XVI. Indian Power Projection in the Greater Middle East: Tools and Objectives

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Abstract

India’s approach to the Middle East during the Cold War years was weighed down by the partition of the subcontinent and the creation of Pakistan on a religious basis, the dispute with Pakistan over the Muslim majority province of Jammu and Kashmir, and its own large Muslim minority. Hence, its policy towards the region tended to be defensive and reactive, and a general policy of support to the Arab causes, particularly that of the Palestinians, and a non-relationship with Israel were considered necessary to serve India’s broad interests in the region. India’s projection of secularism into the region was meant to prevent Pakistan from organizing an anti-Indian Islamic bloc in the region, and its projection of nonalignment was meant to scuttle the Western attempts to build anti-communist alliances there. However, the transformation in the superpowers relations following the collapse of the Soviet Union, changes in the regional environment in the Greater Middle East (GME) as well as South Asia and changes in India’s domestic sphere created a new strategic and economic context for India to pursue its interests in the GME in the 1990s. There is an increasing convergence of strategic interests between the two regions and a growing complementarity of their economies in the post-Cold War world. Iran and Israel have become the two lynchpins of India’s policy toward the region and, as an emerging global player, India, unlike during the Cold War, is in a strong position to promote its own interests as well as those of the international system in the region, which largely seem to coincide in the post-Cold War milieu.

Introduction

The Middle East, perhaps, has been the most important region for India’s foreign policy calculations outside the subcontinent ever since the
emergence of India and Pakistan as independent states from British colonial rule in 1947. Though India has had close and continuous commercial and cultural relations with the region from the beginnings of recorded history, the nature and content of this interaction changed dramatically with the emergence of the modern state system, with sovereignty and territoriality as its defining features, in the Middle East as well as in South Asia. The nature of India’s power projection in the Greater Middle East (GME) in the post-Cold War world, the objectives of such an exercise and the tools deployed to achieve them, are very different from those obtained during the Cold War. This is primarily because of the dramatic changes that have taken place at the global level in the superpowers’ relations, at the regional level in the Middle East and South Asia and in India’s own domestic sphere following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, and the subsequent end of the Cold War.

This chapter, after a brief survey of India’s interaction with the Middle East during the Cold War, will focus on India’s post-Cold War forays into the GME and the forces and factors that influenced them. This focus makes it possible to appreciate change as well as continuity in India’s policy toward the region during and after the Cold War.

India’s relations with the Middle East went through certain distinct phases during the Cold War. The 1950s and 1960s saw India adopt a highly political approach to the region as a consequence of the partition of the subcontinent and the creation of Pakistan on the basis of self-determination for Muslims of the subcontinent, the dispute over Muslim majority province of Jammu and Kashmir, and the existence of a large Muslim minority in India even after partition. India’s projection of secularism into the region was meant to counter the possible emergence of a Pakistan-inspired Pan-Islamic movement inimical to India’s national interests in the region. India’s simultaneous projection of nonalignment into the Middle East was designed to arouse nationalist sentiments among the people of the region in order to counter the Western efforts to build anti-Soviet alliances there. Pakistan, joining the Baghdad Pact in 1955, from the Indian point of view, provided for the convergence of these two forces, confirming India’s worst fears. Consequently, a Cairo-centric regional policy and a non-relationship with Israel, in spite of India’s recognition of the Jewish state in 1950, were the political props considered necessary by successive Indian governments to protect and promote India’s perceived interests in the region. The 1970s and 1980s, however, witnessed a shift in India’s policy towards the region from the political to the economic. After the oil boom in the mid-1970s, the Middle East became an important source of oil for India’s growing economy, of employment for its citizens, and of huge foreign remittances. India also made a conscious effort to cultivate the newly emergent powers