

EDITORIAL

DATE : 10th October

India's Strategic Diplomacy Amidst West Asian Tensions: Balancing Regional Interests and Stability

Context:

West Asia has long been a region of strategic importance, not only due to its vast oil reserves but also due to its complex socio-political dynamics, historical legacies, and religious divides. For India, the region is crucial for **energy security**, **trade relations**, and the **welfare of its large diaspora**. However, the region is also prone to frequent conflicts, stemming from **geopolitical rivalries**, **sectarian divides**, and **external interventions**. As tensions between key players like **Iran and Israel** escalate, India faces significant challenges in balancing its diplomatic and economic interests without getting entangled in the region's ongoing conflicts.

India has developed close ties with both **Israel** and **Iran**, making it crucial for the country to adopt a **neutral stance** while promoting **peaceful dialogue** and **multilateral cooperation** in the region. At the same time, India's **energy dependency**, **diaspora ties**, and **trade relations** make it vulnerable to any significant disruptions in West Asia. India's foreign policy must ensure **strategic autonomy**, **energy diversification**, and **robust diplomatic engagements** to protect its national interests while contributing to regional stability.

India's Stance on Iran-Israel Tensions:

- The recent escalation of tensions between **Iran and Israel** has raised fears of a broader conflict in West Asia. In this situation, India has called for **restraint** and encouraged both sides to resolve their differences through **dialogue and diplomacy**. India's position is neutral, focusing on **de-escalation** and **peaceful resolution** rather than taking sides.
- India, while deepening ties with **Israel** in recent years, also shares significant historical and economic relations with **Iran**. Therefore, a balanced approach is crucial to safeguarding its **strategic interests** in the region.

- Additionally, India has expressed concern over the **humanitarian crisis** in **Gaza** due to ongoing blockades and violence, demonstrating its awareness of the socio-political sensitivities in the region.

Reasons for Continuous Conflict in West Asia:

West Asia, or the Middle East, remains one of the most volatile regions in the world due to several underlying factors:

Geopolitical Rivalries and Proxy Wars:

- The rivalry between **Iran and Saudi Arabia** stems from their differing religious ideologies (Shia and Sunni), but more importantly, their desire for **regional dominance**. This rivalry is often expressed through **proxy wars**, where both countries support opposing sides in conflicts, as seen in **Yemen** where Saudi Arabia leads a coalition against **Iran-backed Houthi rebels**. These proxy wars have devastating humanitarian consequences, exacerbating the **refugee crisis** in the region.
- **Iran-Israel tensions** are another major factor. Israel sees **Iran's nuclear ambitions** and support for groups like **Hezbollah** as direct threats to its security, resulting in cyber warfare and airstrikes on Iranian targets. This conflict is ongoing, with **Israel targeting Iranian-backed forces in Lebanon and Syria**.

Religious Sectarianism:

- The deep-rooted **Sunni-Shia divide** further fuels conflicts in West Asia. While most of the region follows **Sunni Islam**, countries like **Iran** and parts of **Iraq** are predominantly **Shia**. This divide has worsened sectarian violence in countries like **Iraq**, where conflicts have led to widespread destruction and loss of life.
- **Bahrain** is another example, where the **Sunni monarchy** suppresses the **Shia majority**, causing ongoing civil unrest, particularly after the **Arab Spring** of 2011.

Control of Oil and Resources:

- West Asia holds nearly **half of the world's proven oil reserves**. Control over these resources has historically been a key factor in regional and global conflicts, such as the **Iraq-Kuwait war**, which led to the **Gulf War**. The region's economic dependence on oil makes it highly vulnerable to **external pressures** and conflicts over resource control.
- Critical **maritime routes**, especially the **Strait of Hormuz**, through which a significant portion of global oil supplies are transported, are also flashpoints of conflict. **Iran's threats** to close this strategic chokepoint during conflicts with the U.S. have raised military tensions.

Colonial Legacy and Artificial Borders:

- The arbitrary borders drawn by colonial powers, especially under the **Sykes-Picot Agreement** post-World War I, ignored ethnic and tribal divisions, creating long-term instability. Communities were split across borders, leading to struggles for autonomy and identity.
- The **Kurdish struggle** for autonomy is an example of this legacy, where the Kurdish population is divided across **Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran**. Similarly, the **Israeli-Palestinian conflict** stems from the division of land post-World War II, leading to ongoing displacement and violence.

Authoritarian Regimes and Political Repression:

- West Asia is home to many **authoritarian regimes**, such as **monarchies** and **military dictatorships**, which often face **internal unrest** due to political repression. The **Arab Spring** movements, which began in 2011, were an expression of the people's frustration with these regimes, but most were met with **brutal crackdowns**.
- **Syria** remains a prominent example, where the **Assad regime**, with Russian support, continues to **repress opposition forces**, resulting in civilian casualties and displacements.

Foreign Interventions:

- External powers like the **United States** have played significant roles in the region, often for strategic interests in **oil** and **regional stability**. However, interventions, such as the **2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq**, have led to **unintended consequences** like prolonged instability and the rise of extremist groups, including **ISIS**.

Implications for India:

Energy Security:

- West Asia is crucial for India's **energy security**, with the region supplying over **60% of India's oil imports**. Political instability often results in **oil price volatility**, impacting India's economy, which is sensitive to **global oil prices**.
- India has diversified its oil imports by increasing supplies from **Russia** and **Latin America**, reducing its reliance on West Asian oil. However, the region remains an essential energy supplier.

Remittances:

- Over **8 million Indians** work in West Asia, contributing significantly to India's **remittance inflows**. In 2021, India received around **USD 87 billion** in remittances, with about **50%** coming from Gulf

Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. Policies like **Saudization** and economic slowdowns could affect the jobs and incomes of Indian workers.

- Regional conflicts, such as the Yemen war or tensions in Saudi Arabia, could result in **economic uncertainty**, affecting Indian expatriates and their remittances.

Trade Relations:

- The **Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)** is one of India's most important trade partners. Bilateral trade between India and the GCC countries stood at **USD 161.59 billion** in FY 2023-24. Any disruption in this region could hurt India's trade and **export sector**.
- India's **Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreements (CEPA)** with the UAE and other countries in the region are designed to **boost trade**, but political instability may limit their effectiveness.

Maritime Security:

- Strategic maritime chokepoints like the **Strait of Hormuz** are critical for India's trade and energy imports. **Piracy** or **state-sponsored attacks** could threaten India's **sea-borne trade**. The seizure of a **cargo ship** with **Indian nationals** aboard by Iran in 2024 underscored the risks to **Indian interests**.

Terrorism and National Security:

- The instability in West Asia has provided fertile ground for extremist organizations like **ISIS, Al-Qaeda,** and **Hezbollah**. These groups may exploit **political unrest** and **recruit** from **South Asia**, including India. The **Financial Action Task Force (FATF)** has also flagged terrorism threats to India from these organizations.

Cultural and Religious Ties:

- India has **cultural and religious ties** with West Asia, home to Islamic holy sites. India's **200 million Muslims** closely follow developments in the region, and any events related to **holy sites** can have domestic implications.

India's Strategic Responses:

Strategic Autonomy:

- India should maintain a policy of **non-alignment** in regional conflicts, engaging diplomatically with all key players, including **Saudi Arabia, Iran, Israel,** and the **UAE**. By avoiding taking sides, India can safeguard its interests and act as a **neutral player**.

- **Neutral diplomacy** on issues like the **Israel-Palestine conflict** and the **Iran-Saudi rivalry** will enhance India's image as a **peace-promoting nation**.

Energy Diversification:

- India should continue to **diversify its energy imports** to reduce its dependency on West Asia. Investments in **renewable energy** sources and **alternative suppliers** such as Russia, the U.S., and Latin America are crucial steps toward **energy security**.
- Expanding India's **Strategic Petroleum Reserves (SPR)** will also help buffer against oil supply disruptions.

Enhanced Diplomatic Engagement:

- India should strengthen ties with West Asian countries through **high-level engagements** and **multilateral cooperation** in forums like the **Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)** and the **I2U2** group (India, Israel, UAE, U.S.).
- India's participation in these forums will help enhance collaboration on **maritime security, food security, and clean energy**.

Defense and Security Cooperation:

- India should enhance its **naval presence** and conduct joint exercises with partners like **Oman, the UAE, and the U.S.** to secure strategic sea lanes. Expanding defense collaborations, focusing on **joint training, intelligence sharing, and cyber-security**, will be vital to safeguard Indian interests.
- Strengthening **counter-terrorism** collaborations with **Saudi Arabia, Israel, and other regional partners** can mitigate extremist threats.

Cultural Diplomacy:

- India's **diaspora in West Asia** is a major asset. Ensuring their welfare through diplomatic engagements, **labor rights advocacy, and educational exchanges** will help strengthen India's influence in the region.
- Hosting **cultural events** and promoting people-to-people ties will further India's **soft power** and goodwill in West Asia.

Conclusion:

India's strategic interests in West Asia require a **balanced approach** that focuses on **neutral diplomacy**, **economic partnerships**, and **security collaborations**. By adopting **strategic autonomy** and fostering **multilateral cooperation**, India can protect its national interests while contributing to **peace and stability** in the region.

MAINS QUESTION

The Strait of Hormuz and other maritime chokepoints in West Asia are vital for India's trade and energy imports. In the face of increasing tensions in the region, particularly involving Iran and Saudi Arabia, discuss how India can strengthen its maritime security strategy and safeguard its commercial and energy interests



IQRA

Wisdom leads to success