

## INDIA AND THE MIDDLE EAST: BALANCING STRATEGIC INTERESTS AMID US-CHINA RIVALRY AND REGIONAL SHIFTS

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### Abstract

India's role in the Indo-Pacific has become more important as US-China rivalry intensifies. With changing power dynamics in the region, India has balanced its foreign policy to safeguard its interests and promote stability. This paper examines India's evolving strategy in the Indo-Pacific, focusing on its balancing act between the US and China in the context of regional security and economic opportunities. While much has been written about the US-China rivalry, the Indo-Pacific's importance from India's perspective has not been fully explored. This study aims to fill this gap by examining India's approach to its relations with key regional powers, particularly considering China's growing influence. The paper argues that India's strategy involves engaging China while strengthening security ties with the US and other regional partners to counterbalance China's dominance. Through this approach, India seeks to maintain strategic autonomy, protect its economic interests, and contribute to regional stability. However, the paper also notes that India's strategy doesn't always fit traditional power-balancing theories, offering a unique model for smaller states navigating great power competition.

## Introduction

The Indo-Pacific is a critical theater for 21<sup>st</sup>-century geopolitics, marked by the intense rivalry between the U.S. and China. India, with its strategic location and growing influence, plays a central role in shaping the region's future (Auslin 2020). This region has become a central arena for global geopolitical rivalry, with both the United States and China competing for dominance in areas such as regional security, trade, and strategic influence (Mohan, 2022; Mearsheimer, 2021). The Indo-Pacific has become the stage for a new struggle for dominance, with China seeking to establish hegemonic influence using its economic, military, diplomatic, and technological strength while US and its partner's trying to counter Chinese Influence. The region, stretching from the eastern shores of Africa to the western Pacific, serves as a hub for global trade, energy supply routes, and strategic interactions. It has become a focal point of great power competition, with China's growing assertiveness prompting counterstrategies from the United States and its allies. China's increasing influence in the Indo-Pacific, coupled with its aggressive posture toward smaller and weaker nations, particularly in the South China Sea, has alarmed regional and global powers. Beijing's militarization of artificial islands, its claims over disputed territories, and its use of economic coercion are clear examples of this aggression (Auslin, 2020). These actions undermine the sovereignty of regional nations and disrupt the established rules-based international order. The United States has articulated its vision for a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP), which emphasizes principles such as freedom of navigation, respect for international law, and economic prosperity. This strategy aims to ensure unimpeded trade and connectivity, regional stability, and security in response to China's assertiveness. FOIP underscores the need to bolster Indo-Pacific security and build regional resilience to transnational threats, including piracy, terrorism, and climate change-related challenges (Auslin, 2020).

However, the U.S.'s vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific is not without criticism. While the U.S. emphasizes the promotion of regional stability, its policies often reflect a broader agenda of countering China's rise. The rivalry between a democratic United States and a communist China in the Indo-Pacific represents a microcosm of their global competition for influence and dominance.

Situated at the core of this competition, India faces the challenge of balancing its relations with these two major powers. Although for India, a free and open Indo-Pacific is vital for its Security, Economic Prosperity, Strategic Importance that's why one of the reasons India's participation in multilateral frameworks such as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), comprising the U.S., Japan, Australia, and India, highlights its growing role in the Indo-Pacific. QUAD aims to promote democratic values, enhance maritime security, and counter China's influence. While strengthening its strategic partnership with the US, particularly through multilateral initiatives like the Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue), India has also maintained engagement with China on shared interests, such as trade and infrastructure (Khurana, 2020; Bhandari, 2022). Similarly, India's engagement with AUKUS (Australia, the U.K., and the U.S.) signals its support for strengthening regional security architectures. Despite its strategic importance, achieving a free and open Indo-Pacific India found itself situated in the middle of the competition between US China personal rivalry in Indo-Pacific while U.S emphasizes the promotion of regional stability, its policies often reflect a broader agenda of countering China's rise. The rivalry between a democratic United States and a communist China in the Indo-Pacific represents a microcosm of their global competition for influence and dominance.

Over the past twenty years, India's strategic approach in the Indo-Pacific has evolved as its economic and security concerns have become more closely linked with the changing regional landscape. While India's growing economic partnerships with Indo-Pacific countries have strengthened its regional standing, the simultaneous rise of China as a regional power and the evolving role of the US present India with both opportunities and challenges (Panda, 2021; Tellis, 2020). The security landscape, influenced by China's increasing military presence and the US's reaffirmation of its commitment to regional allies, has led India to adjust its foreign policy to protect its national interests (Pant, 2018).

Although there is an expanding body of research on the US-China competition in the Indo-Pacific, there is limited research specifically addressing India's role in this strategic contest (Brewster, 2017; Rajagopalan, 2019). Although much has been written about India's bilateral relations with both the US and China, the issue of how India manages the broader implications of the US-China rivalry in the Indo-Pacific has received limited attention. This study aims to address this gap by exploring how India's foreign policy has adapted in response to the competition between the US and China. The paper explores how India balances security concerns, economic objectives, and regional ambitions in this rivalry, and whether India's strategy of maintaining autonomy has allowed it to avoid being caught in a binary choice between the two great powers (Singh, 2021; Goh, 2006).

India's approach to the US-China rivalry in the Indo-Pacific has involved a combination of engagement and cautious strategy. India's policy does not strictly follow the hard balancing or alliance-building strategies observed in other regional powers. Rather, India has adopted a strategy of strategic autonomy, enabling it to safeguard its interests without being overtly drawn into the conflict between the US and China (Harrison, 2022). This nuanced approach allows India to maintain flexibility, preserve its regional influence, and avoid the risks associated with direct confrontation or alignment with either great power (Medeiros, 2005; Kuik, 2008).

This article contributes to the growing body of scholarship on India's foreign policy in the Indo-Pacific by offering a comprehensive analysis of India's evolving strategy in response to US-China rivalry. It builds on the work of scholars who have explored middle power behavior in the context of great power competition (Goh, 2006; Paul, 2018) and applies these insights to India's foreign policy choices. The article first outlines the historical context of India's engagement in the region, then discusses the shifting dynamics of US-China competition. It examines how India has balanced these pressures through strategic cooperation and hedging, before concluding with reflections on the future trajectory of India's

role in the Indo-Pacific. This analysis offers new insights into the strategies middle powers can adopt to navigate a competitive global order, particularly in strategically vital regions like the Indo-Pacific.

### **India's Historical Approach to the Indo-Pacific: From Reluctance to Power Balancing**

India's approach to the Indo-Pacific has evolved significantly over time, reflecting its changing strategic priorities, economic needs, and geopolitical considerations. The Indian Ocean, a crucial artery for global trade and maritime security, has long been central to India's foreign policy, shaping its stance in the Indo-Pacific region. Since gaining independence in 1947, India has recognized the strategic importance of the Indian Ocean, both as a vital link for its trade routes and as a key element for regional security. This recognition was encapsulated in Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's vision of an independent foreign policy aimed at ensuring India's sovereignty and development without external interference. Nehru's emphasis on maintaining autonomy in foreign relations, particularly within the Indian Ocean region, was rooted in a broader objective of non-alignment, aiming to prevent both colonial and Cold War powers from establishing a dominant presence in the region (Pant, 2018). However, during the Cold War, India's foreign policy was characterized by a cautious and strategic reticence, shaped by its desire to avoid being drawn into the intense ideological and geopolitical rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union. India's stance during this period was guided by its commitment to non-alignment, which emphasized independence in decision-making, coupled with the aim of fostering peace and stability in its immediate neighborhood (Mukherjee, 2014). Despite this, India's growing concerns over security in the region, especially with the rise of Chinese influence, have led to a gradual shift in its approach. From the early years of independence to the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, India focused primarily on securing its immediate borders and fostering relations with non-aligned nations. However, the rise of China as a regional power, particularly in the Indo-Pacific, catalyzed a more proactive and assertive Indian strategy. The transformation from reluctance to active power balancing within the Indo-Pacific is particularly evident in the last two decades. India's increasing naval and strategic engagements in the Indo-Pacific, including its growing participation in multilateral forums such as the Quad (comprising the United States, Japan, Australia, and India) and the expansion of its maritime partnerships with countries like Vietnam, Indonesia, and Singapore, reflect a significant departure from its earlier hesitancy (Khurana, 2015). In recent years, India has embraced a more assertive role in shaping regional security architectures, balancing its relations with major powers like the United States and China, while promoting a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific. India's involvement in the Indo-Pacific has been framed by its broader strategic vision, which seeks to bolster regional stability, safeguard vital sea lanes, and secure its interests against an increasingly assertive China. India's historical and strategic interests now align with broader global efforts to maintain peace and security in the Indo-Pacific, further cementing its role as a key player in regional geopolitics (Mohan, 2018). This evolving strategy highlights India's shift from passive observer to active power balancer in the Indo-Pacific, marking a critical turning point in its foreign policy trajectory.

The end of the Cold War and economic reforms in the 1990s prompted India to reconsider its approach. Economic liberalization increased India's reliance on maritime trade and energy imports, which heightened the Indo-Pacific's strategic importance (Scott, 2009). At the same time, the collapse of the USSR and the rise of a unipolar world order required India to reassess its foreign policy, especially in its relations with the United States and China. India's Look East Policy in the early 1990s symbolized its formal acknowledgment of the Indo-Pacific's importance, focusing on enhancing economic and strategic relationships with Southeast Asian countries (Brewster, 2017).

By the mid-2000s, China's rapid economic rise and growing assertiveness, especially in the South China Sea and Indian Ocean, started altering the regional landscape. The launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013 heightened concerns over China's strategic objectives in the Indo-Pacific (Pant & Passi, 2017). India viewed China's Maritime Silk Road, particularly its investments in critical chokepoints like the Strait of Malacca and the Indian Ocean, with increasing apprehension (Sundaram, 2020). These developments led India to adopt a more proactive strategy to protect its regional interests.

India's response took two main forms. It strengthened strategic alliances, particularly with the United States, Japan, and Australia, who shared concerns about China's growing influence, leading to the renewed focus on the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) (Rajagopalan, 2019). Simultaneously, India maintained strategic autonomy, refraining from formal alliances and seeking cooperation with regional actors, including China, when mutual interests aligned (Pant, 2018).

While the US remained a dominant power in the Indo-Pacific, its shift towards a more selective regional engagement under the Trump administration raised concerns about the sustainability of the US-led order (Cha, 2016). Concurrently, China's expanding influence, through infrastructure investments and military modernization, further complicated the strategic landscape (Kapoor, 2022). These dynamics presented opportunities for middle powers like India to assert greater agency in shaping the region's order.

India's strategy in the Indo-Pacific has evolved over the past decade, shifting from limited engagement to a more active role in regional affairs. This shift reflects India's increasing stakes in the Indo-Pacific, along with the limitations of its traditional hedging strategies. India's approach has increasingly focused on balancing power and fostering regional stability through multilateralism and strategic partnerships (Goh, 2006; Paul, 2018). These efforts aim to safeguard India's interests while avoiding overt alignment with either great power.

This historical development illustrates how India's strategy in the Indo-Pacific has been influenced by shifts in both regional and global power dynamics. It emphasizes the challenges India encounters in balancing its economic relations with China while aligning strategically with the United States and other similar-minded nations. As the Indo-Pacific becomes an increasingly important stage for great power rivalry, India's capacity to manage these competing pressures will play a significant role in shaping the region's future.

### China's Expanding Economic and Strategic Presence in the Indo-Pacific Since 2010

China's economic and strategic goals in the Indo-Pacific have grown substantially, fueled by the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) introduced in 2013. As one of the largest economies in the region, China plays a crucial role in influencing trade, infrastructure, and security dynamics. By 2020, China had become the largest trading partner for many Indo-Pacific nations, with its investments in infrastructure growing substantially. For instance, Chinese-backed projects under the BRI include the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), port development in Sri Lanka's Hambantota, and investments in Myanmar's Kyaukpyu port, connecting the Indian Ocean to China's western provinces (Bhattacharya, 2020).

China's focus on improving connectivity has involved substantial maritime investments in the Indo-Pacific. This strategy is closely linked to the region's key sea routes, including the Strait of Malacca and the South China Sea, through which a large portion of its energy imports and exports pass (Efsthathopoulos, 2022). To safeguard these interests, China has ramped up its naval capabilities. Since 2016, it has operated a military base in Djibouti, marking its first overseas military installation, and has conducted joint naval exercises with regional states like Pakistan and Cambodia (Zhao, 2019).

Beijing's economic engagement with Indo-Pacific nations extends beyond traditional investments. For example, Chinese technology companies such as Huawei and Alibaba have significantly influenced digital infrastructure development, establishing China as a key player in the region's technological landscape (Sharma, 2021). These initiatives reflect Beijing's attempt to integrate economic development with strategic goals, leveraging economic tools to extend its influence.

However, China's expanding influence in the region has raised alarms among Indo-Pacific countries. Territorial conflicts in the South China Sea have strained its ties with neighboring nations, such as Vietnam and the Philippines, as China has militarized artificial islands in contested waters (Kaplan, 2022). Moreover, its debt-based investment strategy under the BRI has faced criticism for leading to "debt-trap diplomacy," especially in countries like Sri Lanka and the Maldives (Chellaney, 2017).

In reaction to China's growing influence, regional powers like India, Japan, and Australia have worked to strengthen their strategic partnerships through initiatives such as the Quad. At the same time, the United States has intensified its attention on the Indo-Pacific, stressing the importance of freedom of navigation and opposing China's maritime claims (Green, 2020). Beyond the Quad, other important security initiatives have emerged in the Indo-Pacific region, such as AUKUS, a trilateral pact between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. This agreement aims to strengthen defense collaboration, particularly in areas like technology and defense, including the development of nuclear-powered submarines for Australia. AUKUS helps to enhance the collective defense capabilities of the three countries and extends their influence across the Indo-Pacific, sending a clear message to Beijing regarding the shared concerns over China's expanding military power. Also the United States has revitalized its relationships with other key regional partners, including South Korea and the Philippines, while strengthening its ties with Southeast Asia through initiatives such as the US-ASEAN summit. These steps further underscore the US commitment to regional security and stability. Additionally, the region's security framework is bolstered by broader platforms such as the East Asia Summit and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), with India increasingly playing an active role. Through these collaborations, regional powers are strategically counterbalancing China's growing influence while promoting greater connectivity and economic integration. This network of alliances and partnerships highlights the shifting power dynamics in the Indo-Pacific, where collective security efforts are increasingly viewed as essential to managing China's rise and maintaining regional stability.

Despite criticism, China continues to present itself as a vital partner for economic development in the Indo-Pacific. Its policies often align with the interests of smaller states seeking infrastructure financing, even as these countries navigate the risks associated with deepening ties with Beijing. The Indo-Pacific remains a dynamic and contested space where China's ambitions intersect with regional and global power rivalries, shaping the future of the geopolitical landscape.

As the rivalry between China and the United States escalates in the Indo-Pacific, India's relationship with the Middle East becomes a crucial element of its broader strategy.

### India's Evolving Role in the Middle East

Historically, India's engagement with the Middle East has been shaped by two primary factors: energy security and its diaspora connections. India relied heavily on the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) nations for its energy imports and millions of Indian diaspora in the Gulf have been instrumental in strengthening economic ties, contributing significantly through remittances. India's traditional stance in the region also included unwavering support for the Palestinian cause, the one of the reasons India refrained from establishing diplomatic relations with Israel until 1992 (Rather, 2023). However over the years India's approach to the Middle East has undergone a notable transformation especially under Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Despite its enhanced relationship with Israel, India's stance on the Palestinian issue remains consistent. It continues to advocate for a two-state solution, emphasizing dialogue and peaceful resolution. While maintaining its historical commitment to the Palestinian two-state solution, India has significantly deepened its ties with Israel and Arab nations alike. Modi's 2017 visit to Israel marked a historic moment, shifting the relationship from a "quiet under-the-carpet" alliance to a public and strategic partnership (Rather, 2022). India-Israel relations now focus on security cooperation, technology transfer, and agriculture, with joint collaborations in defense technologies, water management, and cybersecurity. This enhanced partnership reflects a pragmatic approach to harnessing Israel's technological expertise while addressing India's domestic and strategic needs. Simultaneously, India has strengthened its relationships with Arab nations, particularly the GCC states. These ties remain rooted in energy security, trade, diaspora contributions, and emerging areas of strategic cooperation. For instance, the UAE has emerged as one of India's top trading partners, while Saudi Arabia continues to be a critical energy supplier. On one hand India maintains close strategic ties with Israel, leveraging defense and technology collaborations. On the other, it sustains robust economic and political relationships

with Arab nations, ensuring that its energy security and trade interests are safeguarded. This dual approach reflects India's commitment to a multi-aligned foreign policy, where partnerships are developed based on mutual benefits without compromising its core principles.

Historically regarded as part of its "extended neighborhood," the Middle East has been a crucial partner due to its strategic location, vast energy resources, and economic opportunities. The region's significance has further increased in light of the global reordering of power and the intensifying U.S.-China rivalry, necessitating India to recalibrate its engagement to safeguard its national interests.

The Middle East remains India's largest source of crude oil and natural gas. India has diversified its energy imports while enhancing strategic partnerships with countries such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar to ensure uninterrupted energy supplies. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries are among India's largest trading partners. Investments in infrastructure, technology, and renewable energy have gained traction, with India positioning itself as a key player in regional development projects. India has expanded its defense partnerships, focusing on joint exercises, counterterrorism cooperation, and maritime security. The Arabian Sea and the Red Sea are critical for India's trade and energy routes, making maritime security a focal point of its strategy.

### Expanding Economic Relations Beyond Oil

While energy imports remain a cornerstone of India's Middle East engagement, the relationship has diversified significantly in recent years. India's trade with the region has expanded beyond oil to include infrastructure investments, healthcare, education, and technology partnerships. For example, the India-UAE Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) signed in 2022 aims to boost bilateral trade to \$100 billion by 2030. Additionally, India has actively sought opportunities for collaboration in renewable energy, aligning with its transition towards green energy. Initiatives such as the International Solar Alliance (ISA), co-led by India, offer a platform for engaging Middle Eastern nations in the renewable energy sector.

Under prime Minister Narendra Modi India's GCC trade relations has significantly increased. The GCC has grown to become India's largest regional trading bloc, contributing significantly to its overall trade and energy needs. The UAE remains India's principal trading partner within the Gulf while Saudi Arabia also plays a critical role.

**Table 1. India's trade with GCC countries, 2003-2014 (all figures in US \$ millions).**

Financial Year	Export	Import	Total
2003-2004	7,067	3,253	10,320
2004-2005	9,815	7,064	16,879
2005-2006	11,775	7,805	19,580
2006-2007	16,374	30,994	47,368
2007-2008	21,760	45,090	66,850
2008-2009	32,125	59,505	91,630
2009-2010	30,480	53,497	83,977
2010-2011	42,472	74,915	1,17,387
2011-2012	45,360	102,182	1,47,542
2012-2013	51,054	108,092	1,59,146
2013-2014	48,221	101,799	1,50,020
2014-2015	49,296	84,433	1,33,729

Source: MoCI (2022a)

**Table 2. India's trade with GCC countries, 2015-2021 (all figures in US \$ millions).**

Financial Year	Export	Import	Total
2015-2016	41,693	55,790	97,483
2016-2017	41,768	55,172	96,940
2017-2018	39,391	64,079	103,470
2018-2019	41,622	79,716	121,338
2019-2020	40,466	80,465	120,931
2020-2021	28,007	59,589	87,596
2021-2022	43,932	110,723	154,655

Source: MoCI (2022a)

During 2021–2022, three of India's five largest oil suppliers were GCC nations, with Saudi Arabia leading the list, followed by Kuwait and the UAE (April 2021 to January 2022) (Mitra and Kasliwal, 2020; Ministry of Commerce and Industry (MoCI), 2022a; Press Trust of India (PTI), 2022). Qatar has solidified its position as India's primary LNG supplier, contributing over 50% of India's total LNG imports, while the UAE and Oman accounted for 11% and 4%, respectively (Jaganmohan, 2021; John, 2022). Petronet LNG, a state-owned Indian company, has an agreement with Qatargas to import 7.5 million tonnes of LNG annually under a 25-year deal set to expire in 2028, with prospects for renewal (PTI, 2021). The increasing energy demand, alongside the significant need for oil-derived products like petrochemicals and fertilizers, has facilitated a deeper and mutually beneficial economic partnership between India and

GCC nations. This trade relationship is further supported by India's advanced refining and petrochemical capabilities, as well as its geographical closeness to the Gulf (Calabrese, 2017; Pradhan, 2010: 98).

Aside from oil and gas, the India–GCC non-oil trade figures demonstrate the Look West policy's early success. Trade between India and the GCC was around \$10 billion in 2003–2004, but it steadily increased to \$67 billion in 2007–2008. In just 10 years, bilateral trade between India and the GCC reached \$150 billion in 2013–2014. Between 2004 and 2014, India's exports to the GCC steadily increased, while imports remained higher (See Table 1). However, Indian exports have been inconsistent since 2014, and imports, despite being higher, also exhibit an inconsistent trend (see Table 2). Several factors contribute to India's declining export trend, including a downturn in GDP growth rate and manufacturing output (World Bank, 2022a, 2022b), with China, Japan, and South Korea – all of which are manufacturing powerhouses – posing stiff competition in accessing Gulf markets (Calabrese, 2017). The UAE is India's largest export market in the West Asian region and second-largest globally, owing in part to its status as a transshipment hub. Textiles, food products, information technology products, electrical goods, and machinery have found a lucrative market in the GCC, with the UAE and Saudi Arabia ranking among India's top 25 export destinations (MoCI, n.d.). In the services sector, India has a comparative advantage over the GCC countries, which it can leverage to broaden its export portfolio.

In FY2022–2023, trade with the GCC accounted for 15.8% of India's total trade, with major sectors like energy, defense, and health showing strong growth (MEA, 2024). India's oil imports from the GCC represent 35% of its total oil imports, while gas imports account for 70%. In 2021–22, India's crude oil imports from the GCC were valued at \$48 billion, and LNG and LPG imports totaled about \$21 billion (MEA, 2024).

Investment from GCC countries is also on the rise, with Saudi Arabia and the UAE setting ambitious targets for investment in India. The UAE is the seventh-largest source of foreign direct investment (FDI) in India, with investments reaching \$15.3 billion in 2022. Saudi Arabia had invested \$3.2 billion as of March 2022, and Qatar's investments also showed strong growth. Notable projects include the joint \$44 billion Ratnagiri Refinery and Petrochemicals project in Maharashtra, led by Indian, Saudi, and Emirati oil companies (Sonalki, 2024).

India's defense engagement with the GCC has also intensified, with the Indian Navy increasing its deployments in the region to ensure the security of vital sea lanes. The Indian Navy has held bilateral exercises with the UAE, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain, and India is becoming an increasingly preferred security partner for the Gulf states (Sonalki, 2024). With growing economic ties, particularly in energy security, trade, and investment, India has positioned itself as a key player in Middle Eastern affairs. Additionally, India's partnerships with countries like Israel and Iran showcase its balancing act in a region traditionally dominated by Pakistan's alliance (Haqqani, H. 2022.).

The Indian diaspora serves as a vital link between India and the Middle East. As of 2024, there were approximately 8.9 million Indian migrants in the Gulf countries with a significant concentration of this population working in sectors ranging from construction to healthcare. (Nehal Jawed 2024). India's diaspora in the Gulf is a reflection of the deep mutual interests between India and the region. The Indian diaspora not only contributes to the economy but also acts as a bridge for cultural and political diplomacy, enhancing India's soft power in the Middle East. In 2022 alone, the Indian diaspora remitted over \$100 billion, making India the largest recipient of remittances globally (IOM 2024). Additionally, the diaspora helps foster bilateral ties by participating in cross-cultural initiatives and by being a source of influence in both economic and political spheres. However In line with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's foreign policy, India has moved beyond economic transactions to assert a more influential role in regional geopolitics, leveraging its soft power to address regional security concerns (Pethiyagoda, 2017). India has prioritized their welfare while leveraging their economic and cultural contributions to strengthen bilateral ties.

India has adeptly managed its relations with competing powers in the Middle East. For instance, it maintains strong ties with both Israel and Palestine, balancing its defense collaboration with Israel and its historical support for Palestinian self-determination. Similarly, India has navigated its relationships with Saudi Arabia and Iran, focusing on economic and strategic interests while steering clear of their regional rivalries. The intensifying U.S.-China rivalry has also influenced India's policy recalibration. While India collaborates with the U.S. in countering China's influence in the Indo-Pacific, it simultaneously engages with China in Middle Eastern multilateral platforms such as the BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), ensuring a nuanced approach. India's evolving role in the Middle East underscores its ambition to be a global power with strategic autonomy. By emphasizing partnerships that foster mutual growth and regional stability, India seeks to establish itself as a dependable and neutral partner in the region. Continued diversification of energy sources, greater economic integration, and active participation in regional security mechanisms will remain central to India's Middle East strategy in the coming years.

This strategic recalibration not only addresses immediate economic and security concerns but also reflects India's long-term vision of playing a pivotal role in shaping the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East.

### **Balancing the US-China Rivalry in the Middle East**

India's strategic decisions in the Middle East are heavily influenced by the ongoing rivalry between the US and China, as both powers compete for dominance over energy resources, trade routes, and infrastructure projects. India has skillfully leveraged this rivalry, positioning itself as a credible, non-threatening partner for Middle Eastern states, many of which are cautious about being drawn into the Sino-American contest. Unlike China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which is often criticized for creating dependency through heavy debt and raising concerns about strategic overreach, India has advocated for an alternative approach focused on transparent investments and development-oriented partnerships.

India's strategy in the region aligns with its long-standing policy of strategic autonomy, allowing it to maintain cooperative ties with both Washington and Beijing while avoiding alignment with either camp. This pragmatic approach is evident in India's emphasis on developmental projects that prioritize regional stability and shared benefits, rather than fostering

competitive dependencies. New Delhi has further distinguished itself by advancing a “multipolar” framework for the region, which supports local sovereignty and avoids imposing ideological or economic conditions on its partners.

One key example of India’s approach is the I2U2 initiative (comprising India, Israel, the UAE, and the United States), which was catalyzed by the Abraham Accords. This platform emphasizes economic development, addressing climate change, and enhancing infrastructure—goals that align with India’s policy of non-alignment and strategic autonomy. The I2U2 initiative underscores India’s ability to collaborate with diverse actors in pursuit of shared goals while circumventing the polarizing dynamics of US-China rivalry.

Furthermore, India’s involvement in projects like the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) reflects its intent to offer an inclusive, mutually beneficial alternative to China’s BRI, devoid of geopolitical implications. IMEC represents a transformative initiative aimed at creating a sustainable and efficient connectivity network linking South Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. Unlike the BRI, which often attracts criticism for a lack of transparency and disproportionate benefits to China, IMEC promises equitable returns for all stakeholders while fostering economic integration across critical regions.

India’s participation in such initiatives also reflects its recognition of the Middle East as a geopolitical and geoeconomic pivot. The region’s significance is not limited to energy security but extends to trade facilitation, technological collaboration, and cultural exchange. By advocating for shared prosperity and focusing on issues like renewable energy, digital connectivity, and sustainable development, India has built trust and strengthened its ties with key Middle Eastern states, including Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Israel.

India’s balancing act in the Middle East has been further bolstered by its robust engagement with multilateral forums. Its dialogue with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), its observer status in the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and its consistent advocacy for peaceful conflict resolution underline its commitment to fostering stability and avoiding divisive alignments. This nuanced approach has helped India maintain its credibility as a reliable partner while shielding it from the adverse repercussions of the US-China rivalry.

### **India’s Strategic Partnerships in the Middle East**

India’s relationships in the Middle East, especially with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) nations, Israel, and Iran, reflect its practical and multifaceted strategy toward the region. Energy security is a fundamental element of India’s ties with the GCC, which provides over 80% of India’s crude oil requirements. India’s partnerships in the Middle East, particularly with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, Israel, and Iran, underscore its pragmatic, multifaceted approach to the region. Energy security remains a core aspect of India’s relationship with the GCC, which supplies more than 80% of India’s crude oil needs. However, this energy dependency has evolved into a broader, more comprehensive partnership that now includes trade, investments, and security cooperation. For instance, Saudi Arabia’s pledge to invest \$100 billion in India and the UAE’s active participation in infrastructure projects are indicative of the deepening economic ties between the regions.

India’s defense and security partnerships with major Middle Eastern nations have strengthened its role in the region. These collaborations include joint military drills with countries like the UAE and Saudi Arabia, counter-piracy efforts in the Gulf of Aden, and the strategic use of Oman’s Duqm port for naval operations. These activities help safeguard India’s maritime interests, especially its critical sea lanes, and serve as a counterbalance to China’s expanding naval presence, particularly in Gwadar, Pakistan, and Djibouti. India’s defense ties in the region not only enhance its security role but also support regional stability, aligning with its broader strategic and economic goals. India also participates in multilateral security frameworks such as the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and trilateral partnerships with the US and Japan (Quad), strengthening its regional security relations. These initiatives ensure free access to vital maritime routes, address terrorism, and tackle emerging security threats like piracy and cyberattacks. India’s ability to maintain strong defense ties with both Arab and non-Arab countries underscores its diplomatic flexibility and commitment to a stable Middle East, especially as global power dynamics shift with China’s growing military influence. This involvement positions India as a key security partner in the region, contributing to broader efforts to maintain peace and stability.

India’s growing partnership with Israel is a testament to its skillful navigation of regional diplomacy in the Middle East. This relationship spans several key areas, including defense technology, counterterrorism efforts, agricultural cooperation, and water management. By engaging with Israel, India gains access to advanced expertise in sectors like cybersecurity, technology innovation, and intelligence sharing, which enhances its defense capabilities and technological edge. Moreover, this partnership allows India to maintain strong ties with Israel while carefully managing its relationships with other major powers, such as the United States and China, ensuring that it avoids conflict with their respective interests in the region. India’s strategic collaboration with Israel aligns with its broader approach of engaging with various regional actors without jeopardizing its position on the global stage. Israel, closely allied with Western powers, offers India valuable support in crucial areas like missile defense and intelligence sharing. This partnership enables India to deepen its technological and defense ties in the Middle East while maintaining good relations with Arab states. India’s balanced diplomatic strategy underscores its growing role as a pragmatic actor in the region, capable of fostering relationships that support its security and development goals without alienating important global or regional players. This diversified approach helps India secure a respected and influential position in Middle Eastern geopolitics.

### **The Iranian Conundrum: Navigating Complex Geopolitical Challenges**

India’s relationship with Iran has been built on strategic objectives, particularly in the areas of regional stability, energy security, and infrastructure development. The partnership has evolved over time, with India focusing on securing access to Iran’s vast energy resources and its critical locations, such as the Chabahar Port. Chabahar holds great significance in

India's broader strategy to establish a direct trade route to Central Asia, bypassing Pakistan, which would enhance India's economic connectivity across the region. The port's strategic location near vital maritime trade routes in the Indian Ocean further strengthens its importance in India's foreign policy. This partnership not only positions India to increase its influence in the Middle East but also boosts its prospects in terms of energy access and regional trade, underscoring the mutual benefits of this enduring relationship.

However, India's engagement with Iran has been increasingly complicated by the evolving geopolitical landscape, particularly the pressures of US sanctions. As Iran faces mounting economic restrictions due to its nuclear ambitions, India's ability to fully capitalize on its investments in Chabahar has been hindered. These sanctions have created a delicate balancing act for India, which must carefully navigate its relationship with Tehran while strengthening its strategic partnership with the United States. Despite these challenges, India continues to engage with Iran diplomatically, recognizing that a stable Iran is crucial for regional security. India's efforts to maintain strategic autonomy are evident in its nuanced approach to Iran, which seeks to balance economic cooperation with political caution.

At the same time, India is mindful of its broader interests in the Middle East, where the regional dynamics are shaped by both regional powers and global influences. India's engagement with Iran, although vital, must align with its security interests in the region, which includes preventing destabilization and addressing the influence of other powers, particularly China. The growing proximity between China and Iran, highlighted by their cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative, further complicates India's position. While India recognizes the importance of maintaining stable relations with Tehran, it also must weigh the implications of China's expanding influence in the region. As such, India's policy toward Iran is shaped by its broader strategic goals: to ensure access to energy, maintain connectivity, and preserve regional stability, all while avoiding direct confrontation with other great powers like the US and China.

### **Opportunities and Challenges Ahead**

India's expanding role in the Middle East presents both significant opportunities and considerable challenges. India's strategic positioning within the Middle East provides an array of opportunities to strengthen its energy security amidst evolving regional dynamics. The recent normalization of ties between Israel and various Arab nations, notably through the Abraham Accords, reflects a softening stance by many Middle Eastern countries towards Israel. This shift in relations, alongside initiatives like I2U2 (India, Israel, the United States, and the UAE) and the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), opens new avenues for multilateral cooperation, particularly in energy and infrastructure. These partnerships enable India to serve as a critical link between Asia, the Gulf, and Europe, facilitating enhanced energy trade and infrastructural development. The IMEC initiative, focused on improving connectivity across transport and digital corridors between India, the Gulf, and Europe, presents a promising opportunity for more integrated energy exchanges, providing India with diversified energy sources. Additionally, the growing investments in renewable energy projects, including hydrogen, by Gulf nations offer India a chance to shift towards cleaner energy, aligning with global sustainability initiatives while securing long-term energy stability.

One of the most significant opportunities for India in the Middle East lies in the realm of energy security, particularly as global energy markets become increasingly volatile. In the context of geopolitical tensions, such as the Russia-Ukraine conflict and the imposition of sanctions on Russia, India can secure its energy needs by deepening ties with the Middle East, a region that continues to be a major supplier of oil and gas. India's strong partnerships with critical oil producers like Saudi Arabia and the UAE help ensure stable energy imports, reducing the risks of supply disruptions. Additionally, India's position within OPEC+ and its energy agreements with Russia further bolster its ability to secure consistent energy supplies despite global uncertainties. Beyond traditional energy sources, the Middle East's growing investments in renewable energy and hydrogen projects offer India an opportunity to shift towards cleaner energy. Through collaboration in these emerging fields, India can transition its energy relationship with the region from one focused on fossil fuels to one centered on sustainable energy, thereby improving its energy security and contributing to the global green energy movement.

Another major opportunity is the region's focus on infrastructure modernization and digital transformation. The Middle East's focus on upgrading its infrastructure and embracing digital transformation creates valuable opportunities for India. As countries like Saudi Arabia and the UAE continue with their plans to diversify their economies away from oil dependency, they are placing a strong emphasis on advanced technologies such as smart cities, artificial intelligence, and improved digital connectivity. These efforts aim to build more sustainable, knowledge-based economies. India, with its growing expertise in technology and infrastructure, can play a key role in these projects. India's experience in IT, digital technologies, and engineering makes it a strong partner for initiatives in smart city development, urban planning, and digital infrastructure. Possible collaborations include creating AI-driven urban management systems, smart transportation solutions, and renewable energy projects, aligning with the region's goal of building a forward-looking infrastructure. Additionally, India could further strengthen its position in the global digital economy by participating in projects that connect India to the Middle East and Central Asia through modern communication networks and digital platforms. The demand for advanced technology services in the Gulf also provides India with a chance to increase its exports in fields like cybersecurity, digital finance, and e-governance. India's fintech industry, in particular, could find valuable opportunities in the UAE, which is working to establish itself as a leading global financial hub. Collaboration in digital banking, blockchain, and payment systems would allow India to contribute to the region's digital growth. By engaging in these partnerships, India can access new technologies and markets while helping the Middle East achieve its development goals. This growing collaboration will not only enhance India's technological and infrastructure capabilities but also strengthen its role as an important player in the Middle East's geopolitical and economic future.



However, India's expanding presence in the Middle East is not without challenges. The ongoing conflicts in the Middle East pose a significant challenge to India's strategic objectives in the region. India's delicate balancing of its relations with both Israel and Arab nations is made more complex by the intricate network of regional tensions, including the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and the Syrian civil war. These conflicts not only contribute to a precarious geopolitical situation but also heighten India's security concerns, particularly due to its reliance on the Middle East for energy and the sizable Indian diaspora in the region. Moreover, India's steadfast support for Palestinian statehood often puts it in opposition to certain regional powers, especially amid the growing normalization between Israel and several Arab states. The evolving alliances and the increasing influence of non-state actors further complicate India's diplomatic strategy, requiring a nuanced policy that effectively protects its interests while promoting stability in the region. China increasingly challenges India's position in the Middle East due to its growing economic and strategic influence. Through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China has strengthened its trade and infrastructural connections with crucial Middle Eastern countries, especially in energy and infrastructure sectors (Huang, 2020). The recent Chinese mediation between Saudi Arabia and Iran underscores its rising diplomatic influence, establishing China as a significant player in the region's geopolitics (Zhao, 2023). Furthermore, China's strong economic relations with Iran, particularly in oil exports and infrastructure projects, complicate India's strategic interests, especially as India maintains strong ties with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries (Cheng, 2021). As China's presence in the region expands, India faces mounting challenges, both economically and strategically, requiring a reassessment of its Middle East strategy.

Pakistan represents a formidable obstacle to India's aspirations in the Middle East, utilizing its strong religious, historical, and strategic connections with key nations in the region. Its alliance with Saudi Arabia, underpinned by a shared Islamic identity and common interests, provides Pakistan with economic aid, military assistance, and geopolitical influence (Kumaraswamy, 2020). Moreover, Pakistan has cultivated robust defense relationships with Turkey and Qatar, further bolstering its regional clout. Pakistan's prominent role in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) allows it to influence narratives that often work against India, particularly on contentious issues such as Kashmir (Akbar, 2019). Through its emphasis on Islamic unity, Pakistan aims to challenge India's expanding influence in the Middle East, including India's partnerships with the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Additionally, Pakistan's sizable diaspora in the Gulf, which contributes significantly to remittance flows, serves as a key element of its economic and soft power strategy (Ansari, 2021). This ongoing rivalry highlights the intricate challenges India must navigate in advancing its interests in the region amidst Pakistan's proactive diplomatic and cultural initiatives.

India must navigate the complex geopolitical landscape of the Middle East with a carefully calibrated and strategic approach, emphasizing principles of inclusivity, transparency, and mutual benefit. To secure its regional interests, India will need to foster cooperative relationships while avoiding confrontations with rival powers such as China and the United States, along with their respective allies in the region. By prioritizing diplomacy, India can leverage its historical ties, strategic partnerships, and emerging economic strengths to promote stability and growth in the region. This balanced approach will not only safeguard India's long-term objectives but also enhance its role as a pivotal actor in the evolving dynamics of the Middle East, ensuring its position as a trusted partner for all regional stakeholders.

Finally, India's ability to fully capitalize on the emerging opportunities in the Middle East may be constrained by several domestic factors, including fiscal limitations and the imperative to address pressing economic challenges at home. These internal constraints could potentially divert critical resources and attention from its foreign policy objectives. However, to navigate these limitations effectively, it will be crucial for India to adopt a consistent and proactive diplomatic approach, underpinned by strategic investments in key sectors. Such investments, particularly in energy, infrastructure, and technology, will not only reinforce India's economic ties with the region but also bolster its geopolitical leverage. By balancing domestic priorities with a robust foreign policy, India can sustain its influence in the rapidly evolving Middle East, ensuring that its engagement remains dynamic, adaptive, and aligned with both regional and global developments.

## Conclusion

India's strategic engagement in the Middle East reflects a calculated approach to balancing economic and security interests amid shifting regional dynamics shaped by the US-China rivalry. The Middle East remains vital for India, given its reliance on Gulf energy resources, investments, and its substantial diaspora. As the US recalibrates its role and China expands its economic footprint through initiatives like the Belt and Road, India has sought to carve a unique space for itself, emphasizing partnerships with key regional players such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Israel.

While India aligns broadly with the US on many fronts, particularly in countering China's influence, it has avoided overtly confrontational policies, opting instead for soft-balancing strategies. This includes deepening economic ties, participating in multilateral initiatives, and fostering local partnerships to secure its interests without antagonizing Beijing unnecessarily. Moreover, India's nuanced approach reflects a recognition of the Middle East's complex regional dynamics, where countries often hedge between major powers to maximize their gains.

India's ability to sustain this delicate balancing act will depend on its capacity to navigate rising challenges, including the growing Chinese naval presence and its dual-use infrastructure in the Indian Ocean region. However, mutual interests in energy security and economic collaboration also create opportunities for limited India-China cooperation in the Middle East.

Ultimately, India's approach underscores its aspiration to be an independent and influential actor in the region, leveraging its historical ties and economic heft while adapting to the evolving global and regional power structure. Whether this strategy can fully insulate India from future geopolitical frictions remains uncertain, particularly as the US role diminishes and the competition between China and India intensifies.

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