

The West Asia Conflict: Its Perspectives and Lessons for India

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Abstract

Operation Epic Fury between Iran and the United States (US) represents a pivotal geopolitical moment with profound implications for India. Iran's closure of the Straits of Hormuz has disrupted global energy markets while demonstrating the effectiveness of asymmetric warfare through mosaic deployment strategies, swarm drones, and precision missiles. The conflict exposes vulnerabilities in conventional military thinking and highlights the importance of strategic autonomy in a multipolar world. India must prioritise strategic imperatives to safeguard national interests: increase defence spending to 2.5 per cent of gross domestic product, accelerate Atmanirbhar Bharat (self-reliant India) initiatives in semiconductors and advanced weaponry, expand strategic petroleum reserves to 90 days, strengthen cyber security for critical infrastructure, and refine naval strategy toward area access and area denial in the Arabian Sea and Bay of Bengal. Facing concurrent challenges with China along the Line of Actual Control and Pakistan along the Line of Control, India must balance strategic autonomy with robust alliances—particularly technical partnerships with the US and Israel—while maintaining comprehensive preparedness across military, economic, and technological domains.

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Introduction

The ongoing conflict in West Asia, particularly Operation Epic Fury involving Iran and the United States (US), represents a pivotal moment in global geopolitics with profound implications for India's strategic interests. As the Strait of Hormuz remains closed and oil prices surge globally, the conflict has evolved beyond a regional confrontation into a complex interplay of great power competition, energy security, and emerging military doctrines. For India, positioned at the crossroads of competing interests between the US, China, Russia, and regional powers, this conflict offers critical lessons in asymmetric warfare, strategic autonomy, and national preparedness. The conflict in West Asia has exposed vulnerabilities in conventional military thinking while demonstrating the effectiveness of integrated drone warfare, precision missiles, and mosaic deployment strategies.¹ As India navigates its own security challenges along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) with China and the Line of Control (LoC) with Pakistan, it becomes essential to understand these dynamics for formulating robust defence policies and strategic imperatives that can safeguard national interests in an increasingly multipolar world.

Geography, Power, and the Geopolitical Landscape

Geopolitics has two basic ingredients: geography and power, both of which tend to compete with one another.² Geography encompasses territorial boundaries, physical features, waterways, natural barriers, and natural resources. Notably, theorists Alfred Thayer Mahan and Sir Halford John Mackinder, developed divergent theories on sea control and land-based Heartland, which European colonialists followed in their quest for resources.

The collapse of the Soviet Union made America the world's sole superpower, giving it the license to dominate global affairs. For them, sea control implied protection of sea lanes of communication, domination of global maritime trade, the ability to make or break rules, deny access to inimical powers, and shape their behaviour.³ The US's continental geography allowed it to wage war without fear of supply lines being cut, while denying any outside power the capability to wage a war against it. Most nations found it profitable to access the international trading system. Even though major changes in power equations have taken place across the globe, trade patterns remain the same.

Both US trade routes, the trans-Pacific and trans-Atlantic, are profitable and safe. The third route constitutes the global hub for trade and commerce in the Asia Pacific, stretching from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific Islands. All these routes hinge around sea lanes; therefore, sea control assumes great significance. The control of two oceans, the Pacific and Atlantic, is a challenging task for any nation. When control of the Eurasian Heartland was considered, the US strategic interests required many forward-deployed military personnel and assets for power projection. That led to the US acquisition of 750 overseas bases in 80 countries worldwide, including Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean and Qatar in West Asia. This has made North America the 'Centre of Gravity' of the international system, deeply rooted in economic and technological realities.

Most West Asian states are a product of colonial-era cartography more than geography. The West has long treated this region as its geopolitical backyard, given its vast energy reserves, strategic waterways, and opportunities for forging alliances with monarchies. Western powers tend to view their actions through an old lens, believing their military strength, advanced weapons, and technological dominance could transform these 'Weak Monarchies' into willing surrogates.

The West, chiefly the United Kingdom and the US, dominated Iranian politics from 1906 until the 1979 Revolution. The US still believes, after almost five decades, that state-driven social controls, surveillance, suppression of protests, and information manipulation have eroded traditional Persian and Shia Islam culture and economic development in Iran. They assume that the lack of specialised professionals and fragmented infrastructure due to prolonged Western sanctions has created conditions for a 'Popular Uprising' against the repressive clergy rule. This is far from the truth. Iran has a long history of internal struggles for reform. Changes have always emerged from within, through social movements and political struggles. Iranian society is highly educated and resistant to foreign ideology.

The Pentagon has elevated economics and geopolitics above strategy, implying a perceptible shift from tactical manoeuvring to understanding the geography of power. The foreign policy establishment built by and for the multinational corporations in the

elite Washington DC bubble, having an eye on the West Asian oil reserves, holds economic stakes for the military–industrial complex and has always appreciated the importance of the shipping lanes emanating from Iran. Critical shipping lanes run from Shatt al-Arab through the Strait of Hormuz, while gas pipelines connect the Caspian Sea to the Mediterranean and Central Asia.⁴ Iran's coastline provides strategic positions for asymmetric naval warfare. Iran's tribal minorities in the North and South are linguistically and culturally compatible with Iranian culture, and the legitimacy of the clergy regime is fully established.

The US and Israeli planners have relied heavily on their interpretations of graphics simulation tools, which recommended rapid escalation through precision strikes targeting Iranian leadership to initiate regime collapse, dismantle its nuclear and ballistic missiles capabilities, destroy its proxies in Gaza, Lebanon, and Syria, and provide deterrence to Israel's security. For the US, fears of an assertive China securing 90 per cent of Iran's oil exports, all paid in Yuan, its impressive strategic development, the 'De-dollarisation', and threats to the reserve currency have always rankled minds. It is evident that the US escalated the conflict to checkmate China and Iran, and not for the opening of the Strait of Hormuz. It is now amply clear that the US is fighting Israel's war after having achieved its singular aim of effectively denying Iran's oil supply to China.

With its 93 million population living within mountainous borders and the barricade provided by the Zagros ranges, Iran is a virtual fortress that makes direct invasion nearly impossible. Iran has brilliantly consolidated a modern military empire on the bulwark of old military hardware and ageing aircraft inherited from the pre-1979 era. There was a fundamental shift from a conventional powerhouse of sophisticated weaponry to a more self-reliant master of asymmetric warfare, with a highly effective proxy network projecting power well beyond its frontiers to assist Shias in Iraq, Hamas in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Houthis in Yemen.

The Iranians possess the largest and most diverse missile program in West Asia, swarm drones and speed boats manned by the highly motivated Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, which has enhanced their capability to impose high costs through unconventional warfare despite four decades of sanctions. Iran's

Mosaic Deployment strategy across 31 independent district entities commenced immediately after former Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's decapitation, using horizontal and vertical escalation. This strengthened Iran's national resolve. Its tactics to compel the US to deploy expensive interceptors against small, inexpensive drones and short-range missiles appear to have paid off. Iran, on the other hand, has conserved its superior hypersonic missiles for longer range and more lucrative targets.

Latest Situation

Operation Epic Fury has led to Iran's closure of the Strait of Hormuz, triggering immediate surges in global oil and gas prices, widespread aviation disruptions, and heightened volatility in financial markets. Gasoline prices have also risen in the US. Iran retaliated against the US bases in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Kuwait, drawing the Arab states into the conflict. Iranian missiles and drones damaged the US bases and energy infrastructure, while Israeli strikes hit Iranian facilities. Civilian areas have not been spared.

The US seeks unconditional surrender while Iran remains relentless. Washington finds itself in a quagmire, attempting to open the Strait of Hormuz with the support of 20 other nations. The possibility of amphibious or ground attacks on Kharg Island, along with four other islands, and ports such as Bandar Abbas cannot be ruled out, given battle indicators, including major military deployments. The sinking of the Iranian frigate Islamic Republic of Iran Ship Dena in Sri Lankan waters serves as a clear warning for outside powers to stay out of the Indian Ocean. Russia and China have refrained from active involvement, offering only felicitations to the new Ayatollah and rhetoric of 'Unstinted Support'. The Iran–Russia–China Axis with North Korea remains the linchpin of intensifying challenges to the existing US-led geopolitical order.

Back Channel Diplomacy

Neutral countries like Egypt, Turkey, and Pakistan are understood to have attempted to resume talks on de-escalation.⁵ It is unlikely that Iran would accept the US demand of unconditional surrender, even if its fighting potential is considerably degraded. If the US opens the Strait, de-escalation may occur if Iran relocates its enriched uranium, leading to a new Persian Gulf architecture with

reduced US presence. Alternatively, failure could result in Iran announcing nuclear weapon status, continued attacks, skyrocketing oil prices, and accelerated de-dollarisation.

Cascading Effects on South Asia

China's oil supply may be restored, and Pakistan's economy may recover. Islamabad would ensure the safety of Chinese vessels at Gwadar and Karachi, while Chinese warships maintain a presence in the Indian Ocean. Pakistan's pre-occupations on its western frontier across the Durand Line against Afghanistan would continue.⁶ Now that the conflict with the Taliban is out in the open, there is likely to be no let-up on its transgression along the LoC with India and alleged terrorist activities targeting cities and infrastructure in India. Recent statements by the newly elected Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi have prompted caution regarding any Chinese move towards the Taiwan Strait. In addition, Chinese Premier Xi Jinping remains occupied with purges within the Central Military Commission and the economic recession.

India shares geographical boundaries with China in the north and northeast along the LAC, with intrusions in Eastern Ladakh, Uttarakhand–Tibet, and Arunachal Pradesh–Tibet border. China's extensive development of logistics capabilities, especially road, rail, and air networks improvement, the development of border villages, and the construction of the massive Brahmaputra Dam on the border with India cannot be ignored.

Post-elections in Bangladesh, a realistic assessment could now provide the basis for a strategy to balance national interests with geopolitics and demographics. The recent activities of foreign intelligence agencies in India's Northeast, and destabilisation attempts in the tribal areas of Mizoram, Manipur, and Myanmar, are possibly aimed at acquiring St Martin's Island as a naval base.

India's policy of strategic autonomy must change to suit the power dynamics in West Asia. It is all about withstanding of pressure in exercising choice in the best national interests.⁷ In the era of economic warfare, America relies more on the arsenal of economic weapons, chiefly sanctions and tariffs, export controls, and investment restrictions. Its strength also stems from its massive defence budget, use of cutting-edge technologies, and the ability

to innovate faster in Artificial Intelligence (AI), computers, and other fields.

Perspectives and Lessons

Doctrinal Reassessment. The ongoing conflicts in Ukraine and West Asia have brought friction among the key players. India cannot ignore China's collusive support to Pakistan, its own belligerent posture along the LAC, and the ongoing Pakistani infiltration and intrusions by terrorists along the LoC. The 'No War No Peace' status could continue with no troop disengagement in sight. A *de novo* investigation into India's strategy and doctrines has already been necessitated by the experience of the Ukraine conflict, Operation Sindoor, and the conflict in West Asia. These conflicts have brought into focus the importance of AI-driven decision-making, the integration of data from drones, satellites, and ground sensors to assess threats, the use of large language model for multi-domain operations, and the maximum use of precision stand-off weapons, cruise missiles, loitering and decoy munitions, and swarm drones.⁸ The integration of indigenous missiles like Akashteer and BrahMos with other weapon platforms and drones in the aerial defence umbrella must be further refined.

Strong Alliances. India needs to adapt to the changing unipolar world and pursue the United Nations reforms. Technical alliance with the US and Israel for strategic autonomy, import of critical minerals, and rare earths needs to be pursued with renewed vigour.

Smart Power. India's goal towards being a smart power requires a renewed focus on technology with public-private partnerships, energy and global economics, and creation of strategic petroleum reserve depots along the coastline.

Military Diplomacy. This is a vital component of foreign policy that has been at the forefront of the conflict in West Asia. There should be a concomitant focus on how military-to-military contacts can advance their respective governments' viewpoints and immediate objectives in a clear, straightforward manner to influence decision-making. The representation and exchange programs of senior-level officers in each other's defence staff colleges and institutions are a step in the right direction. The regional expertise acquired by Indian military attachés abroad should provide invaluable input for defence policy makers in the Ministry of Defence.

Budgetary Allocation. Geopolitics is fast swivelling towards high technology. An increase in defence spending from 1.9 per cent of gross domestic product to 2.5 per cent for the next five years is necessary. There is also a need for separate allocation to the space organisation for communication satellites, measures to reduce and deter threats to its own space assets, and increased resilience in space. In addition, oil and gas exploration needs a bigger share of the budgetary allotment and must function directly under the Prime Minister's Office.

Chip Production. India has embarked on this aspect by infusing massive government capital into the semiconductor industry and encouraging the banking sector to advance loans without red tape. India needs to lure back home its scientists and engineers trained in the US who worked in Silicon Valley to capitalise on their experience. India must also forge partnerships with leading firms for technology transfer to train local workers.

Atmanirbhar Bharat (Self-reliant India). India needs to reduce its dependency on foreign suppliers for high-value projects like Tejas Mk2 and Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft. Introduce defence acquisitions and procurement reforms to increase the capacities of all public sector undertakings and startups on a wartime basis based on assured orders. One of the most touted projects, the Sudarshan Chakra, is believed to have capabilities superior to those of the Israeli Arrow, Iron Dome, and Patriot Air Defence shield, which is due for introduction by 2035. India's private sector should also be able to reverse engineer and produce at least one lakh low-cost Shahed variety drones and the Ukraine interceptor Sting drone, both for its own use as well as for export.

Strategic Petroleum Reserves (SPR). Subterranean caverns in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka provide buffer storage. The current 25-day capacity is insufficient; India needs 90 days of oil and gas storage. A coordinated national project on expanded SPR must be prioritised. Alternative and renewable energy efforts must continue.

Protection Against Cyber Assaults and Hackers. Critical infrastructure, including government websites, banking sector, power grids, and air traffic control systems, needs protection against cyberattacks. Filters are needed to prevent social media manipulation.

Improvement of Law-and-Order Situation in Northeast Border States.

The law-and-order situation in Northeast border states, such as Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Nagaland, Manipur, and Mizoram, needs improvement, and enemy psychological warfare and propaganda must be countered. Peace talks between rival factions in Manipur, relief and rehabilitation schemes, improvements in the quality of life, and development of road communications should continue. Monitoring of rivers flowing from China, especially in Arunachal Pradesh, is important.

Strategic Imperatives

Certain outstanding issues, once resolved, could contribute substantially to the India's efforts in the aftermath of the West Asia conflict:

- The government must resolve ongoing turf battles and prioritise current commitments. This is because it has been observed that there is a delay in the creation of three independent Theatre Commands and one Maritime Command. There is also a rush to develop a sixth-generation fighter when there is so much delay in fifth-generation projects like Tejas Mk1A, Tejas Mk2, and Multi-Role Fighter Aircraft.
- India should also ponder on why it cannot declare LAC and LoC as red-hot lethal frontiers and provide the best surveillance, maximum mobility to forward troops with the latest weaponry, including satellite imagery, drones, missiles, and quick reaction teams to deal with intrusions.
- India should focus on area access and area denial rather than full sea control. Priority areas include the Arabian Sea (from the Gulf of Oman to the Horn of Africa, Lakshadweep, the Maldives, and Mauritius) and the Bay of Bengal (from the Andaman and Nicobar Islands to the Malacca Straits). India needs submarines, destroyers, frigates, and missile boats to dominate the red lines in both areas. The defence of 7,000 kms of Indian coastline, 370 kms Exclusive Economic Zone, island territories, installations, ports, sea lanes, and shipping need protection.
- India needs to coordinate with Indonesia on Malacca Straits security and maritime law compliance.

- India has invested in good relations with Oman and must strengthen these further. The possibility of securing oil and natural gas supply via land routes or long-term pipelines from the UAE, bypassing the Straits of Hormuz, to Gulf of Oman ports, is to be explored as a priority.

Sometimes the price of peace can be more than the price of war.

Conclusion

The West Asia conflict serves as a stark reminder that modern warfare transcends traditional battlefields, encompassing economic sanctions, cyber warfare, energy security, and technological supremacy. For India, the lessons are clear: strategic autonomy must be backed by indigenous defence capabilities, robust alliances, and comprehensive preparedness across multiple domains. The path forward requires increased defence spending, accelerated self-reliance in critical technologies, including semiconductors and advanced weaponry, expanded strategic petroleum reserves, and enhanced cybersecurity infrastructure. India must also refine its naval strategy to focus on area denial rather than expansive sea control, strengthen border security with AI-driven surveillance systems, and pursue deeper military-to-military cooperation with strategic partners. As geopolitical fault lines deepen and the unipolar world order transforms, India's ability to adapt, innovate, and maintain strategic flexibility will determine its security and prosperity in the decades ahead. Sometimes, indeed, the price of peace demands greater investment than the cost of war.

Endnotes

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⁷ S Jaishankar, *The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World* (New Delhi: HarperCollins Publishers India, 2020), pp 76-88; Michael Pillsbury, *The Hundred-Year Marathon: China's Secret Strategy to Replace America as the Global Superpower* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2015).

⁸ Ibid. Sciutto, *The Shadow War*; Miller, *Chip War*.