of fostering a mutually beneficial economic and strategic relationship.

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