

How India Lost Its Way in Persian Gulf

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There have been [two successive setbacks](#) in the past one-year period to the India-Iran relationship. India has been literally eased out of two strategically important projects in Iran that were full of promise to uplift the ties in a medium and long term perspective.

The first was in July when [Tehran dropped India](#) from the planned construction of a rail line from Chabahar port to Zahedan, along the border with Afghanistan.

The second has been the Iranian decision to award to a local company a contract worth USD 1.78 billion for the development of Farzad B Gas Field in the Persian Gulf, which India's ONGC Videsh Ltd had discovered way back in 2008. Plainly put, India has been [booted out of the project](#).

In both cases, there was considerable delay on India's part to negotiate a mutually satisfactory arrangement at government-to-government level, which apparently left Tehran with no choice but to proceed with the implementation of the projects without the involvement of Indian public sector companies.

Having said that, it was a political decision no doubt that Tehran took, considering the highly strategic nature of the two projects for not only bilateral ties but regional politics as well. While Farzad B Gas Field would have strengthened India's energy security, the Chabahar-Zahedan rail line would be a vital link in regional connectivity for India with land-locked Afghanistan and the Central Asian region. In the latter case, India's capacity to play an effective political role in Afghanistan could get impaired.

Fundamentally, these setbacks are to be attributed to the lack of strategic clarity in India's policies toward Iran and the Persian Gulf region on the whole. Certain serious aberrations had crept into the Indian regional policies in the Persian Gulf in the recent 3-4 years since 2017 that negatively impacted Iran's core strategic interests.

To recap, in a marked departure from the traditional policy not to take sides in the perennial inter-state tensions in the Persian Gulf between Iran and the GCC states, India began to identify itself with the countries of the anti-Iran regional front that the former US President

Donald Trump was sponsoring — involving Israel, Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

How far the US encouraged India to be a 'swing' state to give ballast to the Israel-Saudi-UAE front or whether the Indian 'tilt' was a suo moto decision is a moot point today. Most likely, it was a combination of both templates, stemming out of a deeply flawed Indian assessment of the geopolitics of the West Asian region.

Indian policy got predicated on an entirely unwarranted assumption that the US-led Israel-Saudi-Emirati bandwagon was irrevocably on the ascendance in regional politics and it would be advantageous for India to get on board as a fellow traveller.

Indeed, Indian strategic community contributed significantly to this mishap. With the signing of the Abraham Accords last August, Indian analysts were convinced that the country's regional strategies in the Persian Gulf and West Asian region would be best served by forging even closer links with the US-Israeli-Saudi-Emirati axis.

Two op-Eds in the Indian Express newspaper at that time titled *India's geopolitical interests are in close alignment with moderate Arab centre* and *India must seize the new strategic possibilities with the Gulf* and a piece penned by a former Indian diplomat in the Times of Israel titled *Why India supports the Abraham Accord* stand out as forceful presentation of the case. ([here](#), [here](#) and [here](#))

Unfortunately, the seductive arguments propagating the US-Israeli-Saudi-Emirati axis were falling on very receptive ears in the corridors of power in Delhi. They happened to fit in perfectly with the policy trajectory to give gravitas to the nascent quasi-alliance between India and steadily elevate it to a military alliance dovetailing with Washington's so-called Indo-Pacific strategy against China in the geopolitical space from Western Pacific to the Indian Ocean.

Wasn't India aware that the raison d'être of the US-Israeli-Saudi-Emirati front aimed at isolating Iran in its region and overthrowing the established regime in that country? Of course, Trump and his regional allies had left Delhi in no doubt whatsoever on that score. But, simply put, Delhi had no qualms over it, although Iran has been traditionally a friendly country that never encroached upon India's vital interests and had consistently sought a close friendly partnership with India.

Without doubt, Tehran began noticing the shift in the Indian attitudes. While Delhi's muted response to the US recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital (December 2017) signalled new churning, the [enthusiastic welcome](#) that Delhi extended to the Abraham Accords (August 2020) would have made Tehran sit up.

Indeed, Delhi kept silent when Iran's Quds Force commander Gen. Qassem Soleimani was killed (January 2020) on Trump's orders and when a top Iranian nuclear scientist was assassinated by Israel. Delhi no longer bothered to hide its special relations with the UAE and Saudi Arabia with accent on security cooperation, notwithstanding the two countries' growing hostility toward Iran. In retrospect, India was cruising through a fantasyland, completely out of touch with the realities.

Then the inevitable happened in a rapid sequence — Trump lost the November election; Biden swung toward putting the US' alliance with the Saudi regime under scanner; US began debating retrenchment from the West Asian region so as to focus on the Asia-Pacific; US

stance on Palestinian issue reverted to the default position; and, most important, disregarding protests by Israel, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, Biden decided to engage with Iran.

Of course, the lifting of the US sanctions against Iran, which is on the horizon, will completely realign the security scenario in the Persian Gulf. Saudi Arabia and the UAE are already scrambling to engage Iran on their own initiative to cope with the profound transition that is expected in regional security. Above all, the notions stemming out of the Abraham Accords have died a sudden death. The current conflict in Gaza even accentuates Israel's isolation.

Meanwhile, Iran's surge is in the cards. The lifting of US sanctions and ensuing integration into the world economy will dramatically change the geopolitics of Iran. Iran is a very rich country, and with or without India's cooperation, it will embark on an ambitious programme of economic reconstruction. Symptomatic of it is the recent 25-year, \$400 billion pact of economic cooperation with China.

From the Indian perspective, the easing of tensions in Iran's problematic relationship with Saudi Arabia should be seized as a window of opportunity to inject new dynamism into the Indian policy. India should quietly bury the disastrous Gulf policy trajectory of the recent years built on wrong assumptions and act quickly to revive the verve of the Iran-India cooperation. Reviving the [purchase of Iranian oil could be a first step](#). The road to Tehran will soon get crowded.

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