

India, Pakistan and Bangladesh - Changed Geopolitical Realities in West Asia

What is the issue?

- Iran's senior-most nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh was assassinated recently near Tehran. Iran sees indications of Israeli role in this.
- In this context, here is how India, Pakistan and Bangladesh must deal with the changing geopolitical realities in West Asia.

What does the assassination signify?

- The murder underlines a familiar political truth in the Middle East.
 - It is not that important if you are right or wrong; what really matters is whether you are weak or strong.
- In this light, the assassination of Mohsen Fakhrizadeh highlights Iran's growing strategic vulnerabilities.
- It also points to a continuing regional realignment against Iran marked by the normalisation of ties between some key Arab states and Israel.
- This geopolitical turbulence in the Middle East has major consequences for the Indian subcontinent, which has intimate religious, economic, and strategic ties with the Middle East.

What are the emerging trends in the Middle East?

Iran's growing isolation in the region:

- The U.S. under Trump administration, Israel and the Gulf Arabs have a shared interest in preventing Joe Biden from renewing nuclear diplomacy with Iran and ending its isolation.
- The assassination of Fakhrizadeh is about achieving that political objective.
- If Iran retaliates vigorously, it will invite an all-out confrontation with Israel and the US.
- This will kill the prospects for a productive engagement with the Biden administration.
- On the other hand, holding back will expose Iran's weakness.
 - It will also sharpen Iran's internal divisions between pragmatists who want to engage the US and the hardliners who want a confrontation.
- The frequent attacks on high-profile Iranian targets raise questions about the

hostile penetration of Iran's society.

- The exposure of Iran's internal political weakness is compounded by the massive economic pain imposed by the U.S.

Rapid transformation of Arab relations with Israel

- The fear of Iran has been driving Gulf Arabs to embrace Israel.
- In the recent days, Bahrain and the UAE have normalised ties with Israel.
- There is speculation of an impending normalisation of ties between Israel and Saudi Arabia.

Deepening rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Turkey

- Saudi Arabia and Turkey are in a tussle for the leadership of the Muslim world.
- Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the UAE want to return the Middle East towards political and religious moderation.
- But the once secular Turkey under Recep Tayyip Erdogan has become the new champion of political Islam.
- Turkey's new religious zeal provides a good ideological cover for Erdogan's ambitions to expand its geopolitical influence in the Middle East.
 - Erdogan's Turkey is now hostile to India and has joined Pakistan in taking up the Kashmir question at international forums.
 - However, Saudi Arabia and UAE are not much on Pakistan's side in this regard.
 - More recently, there have been reports of UAE deliberately blocking Pakistani labour exports to the UAE.
 - If Pakistan continues its tilt towards Turkey, Saudi Arabia, which hosts more than 2 million Pakistan workers, could surely follow the UAE example.

Where do Pakistan and Bangladesh stand in this?

- **Pakistan** - Pakistani pragmatists long wanted to establish ties with Israel and neutralise Delhi's connection with Israel.
- But the growing weight of Islamist ideology, conspiracies, and relentless propaganda equating Palestine with Kashmir seemed to hold Pakistan back.
- However, the context has dramatically altered with the normalisation of ties between the Gulf Arabs and Israel.
- Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan has talked of pressure, apparently from Saudi Arabia and the UAE, on recognising Israel.
- Pakistan also knows the value of having a sensible relationship with Israel and its useful spinoffs in the U.S.

- Pakistan is notably trying to limit U.S.'s current political tilt towards India.
- **Bangladesh** - If Pakistan recognises Israel, Bangladesh would not want to be left behind.
- Economic and technological collaboration with Israel will give Bangladesh's economy and foreign policy a big boost.
- Like Pakistan, Bangladesh, too, could use a new Jewish connection to cope with the mounting criticism in the U.S. of Bangladesh's political freedoms and human rights under PM Sheikh Hasina.
- Bangladesh and Pakistan, two of the world's largest Islamic nations, recognising Israel would be a great ideological and political bonus for it.

What is the significance of these developments?

- Narratives about the Middle East have been central to the evolution of the Indian subcontinent's religious and nationalist politics over the last century.
- But the old ideas that defined South Asian discourse on the Middle East are beginning to fade and barely correspond to the changing reality.
- **India** - India has made some important adjustments to its engagement with the Middle East in recent years.
- Nevertheless, it can't ignore the rapid changes taking place in the region.
- On the other hand, Pakistan and Bangladesh can't afford to take the Middle East for granted and view the region solely through the religious prism.
- For now, the challenge for the South Asian states is to manage the consequences of the geopolitical changes in the Middle East and seize the new opportunities that are presenting themselves.

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