

The Strategic Environment in West Asia and its Impact on India's National Security and Foreign Policy

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I feel privileged to have been invited to deliver the Major General Samir Sinha Memorial Lecture for 2008. I returned to India after my service with the United Nations in 2001. I was, therefore, denied the opportunity and pleasure of knowing General Sinha personally. I have heard nothing but the highest praise for General Sinha. He had an exceptionally distinguished career in the Indian Army. He served with even more distinction, and dedication, the United Service Institution of India as its Director for 9 years from 1987-96. Indeed, his association with the USI went back to 1947 when he became a life member of the USI. As Director of Military Training, General Sinha was the Chairman of the USI Executive Committee from January 1977 to June 1979, and an elected member of the USI Council for many years. It is, therefore, with a sense of immense satisfaction and humility that I accepted the invitation to deliver the lecture dedicated to his memory.

To talk about the "The Strategic Environment in West Asia and its Impact on India's National Security and Foreign Policy", in front of a knowledgeable audience, such as you Ladies and Gentlemen, is a challenging task. If I accepted this challenge, it was largely in the expectation that I myself would benefit a great deal from my interaction with an enlightened audience, many of whose members follow the situation and developments in West Asia even more closely than I do.

West Asia is the proper geographical description for the region which is known the world over as "Middle East". The term "Middle East" may have originated in the 1850s in the British India Office and became more widely known, and gradually accepted, when the American Naval Strategist Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan first used the term in his article 'The Persian Gulf and International Relations' published in September 1902 in the British journal National Review. During that time, the British and Russian Empires were vying for influence in Central Asia in what was known as the Great Game. Recognising the importance of Persian Gulf, Mahan labelled the area surrounding the Gulf as Middle East. In his article, Admiral Mahan said, inter alia: "the Middle East, if I may adopt a term which I have not seen, will some day need its Malta, as well as its Gibraltar; it does not follow that either will be in the Persian Gulf.....the British Navy should have the facility to concentrate in force if occasion arises, about Aden, India, and the Persian Gulf". It is interesting that Mahan, an American Naval Officer, was advising the British Navy. His article was reprinted in The Times and followed in October 1902 by a series of 20 articles entitled "The Middle East Question" written by Sir Ignatius Valentine Chirol. When this series of articles ended in 1903, The Times removed quotation marks from subsequent uses of the term.

As Hamid Ansari has pointed out in his book 'Travelling Through Conflict', the term "Middle East" is a misnomer and legacy of an era when points on the globe were identified with reference to the location of seats of European empire. The people of the region have adopted this geographically inaccurate description of their region. In recent years, however, there is a welcome tendency to use the more appropriate term, namely, West Asia. There is no precise definition of the countries covered by West Asian region. Generally speaking, it refers to the vast region between the western border of Pakistan to the western border of Egypt and the countries south of the former Soviet Union. Admiral Mahan had used the term to designate its strategic concept for the land bridge connecting the continents of Africa, Asia and Europe. There is, however, a general understanding that West Asia includes, in alphabetical order, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Palestinian territories, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. Some Foreign Ministries would include Sudan also in this definition. Generally speaking, the area includes the Arab world with the exception of Maghreb, save Egypt.

West Asia, to quote Hamid Ansari again, suffers from "the curse of centrality". It is the cradle of three of the world's major religions - Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Three of its cities - Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and Mecca - are respectively the spiritual centres for each of these three faiths. It is useful to keep in mind two things :-

- (a)** Not all the countries of the region are Arabs - Iran and Israel are important exceptions
- (b)** Only a small part of the more than one billion Muslims of the world live in West Asia, although Mecca is the focus of spiritual belief for all of them.

The strategic importance of West Asia lies in its geography and an essential natural resource, namely, petroleum. The importance of petroleum for world's economy, and hence the importance of West Asia, has received extensive attention at the hands of analysts and scholars. Petroleum is the single most valuable commodity in world commerce, an indispensable item in time of peace and of critical strategic importance in time of war. Two-thirds of the proven crude oil reserves in the world are in West Asia. United States, Western Europe and Japan, particularly the latter two, are critically dependent upon imported oil, principally from West Asia. This will soon be true, if not already so, of emerging economic giants such as China, India, as well as of some countries which are at present self-sufficient for their energy needs. The reverse side is equally important, though not adequately recognised and commented upon. The oil producers in the region - and not all the countries produce oil - are almost entirely dependent on the export of oil for their revenue. A significant drop in the price of oil and/or development of reliable and sustainable sources of alternative energy would have a serious impact on the economies and lifestyles of the people in the region.

Not much is written or said about the importance of West Asia as the strategic crossroads for Eurasia, a concept which Admiral Mahan had recognised over a hundred years ago. The Mediterranean Sea together with the Turkish Straits and the Suez Canal have for many years been the most important waterways in the world. When the Suez Canal was completed in 1869, it immediately became a target for international diplomacy. President Nasser's nationalisation of the Suez Canal in 1956 precipitated a crisis that brought the major powers to the brink of another world war. Following the 1967 six-day war between Israel and the Arabs, the Suez Canal remained closed for over seven years, a fact almost forgotten. Even though the Canal again opened for shipping, it did not regain its former importance because of the development of supertankers which navigate instead around the Cape of Good Hope.

By far, the most critical West Asian waterways today are the Persian Gulf and the Straits of Hormuz. As much as 60 per cent of the world's oil flows through the Straits of Hormuz. It is for good strategic reason that the United States has kept a significant naval force in the Persian Gulf since the first Gulf War, and will certainly maintain that presence into the future. It may be pertinent, in this connection, to refer to the melting of the icecap in the Arctic which has opened up almost revolutionary and realistic possibilities of shortening transportation distances by 20-40 per cent. This development, which could become a reality in as little as a decade, would have strategic and economic implications for the whole world, including West Asia. There is no doubt that strategists of oil are furiously working on planning and mapping pipelines, and tankers which would feel free to reduce the usage of the politically turbulent and dangerous waters of the Gulf and the Straits of Hormuz. There is another strategic dimension which could be explored in the coming years and that is, the rail and land routes across West Asia. Mr Lyndon La Rouche Jr in a speech in Abu Dhabi in 2002 has developed the concept of Middle East as a strategic crossroad. The scholars interested in learning more about this concept would be well advised to refer to his speech which is available on the net.

While the history of oil goes back several centuries, for our purpose, it began with the British Navy's plan for the Great War of 1914-18. The British Empire intended to use petroleum extracted from West Asia to provide its Navy the crucial strategic advantage of a change from coal-burning to oil-burning warships. Since that time, the region has been dominated by the great power struggle over the control of the unique and strategically significant economic advantages of oil. But as has been mentioned earlier, it was not oil alone that shaped the fate of West Asia. With or without oil, the historic importance of West Asia would remain.

If the oil production, processing and distribution had remained in the control of private multinational companies, as was the case for several decades, the region would have remained relatively stable. There was, of course, the Arab-Israeli conflict which was an important battleground during the cold war era. Only a few years into the cold war, the democratically elected Prime Minister Mossadeq of Iran administered a rude shock to the calm waters of West Asia, when he nationalised the National Iranian Oil Company and vested full control over Iran's oil resources into the hands of the Iranian people. He, of course, paid a price for challenging Western domination over the oil resources. Soon after, Iraq followed suit and nationalised its oil industry. That factor, combined with Israel's growing strategic relationship with the United States, ensured that the region would get buffeted by conflicting forces. The blunders committed by Saddam Hussein accelerated the process. The priority of the governments of the industrialised countries has now shifted from retaining direct control to one of ensuring that the control remains in friendly hands.

Edward Luttwak, Senior Adviser at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies in Washington D C, challenges the notion of the strategic importance of West Asia. According to him, the Arab-Israeli conflict has been almost irrelevant since the end of the cold war. As for the impact of the conflict on oil prices, it was powerful in 1973 when Saudi Arabia declared embargo and cut production, but that was the first and last time that the "oil weapon" was wielded. He says that the largest Arab oil producers have publicly foresworn any linkages between politics and pricing, and an embargo would be a disaster for the oil revenue-dependent economies. He quotes an oil expert to show that between 1981 and 1999 – a period when a fundamentalist regime consolidated power in Iran, Iran and Iraq fought an eight-year war within view of oil and gas installations, the Gulf War came and went, and the first Palestinian intifada raged – oil prices, adjusted for inflation, actually fell. He further argues that global dependence on West Asian oil is declining – as of 2007 the region produced below 30 per cent of the world's crude oil, compared to almost 40 per cent in 1974-75. He goes on to argue that a settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian differences would do little or nothing to calm the other conflicts in the region or in other parts of the world such as in Indonesia, Philippines, Chechnya etc. While the international community is hugely apprehensive about the tanker traffic through the Gulf and the Straits of Hormuz in case of an attack on Iran's nuclear installations, Mr Luttwak is quite sanguine about it, pointing out that Iran and Iraq have both tried to attack the tanker flow many times without much success and this time the US Navy stands ready to destroy any airstrip or jetty from which attacks might be launched.

There might be some logic to Luttwak's argument. The rest of the world, however, is not convinced and would want to encourage all concerned to make every effort to ensure that the situation in the region does not get inflamed more than it already is at present. The price of oil has already touched \$ 120 and will easily reach \$ 150 or even \$ 200 a barrel in case of another war in the region, with calamitous consequences for global economy.

There is one other factor, a comparatively recent one, which makes West Asia even more crucial. I am referring to the emergence of the phenomenon of international terrorism and the strengthening of the forces of extremism. The two are different and distinct, but often feed on each other. The manner in which the nations around the world formulate their foreign policy responses to deal with this menace will have direct implications for their domestic peace and tranquility.

The situation in West Asia has changed, mostly for the worse, since the events of 11 September 2001. In their aftermath, the US administration had every right to take measures to ensure the safety of its citizens and the

security of its homeland. Most observers, including in the United States, have been questioning – and not only with the benefit of hindsight – the wisdom of the policies pursued by the administration to achieve those objectives. President Bush declared on 7 November 2003 that the establishment of a free Iraq at the heart of the Middle East would be a watershed event in the global democratic revolution. Secretary of State Dr Rice, in a statement made during the second Lebanon war in the summer of 2006 – a statement which she might have later regretted – said that pushing Israel to accept a ceasefire would not help because it would simply re-establish the status quo ante and not help create a new Middle East.

The West Asia of 2008 is indeed different from that of 2001. The war in Iraq has been the single most important factor behind this transformation. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains unresolved and its parameters have changed significantly with a deep split in the Palestinian national movement, and with questions even being asked whether a two-State solution can possibly be implemented. As for Lebanon, while direct Syrian military presence has been withdrawn, the country remains deeply divided and appears to be on the brink of another civil war. As for Iraq, it continues to be unstable, violent, and deeply divided. The damage to the infrastructure of the country can perhaps be repaired as and when Iraq returns to a state of reasonable stability and security. However, the scars in the form of hundreds of thousands of civilian lives lost and the bloody sectarian clashes would remain for generations. One must also feel sorry for the young American men and women, more than 4000 of whom have been killed in the war, with most of them not quite convinced of what they were sacrificing their lives for.

What Edward Luttwak said about a possible Israeli-Palestinian settlement doing little or nothing to calm other conflicts in the region was perhaps true at one time, but no more. Today, the conflicts have become interlinked as never before and the common factor in all of them is Iran. This knowledgeable audience is surely familiar with the historic antagonism between the Persians and the Arabs over the centuries. In a paper released earlier this year, the Carnegie Endowment for Peace, a respected think tank in Washington D C pointed out that with the demise of Saddam Hussein, the balance of power between Iran and Iraq has been broken, increasing the influence of Tehran in the Gulf and beyond. In my conversations with Ministers and members of strategic community in West Asia over the past few years, I was repeatedly reminded that a secular Iraq acted as a bulwark against Iran. By recalling this historical fact, it is nobody's intention, and certainly not mine, to hold any brief for Saddam Hussein, who was indeed a ruthless despot. While no tears be shed for him, no amount of tears would be adequate or compensate for the sufferings of the Iraqi people.

Democracy does not always produce the result that might be desired by the advocates of democracy. Hardly any country is consistent in the application of principles to the conduct of foreign policy. Double standards might be the rule rather than exception. National interest will always override principles. It was, therefore, not surprising when Israel and the United States of America refused to deal with the government which came to power in the Palestinian territory following the elections in January 2006. The net effect of that decision, however, might not have been the one desired or expected.

The region today is highly volatile. It remains to be seen if George Bush's visit to the region in mid-May would act as a spur to the Israelis and Palestinians to maximise efforts to reach enough common ground for them to agree on a document. Naturally, the more substantive the document, the more difficult it would be to agree on its contents, but a document which merely repeats platitudes would not have much practical meaning. The rift between Hamas and Fatah is not even close to being bridged, with the problem becoming more complicated because of Israel's warning to President Abbas to cut off all negotiations, if the latter agrees to anything with Hamas. If the efforts of the regional countries, especially Egypt, to broker a ceasefire deal between Hamas and Israel do not bear fruit in the next few weeks, I would not rule out the possibility of a major military action there.

Thus, given the continuing, unabated violence in Iraq, the simmering crisis in Lebanon and the looming dangers in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, all in all, it could be a long, hot summer in West Asia.

The position today is that Iran, which until a short five years ago, had hardly any role in the various conflicts in the region, is now in a position to influence the course of events in all of them – Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestine. This perhaps is the most significant geo-political development in the region.

Once again I need not elaborate on this statement, since this well-informed audience surely knows what I am alluding to.

One area which should be of concern to the international community, particularly to us in India, is the growing tensions between the Shia and Sunni communities. A senior Arab personality told me a few weeks ago that Shia-Sunni antagonism is a historical fact and is centuries old. The relations between the two, however, have become particularly acute following the events of March 2003. The majority Shia community in Iraq, as also the Kurds, had been at the receiving end under successive Sunni regimes in Baghdad since the modern State of Iraq came into existence in 1932. It was inevitable that when democracy was introduced, the Shia, being in majority, would assume the reins of power. So far, however, they do not appear to have used their authority in the government apparatus to instill confidence, particularly among the Sunnis. Hopefully this will change in the months ahead. Whatever the scholars outside the region might say, the people in the region are seriously worried about the Shia-Sunni tensions and the destabilising effect that they can have on their societies.

India has a big stake in the region. Energy is the most obvious case in point. 70 per cent of our imported energy needs come from West Asia, and this dependence will only increase if our economy continues to grow at 8 per cent or more. The proposed pipeline with Iran thus makes enormous economic strategic sense as does the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India pipeline. There is a 4 to 5 million strong Indian community working in the Gulf, sending back to their families annually about US \$8 billion. We would certainly wish them to live there in conditions of dignity and self-respect, for which efforts continue to be made and in which the governments in the region are being more and more cooperative. India's non-oil economic relations with the region are also

expanding to mutual benefit. This is true also of Israel. Thus, when we say that India's national interests are directly linked to peace and stability in West Asia, it is much more than a platitude.

In addition to the Shia-Sunni tensions, we also need to keep a close watch on the emergence of the global network of international terrorism, which has come into existence in recent years. West Asia is one of the two epicentres of terrorism in the world today. Terrorists have been second to none in taking advantage of the technological advances of globalisation. As host to the second largest Muslim population in the world, India, an open and democratic society, has to keep a watchful eye on the situation in West Asia. As perhaps never before, foreign policy decisions in the coming years will have consequences for peace and harmony in our multi-cultural, multi-religious country. We should do what we can to support and strengthen forces of stability and moderation.

India has excellent relations with all the countries in the region, bar none. We must keep in regular touch with them; explain our approaches and policies to the governments and the people there. We need more, and more frequent, exchanges of high level visits, more visits by scholars, media persons, think tanks such as the USI. A 24-hour television news channel would be of considerable help in this process. While interacting with the region and its decision-makers and influencers, we must not at all be apologetic or on the defensive. We have a record as a functioning, pluralistic, democratic and fast developing society that, I assure you, is a subject of admiration and even envy. Let us, therefore, exude confidence, but not arrogance, in our foreign policy dealings with West Asia.

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