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FROM PASSIVE OBSERVER TO STRATEGIC ARCHITECT: DE-HYPHENATION AND INDIA'S RECALIBRATION IN WEST ASIA

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Introduction

India's foreign policy in West Asia is unquestionably one of the most difficult tightropes in contemporary geopolitics. Israel, Iran, and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states are the three groups of actors with whom New Delhi has had to maintain cooperative relations despite their long-standing animosity.

For much of its post-independence history, India overcame this obstacle by implementing a policy of strategic flexibility, such as importing Gulf hydrocarbons while maintaining a careful distance from Iran, openly endorsing the Palestinian cause while secretly obtaining state-of-the-art defence technology from Israel, and coordinating its statements to minimise offence to any one party. On the outside, the outcome seemed successful, but in reality, India had very little actual influence over the region, and all of its partners were hardly satisfied.

However, India has drastically altered this strategy since 2014. The deliberate choice to treat New Delhi's relations with Iran, Israel, and the GCC countries as separate, parallel tracks rather than as a single, interconnected issue is known as de-hyphenation¹. Instead of viewing each bilateral relationship through the prism of the others, this framework evaluates each one according to its own strategic merits. This paper defines de-hyphenation, explains its construction, and discusses its importance. The doctrine's ability to survive the largest test to date, the ongoing conflict between the US, Israel, and Iran, is then evaluated. It also examines the material underpinnings of this diplomatic architecture's structural resilience, which are based on India's expanding domestic capabilities.

De-Hyphenation Architecture: Transitioning from Passive Neutrality to Active Involvement

In order to fully comprehend de-hyphenation, one must first comprehend why the policy it replaced was no longer feasible.

In India's post-independence foreign policy, which was heavily impacted by Jawaharlal Nehru's Non-Aligned Movement framework, Israel was seen as a very challenging partner. The Jewish state was perceived as having strong ties to Western powers despite having positioned itself as a champion of the postcolonial world².

This ideological unease was further compounded by a domestic political calculation: India's large Muslim population made open support for Israel a sensitive matter for succeeding administrations³. As a result, India's relations with Israel were always subject to simultaneous declarations of support for Palestine, which analysts came to refer to as a 'hyphenated' policy. Every trip to Tel Aviv included a stop in Ramallah, India, which frequently voted against Israel in multilateral forums, and it secretly and covertly purchased weapons from Israel⁴.

The demands of economic liberalisation, the breakdown of the Cold War order, and a growing realisation that the ideological rigidity of the previous forty years was untenable all contributed to India's 1992 normalisation of diplomatic relations with Israel⁵. In July 2017, Prime Minister Narendra Modi made history by becoming the first Indian Prime Minister to visit Israel alone, eschewing the traditional visit to Palestine and operationalising India's de-hyphenation policy⁶.

This was more than just a formal exit; it signalled a new way of doing business: all of India's relationships with West Asia would now be handled according to their own terms rather than through the lens of conflicting regional allegiances. However, Blarel contends that this change was accompanied by a great deal of continuity, with India retaining aspects of its long-standing pro-Palestinian position in international fora⁷.

India's de-hyphenation policy is an intentional attempt to engage each regional actor along unique and different lines of interest. India's main interests in Israel are focused on technological cooperation, defence technology, and counterterrorism cooperation. Israel has become one of India's most important defence partners since relations were normalised in 1992. It provides cutting-edge military equipment such as surveillance systems, precision-guided ammunition, unmanned aerial vehicles, and the jointly developed Barak-8 air defence missile⁸.

India's interests with the GCC states are focused on trade, diaspora welfare, and energy security. About half of India's imports of crude oil come from the Persian Gulf⁹, around 8.9 million Indian nationals live and work across the GCC states¹⁰, and approximately USD 45 billion, which is about 38 percent of India's total inward remittances¹¹. The India-UAE Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement 2022 moved this association far more than hydrocarbons, reflecting a shift towards broader economic engagement, including trade, investment, and people-to-people linkages¹².

India's central focus in Iran is connectivity, as the Chabahar Port provides India with a direct route into Afghanistan and Central Asia without the need to pass through Pakistan, and the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) provides an opportunity for India to connect to Russia and European markets via Iran¹³. The notion that three separate types of interest operate in their respective areas means that India has the ability to pursue all three without interfering with one another; thus, de-hyphenation becomes a feasible policy rather than merely a goal of diplomacy because there is no intersection between any of them.

The Strategic Architect: How India Operates as a Systemic Balancer

A common criticism of de-hyphenation is that it is essentially sophisticated fence-sitting, an attempt to avoid making difficult choices while presenting it as a strategic approach. However, this interpretation misunderstands the purpose of the policy. As External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar argues, a country can increase its influence when it is viewed as useful by multiple actors in a region, rather than aligning closely with one side and losing the confidence of others. From this perspective, the objective is not simply to remain neutral, but to become indispensable¹⁴.

India's emerging connectivity strategy is characterised by indispensable relationships rather than neutrality. The route being constructed between India and Europe through the Gulf States and Israel by way of the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) is an example of this shift in mentality. This corridor will connect India with Europe via rail and sea transport, thus enabling India to be included in the critical infrastructure systems linking various regions of the world¹⁵.

Yet this meticulously designed architecture now confronts its greatest challenge. The ongoing conflict involving Iran, Israel, and the United States represents a critical challenge to India's policy of de-hyphenation, as it brings into simultaneous play all three of India's parallel regional tracks. The threat to the Strait of Hormuz directly engages the Gulf energy dimension, a region central to India's energy security as a major supplier of oil and gas¹⁶.

Concurrently, Israeli military operations draw attention to India's deepening engagement with Israel, while Iran's actions implicate India's strategic investments, particularly the Chabahar port project. Reflecting the immediacy of these pressures, External Affairs Minister Jaishankar confirmed that he spoke directly with Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi on 28 February and again on 5 March 2026, underscoring India's active diplomatic engagement as it seeks to preserve its capacity to engage all parties simultaneously¹⁷.

Iran ultimately secured safe passage for some Indian-flagged vessels through the Strait of Hormuz, even as broader maritime traffic faced significant disruption amid the conflict¹⁸. This outcome was not accidental. It reflected the cumulative effect of sustained diplomatic engagement with Tehran, India's investment in the Chabahar port project, and its consistent refusal to align with comprehensive sanctions regimes.

On the Israel track, India condemned the Hamas attacks of October 2023 and adopted a calibrated position, supporting humanitarian access and ceasefire-oriented initiatives in the United Nations while continuing its contributions to UNRWA¹⁹. At the same time, it sustained its strategic engagement with Israel. This posture was closely observed in the region, particularly by Gulf states navigating complex relationships with both Iran and Israel. India's ability to maintain its engagement with Iran, which contributed to securing tanker passage, underscored the practical utility of its approach in a period of heightened regional tension. De-hyphenation, in this instance, was not a theoretical aspiration; it was a functioning policy.

The Atmanirbhar Foundation: Indigenous Capability as Strategic Independence

De-hyphenation does not rest on diplomatic agility alone. Its durability comes from India's steadily growing indigenous capability. A country that depends entirely on external partners for its defence systems, energy, and digital infrastructure is always constrained; every dependency creates potential leverage over its decisions. This dynamic can be understood as the 'Atmanirbhar Guardrail': as India's indigenous capabilities grow, the scope for external constraint on Indian diplomacy is reduced.

The India-Israel defence relationship illustrates this dynamic clearly. The relationship has evolved through distinct phases: quiet procurement during the Cold War, open purchasing following the establishment of full diplomatic relations in 1992, and, more recently, a shift towards joint development. The latter phase is particularly significant. Collaborative work in UAV technology and the Barak-8 missile system has increasingly shifted the relationship towards co-development and joint production, reducing India's dependence on a purely buyer-seller dynamic²⁰. When India co-produces a weapons system, the partner country cannot simply withdraw access as a diplomatic lever. India is embedded in the production architecture itself, making the dependency mutual and the leverage reciprocal.

Beyond defence, India's Unified Payments Interface (UPI) has been expanded to enable transactions by foreign nationals and non-resident Indians, including for users in key Gulf markets²¹. This reflects a broader shift in India's role from a participant in Gulf economic arrangements to a provider of financial infrastructure within them. India's National Green Hydrogen Mission, targeting five million metric tons annually by 2030, deepens this trajectory²². As Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Oman invest in clean energy transitions, India is positioning itself as an active partner in this emerging domain.

Recommendations

- **Closing the Credibility Gap:** India's ability to function as a balancing power depends on being trusted by all sides, and that trust requires consistency between what India says and what it does. During the Gaza conflict, India's abstentions on UN resolutions concerning civilian protection, while simultaneously affirming support for international humanitarian law in bilateral

settings, have created the impression that India's stated principles are applied selectively depending on the audience. This inconsistency is being closely watched across the Arab World and the Global South. Bringing India's multilateral voting behaviour in line with its publicly stated values is therefore not just a moral question; it is a practical necessity for preserving the credibility and long-term usefulness of de-hyphenation itself.

- **Moving from Co-Production to Co-Design with Israel:** The India-Israel defence partnership needs to move beyond co-production and toward co-design, where India actively contributes to original research and intellectual property rather than primarily serving as a manufacturing partner. Co-production has helped build domestic industrial capacity, but it does not meaningfully reduce India's dependence on Israeli technology. Co-design would place India inside the innovation process, strengthen its strategic autonomy, and create leverage that is not tied to individual arms deals. The existing India-Israel Industrial R&D and Innovation Fund offers a ready platform through which this shift can be accelerated.
- **Utilising the 2026 BRICS Chairmanship:** India's chairmanship of BRICS in 2026 presents a window that, once closed, will not reopen easily. Few countries can claim what India currently has functioning, credible relationships with Israel, Iran, and the United States all at once and that rare positioning makes it genuinely well-suited to bring otherwise hostile parties into the same conversation, even if only on specific, bounded issues. Rather than overreaching with ambitions of comprehensive peace mediation, India would be far better served by concentrating on the humanitarian dimensions of the conflict, holding ceasefires together, opening corridors for aid, and getting reconstruction efforts off the ground in some coordinated fashion. These are areas where progress is not only necessary but realistically achievable, and where India's diplomatic standing can be put to practical use. If handled with care and purpose, the chairmanship offers India something valuable, the chance to translate years of carefully cultivated goodwill into actual influence, and to demonstrate, rather than merely assert, its role as a serious and dependable voice in a region that is growing more fractured by the day.

Conclusion

India's shift in West Asia from a largely passive player to someone who actually helps shape events hasn't happened by accident, but it hasn't been a perfectly planned journey either. It reflects a genuine, if still ongoing, effort to reimagine what Indian foreign policy can do once it sheds the baggage of Cold War loyalties and ideological rigidity. The central argument here is that de-hyphenation, treating each relationship on its own terms rather than bundling them together, has been the clearest path toward that goal.

And the approach has proven its value in practice. When tensions between the United States, Israel, and Iran reached a boiling point, arguably the toughest real-world test this framework has faced, India managed to keep all three relationships functional at the same time. It continued defence and technology cooperation with Israel, kept Indian ships moving safely through the Strait of Hormuz, and held its diplomatic ground with Tehran, all without being pulled firmly into any one camp. That balancing act wasn't luck, nor was it some carefully rehearsed display of neutrality. It was the payoff from years of quietly building the right relationships, backed by growing domestic capabilities and grounded in interests that are genuinely distinct from those of any single power in the region.

Yet the article is equally clear about what de-hyphenation is not. It is not a substitute for hard choices, nor does it insulate India from the credibility costs of inconsistency. The divergence between India's bilateral affirmations of international humanitarian law and its abstentions in multilateral forums during the Gaza conflict has attracted attention across the Arab world and the Global South. If India wishes to be trusted as a balancing power, that trust must be earned consistently, not merely claimed.

The Atmanirbhar dimension of this story is frequently underestimated. India's ability to engage multiple regional actors without submitting to the leverage of any one of them is, in large part, a function of what India can offer and produce on its own terms. Joint development in defence, the expansion of UPI into Gulf markets, and India's positioning in clean energy infrastructure are not peripheral footnotes; they are the material foundations on which diplomatic autonomy actually rests.

Looking ahead, the central test for India is whether de-hyphenation can be institutionalised, whether it can outlast the individuals who have shaped it and become embedded in doctrine, process, and capability. The 2026 BRICS Chairmanship offers a concrete near-term opportunity to translate accumulated diplomatic goodwill into tangible influence, but the deeper work remains structural: publishing a dedicated West Asia Strategy, closing the credibility gap, and accelerating the shift from co-production to co-design with Israel. De-hyphenation began as a departure from convention, the task now is to make it irreversible.

DISCLAIMER

The paper is the author's individual scholastic articulation and does not necessarily reflect the views of CENJOWS, the Defence forces, or the Government of India. The author certifies that the article is original in content, unpublished, and it has not been submitted for publication/ web upload elsewhere and that the facts and figures quoted are duly referenced, as needed and are believed to be correct.

ENDNOTES

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