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India and the Gulf After Saddam

Strategic Insights, Volume III, Issue 4 (April 2004)

by [Stephen Blank](#)

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Introduction

Both necessity and ambition fueled by opportunity drive India's efforts to cut a figure in the Persian Gulf region. Four million Indians reside in the area and send valuable remittances home to their kinsmen, making them both hostages of the local security situation and also a sign of India's rising interest in the Gulf. This rising interest takes place in a context dominated by three interacting and profound strategic trends: India's rise as a major Asian power with continental aspirations, American dominance of the Gulf, and the visible Indo-American strategic partnership.^[1]

In that context India is determined to prevent any maritime or landward threat to it from the Gulf. Indeed, following Ashley Tellis' analysis in 2001-02, we can state that for India the Middle East and the Persian Gulf constitutes a vast strategic buffer, an outer ring, if you will, that cannot be allowed to become a base from which policies inimical to India's interests and security can be pursued with impunity. Because India must engage states in this area intimately to forestall such negative trends, India has confronted and robustly counters the related threats of terrorism, proliferation and the export of radicalized Islam.^[2] The threat of proliferation in the Gulf, for example as abetted by China, obligates India's policymakers to assert New Delhi's presence there. As Tellis wrote,

The relationship between China and various key states in Southeast Asia, Central Asia, and the Persian Gulf which have the effect of marginalizing India, reducing its access to the region, and creating pockets of Chinese influence in areas where natural resources, physical access, markets, and sources of influence are increasingly coveted, remain a good example of how the relationships among various states in the "outer ring" [of Indian security perspectives] could directly affect Indian interests.^[3]

In this respect, India is in many ways thinking along lines that are either typical of its erstwhile British masters who responded to threats they faced either from advancing major powers or from crumbling or failing states on the approach to India.^[4] Likewise, India maintains that the Gulf must remain a stable and unimpeded source of energy. India not only depends on a stable supply of oil and gas from the Gulf, it is also now seeking to gain equity investment, through its national

company the ONGC, in local energy projects.^[5] Thus, Jasjit Singh, former head of India's Institute for Defense and Strategic Analyses and one of India's most respected strategic thinkers, wrote in 1998 that,

India's economic growth cannot be maintained without assured access to energy, especially oil and gas. The bulk of India's oil supplies in the past have come from the West Asian region. This could change only marginally to the extent that the Central Asian resource base may be accessed in the future. This is why pipelines have been under consideration not only from Oman to India, but also from Iran, Turkmenistan, and other Central Asian countries. The 1995 tripartite agreement between Turkmenistan, Iran, and India creates the framework for such cooperation in the future. The experience of the past indicates that any disturbance in the access to or costs of oil from West Asia have a deleterious impact on India's economy. The oil shock of 1973 and the crisis of 1990-91 stand out as the more notable examples. Increasing consumption and demand for energy in India only increases India's sensitivity to the issue of assured access to oil (and gas) and its price. This had led the parliamentary committee on energy to emphasize energy security and conclude that "deficiencies in this critical strategic sector compromise national security."^[6]

Simultaneously India participates in the enormous Russian-inspired North-South transport corridor which will become a major international route for all kinds of trade from Russia through Iran and Central Asia and through the Gulf to India.^[7]

Desire to Lead

Every assessment of Indian national security policies cites New Delhi's huge ambition to be recognized as and actually play the role of a major Asian power. Thus the long-term development of economic and military capabilities of power projection throughout the Indian Ocean, including the Gulf are now a matter of national policy as outlined by Prime Minister Atal Behar Vajpayee.^[8] In November, 2003 he directed planners to craft defense strategies that extend beyond South Asia and transcend past sub-regional mindsets. India's expanded security perspectives, he claimed, require such fresh thinking about projecting power and influence, as well as security in all these directions. Thus India will seek more defense cooperation with states in the Gulf, Southeast, and Central Asia, presumably going beyond sharing intelligence about terrorist activities. This cooperation will proceed to more bilateral exchanges and exercises and greater sharing of defense advice with friendly nations. In this context relations of strategic partnership with Washington are essential because Russia's ties with India are tempered by Moscow's dependence on the West, particularly America. And because of Russia's dependence upon Washington as seen from New Delhi, India cannot rely upon Russian support if it comes into conflict with Washington, hence the need for strong ties to America.^[9]

While India formally eschews offensive military projections, it is formally announcing its base in Tajikistan, and hopes to undertake the following military programs through 2013:

- Improve military logistics in Iran, Tajikistan, Kazakstan, and Uzbekistan.
- Increase military interaction with Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam.
- Increase naval interaction with African states, especially South Africa and with Gulf nations, especially Iran, Oman, and the UAE.
- Extend infrastructure, logistic, and material support to Myanmar to contain Chinese activities there.^[10]

Beyond those policies all the Indian military services are currently undertaking a major buildup of conventional weapons, creating ways of delivering nuclear weapons, and preparing defenses against nuclear missiles by improving communication and surveillance systems. Although all the services will be built up, it bears noticing that the Navy will construct warships to make India's presence in the Indian Ocean "a force to be reckoned with" and thus one capable of force and power projection if necessary.[\[11\]](#)

Attaining this status and being seen as having achieved it also makes India more valuable as ally and partner to Washington. Meanwhile India already possesses considerable experience and capability to project power in the form of peacekeeping or peace enforcement forces abroad. Indeed, in anticipation of playing exactly this role in Iraq, the Army and some in the government began to plan for that mission in 2003.[\[12\]](#) However major domestic political controversy and the failure of the UN to authorize foreign participation in an Iraqi peace operation prevented the government from authorizing the dispatch of troops there.[\[13\]](#) Nevertheless the Indian government is already deeply engaged in the Gulf.

Interest in the Gulf

For example, India and America have begun discussions of an Asian version of NATO.[\[14\]](#) While it remains unclear who would join this potential alliance, what its missions and purpose will be, and what its "rules of engagement" in peace operations will be, India has already provided access to the United States in its quest for bases against terrorism in the Indian Ocean, bases which were and are being used to prosecute the war in Afghanistan. In the event of future contingencies they could be used in the Gulf as well.[\[15\]](#) India also is very close to Iran and even signed a defense cooperation agreement with it in 2003, which some observers fear is directed against Pakistan.[\[16\]](#) India depends on access to Iranian energy, and to overland as well as maritime trade through the Gulf and the Indian Ocean. India also depends on Iran for direct access to Central Asia, a region that plays a growing role in Indian strategic calculations, has historically good ties to it, and shares a common antipathy to the Taliban and to Pakistani adventurism in Central Asia. Indeed, some Indians feel India could become an interlocutor to bring Tehran and Washington closer together.[\[17\]](#)

Indian policies, like those of other states, attest to the fact that the Gulf, South Asia and Central Asia are now strategically interactive and interrelated regions or "theaters." Thus India's rivalry with Pakistan and its resistance to Pakistan's earlier tactic of using terrorism to put India under constant threat of dismemberment are certainly major factors in its strategic search for greater influence with Iran and in the Gulf. The objectives of India's quest for greater influence throughout the Gulf and Central Asia, are to prevent proliferation as well as terrorism. Indeed, as part of this quest, India has even acquired an air base in Tajikistan.[\[18\]](#) India regards the Gulf as a potential breeding ground for terrorism that could be targeted against Indian interests and thus it is determined to assert itself there to prevent that threat's overt expression and mutation into a threat based on WMD proliferation.

This opposition to terrorism and proliferation not only brings India and America closer, it also catalyzes India's drive to outflank the territorial bases of these manifestations by finding points of influence in the Gulf and Central Asia and by developing a capability to assert and project its power in enduring fashion into these areas. But beyond rivalry with Pakistan the great strategic objective of India's rapprochement with Washington is to convince it that India truly merits being seen as an Asian power that can project influence and power throughout Asia on behalf of common interests against common threats. To the degree that the United States regards India as having legitimate security interests in the Gulf, Southeast Asia, and as far afield as the Straits of Malacca, India is then able to truly play a much greater role on its own. But beyond that it is then able to play a major role working together with Washington in areas that confront the United States with significant difficulties in projecting power: Central Asia, the Indian ocean, Southeast Asia. This cooperation in the "interstices" of Asia on the basis of a shared threat assessment

concerning terrorism, proliferation and the desire to stabilize the Gulf so that those threats are snuffed out there drive much of India's current national security policy.[19] While those policies comport with America's for the most part, the frustration of terrorist challenges in a post-Saddam Iraq is intrinsically an important Indian interest even if it cannot yet commit forces there due to domestic considerations and a different valuation than America's concerning the need for a UN authorization.

The Indian government not only wants Washington to restrain Pakistan from indulging in anti-India activities, it also looks up to Washington for stabilizing the Gulf in order to stabilize the South Asian subcontinent and eliminate the territorial and political bases of the terrorism which threatens the entire region. Thus, assuming we can secure a UN authorization that empowers other states to participate in a post-conflict stability operation in Iraq, it is likely that the Indian government's larger interests in projecting power in the Gulf, stabilizing it, and in acting in concert with the United States will override the significant domestic opposition to an enduring Indian role in a post-Saddam security architecture for the Gulf. This architecture is clearly broader than merely establishing the basis for Iraq's long-term stability and security. But the latter is the essential precondition for any successful security architecture or structure in the region. Without such an architecture India's interests, security, and standing, not to mention American interests will be severely compromised.

Conclusions

India's ambitions, capabilities, experience and interests all suggest that it is interested in playing a major role in helping to stabilize the Persian Gulf in a post-Saddam era. The issue is how to we craft an invitation to India to do so which has a chance of succeeding. Obviously we have to stop dismissing the UN for no matter what we think, India, like many other states, sees its authorization as indispensable to any legitimization of the use of force or for deployment in post-conflict stability operations. Second, before India enters into any such operation it will be necessary to conduct a candid discussion with it as to its strategic objectives, interests, and concerns in the new Gulf. And those interests and fears must be accommodated. Likewise, it will be necessary during this dialogue to elucidate its views as to how that structure or architecture should work and not just what it hopes to gain from its participation in any such system.

In other words, the perception abroad that U.S. policy is characterized by excessive unilateralism must be shown to be groundless. Allies like India must be consulted and accommodated much more openly than was previously the case. This consultation must mean and be seen to mean more than that they were simply heard and that then we proceeded as we had intended to do anyway. Their interests in a stable Gulf, which after all are not far removed from our goals for the area, must be seen as legitimate and it must be understood that no unilateral American system stands any chance of more than ephemeral success in constructing a post-Saddam order in the Gulf. The beginning of wisdom in constructing a Gulf security architecture entails genuine dialogue with allies and partners and a genuine give and take among them and us. The gains in getting the participation of a rising power with a good reputation in the Gulf and a democratic tradition in such a security architecture far outweigh any losses involved in accommodating their interests there and in taking their advice when it makes sense. Partnership, if not alliance, with India is one of the fundamental points of the Administration's agenda and even preceded September 11.[20] As India's power and standing grow it makes all the sense in the world to exploit that partnership on behalf of interests and values that are fundamentally shared and compatible and against common threats. Failure to devise a basis for a significant Indian presence in the new Gulf, on the other hand, all but ensures that the architecture will be built on sand.

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Stephen Blank is Professor of Russian National Security Studies at the [Strategic Studies Institute](#) of the [U.S. Army War College](#). Dr. Blank has been an Associate Professor of National Security Affairs at the Strategic Studies Institute since 1989. In 1998-2001 he was Douglas MacArthur Professor of Research at the War college. Prior to this appointment Dr. Blank was Associate Professor for Soviet Studies at the Center for Aerospace Doctrine, Research, and Education of Air University at Maxwell AFB. Dr. Blank's M.A. and Ph.D. are in Russian History from the University of Chicago. He has published over 350 articles and monographs on Soviet/Russian military and foreign policies. His most recent book is *Imperial Decline: Russia's Changing Role in Asia*, Duke University Press, 1997 which he co-edited with Professor Alvin Rubinstein of the University of Pennsylvania. Dr. Blank is also the author of a study of the Soviet Commissariat of Nationalities, *The Sorcerer as Apprentice: Stalin's Commissariat of Nationalities*, Greenwood Publishing Group, 1994 and the co-editor of *The Soviet Military and the Future*, Greenwood Publishing Group, 1992.

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