

Background

Fragile structure of West Asia stands deeply impacted by the geostrategic shift, as a sequel to the emerging 'new world order'. Radical changes have taken place in the diverse political systems adopted by the nations in the region. External interventions have further contributed to the rapid destabilisation of situation. As a result, Middle East continues to remain in a state of flux for the last few decades.

West Asia has a complex history due to numerous factors : Arab-Islamic heritage, ethno-religious heterogeneity, Arab-Persian rivalry and sectarianism. Colonialism, imperialism and Zionism played critical role in shaping the region's geopolitical architecture. Uneven distribution of resources has been a major reason for conflict in the region.¹ The root cause, however, was the creation of the State of Israel.² During the last century, initially the UK and later the US attempted to impose their security framework on the region. Break-up of the Soviet Union resulted in significant changes in the West Asian landscape. The 9/11 episode marked a major turning point redefining the security dynamics of the region. 'Global War on Terrorism' initiated by the US led to the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan with catastrophic outcomes.

Rising aspirations of the common people gave rise to mass protests in the recent past. A local incident in Tunisia in 2010 sparked off demonstrations which spread like wildfire, engulfing the entire Middle East. Consequently, many longstanding authoritarian regimes were eased out.³ Although the monarchies in the Gulf survived, its security architecture was affected. Due to the interplay of multiple forces, security scenario in the region has turned out to be extremely volatile. Syria is amidst serious turmoil. The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has emerged as a new menace. Russian intervention has further compounded the strategic calculus. Situation in Yemen remains turbulent. It is no longer the case of Arabs versus Israel or Iran versus Saudi Arabia. Arab world today is a divided house, which precludes collective approach to address security issues in the region. The US strategy of rebalancing Asia-Pacific implies progressive shift from the region, thereby limiting its role as a long time security guarantor.

India has vital political, economic and security stakes in the stability of West Asia. The yearly trade is around US \$ 200 billion.⁴ Serious challenge facing India currently is how to balance its national interest with the regional and external players. This paper attempts to provide an overview on the geostrategic shift and emerging security dynamics in West Asia, while briefly highlighting the implications for India.

Geostrategic Shift - An Overview

As a strategic subsystem, West Asia lies on the confluence of three continents and has close linkages with North Africa. It dominates the sea lanes of communications and is home to huge hydro carbon reserves.⁵ British having replaced the Ottoman Empire dominated the region till WW II; in the process broke the monolithic structures into number of monarchical states. Thereafter, the US took control of the region. Its dominance was contested by the Soviet Union which led to the emergence of military governments with social overtones in countries like Egypt, Syria and Iraq.

In 1969, the US initiated Nixon Doctrine which envisaged Allies contributing to their own security with American assistance.⁶ Saudi Arabia and Iran were incorporated to ensure the security of the Gulf region. This arrangement fell apart with the Iranian revolution in 1979. To balance Iran, America turned to Iraq. Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) was formed in 1981 to counter the Iranian threat. Even this strategy failed when Iraq attacked Kuwait in August 1990. Here on, the US resorted to forward presence in the region. Russia by now was out of the scene.

Post 1991 Iraq War, the US initiated Madrid Peace Process by creating multi-lateral security framework. ⁷ In the Gulf, America sought to contain both Iran and Iraq. The reliance was more on the military power and not so much on the political framework. Washington launched Cooperative Defence Initiative (CDI) for integrating the defence organs of the GCC, Egypt and Jordan.⁸ GCC members even signed a defence pact in December 2000.

The geostrategic profile of West Asia transformed dramatically as a sequel to 9/11, with the US unleashing of 'Global War on Terror' in Iraq and Afghanistan. Discovery of Iran's covert nuclear programme further complicated the environment. While in Iraq, war ended by 2005, fighting in Afghanistan dragged on, compelling the US to review its engagement strategy. In May 2006, the US initiated 'Gulf Security Dialogue' to serve as security coordination mechanism with the GCC.

By the end of the first decade of 21st Century, the US was deeply engaged in West Asia. The GCC were wholly dependent on America for their security. Iran stood totally isolated. The Non State Actors emerged as a new phenomenon. Currently, geostrategic landscape in West Asia is undergoing metamorphosis. Key factors which are driving this phenomenon are summarised in the succeeding paras.

Ensuing Conflicts. The region is ridden by a number of conflicts, which are primarily due to long term structural disorder. Important factors are as under :-

- (a) In 2011, the Americans pulled out of Iraq leaving the nation to its fate. With Shia regime in Iraq going overboard, the Sunni Baathists who were in disarray since 2003, managed to regroup. These reorganised elements were instrumental in the creating the ISIS. Iran played a predominant role in ethnic strife by unequivocally supporting the Iraqi Government. Today, Iraq faces the dangerous prospects of disintegration,

given the forays made by the ISIS. Both America and Iran are actively competing in Iraq in their fight against ISIS. Recent Russian move to establish military intelligence 'coordination cell' with Iran and Syria in Baghdad could raise the stakes for others.⁹

(b) Assad's brutal crushing of the peaceful demonstrations in 2011, snowballed into a grave crisis. His minority Alawite regime although considerably weakened, managed to hang on with support from Tehran and Moscow. Due to lack of unity amongst the opposition forces, conflict in Syria has dragged on. For Iran, maintaining influence in Syria is a strategic imperative. Beyond Assad, Moscow's prime interests in Syria are : ensure credibility as a dependable ally, defeat ISIS, maintain military presence in the region and preserve market access for Russian companies including arms industry. Even the US is planning to induct Special Forces to fight ISIS in Syria.

(c) The root cause of prolonged Palestinian-Israeli conflict is sharing of land. The changing internal political dynamics in Israel and Palestine have made it impossible for the two to resolve the lingering conflict on their own. It is increasingly clear that only international intervention could provide viable platform for a fruitful outcome.

(d) In Afghanistan, after the pull out of the US and allied troops in 2014, Kabul is confronted with a serious situation to hold out against Pakistan backed Taliban and their affiliates. The new Government is faced with enormous challenges to steer the Nation from the prevailing quagmire. Keeping in view the latest developments, there is serious rethinking on the part of Obama Administration regarding its military presence in Afghanistan.

Arab Uprising – Political Islam. Since the beginning of 2011, the regional dynamics of West Asia have been drastically altered due to the Arab Spring movement. Toppling of Ben Ali in Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak in Egypt set a precedence for political activism in the Arab World. It further followed violent overthrow of Qaddafi in Libya, with cascading effect on Bahrain and Syria. The pressure was felt even in Algeria, Morocco, Jordan and most of the oil rich Arab states. This forced the authoritarian regimes to even undertake limited political reforms. Arab Uprisings have provided stimulus to political Islamists in the Sunni dominated Arab countries.

Sectarian Fault Lines. With the weakening of Egypt, Saudi Arabia became more assertive as a regional player. Riyadh perceives Tehran as the main regional protagonist and is concerned about latter's expanding influence in the region. Some of the issues which trouble Saudi leadership are : Iran's strategic partnership with Syria, organic links with Hezbollah in Lebanon and relationship with Iraqi Government, as also with some Shia groups in Afghanistan. Hence, Saudi Arabia deployed forces in Bahrain, lent strong support for the Saad Hariri led opposition in Lebanon besides, certain Sunni groups in Iraq and Sunni opponents of Assad regime. Its consistent efforts are to have a favourable regime in Yemen. Tehran's design to counter it has opened another battleground, where Iran backed Houthis are slugging it out with Saudi backed Government Forces.

The geopolitical architecture in West Asia has transformed rapidly, leading to a tectonic strategic shift. The US 'strategy of rebalancing' implies its waning stakes in West Asia. The intensity and extent of impact of the ongoing churning is difficult to be gauged at this stage. Suffice to state, West Asia continues to be on roller coaster mode.

Emerging Security Dynamics

From the above, it is evident that Middle East has remained extremely volatile due to differing perspectives about the security threats. In the absence of one single overwhelming power, the local players have vied for leadership role, adding to the security complexities. Current security challenges of the region can be broadly classified into three categories : conventional, emanating from balance of power dynamics; ones arising out of globalisation; and the third, tied to domestic or regional politico-economic issues.

Since past several decades, West Asia has been witness to multiple interlocking conventional conflicts. The local interstate rivalries coupled with the US policies, particularly military alignments have contributed to the instability of the region. Due to certain significant developments in the region; namely, emergence of Turkey as a major player, marginalisation of Palestine issue in the Arab world and Baghdad-Tehran rapprochement post US withdrawal from Iraq resulted in tangible shift in the balance of power matrix.¹⁰

Second sets of security concerns in the region are closely connected with the global economy. These are food and cyber security, migrant workers and increasing expat population. Although such concerns are domestic in nature, yet have regional ramifications. Energy security is a paramount concern, both by way of flow of oil and routes of transportation.¹¹ Iran's influence over the Strait of Hormuz remains a potential for conflict; despite reduced US commercial interests with Shale gas revolution at home.

The third is the emergence of Non State Actors, especially Jihadist groups in the weak states, posing the most serious challenge. Al Qaida's sway in collapsing states like Iraq, Yemen and Afghanistan and lately ISIS allegedly supported by Saudi led countries marks a dangerous development. A concerted effort to build consensus among both the regional and external powers to defeat the ISIS in Syria is the need of the hour. It requires the US to negotiate with Russia, Iran and Saudi Arabia to develop a comprehensive strategy; ironically the culprits behind the crisis. States which seek security through 'rentier bargains' with other powers and rely on buying off population is yet another issue of concern.

Existing GCC security framework was based on countering Iran, with reliance on the US military presence in the region, complemented by Europe. However, long term security arrangements in the Gulf are unsustainable, without the cooperative involvement of littoral states; Iran and Iraq. New security framework for the Gulf ought to factor asymmetric threats, sectarian issues, radical Islam, piracy and Palestinian-Israeli conflict; as also role of external

powers including India.¹² The future stance of the US would be one of the critical components in the envisioned security architecture. The Gulf region needs to adopt a 'common security framework' based on 'cooperative security model'.

Implications for India

As extended neighbourhood, the developments in West Asia have a direct bearing on India's strategic interests. Ironically, the region has not been given the attention it deserves by Indian policy makers. Salient facets which merit consideration are enumerated below:-

- (a) Due to large energy imports, West Asia remains India's key trading partner, accounting for almost 20 per cent of its total trade. Given India's rapidly growing appetite for energy and domestic production being stagnant, the import dependency is going to increase further.¹³
- (b) India is looking for investments in infrastructure and development projects from West Asia. Reciprocally, it can offer expertise in developing 'knowledge centric economies' based on IT, space and lead technologies. In addition, sectors like health, pharmaceuticals, tele medicine and cost effective R&D offer significant scope.
- (c) The Indian expat community, numbering nearly seven million is making huge contribution in development of the region. Their annual remittances to the home country are around US \$36 billion. Image of India, as only an unskilled workforce provider is also fast changing. The security of expat community stands out as a paramount concern.
- (d) Peaceful, secure and stable West Asia serves India's multiple interests. There is vast scope of cooperation in the field of defence and security. But for the boots on the ground, in the areas of training, intelligence sharing, homeland security, anti piracy operations and sale of armament are some of the areas where fresh avenues can be explored.

India needs to carry out a holistic review of its West Asia strategy, in the long term perspective. Delhi must leverage the goodwill it enjoys in the region by playing more proactive politico-diplomatic role in supporting fresh multi lateral initiatives.

Conclusion

Political developments in the wake of rapidly changing global landscape have resulted in paradigm geostrategic shift in West Asia, intensely impacting security environment in the region. The phenomenon has been driven both by internal and external factors. Current security situation in the region is extremely volatile and highly complex, with numerous imponderables; characterised by conflicting interests, alignments and alliances. Military approach to tackle the problems of the region has not yielded results. There is need for the major players to cut across the party lines and explore viable politico-diplomatic options.

Specific to the Gulf, prevailing security architecture needs urgent restructuring, if the region is to come out of the prevailing chaos and instability. The new security framework has to be inclusive, multilateral and right sized. In view of the deep rooted mistrust, ideological conflict, regional rivalries and divergent interests, it appears a herculean task. The current state of impasse in West Asia can be tackled only through fresh thinking by optimising the existing institutional mechanisms. The belligerents have to be brought on the negotiation table, by creating conducive environment, through persuasion. Defeating ISIS and terrorism provides a common platform for the key players. Given the current imbroglio, any significant improvement of situation in the region is unlikely in the near future.

India has high stakes in West Asia and its interests are best served if the region is politically stable and economically prosperous. Delhi's traditional policy has been to maintain friendly relations with the regional players and pursue a policy of minimalist response. India has the opportunity to play a more meaningful role in the region. For this, it has to redefine the strategy and adopt decisive approach in building consensus to support fresh multilateral initiatives.

Endnotes

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@Major General GG Dwivedi, SM, VSM and Bar, PhD retired as Assistant Chief Integrated Defence Staff in 2009. He served as Military Attaché in China, with concurrent accreditation to Mongolia and North Korea. Currently, he is the Professor and Chairperson, Faculty of International Studies, Aligarh Muslim University. He is a life member of USI and writes frequently on strategic issues and international relations.
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