

MEI DOCUMENTS

No. 18

Thursday, 14 February 2013

Emerging Trends in West Asia: Regional and Global Implications

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Members of the strategic communality,
Distinguished participants,
Excellencies,
Members of the media,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to address this distinguished gathering that has come together for the 15th Asian Security Conference being organised by IDSA. Over the years, the Conference has attracted eminent strategic experts and scholars from across the world. This is the 15th year in a row that the IDSA is organising a conference on themes pertaining to Asian security.

The response of the international strategic community to this year's theme, "Emerging Trends in West Asia: Regional and Global Implications", has been encouraging. In the context of West Asia, the theme is highly relevant, as developments in West Asia have a major impact on regional and international security. Many distinguished speakers from West Asia, North Africa, United States, United Kingdom, Europe, Australia, Pakistan, Japan and China will be sharing their views during the Conference. '

Since December 2010, the Middle East has been experiencing tumultuous changes. These changes have ushered in fundamental political and socio-economic transformation in the Arab

world. New political dispensations have taken over in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and Yemen. Such transition, unfortunately, has been accompanied by large-scale violence. The ongoing violence in Syria is a matter of concern for the region, as well as the world. Moreover, recently, extremists believed to be linked with the Al Qaeda elements took over the government in Mali. Meanwhile, France has sent its military forces for intervention.

The recent developments in all these countries afford a few lessons: Firstly, no government, or regime, can afford to ignore the popular aspirations anymore. The common strand running through all these protests and demonstrations has been the youth. The voice of the youth is a universal message that is strongly echoing across to governments in all regions of the world. The strong urge for change is clearly visible across the region. Secondly, the process of transformation is far from complete and on the contrary, has just begun. The journey ahead will be long, tortuous and full of unexpected twists and turns. Thirdly, the developments in West Asia have the potential of changing the regional and geopolitical landscape. The West Asia region is critical for energy security. Instability in the region will have an impact on global oil prices, availability of oil and gas and shipping of these resources. Fourthly, though traditional political and socio-economic structures have been transformed, new structures that will replace them have not yet got consolidated. While fundamentalist forces have got a fillip, democracy is yet to be consolidated. New political equations are emerging in Iraq and Afghanistan, which has heightened regional and global uncertainties. Lastly, social media has emerged as a potent and vibrant force. The social media has served as a 'force multiplier' in the hands of the protesters.

For India, in particular, West Asia is a critical region. People-to-people contacts have existed between India and West Asia for centuries. These links have got deepened and further strengthened in the era of globalisation. Our stability and prosperity are affected by the developments in the region. First, the Gulf region is vital for India's energy security. The region has about 48 per cent of the world's total proven oil reserves and almost 15 per cent of the world's natural gas reserves. Nearly two-thirds of our hydrocarbon imports are from this region. This will continue to be so in the near future. In addition, nearly 6.5 million Indians live and work in different countries of this region. A World Bank report says that India received US \$ 70 billion in remittances during 2012 and a majority of the remittances came from the Gulf region. These remittances support nearly 40-50 million people in India and at the same time, contribute to local prosperity. During 2011, India evacuated nearly 19, 000 Indians working in Libya. The safety and security of Indians working in the region is a sensitive concern for the Indian

government.

India's trade with the region is expanding. During 2011-12, India's trade with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) was more than US \$145 billion (with exports and imports from the region standing at 20 per cent and 14 per cent) respectively). India also offers a destination for surplus funds in GCC countries. India has a long tradition of democracy and it is home to a diverse, pluralistic society. The democratic processes have managed its vast regional, cultural, linguistic and regional diversity. At a time when several West Asian nations are in a state of transition, India can share its experiences with the governments and civil societies.

Recent developments have complicated the security situation in the region. Given India's vital stakes in peace and stability in the region, it is natural for India to have an interest in abiding peace and security in the region. At the same time, long-standing conflicts in the region cannot be ignored.

India can ill-afford to remain aloof from the transformative changes taking place in its immediate and extended neighbourhood. We have centuries old linkages with the Arab world. Our civilisations have closely interacted and influenced each other in the past. We have excellent bilateral relations and the relation can be placed on an even stronger footing in the new phase that has set in recently in West Asia.

Ladies and gentlemen,

This Conference is holding deliberations on several themes. The discussions will explore the causes behind the ongoing transformation; look into the future and make an attempt to assess the regional and global impacts of these changes. I have been told that several sessions will also explore India's relations with this region. I am sure that the delegates will come up with crucial inputs and practical recommendations during these discussions.

With these words, I hope that our foreign guests will have a pleasant and an enjoyable stay. I wish the deliberations at the Conference all success.

Thank you. Jai Hind.

Note: Inaugural Address by Defence Minister A K Antony at the 15th Asian Security Conference on "Emerging Trends in West Asia: Regional and Global Implications", February 2013

Source: IDSA, New Delhi,

http://www.idsa.in/keyspeeches/DefenceMinisterAKAntony_15ASC

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