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About this Series

Op-Med is an ongoing series of opinion pieces on topical issues in Mediterranean politics from a transatlantic perspective. The series brings together European, North American, and southern Mediterranean experts through the German Marshall Fund–Istituto Affari Internazionali strategic partnership. The series examines key questions surrounding the political, societal, and economic evolution of specific Mediterranean countries as well as the broader regional and international dynamics at play in the Mediterranean region as a whole.

Middle East: On the Agenda for the Next Leader of India?

by P. R. Kumaraswamy

With the elections to the 16th Lok Sabha underway, India's engagement with the wider Middle East raises more questions than answers. The process of electing the 543-member parliament has been going on since early March and will be completed on May 16 when the votes are counted. With over 800 million eligible voters, this is the largest democratic exercise in history.

Earnest election campaigning began in late 2013, when political alliances were made and unmade, with parties and individuals switching loyalties and the two prominent political forces projecting their prime ministerial candidates: Rahul Gandhi, the youngest member of the Nehru-Gandhi scion by the Congress Party and Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi by the Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

A number of opinion polls predict a resounding defeat for the Congress Party and the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) that has governed India since 2004. However, this is where their consensus ends. Some polls anticipate a greater role for regional parties; others predict major gains for the BJP-led National Democratic

Alliance (NDA) that ruled India between 1998 and 2004. While the boisterous Indian middle class clamors for stability, it is uncertain whether the electoral verdict due on May 16 will be a decisive or a fractured mandate. The latter of which could be followed by considerable horse-trading among law makers.

Foreign Policy Paralysis

Challenges for India's next prime minister are daunting and meeting them will require major damage control, direction, and foresight. Keen political observers agree that diplomatic gains made during the first term of the UPA were squandered when the Congress-led coalition was returned to power in 2009. An unending chain of high-profile scams, desertion by key allies, electoral reversals, and, above all, policy paralysis resulted in India frittering away its newly found friendship with Washington.

The 2005 Indo-U.S. nuclear deal and the U.S. willingness to accommodate India's nuclear concerns despite New Delhi's refusal to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) opened many doors, and a number of leaders from the West and emerging

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economies made a beeline to New Delhi. In recent months, in contrast, Indo-U.S. relations have been under stress due to the mishandling of the nannygate controversy involving an Indian diplomat in New York. Restoring closer ties with the United States, a pivot to India's great power aspiration, will be the most urgent foreign policy priority of the next Indian prime minister.

The policy paralysis under UPA has been even more palpable vis-à-vis the Middle East. After Manmohan Singh became prime minister in 2004, there were even fewer political interactions with the Middle East than before. During the past decade, there were a few visits to the region by Indian leaders, including the president, vice-president, or prime minister. But no Indian leader has visited any of the Arab countries since the Arab Spring began in January 2011.

This passive foreign policy line might be connected to India's failure to secure a permanent seat in the United Nation's Security Council (UNSC) before its term as a non-permanent member ended in December 2012. There is no longer the compulsion for India to formulate and articulate its position on various international developments, such as the Geneva Iranian nuclear deal, the Syrian crisis, ongoing Saudi-Iran tensions, the turmoil within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and the Crimean crisis. On the Syrian crisis specifically, New Delhi has been reluctant to criticize the regime and has pushed for a negotiated settlement, but the extension of the conflict and lack of credible political initiatives from the regime have curtailed India's diplomatic space. Unable to influence the regime or the opposition toward a negotiated settlement, India has taken a backseat on the Syrian crisis.

Furthermore, the studied silence vis-à-vis the Arab Spring has also been influenced by India's vital economic, energy, and hence strategic interests in the Persian Gulf. The region

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accounts for about one-quarter of its total foreign trade, supplies about 60 percent of its oil and gas imports, and the Arab countries are home to about 6 million Indian expatriate laborers who, during 2012, remitted at least \$30 billion to India. Given their geo-strategic importance, New Delhi has refrained from making any public statement regarding internal disturbances in Bahrain and, to a lesser extent, in other countries, including Saudi Arabia.

At the same time, the period since February 2014 has witnessed a spate of visitors to New Delhi from the region. The king of Bahrain visited India in the middle of that month. In the last week of February alone, India hosted the crown prince of Saudi Arabia and the foreign ministers of Iran and Oman. These led to speculations of India seeking to benefit from, if not mediate between, Saudi Arabia and Iran. Despite media reports that the visits were related to issues of energy cooperation, the Foreign Office did not put out any information regarding the visits by the Iranian and Omani foreign ministers. These visits can be seen within the context of the upcoming general elections and the desire of the Congress Party to garner political mileage from the photo-ops. India's Muslim population constitutes a sizeable vote-bank for the party and it is likely that the Congress Party wanted to signal to the community that it was keen on maintaining good relations with these Islamic countries.

The Persian Gulf as a Major Upcoming Foreign Policy Challenge

However, irrespective of the outcome of the Lok Sabha elections, the new prime minister will be confronted with three major foreign policy challenges. One, the controversy surrounding the Iranian nuclear program, which is increasingly taking a regional flavor and has intensified Saudi-Iranian tensions. So long as the Iranian controversy remained within the U.S. ambit, India was able to manage its incoherent and chaotic approach of not defining its interests and problems vis-à-vis the India-Iran-US triangle. Its failure to define energy security interests with Iran and settle the nuclear agenda vis-à-vis the United States was harmful but not disastrous.

Two, Saudi Arabia is now emerging as the third wheel in Indo-Iranian relations. Given the volume of bilateral trade, its importance from the point of view of India's energy security, and its Islamic clout, Saudi Arabia wields greater influence over India than the United States and hence is more

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influential over New Delhi-Tehran ties. Its exclusion from the Geneva deal has prompted Riyadh to pursue a number of parallel and even conflicting options. Its overtures toward Israel are accompanied by increased defence- and nuclear-related engagement with Pakistan. There are suggestions of Riyadh “buying” Pakistani bombs. Such a move would only deepen India’s concerns vis-à-vis both Pakistani capacities as well as Saudi intentions in South Asia.

And three, the ongoing tensions between Saudi Arabia and Qatar are potentially harmful to India. The GCC is India’s largest trading bloc, with Saudi Arabia and Qatar being the principal suppliers of oil and gas, respectively. The inter-GCC Cold War can only add to the existing troubles in a region that is already beset by the Saudi-Iran rivalry. Hence, the wider Middle East will require more attention from the next Indian leader than at any time in the past.

About the Author

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