

COMMENTARY

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Play it safe:

India in the Middle East in the middle of rivalries

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Prime Minister Narendra Modi has begun his third year with yet another visit to the Middle East when he met with the Qatari leadership in Doha on Sunday (5 June). In the two years since forming the government at the centre, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has undertaken four visits to Middle Eastern countries including UAE (16-17 August 2015), Turkey (14-16 November 2015 for G-20 meeting), Saudi Arabia (2-3 April 2016) and Iran (22-23 May 2016). Additionally, External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj has visited Bahrain (twice), UAE, Oman, Egypt, Israel, Palestine and Iran while President Pranab Mukherjee visited Israel, Palestine and Jordan in October 2015. In fact, if the President's combined visit to Israel, Palestine and Jordan and Swaraj's visits to Israel-Palestine and Egypt are ignored, largely the visits are confined to the Gulf region.

It reflects the significance India attaches to the Gulf, considered India's extended neighbourhood, a major external trade bloc, home to more than eight million Indian migrant population and principle supplier of oil and natural gas. However, in addition to these traditional points of convergences, the new-found vigour in Indian engagement with the Gulf is focused on two agendas; enhancing trade and investments and security and counter-terror cooperation.

Firstly, India is looking to improve investments from the GCC countries, especially the UAE and Saudi Arabia that have large sovereign wealth funds. This is a priority area for the Modi government because the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power in May 2014 with promises to put Indian economy back to fast growth. India under Modi, thus, has tried to attract investments from across the globe, especially the US, China, Japan and the Gulf. It is yet to be

seen whether this results into improvements in FDI's, though early trends indicate that foreign investors despite interests are apprehensive to invest because of procedural hurdles, lack of clarity in guidelines, requirements for multiple clearances and fears of disputes and long-drawn court cases.

India is also looking to enhance bilateral trade with each country in the region and is keen on investing in projects in the region that gives it an advantage competitors like China, as evident in the Chabahar Port project in Iran.

Secondly, India is focused on improving security and counter-terror cooperation with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and shares concerns of rising radicalization with Iran. One of the common strands in the joint statements issued during Modi's visits to the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Iran has been an emphasis on the need for fighting the scourge of terrorism that has enveloped the region especially since the outbreak of the Arab Spring and that threatens to spread to South Asia. During the prime minister's visit in August 2015, India and UAE agreed to "enhance cooperation in counter-terrorism operations, intelligence sharing and capacity building" and "coordinate efforts to counter radicalization."

Likewise, the joint statement issued in Riyadh by Prime Minister Modi and King Salman in April 2016 stated that "The two leaders agreed to further strengthen cooperation in combating terrorism, both at the bilateral level and within the multilateral system of the UN." During Modi's May 2016 visit to Iran, New Delhi and Tehran "agreed to enhance regular and institutionalized consultations between them [National Security Councils] and others concerned on terrorism, security and related issues such as organized crime, money-laundering, narcotics trade and cyber crime."

This emphasis on joint efforts to deal with terrorism and organized crime with countries in the Gulf indicates the significance India attaches to security and counter-terror cooperation. India is concerned due to spread of radical ideas among its citizens, especially because in the past months a number of arrests have been made of Indians either involved in online spreading of radical ideologies or willing to join the Islamic State. More importantly, a number of Indians, men and women, have been deported from the Gulf countries for their involvement in either trying to recruit Indian Muslims for Jihad in Iraq and Syria or for propagating the Islamic State's ideology.

To counter such efforts, intelligence inputs and cooperation in cyber security are critically important and hence, India is emphasizing on counter-terror cooperation and intelligence sharing, especially with the UAE and Saudi Arabia that together host over 5.5 million Indians.

The engagements with countries in the Gulf, however, are fraught with challenges because of the tensions between difference countries and multiple social and political cleavages afflicting

them. The Saudi-Iranian rivalry is a case in point and the more India engages with the two regional powers, the more it will be seen with suspicion by the other. The rivalry is deep-rooted and has sectarian cleavages and is currently at an all time high. There is no doubt that both Saudi Arabia and Iran are important for India and it cannot afford to take sides. The second aspect of the close engagements with Arab Gulf states and Iran is India's close relations with Israel.

In fact, when the BJP-led government came to power in 2014, it was expected that Prime Minister Modi will recalibrate India's Middle East policy towards Israel. Nonetheless, in the two years, it has become amply clear that the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government has continued on the policy of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government, so far India's Middle East policy is concerned and does not intend to radically alter its position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict while continuing to enhance its relations with Israel.

This "balancing act" of India in its engagements with regional rivals has worked smoothly so far, especially because India sees these as bilateral engagements. However, the calls for forming multilateral forums and arguments by some Indian analysts to enhance its engagements to mediate between the rivals is fraught with danger mainly because the unpredictable nature of geostrategic alignments in the Middle East. There are no permanent friends or foes and this is clear from the growing willingness of engagement between Israel and Arab Gulf countries with converging interest to counter Iran's regional ambitions and influence.

Undoubtedly, India cannot afford to disengage with these regional powers but will have to tread carefully to not take sides in their mutual problems. Hence, India should avoid the trappings of getting involved in the regional rivalry despite calls for it to take advantage of its good relations with each country and facilitate talks. Indian interest can be better served by understanding the regional cleavages and acting accordingly rather than getting its fingers burned by getting entangled in the regional rivalries.

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