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## Modi Government's Ill-Conceived Policy on West Asia Jeopardises India's Interests and Credibility

By: Srinath Raghavan

*'The strategic geometry and security architecture of West Asia will undergo important changes after this war as countries look for new partners. By our unseemly embrace of Israel and post-haste dumping of Iran, we have dented our future credibility as a partner.'*

Six days into the war on Iran, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has publicly spoken. Standing with the visiting president of Finland, [he said on Thursday 5 March](#) that both countries believed in the "rule of law, dialogue and diplomacy", that no issue could be resolved "solely through military conflict", and that they would support efforts for peace "in Ukraine or in West Asia". Previously, at the outbreak of war, [the Ministry of External Affairs \(MEA\) had posted an official statement](#) urging all sides to "exercise restraint, avoid escalation and prioritize safety of civilians" and advising "dialogue and diplomacy" to address underlying issues. The statement also averred that "Sovereignty and territorial integrity of all states must be respected."

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Although this statement refrained from noting-let alone criticizing-the naked aggression on Iran by the United States (US) and Israel as well as the targeted assassination of the Iranian head of state, several Indian commentators helpfully parsed it as an astute diplomatic message that at once criticized the violation of international law and Iran's retaliatory strikes on Gulf countries. The government was evidently a tad more aware of the infirmities of this stance. Hence, the invocation of "rule of law" by the prime minister, albeit as an abstract universal principle. This slots smoothly with the position of the Europeans, though few have been as frank as [the German chancellor in saying that it would be "inconsequential" to view the war within the framework of international law](#). In any event, New Delhi's latest stance remains mealy-mouthed. It could well redound on India's interests in West Asia in both the short and the long run.

### Abandoning Indian Interests

These interests, as the MEA has reminded us, include the safety of some 10 million Indian citizens living and working in the region, India's dependence on energy imports from West Asia and shipping routes running through it. Indeed, India is a ["proximate neighbour with critical stakes in the security and stability of the region"](#). Further, Indians in the region account for almost 40% of our foreign exchange remittances. Owing to the efforts of the Modi government, Gulf countries' investments in India and imports from India have also significantly risen in recent years. As has India's access to Israeli military technology and intelligence network.

Yet the preservation of our "critical stakes" was always reliant on something more than hectic diplomacy or frantic crisis management. In a chronically unstable region, marked by multiple and intersecting lines of political and military rivalry among states and non-state actors as well as external powers, India's ability to manage its diverse interests with a range of West Asian countries turned on two crucial axes: its overall credibility as a partner, and its willingness to stand by the "rules of the game" of international politics. This is not a question of international law, but of the norms and rules, understandings and standards of conduct about what is and is not permissible in international relations. These form the baselines within which the game of international politics is played. No game, however competitive or brutal, can be played without such rules. For a country with serious interests at stake but limited economic or military capabilities these rules of the game are fundamental. Unfortunately, New Delhi has, by its acts of commission and omission, struck a blow at these foundational elements of its regional policy.

### Ill-advised visit to Israel

Start with the most heedless act of commission: Prime Minister Modi's visit to Israel just two days before the attack on Iran. The deepening of India's strategic, defence and technological ties with Israel-especially in the wake of recent military conflicts with Pakistan-is well known. As is the ideological affinity between the regnant powers in both countries. It was against this backdrop that New Delhi had shamefully equivocated on Israel's genocidal war on Gaza. Even so, the timing of the prime ministerial visit to Israel, which included the signing of a "Special Strategic Partnership for Peace", was extraordinary.

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It is inconceivable that the Indian government was unaware of the impending attack. If that was indeed the case, then we had better take a sharp look at our intelligence and foreign policy establishments. The Israeli ambassador to India has sought to assure us that the "operational opportunity came up only after Prime Minister Modi left." This is at best a half-truth, for the political and strategic - as different from operational - decision to strike Iran was by all accounts taken by Benjamin Netanyahu and Donald Trump earlier. Trump himself made no bones about what was in the offing and in what timeframe.

The timing of the visit can only be explained by the prime minister's penchant for a highly personalized approach to diplomacy. Although this has come a cropper in the past, notably with Xi Jinping and Donald Trump, New Delhi continues to treat national interests as price-tags attached to our relations with this or that world leader. Netanyahu, the most corrupt Israeli leader in recent memory, knows that his political survival depends on two things: the continuation of war in the Middle East and the stamp of legitimacy from foreign leaders. In this instance, Trump gave the former, while Modi obliged with the latter.

Indeed, it was Netanyahu who craved this visit and there was no substantive reason to go to Israel on the eve of war. It is hardly surprising that having launched the war on Iran, [Netanyahu publicly and effusively thanked his "great friend" and India for standing resolutely with Israel](#). The prime minister, for his part, [merely posted that he had conveyed India's concerns about civilians and the need for an early cessation of hostilities](#).

### Silence on Iran

This sharp tilt towards Israel and the US was also apparent in our acts of omission. Far from condemning the assassination of the Iranian supreme leader, New Delhi avoided even condoling his passing. [The Ministry of External Affairs expressly instructed all Indian envoys in world capitals not to sign any condolence books](#) opened by their Iranian counterparts without New Delhi's prior permission. Eventually five days later, in the face of mounting domestic criticism, the Indian foreign secretary went to the Iranian embassy to pay respects.

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The same approach was in play when the Iranian frigate IRIS Dena, returning the Indian fleet review and exercises, was torpedoed off the coast of Sri Lanka. The statement by the Indian Navy did not even mention the attack that sank the vessel or express regret at the death of the sailors. To be sure, the ship was out of Indian waters, and we had no legal or political responsibility. Yet such a formalist view of the serious incident overlooks the fact established conventions and practices were shredded when the Iranian frigate was attacked in this fashion.

Cumulatively, these acts of commission and omission suggest that India is objectively on the side of the aggressors in this war: never mind what we claim about the nuances of our position or our strategic silences. Self-styled realists should remember that in the cynical currency of international politics, talk is cheap and actions speak louder than words. Then again, the Indian government may well have calculated that we should range ourselves against Iran. After all, [India's relations with Iran have been substantially eroded over the past few years owing to the pressure of US sanctions](#). We have considerably reduced oil imports and nearly liquidated our interest in the port of Chabahar (once described as a strategic gateway to Central Asia). By positioning ourselves on the side of US and Israel as well as the Gulf countries aren't we on the dominant-hence, right-side in this war?

### Disregarding 'Rules of the Game'

The problem with this facile calculus is that the Gulf countries can hardly rest easy at the prospect of an Israeli victory in this war. It will leave them entirely at the mercy of a regime that recognizes no restraints in the pursuit of an ideologically driven agenda of total security, which can only mean total insecurity for others. This is precisely why the Gulf states sought to avert this war, but to no avail. The Trump administration too has made history by going to war alongside Israel-something previous US administrations had consciously avoided. The US will hardly seem a dependable ally to the Gulf states in the aftermath of this war. It is no coincidence that Saudi Arabia signed a defence agreement with Pakistan soon after the Israeli American bombing of Iran last year. What's worse, the US military bases that were designed to protect them are the reason they are now under attack. In short, the strategic geometry and

security architecture of West Asia will undergo important changes after this war as countries look for new partners. By our unseemly embrace of Israel and post-haste dumping of Iran, we have dented our future credibility as a partner.

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Credibility apart, New Delhi has demonstrated a surprising disregard for the "rules of the game". To reiterate, this is not about international law or abstract moralizing, but rather the basis for sober realism and effective action. The use of international diplomacy-including intermediaries-as a charade to buy time and lull the Iranians into complacency; the targeted assassination of a head of state who was not hiding; the bogus claims about "pre-emptive attack"; the torpedoing of a ship that was on its way back from a fleet review; the Israeli occupation of Lebanese and Syrian territory-none of this elicited a comment, never mind criticism, from New Delhi. If we truly believe that none of this is consequential, then the more fools we.

What is the pay-off of this abject posture? Apparently, it is more abasement. The US has formally "allowed" India to buy Russian oil with a 30-day waiver.. The Trump administration had earlier slapped 25% additional tariffs on India for buying Russian oil and then revoked it claiming India had agreed to stop these purchases. Having maintained a studied silence on this topic, we must now turn to the Russians to avoid an oil shock. The latter will of course sell us what we want, but they have also noted our conduct. Meanwhile, a senior American official openly avers in New Delhi that "we are not gonna make the same mistake with India that we made with China 20 years ago": that is, to enable India's economic development to the point it becomes a commercial competitor. It is significant that he clubbed India with China and did not mention similar US policies towards Germany, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan etc. After all, these are subordinate allies entirely dependent on the US for security. India, by contrast, wants-at least in principle-strategic autonomy in a multipolar world. Those who imagine that India can become a great power by clinging to the coattails of the superpower are out to lunch.

It is anyone's guess when this war will end. Meanwhile, the economic costs for countries like India have started to mount in tandem with crude oil prices. If hundreds of thousands of Indians are evacuated back home, then it will have a sharp economic impact on several states, including some that are going to polls in the next 12 months-not least Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh. Unsurprisingly, the MEA had stated that the prospect of continued conflict "evoke[s] great anxiety."

### Damaged credibility

Internationally, we are now ill-positioned to help end the war and are left with little more than pious expressions of hope for peace. Beyond West Asia, our handling of the current crisis impacts on our standing in the global South. As it happens, India is hosting the BRICS summit this year and our stance is until now an outlier among the founding members. In these circumstances, our standard avowals of leadership and multipolarity may seem little more than hot air.

It may not be too late for course correction, but we need to return to basics. Foreign policy cannot be a series of expediencies; nor can it pivot on personal relations among leaders. As Robert Musil put it, "Imagine a squirrel that doesn't know whether it is a squirrel or a chipmunk, a creature with no concept of itself, and you will understand that in some circumstances it could be thrown into fits of terror by catching sight of its own tail." (Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities Volume I* (New York: Knopf, 1995), p. 491)). Musil was, of course, underlining the solipsism and utter lack of self-consciousness in the ruling elite of Austria-Hungary that proved disastrous in the run up to 1914.

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A spot of Indian history might also help. Independent India's adoption of non-alignment as its fundamental global orientation did not stem merely from the circumstances of the Cold War. Rather, it was a conscious response of that generation to India's strategic position under the British colonialism. British India was a sub-imperial power that served Britain's wider interests in Asia, especially in West Asia and the Persian Gulf. Postcolonial India sought decisively to break with that sub-imperial outlook and chart a course, however arduous and halting, towards strategic autonomy. "Decolonization of the mind" is the reigning slogan of our times. But it can hardly be undertaken when our minds are mortgaged to the imperial interests and our solidarity reserved for its shock troops.

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