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# Pakistan — the key to India's 'look west'

Pak-F. Relations - India

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*India needs the larger vision of a 'look west' policy that avoids the error of seeing Pakistan in mere bilateral terms*

A little over a decade ago, the Congress Government led by P V Narasimha Rao launched one of India's more successful foreign policy initiatives — the "look east" policy. It reconnected India to the booming economies of East and South East Asia. The regime of Atal Behari Vajpayee expanded this policy by developing physical connectivity to eastern Asia as well as defence and security cooperation with key nations of the region.

Can the Manmohan Singh Government complement India's eastern initiative by launching a badly needed "look west" policy. The Common Minimum Programme of the Congress-led coalition talks about the importance of developing relations with West Asia. But the region is much more than an arena of confrontation between Israel and the Arabs.

The geographical conception of West Asia has significantly expanded since the collapse of the Soviet Union and is now called the "Greater Middle East." It includes the far corners of northern Africa and the now independent republics of Central Asia and the Caucasus. Much like South East Asia, this region shares a long historical association with India. It is the source for India's ever-expanding needs of energy. It is also a huge market for Indian goods, services, and skilled

manpower. And, it is the arena for the unfolding confrontation between the impulse for political modernisation and religious extremism. This tension has naturally overflowed into the Subcontinent destabilising India's own security environment.

While India's engagement with the Greater Middle East has increased in the 1990s, there is as yet no coherent strategy. India has attempted, in a piecemeal manner, to improve relations with the Central Asian states, sought to promote its energy security partnerships in the Gulf and beyond, and reach out to markets there. It has sought to develop a special relationship with Iran and intensify its role in Afghanistan. All these efforts have not added up to much. Nor has India been able to reclaim its pre-independence primacy in the region.

The inability of India to make a strategic breakthrough in the Greater Middle East lies in the unending political rivalry and military tension with Pakistan. The Partition in 1947 removed India's physical access to the region. Pakistan, of course, is more than a geographic barrier between India and the Greater Middle East. It has effectively neutralised many of India's initiatives through its own special links to the Greater Middle East.

As India unveils yet another effort at comprehensive bilateral engagement with Pakistan, it needs a different strategic perspective about its western neighbour. The essence lies in developing policies that will transform Pakistan from a barrier into a bridge to the west.

India and Pakistan as partners in the Greater Middle East? At first cut, this appears an outlandish idea. After all have not India and Pakistan contested each other's influence all over the Greater Middle East? Are not New Delhi and Islamabad deadly rivals in Afghanistan? But the past need not necessarily be a guide to the future.

The Pakistani establishment has always been acutely conscious of its special geopolitical role at the confluence of the Subcontinent, the Persian Gulf and Central Asia. Pakistan leveraged this

the energy-rich Persian Gulf and Central Asia. Pakistan could become the transit route for the movement of goods, people and energy between India and the Greater Middle East.

But why would Pakistan want to be India's gateway to a region it thinks is part of its own strategic depth and religious identity? There are good reasons to believe Pakistan has begun to move the self-perception of its location from geopolitics to geo-economics. Even more important, a quiet "look east" policy has developed in Pakistan in

Studies. In her keynote address to the conference, Maleeha Lodhi, currently Pakistan's envoy to Great Britain, suggested that New Delhi and Islamabad grant each other transit facilities when bilateral relations improve.

If that idea fructifies, India will gain overland access to Afghanistan, Iran and Central Asia; Pakistan in turn will be able to trade along the Indian highways with Nepal, Bangladesh and South East Asia. Today India is going to great lengths to develop access to Afghanistan and Central Asia through Iran. Pakistan

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A bold 'look west' policy from New Delhi would acknowledge the geopolitical significance of Pakistan and turn it on its head. Instead of a perennial obstacle to the Greater Middle East, Pakistan could become a link connecting the Subcontinent to the energy-rich Persian Gulf and Central Asia. Indeed, Islamabad could become the transit route for the movement of goods, people and energy between India and the Greater Middle East

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locational advantage throughout the Cold War and made itself indispensable for the United States and China. India tended to complain but there was little it could do to change the basic geopolitical attributes of Pakistan. The loss of Bangladesh in 1971 made no difference.

A bold "look west" policy from New Delhi would acknowledge the geopolitical significance of Pakistan and turn it on its head. Instead of a perennial obstacle to the Greater Middle East, Pakistan could become a link connecting the Subcontinent to

recent years. Its initial success is reflected in Pakistan's incipient admission later this month into the security arm of the Association of South East Asian Nations, the ASEAN Regional Forum. If Pakistan is to realise the full potential of this initiative to the east, it too needs to overcome the physical barrier that India is.

The changing perceptions in Pakistan were reflected at a conference on peace and stability in the Subcontinent organised last week in Islamabad by the Institute of Regional

similarly has to circumnavigate India to get to the east.

The idea was further developed by the President of Pakistan, Pervez Musharraf, who addressed the concluding session of the IRS Conference. The essence of his argument was that an India-Pakistan rapprochement would unleash the potential for both regional economic integration in the Subcontinent as well as trans-regional cooperation involving South Asia, Central Asia, and the Gulf. Pakistan could become the transit hub of com-

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offer to negotiate trade and transit treaties involving all the four countries. India could also propose cooperation with Pakistan in promoting free trade between South Asia and the Gulf Cooperation Council.

An Indian offer to begin early negotiations with Pakistan on the pipeline projects could send a powerful signal about New Delhi's will to enter into strategic cooperation with Islamabad. In any event the success of the current peace process depends on the ability to come up with some creative ideas on resolving the Kashmir question.

Any final settlement of the Kashmir question would inevitably involve innovative political cooperation across the divided state. It would also entail the complete normalisation of India-Pakistan relations and the transformation of the borders. Projects such as natural gas pipelines, interconnected electricity grids, and trans-national highways will unveil the new strategic conception of Pakistan as India's gateway to the west. India, in turn, will be Pakistan's bridge to the east.

As India gets down to negotiations on a variety of subjects in the coming weeks, it will be easy to get lost in petty arguments and technical detail. To make a success of the peace process with Pakistan, India needs the larger vision of a "look west" policy that avoids the error of seeing Pakistan in mere bilateral terms. Until now India and Pakistan have diminished each other in the Greater Middle East. Together they can both improve their standing in this vital region. COURTESY THE HINDU