

# Indo-Chinese Cooperation for Gulf Security

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**Abstract:** *Gulf-Asia ties are no longer restricted to just economic, political and cultural ties. There is noticeable intent of collaboration in the security realm as well. The slow but certain American disengagement from the Middle East has not only affected Gulf security, but could also impact the “free rider” status of China and India in future. As the economies of the Asian giants grow and their naval presence expands to protect the supply routes in the Indian Ocean, they could either themselves play or be called upon to play a security role in the region. This serves as an opportunity to explore a new collective security architecture, involving Middle Eastern, Asian and Western powers. While China and India have not laid bare their cards, they have not ruled out a prospective security role, either independently or collectively. Simultaneously, while Sino-Indo competition is inevitable, there is nothing stopping them from cooperating and avoiding confrontation. Their cooperative relationship has significant implications not only for the future of the two countries, but also for the Gulf. The proposed paper explores the dynamics of these developments and future possibilities.*

**Key Words:** *China; India; Middle East; Gulf; Security*

India and China are great civilisations with different postcolonial development models that together account for more than a third of the world’s population. Both have not only consolidated their place in Asia, but are also making their presence felt on the global stage. But the rise of “Chindia” (China and India) – “which together accounted for half the global economy three centuries ago, but declined to less than one fifth, may emerge once again, perhaps within 50 years, as two of the three largest economies in the world, after the United States” – brings to the table a set of uncertainties and opportunities too.<sup>②</sup>

In recent decades, the two have attempted to balance their demand-supply chain of energy and raw materials to feed their expanding economies — as seen in both wooing Africa. This could become more apparent in their relations with the energy-rich Gulf countries, especially as their naval presence expands to protect their supply routes in the Indian Ocean in future.

Simultaneously, the discourse on a potential Sino-Indo rivalry in the Gulf region is also drawing attention. This apprehension comes amid the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries recognising the significance of Asia as an economically and adopting a

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<sup>②</sup> The term “Chindia” was coined by Indian economist politician Jairam Ramesh. For more read, *Making Sense of Chindia: Reflections on China and India*, New Delhi: India Research Press, 2005; Also see, Kishore Mahbubani, *The New Asian Hemisphere: The Irresistible Shift of Global Power to the East*, Canada: Public Affairs Books, 2008.

“Look East” policy over the last decade and a half, which is also referred to as a period of “rediscovery” of Gulf-Asia ties. A combination of economic factors and the fallout of 9/11 continue to make the GCC countries approach the East as their preferred partner.

The “Look East” policy in the economic realm also comes at a time of regional introspection in the political arena, which is likely to influence the long-term political economy of the GCC countries and shape international relations in the coming decades.<sup>①</sup> This is particularly relevant in the backdrop of India and China bringing to the table another important dynamic — their ties with Iran and Israel, which could be used positively to reduce regional tension.

This article attempts to delve into issues pertaining to new dynamics of Gulf security in future. It also aims to highlight the importance of a Sino-Indo cooperative relationship, which has significant implications not only for the future of the two countries, but also for the Gulf region, especially in the security domain.

This narrative is rooted in three premises.

1. A relationship based purely on economic engagement is untenable in the long run. This means that India, China and the GCC countries have to look beyond a buyer-seller relationship. They have to set the vision beyond oil, trade and expatriates by converting the transaction-based relationship into a strategic one.
2. In the wake of the evident decline of the US influence in the region, it makes economic sense for India and China to be part of any new international security system in the region. Similarly, it would be beneficial for the Gulf countries to have India and China on board.
3. The Gulf countries may not recognize India and China’s influence in the same vein as they would if both assure the oil-rich, but security-poor, countries of strategic cooperation in any collective security architecture that may emerge in the future.

All these factors make Sino-Indo ties with the Gulf countries akin to an incongruent triangle. This raises the question as to whether India and China cooperate, compete or confront on matters related to the Gulf in the decades ahead<sup>②</sup> From an optimistic perspective, while competition is inevitable in meeting economic, political and strategic objectives, there is nothing stopping the two countries from cooperating and avoiding confrontation to maximize mutual benefits.

## I. Changing India-GCC Ties

Relations between India and the GCC countries have evolved greatly since Bombay’s days as a premier marketing centre for pearls and dates from the region, and Indian currency and postage stamps were in circulation in the Gulf.

While India-GCC ties are rooted in oil, trade and expatriates, the current GCC interest in India is gaining momentum and expanding into the strategic arena amid a changing perception of India and Indians in the Gulf. “In the past, India has been called a caged tiger, a lumbering elephant, and various other exotic animals in the zoo. I think it would not be boastful to say that today we have moved out of the zoo – and on to the race course,” is a sentiment that is striking a chord in the region.<sup>③</sup>

After being the major source of unskilled and semi-skilled workforce for decades, India is better positioned to increase its share of skilled and professional workforce in the

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<sup>①</sup> N. Janardhan, “GCC-Asia Ties: Economy First; What Next?” *Khaleej Times*, January 31, 2006.

<sup>②</sup> N. Janardhan, “Chindia: Cooperate, Compete or Confront?” *Khaleej Times*, June 18, 2008.

<sup>③</sup> Indian Minister of Commerce and Industry, “Kamal Nath’s Statement at a Lecture in University College,” Oxford, May 2007.

region, which is bound to alter the composition of the Indian workforce in the region to some degree. The wealth of resources India has to offer in the realm of the knowledge economy is an aspect that the GCC countries can tap into.<sup>①</sup>

Characteristics such as India being the world's largest democracy, home to about 160 million Muslims, fourth largest economy in the world in terms of purchasing power parity, and world's largest provider of UN peacekeepers are well documented. But, India's strategic importance lies in what the country has become and intends to do in future — the fourth largest consumer of energy, hi-tech plans to develop supercomputers, complete nuclear fuel cycle facilities and placement of own satellites in orbit, replicating IT success in biotechnology, biogenetics and pharmaceuticals; and more importantly, a strategic partner of the US which is sharing nuclear technology for civilian use and even agreed to share roles in joint space missions.

Even as it is “super poor” at one level, it has the makings of a “superpower” at another level — a contradiction and a bitter reality that India and the world will have to get used to in future. India is now the third most powerful nation, behind the US and China, according to an American report — Global Governance 2025 — jointly issued by the National Intelligence Council of the Office of the Director of National Intelligence and the European Union's Institute for Security Studies.<sup>②</sup>

It is now evident to the GCC countries that the beneficiaries of India's knowledge economy include the US and Europe, and this may help India play a bigger role in the region's service industry. Further, the expanding private sector in the region has given Indians a level playing field with Western expatriates and an opportunity to showcase their professional skills more effectively.

Beyond the economy and politics, the GCC countries and India have several mutual concerns – terrorism being notable among them — maintaining closer ties becomes inevitable. Given the subcontinent's volatile security milieu and the critical developments in the Gulf, these acquire a sense of urgency.

The visit of King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia to India in 2006 — the first by a Saudi head of state in 60 years — contributed positively to India's image and served as an acknowledgement that the Gulf is also taking note of India's renewed interest in the region. This and the mutual visits by Indian prime ministers and other leaders thereafter yielded the New Delhi, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi Declarations, among others, which have helped India-Gulf ties evolve and acquire a ‘strategic’ dimension for enhanced engagement in the future.

## II. China-GCC Ties

China, on the other hand, neither has strong historical ties nor has it developed long-term strategic interests in the Gulf till now. Any role that it did have in the Middle East was laced with Maoist ideology and influenced by Third World solidarity for leftist independence movements. Yet, its relationship with the region has assumed dynamic proportions, chiefly due to its energy requirements to feed its thriving economy.

But, unlike China's ties with Africa, which have been seen by some as “resource imperialism”, Beijing's renewed interest in the Middle East, particularly the GCC countries, has been termed as a “joining of equals – newly rich Chinese manufacturers cutting deals with flush petro-princes from a tradition of unfettered trade as rich and old as China's.” Starting with “exchange of Arab oil for Chinese capital,” it has developed during

<sup>①</sup> India now annually produces more engineers than the European Union.

<sup>②</sup> “New Global Line-up Lists India 3rd Most Powerful Nation,” *Indian Express*, September 21, 2010.

the last decade into a web of two-way deals in banking, property development, industry and tourism.<sup>①</sup>

The GCC-China trade ties are still rooted in oil – China relies on imports for more than half its daily oil consumption and China has forged several joint ventures to strengthen the energy ties in the region. Moreover, China's shift from exporter to consumer market is being seen as an opportunity for the GCC countries to sharpen their competitive edge and increase their share in the world's largest market, as well as play a pivotal role in re-exporting Chinese goods to European countries. The region is already benefiting from access to cheaper Chinese products, with enormous demand for garments, fabrics, electronic and telecommunications products.

### III. Gulf Security Dynamics

Where the Chindia-Gulf ties take a twist is in the slowly, but surely, changing security scenario of the Gulf region, as well as that of China and India.

There have been increasing calls in recent years for the GCC countries to take stock of the situation, act independently and design future security arrangements, without leaving everything for the US to formulate, thus opening a window for Asian countries. It is true that though the GCC's ties with Asia are expanding, no other international actor can replace the US in the short- or even medium-term future of the region. But that could change in the long term.

The GCC countries are increasingly facing a dilemma having to choose between their traditional security guarantor, the US, and their disagreements with many aspects of US policy since the turn of the century. They are more and more convinced that events in the Middle East are beyond the scope of US influence and certainly not in the best interests of the GCC countries. Given the added pressure of the region's leadership being unable to provide the necessary security vision, two schools of thought prevail in the region: one urging less international involvement in the region's affairs and the other, urging more involvement.

Those arguing that the way out of the dilemma is through the withdrawal of external powers from the Gulf feel that they have precipitated the crises rather than contribute positively. Therefore, the new mantra is that "a lasting Gulf security system can only function if it is based on a regional initiative." But the situation on the ground is really not conducive to the complete removal of external forces. As a result, an indigenous alternative and viable security architecture is highly unlikely.<sup>②</sup>

In such a situation, the only option is further internationalisation of the region. Hence, the GCC countries are willing to consider intense political, economic and social ties with other countries to counter the prevailing notion that only American military power counts.

At the 2004 Gulf Dialogue in Bahrain, Saudi Foreign Minister Saud Al-Faisal said: "Guarantees for Gulf security cannot be provided unilaterally even by the only superpower in the world...The region requires guarantees provided by the collective will of the international community."

Similarly, Qatar's Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani told the United National General Assembly in 2007 that "the major conflicts in the world have become too big for one single power to handle them on its own."

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<sup>①</sup> Stephen Glain, "The Modern Silk Road," *Newsweek*, May 26, 2008.

<sup>②</sup> For more on these issues, read Christian Koch, "Gulf Region Bakes Strategic Shift in New Global System," *Arab News*, October 22, 2006; and "Gulf Needs More, Not Less, External Involvement," *Gulf in the Media* (UAE), January 27, 2006.

#### IV. Fatigue with the United States

Alternatives are also being considered because of the US fatigue with the region and the region's fatigue with the US. The former sentiment is evident in the following views.

First, from being famous as an undisputed 'superpower' not too long ago, the US now has a new nickname — "The Frugal Superpower." According to Michael Mandelbaum's book, this emanates from the US leadership's propensity to induce budget cuts, including in the foreign policy arena, which is bound to restrict its power and influence externally. The book suggests that while the US role around the world will not disappear, it will almost certainly shrink. This new tag was further spiced up with the "superfrugal, super broke, superpower" reference.<sup>①</sup>

Second, in *Monsoon – The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power*, Robert Kaplan argues that Asia will "demographically and strategically be the hub of the 21st century world", marking a shift from the West, which has been the centre of world history for the past few centuries. He looks at the strategic situation in the greater Indian Ocean in the light of the diminishing US influence in the region and the inexorable rise of China and India as economic and military powerhouses. He points out that over the long term the future in "Monsoon Asia" will be one of "greater integration" in which the US will have little or no role. According to Kaplan, India's strategic thinkers are deeply conscious of the role the country will play in this century, and, specifically, their commitment to building a navy that will project its power across the Indian Ocean and beyond.<sup>②</sup>

Third, if the developments in Iran and Iraq exposed US capacity or lack thereof to deal with the region's problems, the tumultuous Arab uprisings exposed its credibility or lack of it, especially after Washington's role in the ouster of Egyptian leader Hosni Mubarak, despite Saudi counsel to the contrary and the US decision not to use force to oust Bashar Al Assad in Syria.<sup>③</sup>

Fourth, amid the Arab uprisings, Saudi Arabia rallied Muslim nations across the Middle East and Asia to join an informal Arab alliance against Iran. Saudi officials approached Pakistan, Malaysia, Indonesia and Central Asian states (and India too) to lend diplomatic support-and potentially military assistance to stifle the crisis in Bahrain. The chief of the Saudi National Security Council, Prince Bandar bin Sultan al Saud, told Pakistan in 2011 that the US should not be counted on to restore stability across the Middle East.<sup>④</sup> A similar Saudi-led coalition is now aiming to counter "Islamic State" in Iraq and Syria.

Fifth, the sharpest nail in the debate was hammered by Saudi strategic analyst Nawaf Obaid in May 2011: "Saudi Arabia has the will and the means to meet its expanded global responsibilities...In some issues...the Saudis will continue to be a strong US partner. In areas in which Saudi national security or strategic interests are at stake, the kingdom will pursue its own agenda. With Iran working tirelessly to dominate the region, the Muslim Brotherhood rising in Egypt and unrest on nearly every border, there is simply too much at stake for the kingdom to rely on a security policy written in Washington, which has

<sup>①</sup> Michael Mandelbaum, *The Frugal Superpower: America's Global Leadership in a Cash-Strapped Era*, New York: Public Affairs, 2010; also read Thomas Friedman, "Superbroke, Superfrugal, Superpower?" *New York Times*, September 4, 2010.

<sup>②</sup> Robert Kaplan, *Monsoon – The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power*, New York: Random House, 2010; also read Talmiz Ahmad, "Strategic Scenarios," *Frontline*, Vol. 28, Issue 3, January 29-February 11, 2011.

<sup>③</sup> "Bahrain Crisis Exposes US-Saudi Arabia Rift," London: *Reuters*, March 15, 2011.

<sup>④</sup> "Saudi Bid to Curb Iran Worries US," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 27, 2011.

backfired more often than not and spread instability. The special relationship may never be the same, but from this transformation a more stable and secure Middle East can be born.<sup>①</sup>

Due to some of these factors and the shift in the economic power centre from the West to the East, the GCC countries began building ties with a host of alternatives, particularly in Asia, including India and China.<sup>②</sup> While cultivating the new relationship, the region is linking its economic interests and security needs. And, apart from the importance of energy, India and China are showing signs of relating the relevance of the Gulf region to transnational security issues such as proliferation of weapons, crime, drugs and terrorism, and their impact on their domestic scenarios.

Thus, rather than put all their eggs in one basket, this “omni balancing” means the region’s ties with the US are no longer exclusive.<sup>③</sup> The fact that the GCC countries are even willing to consider alternatives is the real strategic shift occurring in the region.

It is in this context that some Indian scholars, including this author, have been propagating the idea of upgrading the GCC-Asia buyer-seller relationship to a strategic one at both Track 2 and Track 1.5 levels. They are also exploring possibilities for a new collective security architecture, which would involve both Asian and Western powers, including China and the US.<sup>④</sup> It is still early, but the attempt is to build on the present conducive economic and political bonhomie to chart out a strategic security dimension to the relationship.

However, the US is in no mood to relent. In November 2011, Hillary Clinton stressed that “the future of politics will be decided in Asia, not Afghanistan or Iraq, and the US will be right at the center of the action.” This assertion throws up the possibility of intense competition over influence and discord over the long-term interests among the US, India, China and the GCC countries.<sup>⑤</sup>

Yet, the fact that the GCC countries are even willing to consider alternatives amid US displeasure, and even fatigue, at the turn of events, is the “real strategic shift occurring in the region”.<sup>⑥</sup>

## V. US Fatigue

The failure of the US to limit the chaos in Iraq after its invasion, the nuclear deal with Iran, which compromised the GCC countries’ perceived security concerns, and the inaction in the Syrian war, which left the region divided more than ever, heightened the fatigue about the US.

Apart from the region’s fatigue with the US, a sense of US fatigue with the region is prevalent as well. The gist of former US president Barack Obama’s foreign and defence policy in the State of the Union address in 2014 was that Washington would limit US military intervention in conflicts around the world, without neglecting global terrorism.

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<sup>①</sup> Nawaf Obaid, “Amid the Arab Spring, a US-Saudi Split,” *Washington Post*, May 16, 2011.

<sup>②</sup> Christian Koch, “Gulf Region Makes Strategic Shift in New Global System,” *Arab News*, 22 October 2006; “Gulf Needs More, Not Less, External Involvement,” *Gulf in the Meida*, January 27, 2006.

<sup>③</sup> Concept propounded by Steven David of Johns Hopkins University.

<sup>④</sup> Ranjit Gupta, Abubaker Bagader, Talmiz Ahmad and N. Janardhan, eds., *A New Gulf Security Architecture: Prospects and Challenges for An Asian Role*, Gerlach, Germany, 2014.

<sup>⑤</sup> Hillary Clinton, “America’s Pacific Century,” *Foreign Policy*, November 2011.

<sup>⑥</sup> For more on these issues, read Christian Koch, “Gulf Region Makes Strategic Shift in New Global System,” *Arab News*, October 22, 2006; and “Gulf Needs More, Not Less, External Involvement,” *Gulf in the Media*, January 27, 2006.

This policy indirectly reflects the desire to focus on domestic issues over its international role.

At the heart of this policy is Obama's recognition of a major reason for the US economic slump – the George W. Bush administration's Afghan and Iraqi misadventures, which may finally cost the US about \$6 trillion. These “most expensive wars in US history” will impact US federal budgets for decades.<sup>①</sup>

Among others, this has made Americans favour a diminished US security role abroad. Various public opinion polls have shown that a majority of Americans feel that Washington should “mind its own business internationally and let other nations get along the best they can on their own.” This is the most emphatic response on this issue in about five decades. This has been qualified by an overwhelming majority wanting Washington to “concentrate more on national” than international problems.<sup>②</sup>

These sentiments and Obama's recognition of the same were encapsulated in the 2014 statement: “Just because we have the best hammer does not mean that every problem is a nail.”<sup>③</sup> And, given the recent US economic growth figures, it is yielding results too, at least for the US.

Further, since April 2016, the media has publicized Obama's comments in *The Atlantic* magazine – particularly about GCC countries being “free riders” and the need for them to “share” the Middle East with Iran. However, what received less publicity is another candid comment: “There's a playbook in Washington that presidents are supposed to follow. It is a playbook that comes out of the foreign policy establishment. And the playbook prescribes responses to different events, and these responses tend to be militarized responses. Where America is directly threatened, the playbook works. But the playbook can also be a trap that can lead to bad decisions.”<sup>④</sup>

In the most recent reasons for GCC-US tension, no matter what the compulsions of the GCC-Iran friction are, Washington-Tehran ties have their own dynamics, dictated by their domestic interests, including their current leaders' character, and would continue to be driven by them rather than the GCC bloc's concerns — however genuine they are. Despite the rhetoric from some quarters of the American political establishment, it is unlikely that even a post-Obama administration would be able to significantly alter the nuclear deal with Iran, let alone reverse it.

## VI. Chindia Perspective

India and China are military powers in their own right and given the current level of economic engagement, they are bound to take part in any arrangement that safeguards their interests, thereby overlapping with the security requirements of the region. Some of the developments in and statements of both countries point to the possibility of an Asian role in the security architecture in the Gulf being more than rhetoric in the long run.

### 1. From the Perspective of India

While energy security is certainly a factor, India is willing to showcase its power and influence in the region. This expanded security perspective is driven by necessity, ambition and opportunity. The desire to lead coincides with its rise as a major power with continental aspirations. Former premier Atal Behari Vajpayee and current Dr Manmohan Singh urged looking beyond the immediate neighbourhood. Singh said “the Gulf region is a

<sup>①</sup> Study conducted by Linda Bilmes of Harvard Kennedy School of Government, March 2013.

<sup>②</sup> “Public, Elite See US Power in Decline,” *Inter Press Service*, December 4, 2013.

<sup>③</sup> Part of Obama's speech on at a US military academy in May 2014.

<sup>④</sup> Jeffrey Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine,” *The Atlantic*, April 2016.

part of our natural economic hinterland. We must pursue closer economic relations with all neighbours in our wider Asian neighbourhood.”<sup>①</sup>

After Pakistan, China, Russia and the US, the Gulf is the focus to ensure against any maritime or landward threat to it from the region, serve as a base to pursue India’s interests, confront terrorism and extremism, as well as tap the investment potential. By focusing on the Gulf and restoring traditional linkages with the immediate and extended neighbourhood, India is seeking to address its “four deficits” in the historical, security, economic and global decision-making realms.<sup>②</sup>

India is now talking about “soft power” and diplomacy – the security of the Gulf countries, as well as the wider Middle East, is of “paramount concern” and New Delhi is ready to contribute to the stability of the region by sharing its experience in combating terrorism, maritime security and military training. India’s National Security Adviser in 2005 M.K. Narayanan said: “The key focus in our external relations today is ensuring the stability and security of the region, comprising the arc of nations from the Gulf to East Asia...”<sup>③</sup>

With this in mind, the government launched in 2003 “a 20-year programme to become a world power whose influence is felt across the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Gulf, and all of Asia”.<sup>④</sup>

India’s desire to play an independent role in the Indian Ocean and the Gulf is also an extension of the notion of maritime primacy that it inherited from the British Raj. Following several decades of inactivity in realising this dream after obtaining independence from the British, India is now in an advanced stage of foreign and security policy change. Its new stress on regionalism rooted in economic integration has made India look favourably with the entire Indian Ocean littoral, including the Gulf.

As economic growth helps India makes rapid progress, it is beginning to lean towards greater strategic realism. The idea of an extensive ring of national security involving the Indian Ocean littoral and the Gulf, the principle that India must play a more prominent role in the region, and a readiness to deploy the necessary resources for such tasks are very much a part of the Indian thought process.<sup>⑤</sup>

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<sup>①</sup> “PM Keen on Building Strong Ties with Gulf States,” Sify.com (India), August 7, 2005. Between 2005 and 2007, 40 Indian naval ships visited the region, with 11 of them docking in Fujairah, UAE, the largest oil bunkering station in the world [(*The Hindu* (India), December 23, 2007]; and, on the first-ever visit by an Indian prime minister to Qatar in November 2008, New Delhi sought surplus funds from that country to sustain the flow of investments at a time of global credit squeeze, and signed two agreements relating to defense and law enforcement, which officials said would “lay out a structure for joint maritime security and training as well as exchange of visits.” Another agreement on security and law enforcement would “lay out the framework for sharing of information and database on threats posed by extremists” and seek to check money laundering and transnational crime (*The Hindu*, November 12, 2008). One Indian government official was quoted as saying, “We will go to the rescue of Qatar if Qatar requires it, in whatever form it takes.” However, he added that “India will not station troops in any foreign country. We don’t want to fight other people’s wars in foreign countries.” [*The Asian Age* (India), November 12, 2008].

<sup>②</sup> Part of a statement by former Indian defence minister Pranab Mukherjee at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, DC, June 27, 2005.

<sup>③</sup> These views were part of his presentation titled “China and India: The Asian Rising Powers Debate – An Indian Perspective,” at the third Global Strategic Review Conference of the International Institute for Strategic Studies in Geneva, September 18, 2005.

<sup>④</sup> India’s defence expenditure shot up from \$11.6 billion in 1998-99 to over \$51 billion in 2015-16.

<sup>⑤</sup> Some of these views were expressed by C. Raja Mohan in “India’s Strategic Challenges in the Indian Ocean and the Gulf,” at a workshop on “India’s Growing Role in the Gulf – Implications for the Region and the United States,” organised by Nixon Center, Washington DC, and Gulf Research Centre, Dubai, in November 2008.

A key role in this programme is to transform the Indian Navy from a “brown water” coastal defence force to a formidable “blue water” fleet. Indicating that its plan is on course, India launched its first nuclear-powered submarine in July 2009, thus becoming only the sixth country in the world to do so.<sup>①</sup>

The Navy’s aim is not just to patrol the seas, but have the capacity to create and “deploy battalion-sized forces at various strategic points... [on] short notice, and disperse them quickly from the landing or dropping zone before any adequate enemy response”. The inference is that the expansion program envisions possible intervention in countries in India’s “sphere of influence”.

It is relevant here to point out that Alfred Thayer Mahan, an American naval officer and historian from the 19th and 20th centuries, said that “whoever controls the Indian Ocean dominates Asia. This ocean is the key to the seven seas in the 21st century, the destiny of the world will be decided in these waters.”

Aware of the need for greater collective security cooperation in the region, the Indian Navy organised the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) in February 2007. The IONS is expected to be a regular feature which would allow sustained interaction among the naval chiefs of the countries belonging to the Indian Ocean rim to develop “cooperative, consultative and inclusive” mechanism that would address threats to Indian Ocean security.

Thus, India’s naval plans and assertions have led some to ask, with concern, if India is turning the Indian Ocean into India’s ocean.<sup>②</sup>

In the security realm, the Riyadh Declaration of 2010 and the Abu Dhabi Declaration of 2015 strategically elevated the partnership to the next (comprehensive) strategic level.<sup>③</sup> The real impact of these, in terms of hard security, may take a while to evolve, but in terms of soft security, there is evidence of increased cooperation between India and the UAE, and India and Saudi Arabia in counter-terrorism statements and operations.<sup>④</sup>

In terms of hard security, the India-Qatar defence cooperation pact, described as an agreement “just short of stationing (Indian) troops” in Qatar serves as a good example. Signed during the first-ever visit by an Indian prime minister to Qatar in November 2008, the agreement “lays out a structure for joint maritime security and training as well as exchange of visits.”<sup>⑤</sup> Qatar, thus, became the first country in the Middle East to sign such a pact with India.

Following the agreement, an Indian official was quoted as saying: “We will go to the rescue of Qatar if Qatar requires it, in whatever form it takes... (But) India will not station troops in any foreign country. We don’t want to fight other people’s wars in foreign countries.”<sup>⑥</sup>

The specifics of this and the India-Oman defence cooperation agreement, also signed in 2008, serve as templates for future India-GCC security cooperation in the short and medium terms.<sup>⑦</sup>

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<sup>①</sup> British Broadcasting Corporation, July 26, 2009.

<sup>②</sup> For more, see “US, China, India Flex Muscle Over Energy-Critical Sea Lanes,” June 10, 2006, [freerepublic.com](http://freerepublic.com).

<sup>③</sup> “Riyadh Declaration: A New Era of Strategic Partnership,” Media Centre, Ministry of External Affairs, India, March 1, 2010; and “UAE, India Issue Joint Statement at the End of Indian PM’s Visit to UAE,” *Emirates News Agency*, August 17, 2015.

<sup>④</sup> “Saudi Arabia Helped India Nab 26/11 Handler Abu Jundal,” *Times of India*, June 26, 2012; and “3 Indians, Suspected ISIS Supporters, Deported from UAE,” *New Indian Express*, January 29, 2016.

<sup>⑤</sup> “India Signs Defence Pact with Qatar,” *The Hindu*, November 12, 2008.

<sup>⑥</sup> “India Vows to Defend Tiny Qatar ‘If Needed’,” *The Asian Age*, November 12, 2008.

<sup>⑦</sup> “India, Oman to Step up Defence Ties,” *The Hindu*, November 10, 2008.

An important indicator of India's new "Think West" policy is reflected in Indian Foreign Secretary S. Jaishankar's statement in 2016: "If the eastern front is building upon longstanding policy, the western one is relatively more recent conceptually, even if India has had a historical presence in the Gulf...I can confidently predict that 'Act East' would be matched with "Think West"...The prospects of fossil fuel, attractions of a more decisive and high growth India, and sharp intra-regional competition have all combined to open up new opportunities for India in the Gulf...This may be expected to be a major focus of Indian diplomacy in the coming days."<sup>①</sup>

## 2. From the Perspective of China

For a long time, Beijing has been a "status quo power that often punches below its weight in international politics." China's current Middle East policy is just one element of its overall goal of addressing this. While Chinese policies are clearly aimed at ensuring energy security, China is equally interested in increasing its influence in a region that is weighing the US presence, thereby challenging American control to complement its own global ambitions.<sup>②</sup>

Beyond this dimension, China is also beginning to look at protecting the valuable energy routes to maintain its development needs. In the past, China raised some eyebrows with its sale of ballistic missiles and related technology to Iran and Iraq during the Iran-Iraq conflict, as well as the long-range CSS-2 missiles to Saudi Arabia.<sup>③</sup> Such sales occurred in a different political environment. Though there is nothing to suggest that China is engaged in any form of military offensive, it is not too long before it starts engaging increasingly in the security debate in the region to have its voice heard or before its real plans for the region crystallise or receive more attention.

The fact is that by 2025, the Indian Ocean and the Straits of Malacca are likely to facilitate about 75% of China's energy imports, which explains its plan to provide more than a billion dollars in aid and loan guarantees for building its "String of Pearls" at the Pakistani port of Gwadar, which is on the doorsteps of the Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz.<sup>④</sup> Beijing is keen to use Gwadar as a transit terminal for Iranian and African crude oil imports, which leaves open the possibility of a role for the Chinese naval patrol. A road, and eventually a pipeline, from Gwadar could give China the alternative energy route that it urgently needs and spur the development of its western provinces. This and the other surveillance stations, naval facilities and airstrips that Beijing is either building or contemplating to safeguard the oil route have long-term strategic ramifications.<sup>⑤</sup> As such, Beijing wishes to reduce the vulnerability of its Middle Eastern oil supply to US power.

The current Chinese views on regional security were mentioned in a government "white paper" on national defence in December 2006. The document said the military improvements are part of the country's overall modernization and economic expansion. It is meant to "lay a solid foundation" by 2010, make "major progress" by the end of the next decade and "reach the strategic goal of building informationized armed forces and being capable of winning informationized wars by the mid-21st century." It particularly aims to shift from infantry to high-tech naval and aerial warfare. It has dropped thousands of

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<sup>①</sup> "After 'Act East', Time for 'Think West': Jaishankar," *Times of India*, April 9, 2016. Also see, speech by foreign secretary at Raisina Dialogue in New Delhi, March 2, 2016, [www.mea.gov.in](http://www.mea.gov.in).

<sup>②</sup> Julian Madsen, "China Makes Friends in the Gulf," *Asia Sentinel*, October 30, 2006.

<sup>③</sup> Dan Blumenthal, "Providing Arms: China and the Middle East," *The Middle East Quarterly*, Vol.12, No.2, Spring 2005.

<sup>④</sup> "China Becomes Increasingly Involved in the Middle East," *PINR*, March 10, 2006.

<sup>⑤</sup> *Iran Daily*, April 16, 2005.

untrained foot soldiers and replaced them with trained technicians with skills to operate computerized weaponry.<sup>①</sup>

According to recent forecasts, China is likely to maintain the last decade's increase in military spending of about 12% every year. Though its current defence budget is less than a quarter of the US, it is forecast to become the world's largest military spender in a little more than two decades.<sup>②</sup>

In a sign of China's increasing willingness to flex its military muscle, Beijing sent four flotillas to help fight Somali pirates in the Gulf of Aden between December 2008 and 2009. This, and sending a warship to the region in October 2009, is viewed as China's "biggest naval expedition since the 15th century".

According to US-based consultancy Stratfor, as a "land power, China has spent little time through much of its history worrying about a significant naval capability," but the Somalia mission "offers the Chinese navy new opportunities for training in extended operations far from the Chinese mainland".<sup>③</sup>

In fact, a top Chinese naval official proposed setting up a permanent base to support ships on an anti-piracy mission in the Gulf of Aden, raising the idea that China could build foreign bases elsewhere, to bolster China's long-term participation in the operation. Though critics have claimed it to be exaggerated, the proposal came after a Chinese cargo ship and 25 crewmembers were rescued from Somali pirates after paying a ransom in December 2009.<sup>④</sup>

It also announced the "One Belt, One Road" initiative in 2013, which focuses on connectivity and cooperation among countries primarily in Eurasia, including the West Asian countries. Reviving the Silk Road project, an ancient trade route linking China to Persia and the Arab world, this initiative has two components – the land-based "Silk Road Economic Belt", and the oceangoing "Maritime Silk Road". While these strategies are primarily economic in nature, they also underline China's desire to take on a greater role in global affairs.

In late 2012, China rolled out a "Four-Point Plan" for Syria that called on all sides to stop fighting, end the crisis and initiate a political transition, but it generated little international interest. And in March 2015, Beijing sent warships to rescue Chinese nationals from Yemen.<sup>⑤</sup> Further, Beijing is also worried about extremist elements in West Asia providing training and inspiration for Muslim separatists in its western Xinjiang autonomous region.

While these examples indicate that China is quite active in the region, the problem is that "Beijing (and New Delhi) does not want to choose sides in a region that regularly demands it."<sup>⑥</sup> In the current context, this is a prudent policy – one that was acknowledged even by former US president Barack Obama earlier 2016 – China is a "free rider...can't the US be a little bit more like China?"<sup>⑦</sup>

Beijing has long espoused a policy of "non-interference" in other countries' internal affairs. It opposed the American-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and voted with Russia to

<sup>①</sup> Edward Cody, "China Offers Glimpse of Rationale Behind Its Military Policies," *Washington Post*, December 30, 2006; for more details of the Chinese Navy modernization plan, see Bernard D. Cole, "The PLA Navy's Developing Strategy," *China Brief*, Jamestown Foundation (Washington), October 25, 2006.

<sup>②</sup> "China's Military Rise," *The Economist*, April 7, 2012.

<sup>③</sup> *Los Angeles Times*, December 18, 2008.

<sup>④</sup> "Views of Yin Zhuo – An Admiral and Senior Researcher at the Chinese Navy's Equipment Research Centre," *Agence France-Presse*, December 29, 2009.

<sup>⑤</sup> Ilan Goldenberg, Ely Ratner, "China's Middle East Tightrope," *Foreign Policy*, April 20, 2015.

<sup>⑥</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>⑦</sup> Thomas Friedman, "Obama on the World," *New York Times*, August 8, 2014.

block action to end Bashar Al Assad's rule in Syria. It is not taking part in the coalition of sixty-odd countries fighting ISIS, despite its oil interests in Iraq and unsubstantiated reports of three hundred Chinese Muslims fighting there.

While Beijing committed combat troops to Mali in 2013 and has more personnel in blue helmets in Africa than any other permanent member of the Security Council, it is a reluctant actor in West Asia. This is because it feels it still does not have the "ability" to lead in resolving current conflicts in the region.

In any case, why should others invest in cleaning the mess that the West has created? Further, India and China still have plenty of domestic issues to address. Given their vast population, they are still a long way from achieving prosperity across the board, which is the key to their political stability.

Taking no risk is sometimes the biggest risk, and India and China are being adventurous in inaction. The recent global economic slowdown will encourage conservatism over adventurism. Both India and China have surely learned from America's misadventures in West Asia, where Washington has earned itself more enemies than friends over the last few decades.

Yet, Beijing released a first of its kind "Arab Policy Paper on China" in January 2016. This sets out the country's development strategies with Arab countries and mirrors its readiness to cooperate with them and to tap each other's strengths to ensure a win-win situation. More importantly, it reiterates its political commitment to peace and stability in the Middle East, which is mutually beneficial.<sup>①</sup>

Within days of releasing this paper, President Xi Jinping made his first tour of the Middle East since assuming office. By visiting Saudi Arabia, Iran and Egypt, especially during the height of the Riyadh–Tehran feud, Beijing clearly demonstrated that the region is very much a part its strategic focus, perhaps extending beyond business interests.<sup>②</sup>

While China is playing a calculated wait-and-watch game in a region torn apart by turmoil, Washington is worried about Beijing's moves elsewhere in the world, thereby intensifying their overall strategic competition.

## VII. India-plus-China Approach

Though Sino-Indo ties have steadily improved, there is enough to keep their relations on tenterhooks. However, in spite of the overall challenges, it is important to stop viewing the Sino-Indo developments in mere China-versus-India terms and take an optimistic China-plus-India approach that offers a win-win situation. As the global economic balance shifts towards Asia, China and India could engage in cooperative as well as competitive, and not necessarily confrontational, engagement.

Given the state of infrastructure in India and the realization about its linkage with growth, China's success is acting as a catalyst for change in India. In the prevailing mood of competition, the Indian leadership has said: "We want to catch up with China," but doing so requires "greater political consensus" on reforms, which is an internal dilemma, without China in the picture.

While it is fashionable among common Indians to believe that India and China are engaged in a developmental race, New Delhi has reinforced that China's rise is an opportunity rather than a threat to India. It has clearly stated that Indians would do well to

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<sup>①</sup> Details of the policy paper are available at China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs website: [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/zxxx\\_662805/t1331683.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1331683.shtml).

<sup>②</sup> For more on this issue, see "Well Wishing," *The Economist*, January 23, 2016.

stop racing with the Chinese and start admiring — “We are not in a race...They have already won the race.”<sup>①</sup>

In the foreign policy realm too, “China is a model for India in how to operate in the new world order and deal with the United States.”<sup>②</sup> Analysts argue that India’s new foreign policy diluting nonalignment is influenced by China’s realism. Further, the “look East” policy could also be a result of the “concern that a rising China might economically and politically isolate India from Southeast Asia.”<sup>③</sup>

Energy has been the prime reason for competition in recent years, but has also witnessed cooperation. They have signed numerous pacts in the hydrocarbon sector, most notably the 2006 “Memorandum for Enhancing Cooperation in the Field of Oil and Natural Gas”. Yes, India lost out to China in \$10 billion of auctions for energy assets, among others, in Kazakhstan, Myanmar, as well as parts of Africa. At the same time, however, the two countries partnered successfully in Syria in 2005.

From about \$1 billion in 1995, the annual bilateral trade exceeded \$75 billion in 2015. The two have pledged to cooperate in science, space exploration, agriculture, education, tourism, nuclear energy sectors, among others. Such has been their inclination to cooperate that Prime Ministers Dr. Manmohan Singh and Wen Jiabao held face-to-face meetings at least 13 times between 2004 and 2012.

Since 2003, there has been a steady progress in security cooperation too. Starting with joint naval exercises, an agreement in 2004 facilitated exchanging military exercise observers; the following year, the two countries announced a deal to convert “bilateral engagements into a long-term and strategic relationship,” pledging to resolve long-standing border disputes and boost trade and economic cooperation.

Of course, there are problems, but they exist between India and Pakistan as well. In fact, the Indo-Pak dimension was, is and will remain more complicated than Indo-Chinese relations can ever get. Yet, if India and Pakistan can stave off confrontation through efforts to cooperate, amid limited competition, then why not India and China? Again, unlike the Iran-Israel relationship, where ideology determines geostrategic interests, there are few or no ideological factors remaining to deter Indo-Chinese ties, leaving them to just worry about geostrategic interests.<sup>④</sup>

Amid these positive factors, there are worrying signals too. According to some Chinese experts, Indian defence strategy now treats China, not Pakistan, as priority target.<sup>⑤</sup> The rationale for such an argument comes from the prevailing ground realities in Pakistan and China. While Pakistan’s internal situation is seen as unstable, economic development slow and military growth restricted, the situation in China is exactly the opposite, which is seen to increase the potential of a ‘China threat’.

Coinciding with this Chinese view is an Indian assessment:

“Hardly a week passes without Delhi taking stock of China’s creeping ‘encirclement’ of India...But the mother of all Chinese encirclement of India still remains largely unnoticed in Delhi – the Beijing-Tehran axis. There is wide recognition that if the US

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<sup>①</sup> Indian Minister of State for Commerce Jairam Ramesh’s comment at a seminar sponsored by the Confederation of Indian Industry in New Delhi in November 2006.

<sup>②</sup> Stephen Cohen, *India: Emerging Power*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001.

<sup>③</sup> Stephen Blank, “Natural Allies? Regional Security in Asia and Prospects for Indo-American Strategic Cooperation,” Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 2005.

<sup>④</sup> Former Singapore diplomat and academic Kishore Mahbubani attributes the lack of regional conflict despite India and China’s simultaneous emergence to Asia’s geopolitical competence – being innovative and creating new patterns of cooperation not witnessed by the West.

<sup>⑤</sup> Hao Ding, “Great Changes in India’s Defence Strategy,” *China Youth Daily*, November 27, 2009. For more, see, D.S. Rajan, “How China Views India’s New Defence Doctrine,” *Rediff News*, January 7, 2010.

hasn't been able to push through another tougher United Nations Security Council resolution against Iran over its nuclear programme, that has been largely because of China's reluctance to concur."<sup>①</sup>

Some of this underlying tension reared its ugly head in newspaper editorials in both countries during the Indian bid to join the 48-nation elite Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) in June 2016. After reports that China had nixed India's chances, an editorial in China's *Global Times* said: "Some Indians are too self-centered and self-righteous...India is spoiled. Although the South Asian country's GDP accounts for only 20% of that of China, it is still a golden boy in the eyes of the West, having a competitive edge and more potential compared to China. The international 'adulation' of India makes the country a bit smug in international affairs...Throwing a tantrum won't be an option for New Delhi...India's nationalists should learn how to behave themselves. Now that they wish their country could be a major power, they should know how major powers play their games."<sup>②</sup>

The *Times of India* responded in kind: "The entire editorial heaps insults on Indians who according to the Chinese paper don't understand nationalism, have no knowledge of morals, cravenly follow the West and are spoiled...It appears the Chinese newspaper's editorial wants to give Indians a lesson in nationalism and patriotism...Just as India has been shut out of the NSG, China has been shut out of the Missile Technology Control Regime...China has been a major proliferator of nuclear and missile technology to North Korea and Pakistan, so its insistence on NPT as a cornerstone of the non-proliferation regime is ironic."<sup>③</sup>

Despite these sentiments and competition, there is nothing stopping the two countries with "oversized egos" from cooperating and avoiding confrontation. Their cooperative relationship has significant implications not only for the future of the two countries, but also for the Gulf region, the Asian continent and the world at large. Both countries have extremely good ties with the GCC countries, Iran, and Israel. Apart from intensifying economic ties, they can serve as the honest peace brokers between the capitals of the GCC countries on one side, as well as Tehran and Tel Aviv on the other. <sup>④</sup>

## VIII. Factors Conditioning Chindia's Role in the Gulf

While all these dynamics present a case for the possibility of intensified Chindia role in the international affairs of the region, the following are some factors that are crucial to either promoting or hindering this prospect.

### 1. Sino-US ties

For now, China says it has no vital "strategic" interests in the Middle East requiring protection. The region is distant from China and is not an area from which hostile forces might threaten Chinese territory. Nor is it a traditional Chinese sphere of influence. China's interests in the Middle East are mainly commercial. And, China does not want to get entangled in any Middle Eastern conflicts. Beijing intends to free ride on Washington's efforts in the Middle East; if the US fails to stabilise the region, China will not step in and is not concerned about who would. And, if China's energy interests are affected because of instability, China will go elsewhere for oil.<sup>⑤</sup>

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<sup>①</sup> M. K. Bhadrakumar, "China Leaves the US and India Trailing," *Asia Times*, December 15, 2007.

<sup>②</sup> "Chinese and Indian Newspapers Trade Insults, Says US Media," *The Washington Post*, June 29, 2016.

<sup>③</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>④</sup> N. Janardhan, "Chindia: Cooperate, Compete or Confront?" *Khaleej Times*, June 18, 2008.

<sup>⑤</sup> Jon Alterman, John Garver, *The Vital Triangle: China, the United States, and the Middle East*, Washington: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2008.

China cannot supplant the US in the Middle East as a military power. “Yet, Middle Eastern countries can use a relationship with China to supplement the bilateral relations with the US and perhaps give those countries the freedom of greater distance from Washington. China is playing the game well. Unlike the former Soviet Union, whose frequently heavy-handed reach in the Middle East prompted most countries to flee for the US security umbrella, all Middle Eastern states welcome China.”

Whether or not China is interested in the region, the US is worried about Chinese inroads in the Middle East, principally in terms of seeking access to its oil and gas reserves. “It is a fear for energy security – rather than a concern over energy adequacy itself – that could fuel Sino-American tensions in the Middle East.” Some US analysts fear that a Chinese military build-up, especially the prospect of blue-water navy and power projection capabilities, could challenge US control of vital sea lanes.<sup>①</sup>

## **2. China and Iran**

One aspect of concern for the GCC countries is the relationship between China and Iran. The two countries share a special affinity that is too close for the comfort of the GCC countries given the lack of confidence between them and Iran; this is also true of the US, the main powerbroker in the region.

Economic ties between China and Iran are robust. China’s economic initiatives in Iran go far beyond the energy field and include a wide spectrum of areas, ranging from infrastructure construction to trade and tourism. China also cooperates with Iran’s missile, nuclear, chemical, and advanced conventional weapons programmes.

As China’s third-largest supplier of crude oil, Iran constitutes a critical piece in China’s energy security puzzle. As a consequence of the UN sanctions, loss of Iran’s oil imports to China has been made up by other Gulf suppliers for now. But, it is increasingly becoming evident that Saudi Arabia is not the swing producer with spare capacity that it was, and even if it were, it is unlikely to dump oil into the market, which would hurt oil prices, thereby affecting its revenues and development agenda in a post-“Arab Spring” environment.

Importantly, China supports Iran’s right to the peaceful use of nuclear energy, which it repeatedly demonstrated as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council. It consistently refused to endorse any other sanctions other than the ones mandated by the United Nations. Moreover, Beijing is continuously reinforcing its relationship with Tehran in order to deepen its presence in Central Asia with the goal of reaching the important energy resources of the Caspian Sea region.

Further, in a period in which energy markets highlight the increasing dependence of industrial powers on oil prices, Iran has an important instrument of geopolitical pressure thanks to its status as a major oil producer and its control of the Strait of Hormuz. As a result, Iran has been accommodated in the Sino-Russian-promoted Shanghai Cooperation Organisation as an observer.

## **3. India-Iran Ties**

India was also under pressure from the US with regard to its ties with Iran. In fact, a certain section of the intellectual community in the GCC countries continues to pressure New Delhi into choosing between the two while deciding on Tehran’s nuclear policy and the threat it poses to the region. India has, however, reiterated the strategic importance of both Iran and the GCC countries, which extend beyond energy interests.

Iranian oil constitutes 12% of its total oil imports. But India’s interests in Iran go beyond just economic and political interests. While India has also been greatly influenced by Persian culture for centuries, New Delhi views Tehran to be a part of its security buffer,

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<sup>①</sup> Ibid.

especially in relation to Pakistan and Afghanistan. In particular, Iran offers India alternative geographic access to Afghanistan and Central Asia since Pakistan has refused to allow overland trade and transit. India is part of a joint effort to expand the Chabahar port in Iran, construction of Chabahar-Faraj-Bam railway line, and the Zaranj-Delaram Road Project in Afghanistan which will act as a North-South Transport Corridor of strategic importance to both India and Iran.

#### **4. US Approach towards India and China**

While Washington would desire “a unipolar world and a multipolar Asia, China would prefer a multipolar world and a China-centric unipolar Asia.” On the other hand, India — which is growing closer to the US and which Washington wants to use to counter Beijing — “would like to see a multipolar world and a multipolar Asia,” thus intensifying Beijing-New Delhi competition.<sup>①</sup>

How the US will reconcile with a new world – which has an emergent India and China – that is not “anti-US, but approaches it as if it were a post-US world” is important.<sup>②</sup> While economic growth enables countries to play around with existing structures to protect their interests, too many in the US appear to be looking at dangers, rather than the opportunities of the Asian giants. The US could be making a mountain out of a molehill while expressing long-term fears about China’s intentions in the Gulf security architecture, and possibly India’s in the future.

#### **5. US-India versus China**

How successful will the US effort be to woo India in order to counter China and how will India’s growing ties with the US be viewed by the GCC countries, especially at a time when the mood in favor of the US and its policies is clearly at the lowest ever?

Marked by the civilian nuclear deal and enhanced military cooperation, the relationship between India and the US has undergone radical transformation during the last decade. However, it is still unclear if it is a natural alliance or a relationship of convenience marked by divergences in their individual interests and objectives. One such example relates to Iran. While Washington expected India to be part of the US plan to isolate Iran, New Delhi repeatedly asserted that Tehran is an important strategic ally.

The Iran factor reinforced India’s policy of maintaining an independent foreign policy, without affecting its ties with the US. However, it is still unclear if New Delhi’s quest for better ties with Washington has taken into account the declining popularity of the US in the Gulf and what impact it would have in terms of the India-Gulf equation.

For now, the common concerns related to energy security, protection of sea-lanes, maritime policing and counter terrorism and the importance of strategic coordination on these issues are likely to make the two countries engage constructively in the Gulf. Further, since India’s desire to play an influential role in the Gulf is yet to translate into reality, the US is not particularly concerned. At the same time, the US may be willing to accommodate India more than it really wants in order to counter China’s influence in the region.

Whether or not this will lead to mutually-acceptable sharing of burden between the two in the Gulf in the long term is a matter of conjecture, and one that will depend on “the prospects of the US shifting towards the concept of ‘off shore’ balancing in theatres of vital national concern to it.”<sup>③</sup>

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<sup>①</sup> “India as a Strategic Factor, in 21st Century Geopolitics,” a lecture by Ambassador Ranjit Gupta at the Gulf Research Centre, Dubai, March 2008.

<sup>②</sup> Fareed Zakaria, “The Future of American Power: How America Can Survive the Rise of the Rest,” *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2008.

<sup>③</sup> Raja Mohan, No. 27.

Finally, it is heartening that even some American experts are propagating the idea of a collective security architecture, which includes an Indian and Chinese role. Frederic Wehrey and Richard Sokolsky's paper titled "Imagining A New Security Order in the Gulf," published by Carnegie Endowment in October 2015, recommended that:

"US engagement in the region should elevate the priority of creating a new multilateral forum on Gulf security issues that includes the GCC countries, the US, China, the European Union, India, Iran, Iraq, Japan, and Russia. This forum should be the first step in realizing a long-term vision for a more formal, rules-based security structure."

### **Conclusion – An Asian Asia**

With the Asia-Pacific region emerging as the playground of escalating US-China rivalry, India is in a rare and enviable situation: it is being wooed by both. During a 2012 visit to New Delhi, US Defence Secretary Leon Panetta said India would be "a linchpin" in America's unfolding new defence strategy that revolves around "re-balancing" its forces "towards" Asia-Pacific.

At about the same time, Chinese Vice-Premier said that Sino-Indian ties would be the most important bilateral relationship in the 21st Century. China, which sniggered at India after the 5000-kilometre Agni-V missile test, appears to have reconciled to New Delhi's strategic autonomy. This was evident in an editorial in Chinese People's Daily, which criticized the new US strategy, but stressed that India had an independent foreign policy and could not be manipulated.

New Delhi also conveyed to Washington that it needed to recalibrate or rethink its policy. It emphasized that there was a "need to strengthen the multilateral security architecture" in the Asia Pacific and that it must "move at a pace comfortable to all countries concerned". New Delhi stressed that India aims to have "cooperative ties with both China and the United States". It also underlined that the cooperative relation between India and China "poses no threat to others and is not developed at the expense of other countries' interests."

In such a milieu, it is important to read the goings-on in the global economy and politics in not only a balanced, but a futuristic perspective too. Asian economic boom and its increasing foothold in global politics is not a mirage. The GCC's "Look East" policy must not be seen as a replacement for its traditional ally, the US. On the other hand, it must be construed as an effort to evolve alternatives to make up for Washington's surely diminishing influence. This means that the GCC-US ties are unlikely to be exclusive in future. This also means that any new alternatives, like BRICS or "BRICS Plus" for example, that are making their presence felt or may materialize in future need not be viewed as competitors with the US, but should be approached in the spirit of cooperation, in a "post-US world", not necessarily anti-US world.

In such a scenario, the GCC countries too need to take note of the fact that Chindia's basket of energy suppliers are widening. It is not impossible that India may follow the US, which got more oil from Africa than the Middle East, or China which got more crude supplies from Angola than Saudi Arabia for some time. Chindia's quest to expand their sources of energy has even touched nuclear frontiers. With a view to strengthening and diversifying relations, it is imperative for the GCC countries to treat India and China in a manner that does not antagonise one against the other. In fact, the GCC countries must evolve fresh dimensions to consolidate their positions in a fast-changing world.

Further, while the GCC countries may be uncomfortable with India's or China's ties with Israel and Iran, there is no doubt that New Delhi and Beijing will not compromise on

their own strategic interests and downgrade their relationship with Tel Aviv and Tehran to accommodate the GCC countries reservations. Instead, the GCC countries could use the India-China-Iran bonhomie to their advantage by in mending ties with Tehran.

The challenge is if the Asian security architecture, led by China and India, among others, will be able to give rise to new institutions that foster stability, security, cooperation, and growth instead of being mired in suspicion and insecurities that others will take advantage of. If the 21st century truly has to be Asia's, the ties between and among India, China and the GCC countries have to be based on the development and security of all the countries and their people, as well as playing a constructive role in world affairs.

New Delhi has stressed that "the world is big enough for both countries and each is too big to be contained by the other." This lends hope against confrontation. However, whether or not this developing triangle will remain in the realm of competition, move towards cooperation or deteriorate into confrontation depends on whether the forecast is made from the perspective of a pessimist, optimist or fatalist, respectively. Further, it is also contingent on several extraneous factors, which will pan out only in the medium-to-long term.

The point is that India, China and other principal Asian players would have to stop riding "piggyback" on US naval presence in the region's waters at some point and find their own means of securing their sea lanes. Since this aligns with the security requirements of the region, and assuming that the US engagement in the region will diminish in the decades ahead, it opens interesting and diversifying possibilities in the region's security arena.