

Introduction

Harsh V. Pant and Hasan T. Alhasan

For decades, India's foreign policy in the Gulf defied explanation. From the oil boom of the 1970s until Manmohan Singh took office in 2004, the density of India's interactions with the region, be it in the form of migration, financial remittances, or trade, surpassed by multiple orders of magnitude India's diplomatic and strategic ties with the Gulf states. Bureaucratic lethargy, the legacy of the Cold War, the lasting effect of Nehruvian non-alignment, and religiously rooted solidarity with Pakistan have been cited as factors that explain this puzzling feature of India's foreign relations in the Gulf. The rapid improvement in India's relations with the Gulf states during the Manmohan Singh years has proved no less puzzling. India's sudden interest in the region has been attributed to the improvement in relations with the US in the wake of the 2005 Indo-US nuclear deal and to the desire of the Gulf states to cultivate partnerships eastwards in Asia.

But such factors pale by comparison to the size of India's economic and security interests in the region. During the 1990 Iraqi Invasion of Kuwait, India carried out the largest airlift in history by evacuating over 170,000 Indian nationals who had escaped Kuwait via Iraq to Jordan. International sanctions placed on Iraq and occupied Kuwait cut India off from its two main suppliers of crude oil and forced it to purchase oil from the spot market at a massive premium, driving it to the brink of default. The 1990–91 Gulf crisis was ample demonstration that India's own economic and security interests were closely intertwined with those of the region, a lesson that has remained with Indian policymakers. Since then, India's dependence on energy imports from the region, the size of its diaspora, and the financial remittances they send home to their families have grown precipitously. Why India's foreign policy may have neglected the Gulf region, and why the region may then have captured the attention of Indian foreign policymakers, are among some of the questions that this volume seeks to answer.

About This Volume

The origin of this volume lies in a literature review prepared during the course of one of its co-editors' doctoral research at King's College London. Sharing a concern over the largely insular nature of the literature on India's foreign policy in the Gulf and its isolation from the broader field of Indian foreign policy analysis (FPA), the idea of putting together a volume that would examine the topic from a variety of theoretical lenses and methodological approaches appealed to us. In addition to embracing theoretical and methodological pluralism, a premium was placed on soliciting contributions from scholars from various cultural and academic backgrounds. Our contributors include both established and budding scholars who hail from academic and policy institutions in India, Bahrain, the UK, and Australia, culminating in a diverse and pluralistic discussion that addresses some of the field's most pressing themes and debates.

Our contributors were asked to think reflexively about the epistemological or theoretical traditions in which they were writing. Each chapter therefore grapples with the merits and drawbacks of its respective approach, justifying its choice by highlighting its relative strengths but also acknowledging its limitations. By doing so, we hope this volume will connect the study of India's foreign policy in the Gulf to the broader disciplinary debates in the field and serve to test, refine, or develop theory. We also hope that the chapters are a useful illustration to students of international relations (IR) or FPA of the many ways in which foreign policy can be fruitfully analysed through a variety of epistemological, theoretical, or methodological frameworks.

Why the Gulf?

If names are but arbitrary labels, they nevertheless imply conceptual, aesthetic, and at times even political choices. To begin with, the choice of referring to the region simply as the Gulf, rather than the Persian or Arabian Gulf, for instance, implies a choice of nomenclature. Throughout history, the body of water between the Arabian Peninsula and the Iranian plateau has been referred to in a variety of ways, including by the Sumerians and Akkadians as the Lower Sea, by the Greeks as the Erythrean Sea, medieval Chinese writers as the Green Sea, by certain Muslim geographers, the Portuguese, the British, and the Dutch as the Sea or Gulf of Persia, by the Ottomans as the Gulf of Basrah, and by the Arab nationalists of the 1960s as the Arabian Gulf, among others.¹ Since the rise of Arab nationalism in the 1950s and 1960s, the resurgence of Iranian nationalism during the Pahlavi era,

Arab furore over Iran's *de facto* recognition of Israel in 1960, and the eruption of the Iran–Iraq War, however, the choice of nomenclature has become a highly polemical and politicised one.² The Arab Gulf states have championed the Arabian Gulf nomenclature as a symbolic means of contesting Iran's neo-imperialist designs in the region.³ Meanwhile, Iran has fiercely criticised the use of any nomenclature other than the Persian Gulf as politically motivated, if not conspiratorial, revisionism.⁴ Those preferring neutrality – the editors of this volume included – tend to refer to the body of water as the Arab–Persian Gulf or simply as the Gulf.⁵

Beyond nomenclature, focusing on the Gulf can also be understood as a function of scope, that is a decision to restrict the geographical area of interest to the body of water separating the Arabian Peninsula from the Iranian plateau and stretching from the southern shores of Iraq to the Strait of Hormuz and its littoral states, namely Bahrain, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), while excluding broader regional conceptions or configurations such as the Arab world, the Middle East, West Asia, and so on. From an analytical perspective, the Gulf sub-region has arguably acquired greater autonomy since Britain's departure in 1971, implying that its security dynamics are sufficiently self-contained to be analysed on its own.⁶ The density of India's relations with the region in economic, migratory, and political terms – as much of this volume will discuss – also justify this restriction in scope. Discursively, the Indian government has recognised the Gulf as an autonomous regional construct in its own foreign policy discourse. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh suggested in 2005 that the 'Gulf region, like South-East and South Asia, is part of our natural economic hinterland' while India's Defence Ministry has noted that 'India's security environment extends from the Persian Gulf in the west to the Straits of Malacca in the east'.⁷ The Gulf has also been referred to by Indian academics and policymakers as being part of India's 'extended neighbourhood', suggesting that it held a special significance for India that set them apart from the rest of the Arab, West Asian, or Middle Eastern states.⁸ Mirroring this trend, a growing number of Indian scholars have restricted the scope of their analysis of Indian foreign policy to the Gulf and its littoral states.⁹

Historical Background

Although this volume addresses the period from 1991 onwards, the history of India's foreign policy in the Gulf region goes back to India's

independence in 1947. At the time, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Iraq were monarchies under the respective rule of King Abdulaziz Al Saoud, Mohamed Reza Shah, and King Faisal II, though the latter was soon overthrown and killed during the 14 July Revolution of 1958 that installed a military regime under Brigadier Abd al-Karim Qasim. Meanwhile, the remainder of the Gulf sheikhdoms were still under British protection.

As India's first post-independence prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru left a lasting mark on the country's foreign policy. Motivated by a desire for neutrality or non-alignment between the Cold War superpowers, Nehru joined Egypt's President Gamal Abdel Nasser, Indonesia's President Sukarno, Yugoslavia's President Josip Broz Tito, China's Chairman Mao, and other third world leaders in convening the Bandung Conference of 1955 and founding the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) a year later. Although several Arab and Middle Eastern states, including Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Iran, and Saudi Arabia were founding members of NAM and therefore formally non-aligned, they did in practice take sides during the Cold War. Whereas Egypt, Syria, and Iraq were inclined to side with the Soviets, Saudi Arabia and Iran (until the Shah's overthrow in 1979) were aligned with the US. Nehru entertained good relations with Iran with whom India exchanged state visits, but the focus of his foreign policy in the Middle East was Nasserist Egypt. After all, Egypt was, like India, Soviet-leaning and due to its own Arab nationalist ideology was opposed to the formation of an Islamic bloc or alliance, an idea that India feared could be used by Pakistan against it if it were to come to fruition.¹⁰ India's relationship with Egypt paid off for New Delhi as Nasser, despite remaining fairly neutral on the Sino-Indian war of 1962 and the Indo-Pakistani war of 1965, was instrumental in preventing the Arab League from siding unequivocally with Pakistan on Kashmir.¹¹ Similarly, Nehru was vocal at the United Nations (UN) in his advocacy for the Palestinian cause and opposition to the Tripartite Aggression orchestrated by Israel, Britain, and France following Egypt's nationalisation of the Suez Canal in 1956.¹² Nehru's death in 1964 and Egypt's own defeat against Israel in 1967, however, marked the beginning of a turning point in Indian foreign policy in the region. Under Indira Gandhi, Indo-Egyptian relations cooled down; Egypt under Anwar Sadat took a pro-US orientation and was ostracised in the rest of the Arab world for signing peace accords with Israel, while India had formalised its alignment with the USSR by signing the 1972 Treaty of Friendship with Moscow.¹³

From the late 1960s and early 1970s onwards, India shifted the focus of its foreign policy in the region from Egypt towards Iraq and, to a lesser extent, Iran. Baathist Iraq had stood by India during the 1965 Sino-Indian war and gradually shed its pro-Pakistan position on Kashmir.¹⁴ Like India, Iraq too formalised its relationship with the USSR by signing a treaty of friendship in 1972.¹⁵ India and Iraq cemented their economic relationship as Baghdad became a main supplier of crude oil and creditor to New Delhi.¹⁶ Meanwhile, Indo-Iranian relations proceeded albeit at a slower pace. India and Iran had not always seen eye-to-eye on international and regional issues, including the Indo-Pakistani wars of 1965 and 1971 during which Iran threatened – but ultimately decided not – to halt oil supplies to India.¹⁷ Following Gandhi's visit to Tehran in April 1974 and the Shah's return visit to New Delhi in October later that year, however, India and Iran appeared to reach a strategic understanding.¹⁸ The trilateral agreement of 1974 between India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh neutralised a major irritant in Indo-Iranian relations, namely Iran's support for Pakistan, while the Shah accepted India's position on the Peaceful Nuclear Explosion of May 1974.¹⁹ Although India cautiously welcomed the Iranian Revolution of 1979, India worried that Pakistan would succeed in listing the Islamic Republic of Iran into its effort at creating an Islamic bloc of countries that would ostracize India. The Iran–Iraq War, which lasted between 1980 and 1988, dampened India's relations with the two sides.²⁰ Meanwhile, Gandhi doubled down on supporting the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO), on which it conferred diplomatic privileges, and advocated imposing economic sanctions on Israel.²¹ During the final decade of the Cold War, India's foreign policy in the Middle East appeared largely as a failure, however. Its closest partners in the region were either marginalised or at loggerheads with each other; Egypt had been expelled from the Arab League for signing a peace treaty with Israel in 1979 and would only be reinstated as a member a decade later, while Iran and Iraq were engaged in a bloody, eight-year conflict that left them exhausted on all fronts.

The USSR's defeat in the Cold War and the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 was a shock to India's foreign policy both on the global and regional levels. Under the Janata Dal government, India was rather slow to adapt to the post-Cold War reality of American unipolarity and continued to extend Iraqi President Saddam Hussein moral support at a time when he was ostracised worldwide.²² The Chandra Shekhar government changed course by condemning Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and secretly allowing US military

planes to refuel in India during the 1991 Gulf War.²³ By interrupting the supply of crude oil from Iraq and Kuwait and hiking up the price of oil on the spot market, the 1990–91 Gulf crisis plunged India into a balance-of-payments crisis, pushing it to the brink of default.²⁴ The episode, during which India evacuated over 170,000 Indian nationals in the largest airlift in history, ended up catalysing India's liberalising economic reforms while demonstrating the Gulf region's vitality to India's economic and strategic interests.

This Volume's Approach

The aim of this volume is to bring to bear various theoretical approaches to key contemporary themes of India's foreign policy towards the Gulf region. While this volume covers a range of traditional and novel themes in India's foreign policy in the Gulf, including India's alignment choices and its strategic partnerships in the region, domestic debates on India's Gulf policy, and the paradiplomacy of Indian states in the region, it does not aspire to exhaust all aspects of India's Gulf policy. Other topics, including immigration, energy, and maritime security, have been written about in greater detail and are therefore not covered in this volume.

This volume is divided into two main sections, the first of which addresses India's alignments and partnerships in global and regional contexts. In Chapter 1, Md Muddassir Quamar revisits the concept of non-alignment and seeks to furnish a new response to the question of whether it continues to describe adequately India's foreign policy behaviour in the region. He argues that whereas India's foreign policy has generally shifted from non-alignment to multi-alignment following the peaceful nuclear explosion of 1998, the transition to a multi-aligned paradigm has proceeded at a slower pace in the Gulf. Quamar suggests that India's foreign policy in the Gulf was constrained by the historical baggage of the Gulf states' solidarity with Pakistan against India during the Cold War on the basis of their shared Islamic identity. However, the convergence of India's and the Arab Gulf states' threat perceptions of international terrorism after 9/11, the acceleration in trade and investment flows to and from the region, and China's larger interest in the Gulf have catalysed the shift to a multi-aligned engagement with regional powers. Having lagged behind India's engagement with other regions of the world, India's foreign policy in the Gulf has since become almost entirely normal.

In Chapter 2, Harsh V. Pant and Anant Singh Mann offer an alternative explanation that analyses India's foreign policy behaviour in the region through the lens of neoclassical realism. The authors choose as their starting point 'the shifts in global and regional distributions of power' and the change in India's perception of its own role in international politics. The increase in India's relative capabilities and its ambitions for a greater role on the world stage since the early 2000s, Pant and Singh Mann argue, have caused India to take a more proactive approach in protecting its energy security, looking after its expatriate community, and cooperating on international terrorism with the Gulf states. Although the US's gradual disengagement from the region and China's growing presence risk destabilising the region's present balance and creating a greater need for India to play a more active role as a 'net security provider' in the region, domestic constraints including India's large Muslim population and sheer bureaucratic lethargy may end up limiting India's regional involvement.

In Chapter 3, Manjari Singh addresses India's strategic partnerships in the region, an arrangement to which India has resorted with increasing frequency to manage its inter-state relations across the globe. The author argues that India's strategic partnerships with Iran, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE are underpinned by three main considerations: energy, the economy, and expatriates. The author identifies security and defence cooperation as an 'emerging fourth pillar' of India's strategic partnerships in the region as the Gulf states represent potentially interesting partners for India in the domains of counter-terrorism, defence industrial development, and maritime security. Singh places India's strategic partnerships in the region into the broader typology of India's strategic partnerships around the globe, highlighting the main similarities and differences in their key attributes.

The second section of this volume examines the domestic dimension of India's foreign policy towards the Gulf. In Chapter 4, Hasan Alhasan employs a role theoretical framework to examine the debates that took place in parliament over what roles India should play during the 1991 Gulf War and 2003 Iraq War. In both cases, opposition parties and the Indian public contested the governments' attempts at enacting new roles – namely *independent* and *emerging power* roles – that appeared to be inconsistent with India's non-aligned identity. The domestic contestation of India's foreign policy roles placed considerable constraints on the ability of the Chandra Shekhar and Atal Bihari Vajpayee governments to enact these roles, illustrating the enduring effect of non-aligned identity on Indian foreign

policy in the Gulf. In revisiting the perennial question of non-alignment, Alhasan proposes national role conceptions as intermediaries that causally connect India's non-aligned identity with its foreign policy behaviour (or role enactment). The contestation and selection of one or more national role conceptions are processes that take place within – and are ultimately mediated by – domestic political institutions.

In Chapter 5, Stuti Bhatnagar takes a constructivist approach to Indian foreign policy discourse on the Gulf states, examining the strategic narratives of the Manmohan Singh and Narendra Modi governments and the ways in which they relate to these governments' domestic political projects. The author argues that 'India's engagement with Gulf states since the 1990s has been shaped by varying domestic political projects'. Although Modi's foreign policy in the region has built on his predecessor's, its articulation has differed markedly. Whereas the Manmohan Singh government emphasised 'India's advancement as a market-driven state and society with a secular-social democratic identity', the Narendra Modi government has pushed the project of 'marketised Hindutva' in dealing with the region, emphasising self-reliance, economic openness, and Hindu nationalist identity. By comparing the Singh and Modi cases, Bhatnagar is able to illustrate that India's foreign policy discourse in the Gulf region is not a special or insular part of India's foreign engagements, but rather one that is linked to the domestic political designs of Indian governments. The Gulf region, therefore, serves as an international stage on which Indian leaders articulate and enact their domestic political projects to their domestic constituents.

Finally, in Chapter 6, Kabir Taneja looks at the paradiplomacy of Indian states in the Gulf region. The author notes that Modi had partly campaigned on the promise of empowering the states to engage in diplomacy, a practice that had been dominated by the union government. The union government's refusal of the offer made by the UAE to dispatch aid to Kerala in the wake of the 2019 floods, however, points to its reluctance to forego its quasi-monopoly over foreign policy in favour of the states and underlines the challenges that state-centre relations present for sub-national diplomacy.

Notes

1. Bosworth, 'The Nomenclature of the Persian Gulf'; Abdi, 'The Name Game'.
2. Abdi, 'The Name Game', 219–20.

3. Ibid., 220–21; Levinson, ‘Mapping the Persian Gulf Naming Dispute’, 280.
4. Abdi, ‘The Name Game’, 211; Levinson, ‘Mapping the Persian Gulf Naming Dispute’, 281.
5. Although some Iranian nationalists object that there simply is no room for neutrality as the use of any nomenclature other than the Persian Gulf implies a departure from historical and geographical convention. See Abdi, ‘The Name Game’, 227; Levinson, ‘Mapping the Persian Gulf Naming Dispute’, 280.
6. Buzan and Wæver, *Regions and Powers*.
7. Quoted in Pradhan, ‘India and Gulf Cooperation Council’, 410; quoted in Scott, ‘India’s “Extended Neighborhood” Concept’, 114.
8. Kumar, ‘India’s Policy Towards Its Extended Neighbourhood’.
9. Ahmad, ‘The Gulf Region’; Ansari, ‘India and the Persian Gulf’; Janardhan, ‘China, India, and the Gulf’; Pasha, ‘New Directions in India’s Role in West Asia and the Gulf’; Pattanayak, ‘Oil as a Factor in Indo-Gulf Relations’; Pradhan, ‘India and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)’; Roy-Chaudhury, ‘India: Gulf Security Partner in Waiting?’; Seethi, ‘India and the Emerging Gulf’.
10. Mudiam, *India and the Middle East*, 48–50.
11. Ibid., 52–53; Pradhan, ‘Changing Dynamics of India’s West Asia Policy’, 9–10.
12. Mudiam, *India and the Middle East*, 54–55; Pradhan, ‘Changing Dynamics of India’s West Asia Policy’, 8; Alhasan, *The Middle East in India’s Quest*, 236.
13. Pradhan, ‘Changing Dynamics of India’s West Asia Policy’, 11–12.
14. Mudiam, *India and the Middle East*, 62–63.
15. Ibid., 65; Pradhan, ‘Changing Dynamics of India’s West Asia Policy’, 12–13.
16. Mudiam, *India and the Middle East*, 64; Pradhan, ‘Changing Dynamics of India’s West Asia Policy’, 12.
17. Mudiam, *India and the Middle East*, 79; Rizvi, ‘Interpreting India’s Vision in West Asia’, 86.
18. Mudiam, *India and the Middle East*, 83; Pradhan, ‘Changing Dynamics of India’s West Asia Policy’, 28.
19. Mudiam, *India and the Middle East*, 81–82.
20. Pradhan, ‘Changing Dynamics of India’s West Asia Policy’, 28–29.
21. Alhasan, *The Middle East in India’s Quest*, 240.
22. Malik, ‘India’s Response to the Gulf Crisis’, 850–51.
23. Ibid., 853; Baral and Mahanty, ‘India and the Gulf Crisis’, 376–77.
24. Baral and Mahanty, ‘India and the Gulf Crisis’, 377.

Bibliography

- Abdi, K. 'The Name Game: The Persian Gulf, Archaeologists, and the Politics of Arab–Iranian Relations'. In *Selective Remembrances: Archaeology in the Construction, Commemoration, and Consecration of National Pasts*, edited by P. L. Kohl, M. Kozelsky, and N. Ben-Yehuda, 206–43. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007. <https://archive.org/details/TheNameGame2007/page/n5/mode/2up>. Accessed on 23 March 2023.
- Ahmad, T. 'The Gulf Region'. In *The Oxford Handbook of Indian Foreign Policy*, edited by D. M. Malone, C. R. Mohan, and S. Raghavan, 437–51. 1st ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Alhasan, H. T. 'The Middle East in India's Quest for Status'. *India Quarterly* 78, no. 2 (2022): 229–47. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09749284221089529>.
- Ansari, H. 'India and the Persian Gulf'. In *Indian Foreign Policy: Challenges and Opportunities*, edited by A. Sinha and M. Mohta, 275–92. 1st ed. New Delhi: Academic Foundation, 2007.
- Baral, J. K., and J. N. Mahanty. 'India and the Gulf Crisis: The Response of a Minority Government'. *Pacific Affairs* 65, no. 3 (1992): 368. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2760069>.
- Bosworth, C. E. 'The Nomenclature of the Persian Gulf'. *Iranian Studies* 30, nos. 1–2 (1997): 77–94.
- Buzan, B., and O. Wæver. *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. Electronic.
- Janardhan, N. 'China, India, and the Gulf'. In *International Politics of the Persian Gulf*, edited by M. Kamrava, 207–33. 1st ed. New York: Syracuse University Press, 2011.
- Kumar, Y. 'India's Policy Towards Its Extended Neighbourhood and the Larger Context of National Foreign Policy Challenges'. Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 13 May 2016. <https://mea.gov.in/distinguished-lectures-detail.htm?524>. Accessed on 23 March 2023.
- Levinson, M. H. 'Mapping the Persian Gulf Naming Dispute'. *ETC: A Review of General Semantics* 68, no. 3 (2011): 279–87.
- Malik, J. M. 'India's Response to the Gulf Crisis: Implications for Indian Foreign Policy'. *Asian Survey* 31, no. 9 (September 1991): 847–61. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2645299>.
- Mudiam, P. R. *India and the Middle East*. London: British Academic Press, 1994.
- Pasha, A. K. 'New Directions in India's Role in West Asia and the Gulf'. *International Studies* 47, nos. 2–4 (2010): 333–46. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002088171104700416>.
- Pattanayak, S. 'Oil as a Factor in Indo-Gulf Relations'. *Strategic Analysis* 25, no. 3 (2001): 465–80. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09700160108458969>.