

The Arab Spring and West Asia: Challenges for India

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Respected Prof P.Suryanaraynan, Prof Ramu Manivannan, Head of the Department of Political Science and Public Administration of the Madras University, Commodore Seshadri Vasam, Director of the Center for Asia Studies, distinguished guests and dear students. It is an honour and privilege to speak at this prestigious university.

I would like to thank you for inviting me to deliver this lecture. I would like to thank the Public Diplomacy Division of the Ministry of External Affairs for organising my visit under its innovative outreach programme.

Given my Foreign Service background my perspective is that of a diplomatic practitioner; for me national interest and ground realities must be the preeminent starting points of any analysis with ideology, personal biases and preferences and wishful thinking to be strictly avoided.

What is the Arab Spring?

The Arab countries have never known anything other than autocratic regimes. But truth, as the saying goes, can be stranger than fiction. On 17 December 2010 a vendor being slapped by a police personnel in a small rural town in tiny Tunisia, a common everyday occurrence in Arab countries, implausibly sparked an unlikely revolt and on 14 January 2011 Zinedin Ben Ali who had ruled Tunisia for 23 years fled the country. Cairo – the heart and soul of the Arab world – caught the virus quickly and Tahrir Square witnessed an unprecedented ‘day of rage’ on January 25, 2011. Hosni Mubarak who had ruled Egypt with an iron hand for

30 years stepped down on Feb 11 2011. The utterly unimaginable had happened.

People had risen up spontaneously and in unprecedentedly large numbers demanding not merely reform but regime change. In the Arab context this was REVOLUTION in capital letters. There is still no rational explanation why this eruption took place when it did, for the sudden realization by the common people that their destiny is in their own hands and will no longer be permitted to be determined by their dictatorial rulers or by foreigners. Before regimes can be overthrown or dislodged, people must overcome fear of regimes, even of the most autocratic ones and must even be ready to die. Astonishingly, that is what happened and once again there is no explanation of why and how at this time.

There were several other unique features of this popular upsurge - it started without known or identifiable leaders, without the banner of any specific ideology or organization, without instigation and incitement from abroad. It was preeminently a movement spearheaded by the younger generation and was consciously inclusive of all the diverse elements that constitute a national society. The unrest initially began everywhere as a peaceful, non violent protest against autocratic, corrupt and brazenly repressive rule and the lack of economic development and opportunity for the people at large while the ruling elite lived in luxury. The focus of the protests had been almost completely domestic - a demand for democracy, for fundamental political, economic and social reform, for basic human freedoms and had little or nothing to do with external relations. No government, no intelligence agency, no expert on the Arab world anywhere had anticipated even the remote possibility of anything like this happening.

Without taking anything away from the courageous protests of hundreds of thousands of common people, the unvarnished reality is that the regimes fell because the armed forces chose not to

violently confront their own people and thus effectively deprived the two regimes of the major potential instrument of overcoming the revolts; the dictators, being utterly unpopular and deeply despised, had no legs to stand on to survive. A truly miraculous 'Arab Spring' had dawned.

Very significantly, there was no Islamist fervor or flavour to the protests, which clearly represented a more than tacit rejection of what Al Qaida has stood for. Despite its popularity in the Arab street and its immediate support of the revolts in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, Iran was not heralded as a beacon. In fact, foreign policy issues had not been a factor at all in initiating, propelling or sustaining the protests; there was a conspicuous absence of anti Americanism and anti Israeli sentiment.

The Worm Turns

Although an uplifting spirit of revolt against autocratic authority provided a common thread that underlay the unrest and longings for change which spread across the Arab world, very distinct variations in the evolution of events in each country emerged including in regard to the approach adopted by the people, reactions by ruling regimes and policies of outside powers.

Rulers in other Arab countries carefully observed evolving events and drew lessons from the outcomes in Egypt and Tunisia. Regime preservation and security became the preeminent priority of the ruling classes whatever the costs in blood and treasure. In many countries, the ruler's family members and close tribal kin commanded and controlled the intelligence, internal security apparatus and the military. These power holders and wielders, the Islamists who emerged as new power seekers and Western countries, the traditional power brokers used or sidelined the original protestors to shape outcomes. A few Arab countries actively intervened too. Foreign intervention became an integral

part of unfolding events. In just a few months the soaring hopes of a jasmine scented spring gave way to a summer of growing discontent and frustration amidst harsh and bloody repression of popular uprisings as the regimes struck back with brutal force. The Arab spring had died a premature death.

Anti-government protests began in Libya on 15 February 2011 and by 18 February, the opposition controlled most of Benghazi, the country's second-largest city. Despite unleashing his security forces to hunt down and destroy the rebel “rats” as Qaddafi and his sons characterised the protesters, seven months after a widening and deeply destructive civil war, Qaddafi was killed after 42 years of unalloyed dictatorship over Libya. Foreign intervention had played a major role in the ultimate toppling of Qaddafi's regime. In March 2011 pro–democracy protests erupted in Yemen and Ali Abdullah Saleh cracked down hard. In the following months thousands were killed but proactive GCC mediation finally paved the way for Ali Abdullah Saleh to leave after 33 years at the helm. By March 2011 Syria was also witnessing widespread demonstrations but an utterly overconfident Bashar Al Assad, who admittedly had much greater support in the country than the other 4 dictators had in theirs felt he could handle the situation and no compromises were necessary or needed. Assad had not anticipated that the mostly passive GCC countries were capable of mounting the kind of intervention that they surprisingly proactively embarked upon to help the opposition. Turkey, heretofore a particularly close friend, joined the GCC countries. The situation progressively deteriorated and Syria descended into a deeply destructive full scale civil war which is still continuing with increasing ferociousness 20 months later. In my assessment it is only a matter of time that Bashar Al Assad will have to go.

Though low intensity demonstrations still continue sporadically in Bahrain, the regime is in control of the country. Tunisia has been the only real success; certainly Libya and Yemen but even Egypt

will take time to settle down. In post Assad Syria I foresee a situation that is likely to be as bad if not worse than in post-2003 Iraq with unpredictable consequences for West Asia as a whole particularly in the Levantine region. How Iran reacts to Assad's overthrow will complicate an already murky scenario. Uncertainty about the future is the only certainty at the moment.

Consequences of the Turmoil in the Arab World

Beyond the emergence of new regimes in 4 countries, there have been three major consequences. These will have a very significant continuing impact within the Arab world and for all countries that have a stake in the region. They are: **first** – in the immediate short term, the evolving geopolitics of the West Asian region will be greatly influenced by the outcome of the Arab Spring induced acrimonious standoff between Saudi Arabia and Iran personifying a vigorous Sunni response to what has been perceived for some years to be a rising Shia threat. **Second** – for the longer term the political rise of Islamist forces is likely inject a new and powerful factor that could transform Arab countries into a very different persona from that the world has known and dealt with for a very long time. **Third** – the surprise emergence of two increasingly influential new players in Arab world geopolitics – the GCC countries and Turkey, and the return of Egypt to mainstream Arab politics.

The Saudi Iranian Cold War

The estimated Shiite population percentages of GCC countries are: Bahrain around 70 %; Kuwait about 30 %; Saudi Arabia about 18%; Qatar and UAE about 10 %; and, Oman about 8 %. About 65 % of Iraqis are Shia. Including Iran – 90% Shia, more than 60 % of the combined populations of the 8 countries of the Gulf region are Shia. Yemen has a 35-40% Shia population. More than 50 % of the Arab Gulf region's oil reserves are located in the Shiite populated

parts of the region. Following the US engineered downfall of the Sunni regime in Iraq, Shia political forces emerged as the predominant component of the country's ruling dispensation for the first time in modern history. Iran now has much more influence in Iraq than fellow Arab countries. The Shias of Iraq and the GCC countries have been consistently discriminated against and treated as second class citizens. Furthermore, there is a huge and unbridgeable asymmetry between the GCC countries' national power and that of Iran in terms of demography, institutional capacity, military manpower strength and indigenous capability. These features provide Iran enormous potential leverage in exploiting Shiite identity to disturb, even reshape, the balance of power in the Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf region. Saudi Arabia is acutely aware and traumatically afraid of these realities and has adopted the principle that offence is the best form of defence.

Within weeks of protests starting in Tunisia and Egypt the wave hit Bahrain. The protest movement in Bahrain was not originally motivated by sectarian considerations but by a quest for dignity and equality through greater economic opportunity and political freedom for all its citizens. However, alarm bells rang out loudly in Saudi Arabia as Bahrain is only 20 kms off its eastern sea coast where its disenchanted Shiite population is concentrated. Saudi Arabia immediately accused Iran of instigating the huge daily demonstrations and soon thereafter dispatched troops to Bahrain making it abundantly clear that the regime there will not be allowed to fall or indeed in any GCC state. Saudi Arabia also granted \$ 10 billion as aid to finance sops to the restive population and some reforms. Bahrain's King appointed an independent commission of enquiry, which concluded that there was no Iranian interference and that the government had used unnecessary force. Nevertheless, the Bahraini regime, Saudi Arabia and other GCC countries continued to blame Iran, succeeding thereby in preempting Western reform oriented pressures on themselves. By ceaselessly and loudly projecting events in Bahrain in sectarian

terms as a conflict between Sunni and Shia, Saudi Arabia successfully galvanised support across the overwhelmingly Sunni majority Muslim world for its policies.

Much more importantly, the happenings in Bahrain prompted Saudi Arabia to launch a high profile campaign against Iran. Syria has been Iran's longest standing and staunchest ally in the Arab world. Alone amongst Arab countries it had supported Iran in the Iran Iraq war. Syria has been the main conduit of Iran's formidable influence in the Levant providing it vital connectivities enabling it to create and sustain Hezbollah in Lebanon, support Hamas in Gaza, both of whom have acquired halo status on the 'Arab Street' due to their uncompromising resistance to Israel. Iran has thus projected itself as the main defender of Palestinian rights and interests and undermined the credibility of Arab regimes in the eyes of their peoples. If Assad's regime were to fall Iran would find it virtually impossible to support Hezbollah and Iranian influence in the sensitive Levantine region would be dealt a virtual death blow. Iran's ability to play a role in Arab politics would be severely curtailed. Hamas has already moved under the umbrella of the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt, of which it originally was an offshoot. Thus, Syria is the big prize in the Saudi Iranian confrontation.

Assad's rebuffing of all suggestions for political reform set the stage to use the evolving situation as a perfect, long-awaited opportunity to hit both the disliked Assad regime and Iran. It was no longer about democracy and reform as Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey came out in open support of the 'rebels' and Assad's removal became their publicly announced objective. Syria has also become the cockpit of a resurrected Cold War with the US and Western countries supporting the GGC countries and China and Russia supporting Syria, even using the veto 3 times in the Security Council. In my assessment there is no possibility of a negotiated settlement which permits Assad to be a part of any new

ruling structure – too much blood has been shed; also, UN efforts will not lead to any solution. The standoff has now become a zero sum game.

The different and disparate opposition groups have been coaxed by their foreign supporters and patrons to coalesce into the Syrian National Coalition. This includes strong Islamists elements and even Al Qaida related groups but lack representation of important minority groups particularly Alawites and Christians. It has been widely reported that the SNC has been recognised as the sole legitimate representative of the Syrian people by over 114 countries including all Western countries and most Arab countries. As of now India has not done so. China has become less vocal and active and is even having dialogue with the rebels; even though Russia has been more steadfast in supporting Assad doubts its resolve is weakening. The balance is slowly but surely tilting against Assad.

The rise of political Islam

Even though they were neither in the vanguard nor even active participants, the ‘Arab Spring’ enabled the emergence of the long banned, exiled and persecuted Islamic parties to come out into the open. Their underground organisational networks were activated and they were thus much better placed to take advantage of newly emerging political opportunities. Another bonus was that unlike in the past when electoral success in Algeria was violently overturned or as in the case of Hamas in Gaza greatly emaciated due to a boycott by most Arab and Western countries who are major players in the region. This time around, the electoral success of Islamic parties has been accepted both domestically and by the world at large. Tunisia and Egypt are now ruled by Islamic parties. An Islamist party won the largest number of seats and heads the governing coalition in Morocco. Post Qaddhafi Libya rapidly slipped into chaos and though elections have been held with the

moderate pro-business National Forces Alliance winning an unexpected landslide victory against the Islamist parties, the country is infested by numerous armed militant groups, many of them salafists; they will inevitably play a role in time to come. Whatever the outcome in Syria the fact of it being a Sunni majority country will inevitably colour the composition of any new ruling dispensation as had happened in Iraq, though in that case in the reverse direction. The Islamist genie cannot be put back into the bottle. Apart from there being domestic socio-political consequences of rule by Islamist parties, there will certainly be foreign policy reorientations, even major ones as is already evident in the case of Egypt under Morsi's presidency. The unmitigated hostility of the past against Iran is set to be replaced by a policy of engagement; Egypt is playing a major role in attempting reconciliation amongst Palestinians factions; etc. In strong contrast to the past, governments of Islamist parties are almost certainly likely to shed overly pro-Western orientations, bring the Palestinian issue back to centre stage and have more national interest imbued foreign policies.

GCC countries emergence as a force in the Arab world

While change across the Arab world is probably inevitable in the longer term, its content, speed and direction are likely to vary in different countries. I expect it will be the slowest in the GCC region. There are plausible reasons for that – monarchies are, at the end of the day, a modern version of the rule of tribal sheikhs with which the people have lived throughout history; before the oil era peoples of the Arabian Peninsula were amongst the poorest in the world while today the general conditions of life for the people at large are unimaginably better than their forefathers could ever have dreamt of and incomparably better than anywhere else in the rest of the Arab world; the regimes have the resources to pamper their relatively manageable populations or, to put it more crudely, buy off their loyalties. People are seeing the chaos, death, destruction

and economic collapse raging in other countries. Why should they risk their comfortable and enviably peaceful lives?

Regimes in the GCC countries will increasingly band together to ensure that monarchical regimes will not be allowed to be overthrown in any GCC country. Unambiguously strong Saudi rhetoric and the dispatch of troops to Bahrain, along with those of the UAE, are consciously thought out signals to the world and even to their own people. Overcoming the inertia of the past, GCC countries, individually and collectively, have been playing uncharacteristically proactive and substantive roles in supporting and helping each other and taking adversaries head-on. Saudi Arabia has been leading the way with huge packages of financial aid to poorer brother monarchical states. If any monarchical regime falls it will be far more due to internal politics within royal families in connection with issues associated with succession to rather than brought about by public demonstrations.

The GCC bloc had been singularly impotent as a meaningful strategic factor even in their own region let alone West Asia as a whole in the past. Except for huge financial assistance and some arms supply extended to Iraq by some individual members, they were utterly passive during the Iran Iraq war; even when one of its members, Kuwait, was invaded and occupied by Iraq, it was the US which rescued Iraq. The Damascus Declaration was abandoned within weeks of its being signed. The Peninsula Shield, their ostensible joint force, is more gimmick than anything meaningful. However, this time around the GCC countries, individually and collectively, have been playing completely uncharacteristically proactive and substantive roles in supporting and helping each other and taking their adversaries head on. They have been in the vanguard on the politico- diplomatic front in relation to events in Libya, Syria and Yemen and very agilely mended fences with the evolving power structures in Egypt quickly overcoming their deep disappointment with events and US policy there. They sent troops

to Bahrain. They openly supplied arms to the opposition in Libya and Syria. They brokered the solution in Yemen. They have been active in the Arab League and the UN. They have disbursed huge packages of financial aid to poorer brother monarchies and Yemen. A small country with a miniscule population but with very deep pockets and the highest per capita income in the world, Qatar has been assertively hyperactive being substantively involved in far away Libya, Palestine, Syria and Yemen. The GCC states' involvement has had direct and manifestly tangible impact on shaping outcomes. They have now developed the self confidence to be players in relation to developments in West Asia in particular and in the Arab world in general rather than remaining passive witnesses as in the past.

Spurned by Europe in its endeavours to join the EU, Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan's Islamist governments turned to cultivate a salient role in the Middle East. It had accorded high priority to building close relations with the monarchical states, Palestine and Yemen even as it had continued to maintain very good relations with the supposed pariah states – Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel and Syria. The events of the past two years have provided the long hope opportunity for a genuine breakthrough. Turkey has been proactively involved in the evolution of events in each country in full cooperation and coordination with the GCC countries. It has made a conscious choice as its relations with Iran, Israel and Syria have plummeted drastically. Relations with the central government in Iraq have also deteriorated. Turkey is politically stable, wields increasing diplomatic clout, is militarily the strongest power in the region and has a robust economy –it will hereafter be a significant player in the region.

Challenges for India

In my view guidelines for Indian policy vis-à-vis West Asia in the aftermath of events in the Arab world of the past two years, should be as follows:

First, India's national interest stakes in relationships with individual Arab countries and sub regions vary very significantly: There cannot be one-size-fits-all reactions and our policies must be country, region and issue specific. Reactions, cosmetically attractive in the context of events in distant countries but which convey ambivalent messages to countries which are important substantively, would be counterproductive.

Secondly, the situation in West Asia is exceedingly fluid and uncertain. There are multiple players, both regional and non-regional, who are proactively involved. An indisputable fact is that whatever India says or does is not likely to influence outcomes on the ground. Therefore, in formulating policies India must be fully conscious of this reality and refrain from statements and actions which in the longer term could be prejudicial to national interest.

Thirdly, the principle of non-intervention in internal affairs has always been sacrosanct for India. India would react strongly to outside comments on internal political matters. Reticence or so-called policy passivity in an unpredictably changing environment does not reflect an absence of decision making or an abdication of 'leadership'. India's policy makers should not be deterred by ideologically motivated domestic criticism about supposedly abandoning a so-called 'independent' foreign policy or criticism by foreign countries on this account.

Having said this, it would be useful examine the nature of India's current relations with countries of the West Asian region.

I would assert that India's most spectacular foreign policy success of the past decade has been vis-a-vis the GCC countries. I will readily acknowledge that many in the strategic community, even

more in media and academia and some former Foreign Service officers would dispute this. However, I invite you to let the facts speak for themselves.

The GCC countries constitute India's largest socio-economic partner anywhere in the world today. Trade, both oil and non oil, investments, remittances, expenditure by Gulf citizens visiting India, etc, would total up to \$200 billion or more in 2010-2011. With total trade at \$67.6 billion, UAE was India's top trading partner, leading export destination and also had a small favourable trade balance – contrast this with the completely lopsided trade relationship with China where India's trade deficit is larger than its exports and our main export is a primary commodity, iron ore; yet, India celebrates this relationship in exuberant terms constantly though it is clearly more akin to a trade relationship between a colony and its colonial master. The value of two way trade with Saudi Arabia in 2010-2011 topped \$25 billion, rising an incredible 7 times in 5 years making Saudi Arabia India's fourth largest trading partner.

Indo-GCC trade has exhibited the fastest rate of growth of Indian trade with any region increasing by 1600% in the period 2000-2008; this is considerably faster than China's rate of growth of trade with the GCC countries - 900 %. China has the world's fastest trade growth rates both in absolute terms and also in relation to different parts of the world. To be ahead of China in any economy or trade related statistic is a major achievement!

Saudi Arabia is the leading source India's oil requirements supplying 22%; its share has been steadily increasing. Saudi Arabia or indeed any other GCC country never stopped oil supplies to India nor even threatened to do so through the 4 wars with Pakistan and other negative political factors. In fact, it has made up shortfalls from other suppliers when Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990 and after the US invaded Iraq in 2003. It has publicly offered to

make up any shortfalls due to imports from Iran being constrained due to sanctions. 3 GCC countries –Saudi Arabia, UAE and Kuwait are amongst the top 6 oil suppliers to India with Iraq being the second highest. Almost 85% of India's oil and gas imports are from this region; every single projection by international, regional and national agencies indicate that India's hydrocarbon dependency on this region is going to keep increasing in the future and the GCC countries will be the linch pin.

Heads of State or Government of all GCC countries have visited India in the past decade, some more than once. The Riyadh Declaration between King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia and the Indian Prime Minister has elevated the bilateral relationship to one of strategic partnership embracing defence cooperation also. In fact defence and security cooperation has become a feature of the relationship with all other GCC countries also. Extradition of two high profile terrorists to India by Saudi Arabia last year despite exceptionally strenuous efforts by Pakistan to prevent it is a particularly significant reflection of how far this relationship has come. The UAE has been similarly helpful for some years now.

Almost 6.5 million Indians live and work in the GCC countries - Indians are the largest expatriate group in the GCC region as a whole and in each country individually; the numbers have been rising constantly and the gap between Indians and Pakistanis widens each year. Almost 55 % of total inward remittances comes from the GCC region. Almost 50% of total flights to and from India are between India and the 6 GCC countries, etc.

India being a socio-culturally compatible, rising economic, military and political power with the fastest trade growth rates with and oil import growth rates from the region and being located next door to GCC countries are factors that have cemented this relationship. The GCC countries have obviously consciously decided to bypass the Pakistani and Israeli factors, elements which

would normally have been considered virtually unsurpassable roadblocks.

Despite the fact that after Nasser, Saddam was India's best friend in the Arab world for decades, the India-Iraq relationship seems to have disappeared from the radar completely judging by current media coverage and its absence from the very proactive seminar scene in Delhi. India withdrew all India based personnel from its Embassy in Baghdad shortly after the US invasion in 2003, sent a junior level Cda in late 2004 and an Ambassador only in June 2011. There have been no Indian senior officials' let alone Ministerial visits to Iraq. A few Iraqi Ministerial visits have taken place. Due to unsettled conditions an embargo was placed on Indians going to work in Iraq. Apart from US, EU, Iran and Syria which have special relationships with Iraq, China and Turkey have been very active there and even South Korea. Despite all this, as of 2011 India emerged as Iraq's 5th largest trade partner and its third largest export destination and Iraq has become India's second largest source of oil after Saudi Arabia and much ahead of Iran. In 2011-12, Indian imports of crude oil from Iraq stood at 24.51 million tonnes worth more than US\$ 14 billion. IOC is the single largest purchaser of Iraqi crude. India is involved in the oil sector in Iraq.

These facts exhibit that pragmatism has quietly trumped both ideology and supposed special relationships in forging the current relationship between the GCC countries and India based upon a unique compatibility which highlights multi-spectrum mutual dependence on one hand, and symbiotic synergy on the other. All this has been possible largely due to a low key non-intrusive Indian policy approach to the region guided solely by considerations of mutual benefit. This approach is likely to remain the best way forward, supplemented by extending full support to endeavours of the countries of the region in addressing their problems themselves

- individually, bilaterally, regionally through their organizations such as the GCC and the Arab League.

There can be no two opinions about the strategic importance of Iran for India. Strategic convergence in the context of the Taliban in Afghanistan in the past, in the context of Pakistan's efforts to exercise overarching control in that country, in providing India connectivity with Afghanistan and Central Asia, and being an important source of oil and gas, have been the main factors for Iran's importance for India. Despite India's relationship with the US being at a critical cusp, India had invited the Iranian President to be the Chief Guest at the Republic Day in 2003. The Joint Declaration envisaged the emergence of an ambitious, mutually beneficial multi-sectoral strategic partnership. However, problems in the implementation of agreements in the transport connectivity and hydrocarbon sectors, doubts about Iran's nuclear programme, its growing international isolation, the ever tightening sanctions against it, the growing rift between Karzai and Iran and Teheran's recent hobnobbing with Taliban elements, etc, have acted as constraining factors. India has not found it possible to join the Iran Pakistan India pipeline project for very sound reasons; oil imports from Iran have been coming down due to constraints beyond India's controls and in April – November 2012 Iran dropped to 7th place as supplier of oil to India; etc. Thus, bilateral relations have been on a downward trajectory. According to media reports following the recent Track II interaction in IDSA, the leader of the Iranian delegation repeatedly and trenchantly criticised Indian policies towards Iran and made it clear that India would have to choose between Iran and the US if the bilateral relationship is to be meaningful. Iran is prone to towards a demand/threat, zero sum outcome approach which is hardly conducive to the development of a healthy relationship. Yet, India nevertheless inexplicably continues to invest an enormous amount of political capital, even at the highest levels, to woo Iran.

I had said earlier that GCC states are involved in an escalating standoff with Iran. In India there is a huge constituency very empathetic to Iran whether it is the elite in all political parties, in the national security establishment, in the media and in academia. On the other hand, there is apathy and very little knowledge of the great importance for India to maintain particularly good relations with the GCC countries. Therefore, from a strictly national interest perspective I find this one-sided love affair with Iran somewhat puzzling. India is risking its far more important relationships with the GCC countries, US and Israel. Establishing a workable balance in relations between India and Iran on the one hand with that between India and the GCC countries on the other is likely to be the most important challenge for India in West Asia in the next 2-3 years. In the short term at least, if push comes to shove and a choice becomes unavoidable, India must opt in favour the GCC countries.

Though it is early days yet, another factor is looming on the horizon which has the potential of creating misunderstandings between India and the GCC countries. The developing nexus between Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the Taliban in the context of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan could create problems for India.

The rise of political Islam in the contexts of democratic constitutional frameworks should not be a matter of concern to a pluralist democratic India. In fact this approach is likely to help diminish radicalism. Considerations of Islamic solidarity may come into play in greater measure than before but in fashioning external relationships, national interest and pragmatic considerations of direct mutual benefit are likely to be given priority. This in fact has happened specifically in the case of Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE with whom India today has excellent relations. India's relations and interaction with the new Egypt are very satisfactory, in my view already better than during the sterile

Mubarak period. India need not lose sleep due to the ascendancy of political Islam.

To conclude, India's example as a successful, pluralistic, secular democracy in the world's most diverse country with a very large Islamic persona and with a strongly growing economy, is the best model for inspiration and emulation for the young generations of Arabs. In the context of a rising India, a long standing traditional friend of the Arabs, having an empirically established and proven strongly mutually beneficial relationship, and socio-cultural compatibility with the Arab world, India need not fear adverse outcomes.

Thank you for your attention.

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