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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

India and West Asia – Strategic Silence as Responsible Statecraft

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GS2



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MAINS RELEVANCE:

GS Paper 2



INTERVIEW ANGLE

"Is India's silence on West Asia a principled position of strategic autonomy or an abdication of moral responsibility as a rising power?"

WHY IN NEWS

India signed the India-Arab League Delhi Declaration in March 2026, reaffirming support for a Palestinian state alongside a secure Israel — yet continued to abstain on key UNSC and UNGA resolutions condemning specific actors in the Israel-Gaza conflict, reigniting debate about whether India's calibrated silence is sophisticated statecraft or strategic evasion.

THE ANATOMY OF INDIA'S WEST ASIA STANCE

When the United Nations General Assembly and Security Council have repeatedly called for votes on the Israel-Gaza conflict, India's response has followed a consistent pattern: abstain, issue carefully worded statements calling for a ceasefire, express humanitarian concern, and invoke the language of a "two-state solution" — all without explicitly condemning Israel or Hamas. This posture has drawn criticism from commentators who argue that a country aspiring to a permanent seat on the UN Security Council must demonstrate moral clarity. The countervailing argument — one that deserves serious examination — is that India's position is not moral surrender but responsible statecraft rooted in a clear-eyed reading of national interest.

India's formal position rests on three pillars. First, it supports the right of Israelis and Palestinians to live in peace within secure, internationally recognised borders — the classic two-state framework. Second, it calls for an immediate ceasefire and unimpeded humanitarian aid. Third, it consistently avoids attributing blame to specific actors. The result is a position that satisfies no ideological constituency but, arguably, keeps every door open.

WHY INDIA CANNOT AFFORD TO CHOOSE SIDES

The structural reasons for India's studied neutrality are not difficult to identify, and they are more numerous than critics allow.

The Diaspora Imperative: Approximately 9 million Indian nationals live and work in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states — Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, and Bahrain. Their collective remittances amount to nearly \$40 billion annually, making the Gulf the single largest source of inward remittances to India. Any rupture in India's relationship with Arab League members — most of whom are deeply invested in Palestinian statehood — risks the livelihoods of millions of Indian families. This is not abstract geopolitics; it is kitchen-table economics.

The Defence Relationship with Israel: Israel is India's second-largest arms supplier after Russia. The bilateral defence relationship, cemented after full diplomatic normalisation in 1992, covers Heron and Heron TP unmanned aerial vehicles (drones), Spike anti-tank guided missiles, Barak-8 surface-to-air missile systems (co-developed via DRDO-Rafael partnership), and advanced surveillance technologies. India's military modernisation would be materially set back by a breakdown in this relationship. Crucially, the defence relationship is operationally sensitive — Israel has supplied systems that are active on India's borders.

The Abraham Accords Architecture: India has deepening economic ties with the UAE, Bahrain, and other Abraham Accords signatories. The UAE-India Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA), signed in 2022, is one of India's most significant bilateral trade deals. India's pivot to the Middle East as an investment destination — the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), announced at the G20 New Delhi Summit in September 2023 — is premised on stable relationships with precisely these states.

The Iran Equation: India's engagement with Iran through the Chabahar Port project gives it a critical overland route to Afghanistan and Central Asia, bypassing Pakistan. Antagonising Iran — which is deeply hostile to Israel and supports the Houthi movement in Yemen — would jeopardise this strategic asset. The Chabahar route also serves as leverage in India's broader Central Asia connectivity ambitions.

Energy Dependence: India imports approximately 85–88% of its crude oil, with a significant share coming from Gulf states. Energy security is a non-negotiable constraint on Indian foreign policy in this region.

THE DOCTRINE: MULTI-ALIGNMENT, NOT NON-ALIGNMENT

India's posture in West Asia is best understood through the lens of what strategists call "multi-alignment" — a post-Cold War evolution of Nehruvian non-alignment. Where non-alignment was essentially about refusing to join military blocs, multi-alignment is about actively cultivating relationships with competing powers simultaneously. India is a member of the Quad (with the US, Japan, and Australia), maintains deep defence ties with Russia, has signed CEPA agreements with the UAE, and is a founding member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). Each of these relationships constrains and enables different aspects of Indian foreign policy.

Critics sometimes point to India's eventual vote in favour of UNGA resolutions condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine as evidence that India CAN take principled positions when pressed. This is true — but it also illustrates the multi-alignment calculus. India abstained on the first several Ukraine-related votes, only supporting resolutions after careful calculation that the global consensus was overwhelming and that its own relationship with Russia could absorb the reputational cost. The West Asia case is structurally different: there is no overwhelming global consensus, the competing interests are more evenly balanced, and the cost of taking sides would be immediate and severe.

THE MEDIATION ARGUMENT

Perhaps the most compelling strategic case for India's silence is the mediation argument. A country that has not publicly condemned either party to a conflict retains the credibility to serve as a neutral interlocutor. India's Prime Minister visited Israel in 2017 — the first Indian PM to do so — and has maintained contacts with Palestinian leadership. India's March 2026 Delhi Declaration with the Arab League, in which 22 member states joined India in calling for a negotiated two-state settlement, suggests that Arab partners do not read India's silence as endorsement of Israeli policy. On the contrary, they read it as a signal that India's door remains open for a future role.

The EU and the United States, for all their rhetorical commitment to international law, have themselves practised strategic flexibility when their interests have demanded it. The argument that India must choose moral clarity over strategic balance implies a standard that major powers have never applied to themselves.

THE LIMITS OF SILENCE

None of this means India's position is without cost or risk. Prolonged silence on humanitarian catastrophes can corrode soft power over time, particularly among Global South audiences who increasingly expect India to speak for the dispossessed. India's claim to represent the voice of the developing world — articulated with considerable force at the G20 and the Global South Summit — sits uneasily with its silence on Gaza. There is also a reputational risk: if India aspires to a permanent UNSC seat, it must demonstrate that it can exercise the responsibilities of great power, including on contentious global issues.

The editorial case, ultimately, is not that India's silence is the perfect answer — it is that it is the least-bad answer given the structural constraints. Strategic autonomy is not a moral luxury; in India's case, it is a necessity imposed by geography, demography, and the hard arithmetic of national interest.

UPSC RELEVANCE

India-Arab League Delhi Declaration 2026; IMEC (India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor); Barak-8 missile system; Chabahar Port; Abraham Accords; Multi-alignment doctrine; UNGA vs. UNSC voting procedures; Non-Alignment Movement (NAM) history.

MAINS GS-2:

India's foreign policy doctrine — strategic autonomy vs. multi-alignment; India's bilateral relationships with Israel, Gulf states, and Iran; India's position in multilateral forums (UN, SCO, G20); Diaspora as a foreign policy instrument; India's aspirations for UNSC permanent membership and the credibility requirements it entails.

★ FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGEPEDIA

INDIA-WEST ASIA DIPLOMATIC SNAPSHOT:

- Indian diaspora in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC): ~9 million persons
- Annual remittances from Gulf to India: ~\$40 billion (largest single-region remittance source)
- India's crude oil import dependence: 85–88% (significant share from Gulf states)
- India-Arab League Delhi Declaration: signed March 2026; 22 Arab League member states
- India's stated position: supports two-state solution; calls for ceasefire; avoids blame attribution

INDIA-ISRAEL DEFENCE RELATIONSHIP:

- Full diplomatic normalisation: January 1992
- India's arms imports from Israel: 2nd largest supplier after Russia
- Key systems: Heron / Heron TP UAVs; Spike anti-tank guided missiles; Barak-8 surface-to-air missile (co-developed DRDO + Rafael Advanced Defence Systems)
- PM Modi's Israel visit: July 2017 — first Indian PM to visit Israel

INDIA-GULF ECONOMIC ARCHITECTURE:

- UAE-India Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA): signed February 2022
- IMEC (India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor): announced G20 New Delhi Summit, September 2023; connects India → UAE → Saudi Arabia → Jordan/Israel → Europe
- Abraham Accords (2020): normalisation agreements between Israel and UAE, Bahrain, Sudan, Morocco — India has strong economic ties with UAE and Bahrain

INDIA-IRAN ENGAGEMENT:

- Chabahar Port: India's gateway to Afghanistan and Central Asia; bypasses Pakistan
- Strategic value: overland access to Afghanistan, Central Asia, Russia — independent of Pakistani territory
- India-Iran Joint Economic Commission operational despite US sanctions pressure on Iran

INDIA'S UN VOTING RECORD (ILLUSTRATIVE):

- Russia-Ukraine UNGA resolutions: India abstained on several early votes; subsequently supported humanitarian resolutions
- Israel-Gaza UNSC/UNGA votes: India has consistently abstained on resolutions attributing specific blame; supported general ceasefire and humanitarian aid resolutions

STRATEGIC AUTONOMY / MULTI-ALIGNMENT DOCTRINE:

- Non-Alignment Movement (NAM): founded 1961 at Belgrade Conference; Nehru, Nkrumah, Tito, Nasser, Sukarno (Panchsheel + Bandung principles)
- Multi-alignment: post-Cold War evolution — active simultaneous engagement with competing powers (US via Quad; Russia via S-400 purchase; China via SCO; Gulf via CEPA)
- India's memberships: Quad · SCO · BRICS · G20 · Commonwealth · NAM (still a member)

OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

- India's UNSC permanent membership campaign: India holds non-permanent UNSC seat periodically; advocates G4 reform (India, Germany, Japan, Brazil seeking permanent seats)
- Houthi attacks on Red Sea shipping (2024–2026): India deployed INS warships for convoy escort under Operation Sankalp; did not join US-UK military strikes on Houthi positions in Yemen

India-Palestine: India recognised Palestine as a state in 1988; maintains embassy in Ramallah; consistent supporter of Palestinian Observer State status at UN (2012 UNGA vote: India voted yes)

Two-state solution: envisages an independent Palestinian state on pre-1967 borders with East Jerusalem as capital, alongside a secure Israel — the internationally accepted framework endorsed by UNSC Resolution 242 (1967)

Sources: Indian Express, Ministry of External Affairs, UN General Assembly

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