

India's New Engagement in West Asia: The Strategic importance of I2U2

NITISH KUMAR*¹ AND SUBHASH SINGH²

^{1&2}Assistant Professor

Department of Political Science, Gargi College, Delhi University, New Delhi (India)

Department of Education in Social Sciences (DESS), National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), New Delhi (India)

ABSTRACT

India's 'West Asian Quad' (I2U2) was established on July 14, 2022, by India, Israel, the US, and the UAE, focusing on enhancing cooperation in six key areas: health, food security, energy, transportation, space, and water. India benefits significantly from its membership in the group, particularly in terms of increased investment and diplomatic relations. Joining the I2U2 also allows India to expand its global influence and profile in West Asia while maintaining strategic autonomy and working with Washington beyond the Indo-Pacific region. Therefore, this research paper aims to investigate India's new engagement in West Asia and examine the strategic significance of I2U2 for India.

Key Words : India, Israel, US, UAE, I2U2 and West Asia, etc.

INTRODUCTION

The West Asian region has been important for India's foreign policy because it is the epicentre of numerous conflicts. India considers West Asia a strategic hub with significant geopolitical and economic ramifications. The region and India have extensive cultural exchange, historical ties, and contacts between their civilizations.¹ Due to its supplying nearly two-thirds of India's total oil imports, West Asia is vital to the country's economy. During the Modi era, bilateral trade is also prosperous, especially with the United Arab Emirates and other Arab Gulf states. India's policy of non-alignment has gained a lot of support and strength in the region since independence, enabling it to overcome the dangers posed by Cold War influences. India's approach to policy and strategies for dealing with the region has also been influenced by the substantial Muslim population of India and Pakistan's conspiracy regarding the Kashmir issue in Islamic forums. The preceding factors and India's anti-colonial commitments were the foundation for its Palestine

policy and support.²

The region's strategic location and numerous historical and contemporary connections greatly influence India's quest for intense bilateral relations with West Asian countries. However, due to the region's fractured socio-religious landscape and intractable political divides, such as the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Iran-Saudi rivalry, the policies of former governments have focused only on energy security and other non-political issues. The region has played a crucial role in conflicts and competition between great powers.³ At the moment, "it is characterised by a cocktail of the political rivalry of the regional powers, spiralling conflicts and unending violence with Arab Spring, terrorism and proxy wars."⁴

In the aftermath of the Cold War, India launched *the Look East Policy* in 1991 to engage with Southeast Asian nations and counter China's influence in the region.⁵ Moreover, New Delhi was forced to cooperate with the United States as it was now the dominant power due to the downfall of the Soviet Union, India's primary global partner during the Cold War era. Further, Guy Burton

states, “India’s state-led development model was also exposed to the market’s demands and globalization, now the principal form of economic organization. In this situation, India’s need for economic development made West Asia increasingly important for New Delhi, both as a source of fuel imports and a destination for migrants sending remittances. Saudi Arabia, Iran and Qatar have been vital suppliers of hydrocarbons. Since the oil boom of the mid-1970s, the number of Indians living and working in Arab Gulf states (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman and the UAE) has grown rapidly.”⁶

After successfully implementing the “*Look East*” policy to encourage trade and investment with its Southeast Asian neighbours, India has implemented a “*Look West*” policy toward West Asia. After adopting the new policy in 2005, India increasingly desired to engage with its West Asian neighbours. It is also a strategy for India to engage the oil-rich region, transcending the geopolitical constraints imposed by Pakistan. As a result, ‘I2U2’ and the ‘Look West’ policy became essential components of Modi’s foreign policy. India’s new engagement in the region is based on the country’s national interests, such as energy security, climate action, sustainability, terrorism, etc.⁷

India’s Look West Policy

Prime Minister Modi’s remarks at the “Make in India” conference in New Delhi on September 26, 2014, “For a long time Look East policy is under discussion, I would like to talk about Link West,”⁸ brought fresh attention to the earlier Look West policy. A multi-layered engagement began after the ‘Look West’ became a positive aspect of Modi’s foreign policy in pursuing India’s interest abroad. As a result, the West Asian region has become a priority for Indian policymakers and a destination for diplomatic outreach.⁹ India’s new approach in the form of ‘Look West’ Policy focuses on three main axes: the countries of the Arab Gulf, Israel, and Iran.¹⁰

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) has tremendous significance for India as a collective entity. “The Gulf constitutes India’s ‘immediate’ neighbourhood separated only by the Arabian Sea. Therefore, India has a vital stake in the Gulf’s stability, security and economic well-being. As a group, the GCC has been increasingly determining its member states’ economy, political and security policies. The GCC countries are moving ahead rapidly with their economic integration efforts.”¹¹ India

is now a significant trading partner of the GCC. As India’s future investment partner, it has enormous potential. The substantial oil and gas reserves of the GCC are of the utmost importance for India’s energy requirements. The GCC states collectively host a significant number of Indian expatriates. The Gulf Cooperation Council and India have enormous potential for energy, human resources, trade, and investment cooperation.¹²

From the perspective of India’s strategic vision and national interests, the new prominence of the “Look West” policy is a valiant move for all stakeholders.¹³ “The turbulence in the region, in a way, is an opportunity to build relations on fresh visions without taking sides in their areas of differences and rivalry. We need not choose between Arab and Israel or between Saudi Arabia and Iran. India needs to capitalise on its own peerless soft power and the strength of its huge diaspora in the region.”¹⁴ For a long time, millions of Indian migrants have moved to West Asian countries to look for work. They are thought to make up a significant portion of all foreign remittances.¹⁵ The enormous Indian diaspora is the backbone of the country’s economy. PM Modi has personally discussed with most Gulf leaders the need to develop a collaborative and mutually beneficial infrastructure development and economic engagement strategy.¹⁶

India established full diplomatic relations with the Jewish State of Israel in 1992. Since then, the two countries’ economic, military, agricultural, and political ties have grown significantly. Because both nations see themselves as isolated democracies that are under threat from neighbours who train, finance, and support terrorism, they also see their cooperation as a strategic necessity.¹⁷ India has relied heavily on Israel for its technical, intelligence, and military assistance. India has been associated with Israel since the end of the Cold War, as evidenced by America’s continued support of Israel. Israel is now India’s primary supplier of military equipment and a significant trading partner.¹⁸ India is the largest purchaser of Israeli military equipment, and Israel is India’s second-largest defence supplier after Russia. When the charismatic leader of India, Shri Narendra Modi, was elected as the country’s Prime Minister in 2014, cooperation between India and Israel significantly increased. The same year, Israel exported weapons and defence items worth \$662 million to India. This number of exports exceeds the sum of all Israeli exports to India over the previous three years.¹⁹ Israel’s contentious

conflict with Palestine and India's expanding synergies with Israel pose challenges to India's internal politics and West Asian diplomacy. Muslims in India have a soft corner for Palestine. India faces a challenging task in finding a middle path between Israel and Palestine.²⁰

Iran is an important neighbour of India, and the two states shared a border until India became independent in 1947. Iran is also strategically significant for India because it allows it to connect Afghanistan and the Central Asian Republics if India does not get permission to use Pakistan's land route.²¹ "India-Iran relations have, however, witnessed ups and downs over the decades, mostly owing to factors that go beyond strictly bilateral issues, like the stoppage of oil imports from Iran after May 2019 owing to U.S. sanctions following the revocation of the Iran nuclear deal, India's close relations with Israel, and Iran's ties with China, including signing a 25-year strategic partnership agreement."²² New Delhi must carefully weigh the advantages and disadvantages of its interactions with Tel Aviv and Tehran. Iran is a "rogue state" to the United States. Iran's manufacturing of 'illegal' nuclear weapons is the main reason for it. However, the United States still needs to receive evidence. India was asked to reevaluate its relations with Iran due to sanctions imposed by the United States. Iran is the essential fuel supplier state to India, particularly natural gas. Therefore, this is a very important question: How should India deal with Iran?²³

The Abraham Accords and the origin of I2U2

West Asia's political alignments have been rearranged due to the signing of the "Abraham Accords"²⁴ and the normalization of formal diplomatic relations between Israel and the UAE, followed by Israel and Bahrain.²⁵ "In a world which is passing through uncertain times, characterized by power rivalries, armed conflicts, the looming fear of food crisis coupled with pessimistic market sentiments in a post-pandemic era, the Abraham Accords have not only created opportunities for bilateral engagements between the countries of West Asia but also have led to the creation of a Quadrilateral cooperative framework between India, Israel, the United States and the United Arab Emirates."²⁶ The first letters of the English names of India, Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States are used in the name of a new partnership. The alliance of quadrilaterals was referred to as the "West Asian Quad" or "I2U2", with "I" denoting India and Israel and "U" denoting the United

States and the United Arab Emirates.²⁷

On July 14, during the visit of US President Joe Biden to Israel, the countries that make up the I2U2 group held their first summit-level virtual meeting. In October 2021, the talks between the foreign ministers of the member states of I2U2 provided a positive impetus. Although some analysts referred to this new coalition as the "West Asia Quad," there was a period of inactivity after the initial boost.²⁸

"This unique grouping of countries aims to harness the vibrancy of our societies and entrepreneurial spirit to tackle some of the greatest challenges confronting our world, focusing on joint investments and new initiatives in water, energy, transportation, space, health, and food security."²⁹

The I2U2 group is also committed "to mobilize private sector capital and expertise to modernize infrastructure, advance low carbon development pathways for our industries, improve public health and access to vaccines, advance physical connectivity between countries in the West Asia region, jointly create new solutions for waste treatment, explore joint financing opportunities, connect our start-ups to I2U2 investments, and promote the development of critical green technologies, all while ensuring near- and long-term food and energy security."³⁰

The strategic importance for India

Due to its diplomatic prowess, India has participated in major economic initiatives with its neighbours, such as the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, BRICS, and now the I2U2. After the formation of I2U2, India can diversify the supply chain mechanism and secure investments from Israel, the UAE, and the US. The I2U2 grouping results from India's legacy of its efforts to foster peaceful and economically advantageous relationships with West Asia as part of its 'Look West' policy.³¹ "During the summit, it was announced that UAE would invest \$2 billion to develop sustainable and hi-tech integrated food parks in India's Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh."³² The Indian agricultural system will benefit from the investment in food parks because, with the assistance of the Israeli and UAE governments and the private sector, more agricultural output will be produced. The four-way alignment will also improve food security and allow India to negotiate energy security with other countries.³³ Regarding India's membership of I2U2, C Raja Mohan argues, "India's new West Asia approach is a welcome

break with past diffidence. India's participation in the I2U2 summit – with Israel, US, UAE – marks a more confident engagement with the region.”³⁴

In addition, the I2U2 group focuses on linkages between start-ups, waste treatment issues, and private capital investment and technical expertise. India benefits from these investments because the country's start-up sector is expanding rapidly. “The investments in start-ups and their linkages with other countries will provide an impetus to entrepreneurial innovation and the creation of more such ventures. Besides the food security and start-up-oriented investment, the grouping also benefits India with its clean energy initiative.”³⁵ The initiative anticipates constructing hybrid renewable energy that combines wind and solar power for energy preservation and viable trade promotion. The clean energy project aligns with India's Paris Agreement commitment to reduce carbon dependence. Hence, India gains from the I2U2 group as it is an opportunity to work with Israel and the United Arab Emirates to establish a stronghold in the rest of West Asia.³⁶

India has always advocated for West Asian peace and stability. India views West Asia as its extended neighbourhood because of its long-standing relationship with the region. This view plays a significant role in India's strategic framework for the West Asian region. Since India has a good reputation among regional countries, the US chose to incorporate India as a vital member of the I2U2 in its outreach strategy for West Asia.³⁷

India's tactic of interacting with West Asia creates a foundation for collaboration. India's partnerships with the West Asian countries rest on government-to-government, business-to-business, and people-to-people interactions. The Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA), which India and the United Arab Emirates signed in May 2022, is anticipated to strengthen ties between the two countries. In a similar vein, India and Israel have had historical ties because of India's defence requirements.³⁸ India partners with Saudi Arabia in West Asia, and both countries actively invest in various industries.³⁹ Consequently, the I2U2 strengthens India's position in the region by collaborating with the UAE and Israel on economic, oil, energy, and defence issues, complementing India's Look West Policy.

Conclusion

To conclude, the partnership between India, Israel, the UAE, and the United States is a turning point in

international politics. These states have joined forces to tackle global issues and achieve geo-economic goals of increased investment. The entire West Asia region stands to gain from the newly established diplomatic ties. Its cosmopolitan and high economic profile highlights the UAE's growing prominence in the Gulf region. In contrast, Israel sees this as an opportunity to establish, grow, and maintain official diplomatic relations with other Arab nations. A fruitful partnership between Israel and the UAE, with the support of India and the US, can open doors for establishing an economic relationship between Israel and Saudi Arabia. I2U2 boosts the US efforts to contain China's influence in Asia, reassures West Asia leaders about Washington's dedication to the area, and improves relations between its international allies.

The I2U2 partnership is especially significant to India because it allows New Delhi to use its strategic relationships with Israel, the UAE, and the US to build economic partnerships that benefit both parties without compromising domestic commitments. In addition, I2U2 gives India a chance to lead the world alongside the United States while safeguarding its national interests and strategic autonomy. Due to strengthening links with the entire region, India can access comprehensive diplomatic and infrastructure connectivity channels. India's political and economic interests and the large Indian diaspora in West Asia may gain from this. India should maintain its diplomatic engagement with West Asia in order to maintain its multilateral move towards global relations and prioritize establishing more personal connections. The I2U2 alliance enables India to act as a balancer in the region by engaging with all nations in a geopolitically volatile region.

Over time, India safeguarded its bilateral partnerships with regional countries by maintaining a safe distance from regional geopolitics. An odd one, the I2U2 enables India to deepen its involvement in the geoeconomics of West Asia and improve its trade relationships with the states of West Asia. Due to the availability of production facilities for high-tech and highly sought-after goods, India is a significant market for the I2U2. In the meantime, the I2U2 benefits India politically, economically, and socially; India will be able to strengthen its relationships with Israel and Arab states. After the Quad, India's global position is strengthened by its inclusion in the I2U2. Finally, India also benefits diplomatically from I2U2. It allows India to expand its global influence and enhance its West Asian profile. It

also allows New Delhi to work with Washington outside the Indo-Pacific without compromising its strategic autonomy. India can also strengthen ties with West Asia, a strategically important region due to its energy and economic interests.

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