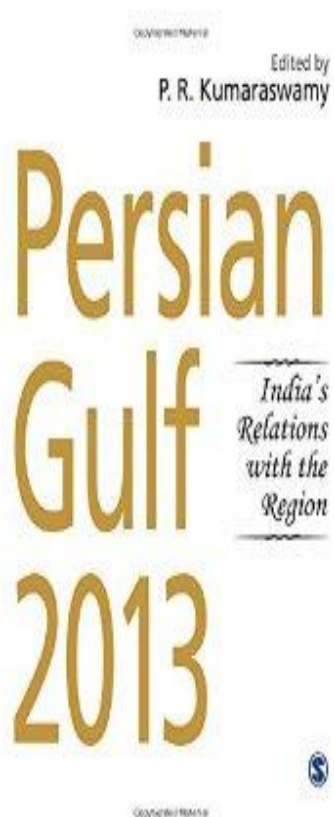


BOOK REVIEW

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PERSIAN GULF 2013:

INDIA'S RELATIONS WITH THE REGION

Ed. By P R Kumaraswamy

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Review by

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The 'West Asian Region' stretching north and south of the Persian Gulf, across to Turkey in the West and Egypt in Africa has always been an area of prime focus in international politics. It has served as a land bridge between the East and West since medieval times (the Old Silk route). While vast oil and gas resources have made the region strategically significant, the threat of terrorism emanating from Islamic fundamentalist ideology has remained

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a cause for global concern.

Although the wider region is important, it is the Persian Gulf region, which is a part of India's extended neighbourhood that serves the country's key national interests and is of vital strategic importance. The region is home to more than 6.5 million Indians, many of whom have been there for generations and contribute more than US\$ 35 billion in remittances. India's economic and commercial engagement with this region is more than US\$ 160 billion per annum. It is a source of more than 65 per cent of India's oil and gas requirements and hence, critical for its energy security. Despite numerous intra-regional issues, which are often contradictory and conflicting in nature, India has successfully managed an independent multi-vector policy with each of the nations.

The outbreak of the popular protests in the Arab world since December 2010 has significantly changed the geopolitical and strategic landscape of the region. The popular uprisings and the subsequent regime change have brought the region again into the limelight. At the same time, old problems like the Israel-Palestine conflict, the Iran-Saudi Arabia rivalry, the Iranian nuclear issue, the continuing turmoil in Iraq and Yemen, etc. continue to haunt the region. The involvement of the extra-regional powers like the US, the EU, Russia, and China adds further to the complex regional intrigue. The rise of Islamists in mainstream politics in the region especially Egypt and Tunisia seems to be another crucial development.

In the light of the evolving regional strategic environment as also long term interests in the region, it becomes essential for India to monitor and study the developments extremely carefully. In this context, P R Kumaraswamy's edited volume on the Persian Gulf not only recognizes the importance of the Gulf region, but also attempts to draw the attention of Indian policy makers towards this vital region. Persian Gulf 2013 is a useful volume for readers looking for insights into major developments in the Gulf region in 2012. The book is very well laid in the form of country wise chapters, which help the reader in assimilating issues better, along with an exhaustive introductory chapter that provides excellent contextual linkages.

The editor highlights the primacy of the Persian Gulf region in the context of India and its neighbourhood, and underscores that despite this acknowledged primacy, the Persian Gulf has inadequate attention from Indian policy makers and think tanks. The region continues to draw attention only for controversies and conflict. Discussions tend to commence with 'civilization links' but fail to tread more important issues. He highlights the importance given by the British to the Persian Gulf region during their rule in India wherein their decisions on the Gulf region were administered from the Bombay Presidency. The imperial connections were however not leveraged by Independent India, shunning it as colonial baggage. The editor also highlights the use of the term 'West Asia' instead of 'Middle East' in India, calling it a disregard to common

expressions used not only by the international community but also by the concerned countries of the region.

The Introduction is exhaustive and gives an excellent overview of the prevailing as well as emerging dynamics in the region. Commencing from historical links, it takes the reader through various issues, which have had an impact on India's relations with the region in the post-independence era. The Arab-Israeli conflict, India's support to the Palestine cause resulting in 'non-relations' with Israel for four decades, the Pakistan factor, the post Cold-War transformation in India's Middle East policy that among other things led to kick-starting a formal and important relationship with Israel, etc. have been highlighted. In a specific mention to the Persian Gulf, the chapter highlights the importance of India's economic engagement with the region and its criticality to India's energy security. Commencing from a meagre US\$ 6.2 billion, the trade with the Middle East in 2011–12 had expanded to US\$ 205 billion with six out of the top 25 trading partners for India being from the Persian Gulf region. Citing the India Hydrocarbon Vision 2025, the editor highlights the importance of the Gulf region to India's energy security requirements. The last part of the chapter outlines some of the major challenges that India faces in its relations with the Gulf region. One of the major challenges in seeking closer ties with the countries in the region is the interstate conflict and rivalries wherein improving relations with one could be seen as adversarial by the other. The author claims that the great power rivalry involving the US, Russia, China and Japan as well as the Sino-Indian political cooperation will be tested in the manner in which they manage the Gulf region, especially its energy resources.

Lack of India's engagement at the highest level including visits by the Prime Minister or the President, the mishandling of the visit of Omani Sultan in 2012 and the perceived indifference to the 'Arab Spring' developments indicate towards India's neglect of the region, which is not only a concern but also a challenge. The US role in the region, the Indo-Iran ties and its impact on India's relations with the US and the region, the diminishing role of Pakistan and the resultant space for enhancement in Indo-Saudi Arabia ties, the rise of China and the intensifying sectarian divide in the region are other major political challenges for India. In the economic sphere, the rising energy demands and the challenge to meet these from the Gulf region, the need to create the right environment to attract investors from the region as also the need to find avenues to balance the trade imbalance, which is presently skewed in favour of the Gulf countries, are cited as major challenges. Despite the undeniable importance of the region to India, it has not received adequate attention. The editor underlines the importance of understanding the complexities of the region as a precursor to formulating meaningful policy options for India.

The following chapters (2–10) deal with each of the countries in the region; the GCC countries, Yemen, Iran and Iraq. The chapters are uniformly laid out and focus on the basic issues,

domestic, political and economic developments in each of the countries in 2012 and their engagement with India. For anyone looking to follow key moments in the country's history in 2012, these chapters provide very useful and relevant information. Key events affecting the nations have been covered in each chapter. Detailed endnotes make it very relevant reference material for further research. Well laid out tables, uniform layout of chapters and inputs from authoritative sources make the assimilation even more comprehensive. The mention of external players like the US, China, Pakistan and even Russia in influencing the discourse of respective countries and their impact on their relations with India are relevant to the context. Some of the chapters (Iran, Chapter 3) have also enumerated and discussed problems and challenges in their relations with India, which give a good insight for policy makers and analysts in seeking solutions and paving a path for better bilateral ties.

The chapters, in their quest for uniformity have, however, missed some important issues, which could be considered necessary in discussing the country. In addition, the interface of each of these countries with the region, especially in the context of historical issues as well as current issues (the Arab Spring) would have made the chapter comprehensive. In the case of Bahrain (Chapter 2), the involvement of Saudi Arabia is very important, but does not get adequate mention in the section on Saudi Arabia. In the case of Iran (Chapter 3), its nuclear issue, its involvement in the Syrian crisis, the impact of the Arab spring on its expansion in regional influence would have made this chapter more comprehensive. Similarly, on Iraq (Chapter 4), the discussion on external players could have included Iran, being so important in shaping Iraq's outlook.

The chapter on Saudi Arabia (Chapter 8) is very well laid out and especially addresses key Indian concerns, namely, its defence relations and Hajj. However, it does not adequately cover Saudi Arabia's role in the region especially in the context of Iran, the GCC, and Israel. Yemen (Chapter 10), often called the battlefield for proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia would have looked more comprehensive with the mention of their role under the section of external players.

The last two chapters focus on the GCC and policy options for India. The GCC's role and stance on regional issues and the critical issue of the GCC security could have been given separate attention. The last chapter on policy options is very well laid out and clearly lays out the broad contours for policy makers to enhance engagement with the Gulf region. Persian Gulf 2013 is the second edition in the series, the first being Persian Gulf 2012, a kindle version. For scholars, policy makers and readers interested in the Persian Gulf region, it is a 'must read'.

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