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The Israel–Iran War: Challenging India's Diplomatic Limits in West Asia

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The Israel–Iran War: Challenging India’s Diplomatic Limits in West Asia

Dr. B. Poornima

The Israel–Iran Confrontation: Escalation in West Asia

The June 2025 Israeli airstrikes on Iran’s nuclear and military installations and leaders, and Iran’s retaliation, threatened to destabilize the already unstable West Asian region further. Despite its brevity, the exchange sparked concerns about a wider regional conflict involving proxy actors and worldwide repercussions from maritime disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz (Benari 2025; Atlantic Council 2025). This recent escalation highlights how unstable the West Asian geopolitical fault lines are. It also brought up important issues regarding the extent to which regional and international players contribute to or deflect tensions. Considering this, the diplomatic stance taken by emerging powers, especially India, garnered increasing global attention.

India’s Official Position and Initial Response

In a cautious statement, India’s Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) urged all parties to avoid raising tensions. It emphasized the value of dialogue in finding a solution (Ministry of External Affairs, India 2025). In keeping with its long-standing commitment to a policy of non-interference in bilateral disputes, New Delhi decided not to place blame. One vital sign is its distancing from the Shanghai Cooperation Organization’s condemnation of Israel (Sharma 2025). More recently, the BRICS grouping condemned the strikes on Iran as a violation of international law but fell short of mentioning Israel and the US. Nonetheless, the members criticized Israel for its prolonged military action in Gaza and urged cessation, highlighting careful messaging (Patrick and Patrick 2025). While these statements have drawn some criticism for their cautious tone, India has historically adopted strategic hedging in its international relations. Rather than aligning exclusively with either side, India carefully maintains substantive engagement with Israel, Iran, and Gulf states. This reflects in neutral diplomatic comments that refrain from criticizing any party, official positions that put the safety of the diaspora first, and sustained support for peace. Hedging has allowed India to protect its main interests in the region’s energy security, economic relations and diaspora security without making too many strategic commitments. However, hedging risks diplomatic pressure if regional partners see India’s balance as a lack of commitment or passivity, which can hurt trust and long-term strategic alliances. India’s distancing has limited its ability to exert decisive influence.

India’s cautious stance aligns with its longstanding effort to balance competing interests—security ties with Israel, energy and cultural connections with Iran, and expanding Gulf partnerships—reflecting a strategic autonomy shaped by external exigencies and internal political complexities. This omni-balancing has allowed India to buffer external pressures from major powers and respond to internal political imperatives, such as diaspora welfare

and energy price stability. The MEA's language, which emphasized the necessity of moderation, de-escalation, and diplomatic efforts, indicated India's primary approach to the region, which was to secure its interests. India's expressed willingness to contribute to a mediation process between the countries to restore normalcy alludes to the same (Ministry of External Affairs, India 2025b). This is different from how some other regional intermediate powers, like Turkey, which strongly criticized Israeli activities, or Egypt, which focused more on humanitarian aid and de-escalation in Gaza, have responded. While this signals a possible recalibration toward more active diplomatic engagement, the actual influence and effectiveness of such outreach remain unrealized. Blarel (2024) argues that India has transitioned from a strategy of buck-passing on the United States for security to a partial soft balancing against China's strategic influence in the Middle East over the past decade. The author also suggests that traditional balance-of-power and strategic hedging may be inadequate to describe India's evolving role in the Middle East.

Why This Conflict Matters to India

India's interest in West Asia's stability is not based on a specific event or ideology but on strategy. The region is of critical interest to India's foreign policy and national security calculus.

Diaspora

More than 9 million Indians live in West Asia, most in the Gulf states (Rashme Sehgal and Sehgal 2025). Any surge in military action puts their safety in danger and might lead to evacuation preparations like the ones India made during the Gulf War, the Libyan crisis, and the Yemen crisis. The 12-day conflict between Iran and Israel, with the US' intervention, led the Indian government to move almost 4,500 Indians out of the two West Asian nations (Ministry of External Affairs, India 2025c).

Energy Dependence and Trade Routes

India has diversified its energy import sources in recent years, but only in April and May did 41% of its crude oil come from West Asian suppliers, and roughly 45% of all oil acquired was shipped via the Hormuz Strait (S. Sharma 2025). If the chokepoint through which nearly a fifth of the world's oil passes were blocked, it would harm India's energy security and much of the world.

India's balancing strategy exemplifies its overall approach: it seeks to avoid zero-sum conflicts while extending influence beyond borders through its economy and diplomacy. As

tensions grew between Israel and Iran, the global community observed India closely, not for military intervention or alliances, but for signs of whether it would assume a more active diplomatic role, possibly as a neutral mediator.

These ambitions are rooted in India's increasing global outreach, such as its role as G20 chair in 2023 and as a voice for the Global South. But with power comes responsibility. The conflict between Israel and Iran served as a test. This Issue Brief hypothesizes that India will continue prioritizing a hedging strategy, emphasizing cautious diplomacy and strategic autonomy over an overt posture tending toward a central role in West Asian affairs. As this Brief discusses, the answer depends not only on India's policies and actions but also on how the broader international community, including major powers and regional stakeholders in West Asia, perceive them.

Global Expectations: Strategic Perceptions of India

As the Israel–Iran conflict intensified, the global community's attention was also on India's positions, not only in terms of its immediate foreign policy choices but also considering its broader aspirations to project responsibility as an emerging global actor. India's strategic doctrine of multi-alignment, its deepening security and economic ties with both Israel and Iran, and its active presence in multilateral platforms place it in a distinctive but diplomatically complex environment.

The US sees India as a key partner in the Indo-Pacific, mainly to check China's spreading influence. The Quad, joint military exercises, and increased defense and technology cooperation are all ways that this alliance is strengthening. However, the US does not appear to expect as much from India regarding West Asia. Washington relies predominantly on long-time Gulf allies like Saudi Arabia and the UAE to support Israel and pressure Iran, including during negotiations with Iran and Hamas in recent conflicts. Under the current administration, the US will likely expect India to take a firmer stance against Iran. While India stops short of openly accusing Iran, it also refrains from actively supporting Tehran's regional moves. Despite Iran's offers for India to help mediate peace in the region, Iran conditioned this on India condemning Israel's military actions, which conflicts with New Delhi's position (The Economic Times 2025). These balancing efforts place India at a disadvantage in the US view because Washington has historically preferred India to choose sides, even though their views on West Asian conflicts are similar. India appears determined to keep its balance between working relations with Iran and building stronger partnerships with Israel and Gulf states. However, this means dealing with conflicting priorities and the risk of overstretching its diplomatic resources.

Western media discourse suggests that the current situation in West Asia tests India's strategy of strategic autonomy, making it harder for India to remain neutral between countries at odds (Fulton 2025). Some Western analysts argue that India's developing connections with Israel and its lack of comment on recent military activities show a change in its diplomatic stance (Bajpae 2024). These interpretations raise questions about how India manages its alliances and how much it takes the lead or holds back strategically, though comprehensive empirical validation remains limited. This not only shows a change in India's approach but also raises questions in the West about how India manages long-term alliances and whether it demonstrates leadership or passive engagement.

Russia seeks to strengthen and expand its strategic influence in the Middle East while countering US influence by forming closer ties with regional powers and deepening defense cooperation, especially with Iran and Saudi Arabia, while maintaining relations with Israel. Russia's view of India's role in West Asia is evolving. As Moscow attempts to carve out a position as a neutral mediator, especially since its influence in Syria has diminished following the regime change in December 2024, Russia likely sees India's role as limited in West Asia (Jordan and Morris 2025). Although Russia has not publicly stated its expectations of India's position in West Asia, Moscow and New Delhi diverge in their stance towards regional conflicts. Russia explicitly condemned Israel's strikes on Iran, while India's move reflected caution (Korybko 2025).

China's influence in West Asia has grown significantly as it positions itself as a rising mediator. China is becoming a major regional intermediary by leveraging economic ties and a neutral diplomatic stance. It has expanded beyond infrastructure and energy interests to high-level diplomacy, such as helping ease tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran in 2023 (The Global Times 2023). China has also hosted Palestinian reconciliation talks, promoted a two-state peace plan, and created multilateral forums like the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum.

Unlike the US, China promotes primarily economic and diplomatic approaches, providing Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, and other regional countries with a counterbalance to US influence. This shift reflects China's broader goal of reshaping regional security arrangements. This approach is important for China to pursue its Belt and Road Initiative in West Asia, as such proactive but calculated engagements could guarantee the security of its projects from regional sources of instability as well as to gain advantage over rival external powers (Griffith Asia Institute 2025). From China's strategic perspective, India is a competitor attempting to establish a diplomatic and economic presence in West Asia. The Iran-Israel conflict has posed challenges for both India and China in balancing their relations. However, China responded to the conflict by condemning Israel for attacking Iran first, positioning itself as a pragmatic yet assertive secondary regional stakeholder (Sim 2025). This stance, contrary to India's, has led some Iranian media outlets to replace India with China in the Chabahar port project (The Week News Desk 2025). China has not officially

commented on India's role in the Middle East, but its policies are overshadowing India's prospects as a regional mediator amid rivalries across West Asia.

India as a Responsible Strategic Power

With its backing of the Global South, leadership of the G20, and increasing participation in multilateral forums, India has been taking measures to be seen as a “responsible stakeholder” in international affairs. In the context of the Israel–Iran conflict, the question is whether India has the credibility and capability to act as a stabilizing power or even a mediator. India has several strengths in this regard. It enjoys close and trusted ties with both Israel and Iran—an unusual diplomatic feat. Moreover, India's tradition of non-intervention, emphasis on sovereignty, and preference for dialogue over coercion resonates with many in the region, particularly in the Global South. This gives India a level of normative legitimacy that only specific countries have.

India does, however, have some limitations. It currently lacks the coercive power, institutional capacity, or intelligence leverage that actors like the US or Russia can wield in the region. It also needs to resist going too far, especially since it needs to preserve its diaspora, keep energy sources safe, and stay neutral in a situation that could change quickly. The challenge is maintaining this equilibrium even as the world becomes more polarized. India cannot afford to alienate either side. Iran is essential to India's regional connectivity strategy. On the other hand, Israel and India share multi-pronged ties ranging from military to people-to-people cooperation. Moreover, India's policy toward West Asia is heavily influenced by domestic factors. Successive administrations have avoided upsetting major religious or regional groups due to political considerations and coalition sensitivity, especially considering India's large Muslim population and left-leaning states that more often pressure the government to take a decisive stance condemning Israel (Bhaya 2025). This has resulted in cautious India–Israel relations. The political pressure has also not been able to force the government to support the Palestinian cause of Iran, making the middle path the best available option. This has also favoured India's vast diaspora in the region. Furthermore, media scrutiny has continued to prompt careful diplomatic engagement and crisis management (Rajagopalan 2022).

So, even though India is increasingly perceived as an emerging power at least among developing states, its role as a mediator remains cautious and limited by both choice and capacity. Nevertheless, India's participation in several multilateral fora raises the possibility of leveraging this institutional infrastructure to lead peace efforts and promote de-escalation narratives without having to take sides or compromise on bilateral relations.

Conclusion

As West Asia gets mired in more complex conflicts involving multiple actors and variables, the increasingly volatile region and its global ramifications will further threaten the international community. The brief Israel–Iran direct confrontation in June offered a taste of it. Such geopolitical junctures are gradually tightening the noose on the delicate balancing act India has adopted in its West Asia affairs, while providing opportunities for the government to play a more impactful and consequential role to project itself as a rising power. For years, India has used the “calibrated realism” playbook in its dealings with West Asia. This means balancing its historical non-alignment stance with practical national security and nation-branding concerns. West Asian geopolitical tensions have put this theory to the test time and again and Indian diplomacy’s ability to be nuanced, and forward-thinking has served the country’s best interests.

Global powers have mixed expectations from New Delhi, from passive neutrality to possible contestation. Though not yet fully empowered, India seems to be enhancing its credibility as a responsible actor by maintaining strategic balance, advocating dialogue, and volunteering to facilitate peace negotiations. With its conscious choice to not see the region’s rivalries in binaries, improving global stature, and stakes in the West Asia’s stability, India is uniquely positioned to act as a link in times of crisis. In doing so, India not only safeguards its own immediate interests in energy, security, and diaspora welfare but also contributes to long-term regional stability to guarantee those interests. Notwithstanding, regional states’ growing expectations on India to take a more pronounced and decisive posture with respect to West Asia’s geopolitical quagmires will continue to prevail as one of the pivotal foreign policy challenges for India to tackle in the foreseeable future.

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