



# COULD EUROPE PLAY A MORE PROMINENT ROLE COOPERATING WITH INDIA IN WEST ASIA? OBSTACLES, CHALLENGES AND SCENARIOS

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In recent years, West Asia has seen a great deal of turmoil. Beginning with the American-led war against Iraq in 2003, events have come in quick succession—the Arab Spring, the attack on Libya, the developments in Syria and the rise of the Islamic State.

Simultaneously this oil rich region has been affected by considerable volatility in the price and availability of oil. War knocked out the production capacities of Iraq and sanctions affected the supplies from Iran. Oil prices reached a historical peak of \$ 145 in early 2008, but fell subsequently because of the economic crash, as well as the rise of shale oil production. The prices today remain between \$ 30-50.

As of today, the US imports some 9.4 million barrels per day of petroleum from a variety of countries, of which 16 per cent is from Persian Gulf countries, principally Saudi Arabia. In any case imports constitute just 24 per cent of the petroleum consumed by the US, the lowest level since 1970.

The EU is the world's largest oil importing region and the number two consumer after the US. Oil demand has however been falling steadily and will continue to do so. But dependence remains high. The bulk of imports come from Russia and FSUs (29 per cent and 2.9 mbd) , 13 per cent comes from Saudi Arabia and Iraq.

As for China, 52 per cent of its oil imports come from Middle Eastern countries like Saudi Arabia, Iran and Iraq. Specialists say that China will remain heavily dependent on Middle East oil for at least 30-40 years. China is acutely aware of the challenge it faces in relation to sea lane security here and it is tackling the problem at two levels—First, developing alternate routes and sources. Second, by enhancing its political and military position in the region.

China has strengthened its relationship with Saudi Arabia and Iran. In August 2016, it reached a deal to provide aid and training to the Syrian government. China has maintained continuous anti-piracy patrols off Somalia since 2008, established a military base in Djibouti and obtained access to ports like Colombo, Karachi, Gwadar and Mombasa. China has been active in peacekeeping in Africa in situations which may not be entirely unconnected to its desire to safeguard its access to natural resources.

By contrast India imports 75 per cent of its oil, and demand is expected to continue to climb. Despite efforts at diversification, India still imports some 58 per cent of its oil from West Asia. In addition, 7 million Indian citizens work in the Saudi peninsula and are the source of substantial annual remittances. In addition

So clearly, neither the US nor EU are as dependent on Middle-East oil as are India and China and their dependence on West Asian oil is at a historic low. Does this have strategic consequences?

The United States remains the most important external actor in the Middle-East with important relationships with Saudi Arabia, Israel, the GCC countries. It is now seeking to normalise ties with Iran. Both the US and EU take the political position of encouraging political reform in the region and

in line with that, supported the Arab Spring. However, EU countries like France and UK have had the role of deepening the political crisis in Libya and Syria.

The US remains the foremost military power in the region, with formal military alliances with some of the states of the region. The US Fifth Fleet is based in Bahrain, and the US has bases in Oman, Qatar, UAE, Iraq and Kuwait. In addition, nearby bases include facilities at Djibouti, Incirlik (Turkey) and Diego Garcia.

The EU as EU does not have a united military system, but it is notable that France opened a base in UAE as of 2009, its first outside the Francophone region in 50 years. The French are also based in Djibouti. The ex-EU country UK set up a military base in Bahrain for the first time in four decades in 2015. The base is being built at Bahrain's cost, with the UK picking up its running costs. The Royal Air Force is based in Qatar as well and technically, Diego Garcia is British run.

### *India-Europe cooperation*

This description of the current reality of the region gives us a template to discuss the issue of whether India and Europe can play a joint role in the region.

One major advantage for such a scenario is that India's developing defence partnership with the United States self-consciously excludes the Middle-East from its ambit. American military interaction with India comes through the United States Pacific Command headquartered in Hawaii. The Central Command headquartered in Florida does not have any significant exercises or coordination with its Indian counterparts.

Clearly, the region is far more important to India than it is for Europe. The rise of the Islamic State has brought home the dangers of Islamist radicalism to Europe. Terrorist incidents in India such as the Bombay blasts of 1992, the train bombings in 2006 and the Mumbai attack of 2008 did not have the kind of salience they should have had in Europe. But after the attacks in France and Brussels, the perceptions have changed. Today there is a united sense of purpose in taking on the challenge of Islamist radicalism.

But the big problem here is to decide just who will constitute the European segment of the partnership. Currently, as we have indicated, only France and Brexit UK are active in the region. The UK is so closely intertwined with the US that the chances of it playing an autonomous role are not very high.

This leaves the possibility of a partnership which could involve India on one hand, and a combination of European nations like France, Germany, Spain and Italy. What would this partnership involve?

Obviously, this would mean a closer political identity of view with regard to the issues in the region. Both EU and India are sensitive to the Palestine issue and will not have the kind of problems here that a potential Indo-US relationship could have.

Second, is the issue of democratic rights as were manifested by the Arab Spring. Countries like France and Britain took an advanced position and are responsible for the mess that has developed in Libya and Syria. It would be a useful corrective to learn some lessons from the military actions of the US and some EU countries in Iraq, Libya and Syria. There has been a tendency in some European nations to push for regime change under the guise of humanitarian intervention. This would be a position that India would find difficult to support.

The third is the level of cooperation and coordination that can be established at the military level, not so much for intervention, but for intelligence sharing relating to Islamist radicals, as well as to deal with contingencies which may affect the sea lane security, as well as the well-being of our nationals in the region. Naturally, an important aspect of this would be to develop a political congruence of views. This is not as difficult as it sounds because essentially, as democratic entities, India and the EU see eye to eye on the need for expanding the democratic space in the region.

A fourth level could arise from promoting connectivity schemes that could benefit India-Europe trade. Technically, the International North South Traffic Corridor is aimed at promoting multi-modal transportation links between India, Iran and Russia, but there is nothing to stop it from linking up with China's One Belt One Road project and forging over-land links with the rest of Europe.