

INDIA AND THE MIDDLE EAST: TREADING A COMPLEX TIGHTROPE

by
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The October 7, 2023, Hamas attack in Israel and the consequent Israeli war on Gaza has reignited the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, bringing it to the fore of Middle East and international politics. The recurrence of violent events keeps the Middle East on the boil forcing the regional and external powers to respond to the immediate issues derailing possible long-term undertakings. With India's [engagements in the Middle East](#) growing rapidly, this makes it very complicated for New Delhi as the international community remains divided on the way forward.

For much of the Cold War, India's positions towards conflicts in the Middle East were rooted in the anti-colonial and anti-imperial convictions of its policymakers. The recalibration of Indian foreign policy in the post-Cold War period started a gradual shift with New Delhi prioritizing interest over values. This meant that New Delhi established diplomatic relations with Israel in 1992 and slowly moved away from unconditional support for Palestinian nationalism. However, this was not a smooth and unhindered transition and it took some time for India to clearly [articulate the de-hyphenation](#) between Israel and Palestine.

In the meantime, bilateral relations with Israel soared at multiple levels including defense and security, science and technology and agriculture, while India continued to engage the Palestinian Authority (PA) with developmental aid for capacity building. The outbreak of occasional violence between Israel and Gaza-based militant organizations since 2008-09 did challenge this approach. Nonetheless, given the domestic sensitivities, the Manmohan Singh government (2004-14) took an [ambiguous position](#) critical of the continued Israeli occupation without calling out the Palestinian violence. This, however, changed under the Narendra Modi government (2014–) given the heightened sensitivity with regard

to terrorism and the end of hesitation in openly embracing Israel.

The Gaza Crisis

India was unambiguous in condemning the October 7 attack by Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Israel as an “act of terror.” Prime Minister Modi was one of the first world leaders to expressing his “[shock](#).” However, the massive Israeli response and the death and destruction caused by it led New Delhi to nuance its position underscoring its continued support for a two-state solution. During the second Voice of Global South summit hosted in virtual format by India on November 17, Modi [underlined](#) the need for “dialogue, diplomacy and restraint” condemning the growing civilian casualties in the war.

The shifts in Indian response can be assuaged from the way New Delhi voted in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) resolutions concerning Gaza crisis. To the resolution “Protection of Civilians and Upholding Legal and Humanitarian Obligations” adopted by the UNGA on October 27, India [abstained](#) along with Australia, Canada, Germany, Japan, Ukraine, and the UK citing objection to the resolution not explicitly condemning the Hamas' terrorist attack and Israeli hostages. Subsequently, India voted in favor of two UNGA resolutions on [November 11](#) and [December 12](#) that called for an end to Israeli settlements in occupied Palestinian territories and immediate ceasefire in Gaza on humanitarian grounds, respectively.

Developments in the Red Sea

Although New Delhi has been able to maintain a nuanced position on the war in Gaza, the expansion of the conflict to the Red Sea complicates India's choices and makes it difficult for it to remain on the sidelines. The Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) in the Western Indian Ocean are critical waterways for India's trade with the Persian Gulf, East Africa, Europe and the Mediterranean, and the disruptions caused in the Red Sea by Houthi attacks is affecting international shipping. The Indian navy has been [active](#) in the region fighting piracy and protecting Indian and international shipping. It has, over the years, increased its interactions with the U.S. and

other navies in the region to coordinate responses to threats to the SLOCs in the region. However, in the current situation, India has largely focused its resources in [acting against piracy](#) attempts without joining the military action led by the U.S. and UK against Houthi targets in Yemen.

Further, there remains a possibility of the war in Gaza and developments in the Red Sea expanding, especially as the West Bank, Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria remain restive and witnessing frequent violence, attacks and counter attacks. The possibility of the [war engulfing the region](#) if Iran and its regional proxies get directly involved or if the U.S. and Israel decide to take the war into Iran – although the possibility remains low – cannot be completely ruled out. Nonetheless, the chances of a prolonged conflict and insurgency in the Occupied Territories remains high. In such a scenario, the regional geopolitical climate would be much more consequential for India.

Regional and International Geopolitics

The prolonged war in Gaza in all likelihood has slowed the Israel-Arab rapprochement marked by the signing of the Abraham Accords. New Delhi's joining of the [India, Israel, UAE, US \(I2U2\)](#) minilateral initiative with focus on energy and food security and proposing the [India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor \(IMEC\)](#) during the G20 Summit in New Delhi in September 2023 underlined the Indian confidence in the Israel-Arab rapprochement. Thus, a prolonged conflict might force some rethinking.

India's ability to find a balance between the three regional poles, Israeli, Arabs (with all its internal competitions and contestations) and Iranian would largely depend on the need, first and foremost, to [safeguarding its interest especially with the Gulf Cooperation Council \(GCC\)](#) states. Simultaneously, India is likely to continue keeping the [diplomatic and strategic channels with Iran](#) open given the situation in Afghanistan. [India's strong defense ties with Israel](#) is also consequential to its choices in the Middle East, including on the Israel-Palestine front.

The focus of the Indian response, while tempered

in accordance with the regional sensibilities, will be determined by the [geo-economic opportunities](#) that the region offers. Thus, the U.S.-led regional approach focused on economic integration and bringing the regional stakeholders on a common platform of prosperity and stability will continue to have Indian support and participation.

Finally, the Indian response is mindful of the highly [volatile](#) international geopolitical situation. The ongoing tensions between the US-led international order and the Chinese attempts at strengthening multipolarity is highly consequential for developments in the Middle East, and is likely to inform the Indian response. This has already led India to explore coordination with the U.S. in the Middle East, and the trend is likely to strengthen in the future with a focus on geo-economic partnerships with likeminded regional actors.

Conclusion

To sum up, India has adopted a complex balancing act so far as the ongoing war in Gaza is concerned. This is informed by the [historical Indian stand](#) on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and its [support for a two-state solution](#). Further, it emanates from the gradual de-hyphenation effected by New Delhi in dealing with Israel and Palestine that is informed by its broader foreign policy directions and national interest. This has created the complex diplomatic tightrope that India is walking in the Middle East today. While recognizing the significance of sticking to the two-state solution, New Delhi is mindful of its wide-ranging interests in the region such as energy security, maritime security and safety and security of the Indian expatriates. India's focus is on maintaining strong relations with the GCC states and Israel and continued geostrategic engagements with Iran. Finally, the Indian choices in the Middle East are mindful of the global geopolitics wherein New Delhi remains committed to a multipolar world order opposed to any hegemonic ambitions.

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