

India has already proven her maritime strength and ability to act in the event of a crisis through Operation Raahat during the Yemeni crisis and could build on these good offices to improve the scope and reach of maritime security goals in the region - **Daneesh Sethna***

India's engagement with the Arab world is rooted in its enduring cultural and civilizational ties with the region. Throughout history, be it through interactions with travellers like Ibn Battuta and Al Beruni or through trade in spices and exchanges of knowledge and culture, India's ties with the westernmost parts of our continent have been those of friendship and cooperation. Even as a modern nation-state, the WANA region has been a major economic and political partner with India as evidenced by the Non-Aligned Movement and the significant Indian diaspora in the region, a sustained relationship of cooperation and international support is in the best interest of all. Amidst India's foreign policy objectives of 'Looking East', in 2014, the country has added a new dimension with its 'Link West' policy demonstrating a renewed commitment to greater friendship and deeper cooperation with the region. However, while economic cooperation and labour trade have been on the rise, India needs to look more deeply into a sustainable cooperation with the WANA region on issues of security.

Unlike most interlocutors in the region, India's ties with West Asia have been devoid of any strategic manipulations as witnessed by the amicable relationship the country has built with Egypt, Morocco and Israel, thus putting India in a strong footing for better partnerships within the region. However, given Indian ambitions to become a major player in the global geopolitical realm, a greater cooperation and engagement with this highly contentious region, especially in terms of security and defence cooperation is essential. The regions of both West and South Asia have been plagued by issues of religious extremism and terror, piracy and insurgency and energy and climate insecurity along with other destabilising factors and greater all-around security cooperation is in the best interests of both regions.



Narendra Modi walks with his Israeli counterpart Benjamin Netanyahu | Image: PIB

Building on our bilateral cooperation with the countries of West Asia and North Africa, India must start investing both economically as well as diplomatically in partnerships both

bilaterally as well as multilaterally in concrete security cooperation. Increasing engagements in counter-terrorism and intelligence activities, with real-time exchange of information, surveillance of the flow of terror financing between the regions and a monitoring of the movement of people will provide major strategic insight and greatly help in countering the scourge of Islamic extremism in the neighbourhood. While India has not been as affected by the activities of the Islamic state, it has been no stranger to terrorist activities and has struggled with problems of radicalisation and extremism on her own soil as well. Security partnerships with the region go beyond the gambit of traditional avenues like defence cooperation and intelligence sharing but extend to an economic and cultural engagement aimed at winning 'hearts and minds'.

India has been reaching out to countries in the region for enhanced capacity building and security cooperation, particularly in the face of maritime peacekeeping and anti-piracy initiatives. With India hoping to also increase her geopolitical influence in the Indian Ocean Region, her collaborations with WANA countries are of strategic significance to the country and while the process has begun India must invest heavily in strengthening and expanding these ties to create veritable maritime security regime in the region. Countering Chinese influence is also a major strategic objective and can be achieved through greater engagements with the North African states of Djibouti, Sudan and Egypt. India has already proven her maritime strength and ability to act in the event of a crisis through Operation Raahat during the Yemeni crisis and could build on these good offices to improve the scope and reach of maritime security goals in the region.

India has a vested interest in matters of energy security in the WANA region, particularly in maintaining the stability of oil and natural gas supply and prices. Thus, Indian engagement in energy security in the region has been driven by strategic objectives and long-term investment plans. Given the current global trends, including the loss of favour of Pakistan within the region and the US' pull-back from interference in the affairs of the region, New Delhi is well placed to developing a more robust energy security cooperation with West Asia. Moreover, India must also look to the future, and increase her investment in and engagement with the entire WANA region in terms of climate diplomacy and cooperation. Not just to help combat the growing insecurity in the region with regards to depleting oil reserves but also to moderate Chinese reach in the region by getting in on the ground-floor with new avenues for creation of sustainable energy sources in the region. In particular, India must invest in the Maghreb to tap into the regions strategic position as a bridge between Europe and the Sahel and further into sub-Saharan Africa to promote the International Solar Alliance and decrease global as well as a regional dependency on oil and natural gas in order to realise energy security goals.

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In order to maintain a holistic security cooperation with the WANA region, it would be imperative to look at food security and India's agricultural cooperation with the region. Building on bilateral and multilateral engagements on food and water security like those with Israel and the GCC, the West Asian and North African countries could become important partners in India's quest for food and water security as well as open up potential avenues of trade and technology transfer that have not been explored so far. Strategically, building partnerships that go beyond the traditional dimensions of security would not only help India gain a strong footing in the region but also go a long way in addressing Indian concerns over the scope and nature of China's Belt and Road Initiative especially in the region.

While India has shown a renewed focus in the region and has particularly committed bilaterally to strengthening defence ties through joint military exercises, capacity building projects, counter-terrorism initiatives and other such programmes, if India is to capture the void created by US disengagement in the region while also countering China's growing influence as a politically neutral international power in West Asia, it is imperative that New Delhi build on this defence partnership and expand its gambit of security cooperation to different fields and partners in the region. While space is open for India to truly engage with the WANA region and strategically place herself as a non-intrusive and neutral ally in the region with engagements across the board with all the nations it would give New Delhi a firm foothold in the greater global geopolitical space.

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