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[Home](#) > Middle East Strategic Churning's implications for South Asia

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The ongoing strategic churning in Middle East portends an unpredictable course for regional power tussles which are not only spawning volatility amongst the United States and Russia but also generates geopolitical challenges for India and Pakistan, based on South Asian and Middle East regional contiguity.

In 2018, it can be asserted that India is well –placed to meet the geopolitical challenges posed by the Middle East ongoing churning in comparison to Pakistan which has a vested interest and an erstwhile standing sheerly by virtue of religious affinity. In 2018, India's ascendancy in the global strategic calculus, its emerging power profile and economic growth have significantly added to India's power and prestige in the Middle East perceptions transcending the religion factor.

India in 2018 can well be considered as force of moderation in the Middle East not only in the power tussle for areas of influence between the United States and Russia but also between Middle East regional rivalries besides a bridging facilitator between the United States and Iran.

During the Cold War and even in the post-Cold War era the Middle East strategic template was seemingly predictable in terms of relationship of regional powers like Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey. Saudi Arabia and the other monarchical States of the Arabian Peninsula were staunch allies of the United States. Iraq was under military control of the United States. Iran and Syria were more aligned to Russia.

In 2018's beginning while Iran still continues strongly in Russia's fold along with Syria, the same cannot be said of Saudi Arabia and Turkey. Saudi Arabia and Turkey have signalled notable openings to tilt towards Russia, as if to spite the United States for perceived unhappiness

respectively with United States strategic moves in the Middle East.

To add to the above political and churning in the Middle East relative to the United States and Russia, in the past year, schisms are appearing within the monarchical Gulf States between Saudi Arabia and UAE with Qatar. This fracture in turn has set in motion its own dynamics in which one sees that Saudi Arabia is intent on emerging as the major regional Sunni Arab power in a contentious power tussle with Shia Iran which by all attributes of power is the naturally predominant power in the Middle East.

The Saudi Arabia-Iran power rivalry is not confined to the Gulf Region only but overshadows the entire Middle East. There is yet another third Middle East power jostling for regional predominance in the Middle East and that is Turkey. But then Turkey can be said to have its area of influence only in the Northern Tier of the Middle East.

Israel sitting on the Western edge of the Middle East is however a powerful actor in the Middle East not only by virtues of its own power-attributes but also on the strength of its unshakeable alliance relationship with the United States. Israel is the recipient of the largest military aid from the US and also the sheet-anchor of American policies in the Middle East.

Russia's Cold War area of influence during the Cold War was confined to the Northern Tier of the Middle East and Iran. In the post-Cold War era, there was a notable void in Russian presence in the Middle East at the turn of the Millennium but in 2018 one finds Russia solidifying its influence in Syria and Iran but also finds Saudi Arabia and Turkey though still in alliance relationships with United States making moves to move closer to Russia.

At this juncture, it is difficult to predict that Saudi Arabia and Turkey's moves towards Russia are enduring or just tactical transactional moves. Of the two, Saudi Arabia can be assessed to be a notable loser as a regional power in the Middle East minus United States support and backing.

In this contextual backdrop one now must examine how these emerging trends in the Middle East impact South Asia in terms of Pakistan and India.

For many years, Indian policy planners had conceded that in the Middle East it was well-nigh impossible to displace Pakistan as the preferred partner in South Asia by virtue of Pakistan being a Muslim nation with a nuclear bomb in its armoury. India's foreign policy was focussed only on somehow maintaining its energy dependency on the Middle East intact and also as a factor in domestic politics in relation to Indian Muslims. There was no assertive element in India's Middle East foreign policy.

In 2018, in terms of Middle East powers perceptions of Pakistan and India, significant changes are visible when compared to preceding decades. Pakistan seems to have moved significantly lower in the perceptions of Middle East leading powers, except Turkey which under

the present Turkish President has revived and given primacy to Pakistan in its South Asian preferences.

India's ascendancy in the global power calculus as a leading global power has prompted both Saudi Arabia and Iran to invest geopolitically and strategically in India's benign rise as an Asian power with credible indicators of being a responsible stakeholder in Asian security, including the Middle East.

This is more noticeable in the last three years of PM Modi in political power in New Delhi heading the BJP Government. Both Saudi Arabia and Iran seem to view India not in terms of Indian domestic politics labels but India as a rising power which cannot be ignored and with which strategic convergences need to be developed.

India however has to walk the tight rope in terms of maintaining balance and poise in its Middle East policies when it comes to Saudi Arabia and Iran in relation to the reality that both of them are contentious adversarial powers in the Middle East and also to the reality that the United States in 2018 stoutly opposes Iran.

However, as a geopolitical analyst one can perceive that the above complex equations of India with Saudi Arabia and Iran simultaneously provide sub-text advantageous openings in its overall policy profiles in the Middle East

India in the last three years under the Modi Government has been able to strike strong strategic partnerships in the Gulf Region but also reinforce its existing relationships in the Northern Tier states of the Middle East. India therefore can be said to have worthwhile relationships in the Middle East with both the Sunni leading power and Shia Iran and the Shia Crescent nations.

Comparatively, Pakistan despite its geographical contiguity and religious affinity with Iran, its giant neighbour, cannot be said to be having significantly good relations. Pakistan's military linkages with Saudi Arabia and its dependency on Saudi munificence coupled with Pakistan's domestic persecution of Shias minority lead to tense relationships.

Let us now examine as to how the ongoing strategic churning in the Middle East impacts South Asia and creates challenges for Pakistan and India more prominently. It would be appropriate first to examine what dynamics that stand injected into the Middle East in 2018 by the United States and Russia and what implications that await Pakistan and India in the Middle East?

In 2018, Pakistan seems to have lost its decade's old strategic utility in United States calculus by the weight of its own strategic contradictions by playing the 'China Card' against the United States. Pakistan seems to have lost heavily in its relations with Saudi Arabia after Pakistan refused to militarily support Saudi Arabia's military intervention in Yemen.

Pakistan's standing therefore with the leading regional powers of the Middle East is tenuous with the exception of Turkey. But Turkey cannot provide to Pakistan the weightage that Saudi Arabia and Iran can provide.

Similarly, the mutual tilt of Pakistan and Russia and the formation of the China-Pakistan-Russia Trilateral confer no significant strategic advantages in the Middle East to Pakistan. Can China and Russia further Pakistan's interests in the Middle East in the churning situation that exists? It is doubtful on present indicators.

The unfolding strategic churning in the Middle East does not create insurmountable obstacles for Indian policy planners. They only create challenges which the Indian policy establishment can meet head-on with India's forging of India's ties with leading Middle East powers like Saudi Arabia and Iran and which have a corresponding effect on their respective partners.

To the above must be added the tangential advantages that stand conferred to India in the Middle East by virtue of its strong strategic relationships with the United States and Israel. The United States by all reckonable factors can be said to enjoy geopolitical sway over the Middle East despite Russian inroads.

Concluding, it needs to be stressed that India's power ascendancy in the global strategic calculus enabling its credible geopolitical profile in the Middle East calls for a further visible enhancement of India's power attributes, the least but not all, being the enhancement of military power to add muscle to its diplomacy in the Indo Pacific and the Middle East.

Tags:

[Middle East](#) ^[1]

[Saudi Arabia Iran Rivalry](#) ^[2]

Category:

[Papers](#) ^[3]

Countries:

[MiddleEast](#) ^[4]

Topics:

[Strategic Affairs & Security](#) ^[5]

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- [1] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/taxonomy/term/1357>
- [2] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/taxonomy/term/1832>
- [3] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/papers>
- [4] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/middle-east>
- [5] <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/strategic-affairs-and-security>