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A West Asia Security Rethink — India's Strategic Recalibration

 **BUSINESS STANDARD**

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INTERVIEW ANGLE

"How should India's West Asia policy evolve in response to the US-Iran conflict — and what does 'strategic autonomy' mean when energy security and diaspora welfare are directly threatened?"

THE CORE ARGUMENT

The US-Iran military confrontation — triggered by Israeli strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities and the American naval response — has shattered the fragile West Asian equilibrium that India had carefully navigated since the Abraham Accords (2020). Business Standard argues that India now faces a **trilemma**: it must simultaneously protect its **energy supply lines** through the Strait of Hormuz, ensure the **safety and employment of 9+ million Indians** in the Gulf, and preserve **strategic autonomy** without being drawn into either the US-Israel or Iran-Russia camp. This is India's most complex West Asia moment since the 1990 Gulf War forced the evacuation of 170,000 Indians from Kuwait.

INDIA'S STAKES IN WEST ASIA

INTEREST	SCALE
Indian diaspora in Gulf countries	~9 million (UAE, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, Bahrain)
Remittances from Gulf	~\$55–60 billion/year (40%+ of India's total remittances)
Oil import dependence (West Asia share)	~60% of crude imports
LPG import dependence	~60% imported; Saudi Aramco is key supplier
Trade with GCC	~\$180 billion/year
Chabahar Port (Iran)	India's strategic access to Afghanistan/Central Asia

THE CURRENT CRISIS — MULTIPLE PRESSURE POINTS

- ❶ **Strait of Hormuz:** Iran has threatened to close the strait — 20% of global oil and 25% of global LNG transits it. India has no viable bypass route for crude
- ❷ **Chabahar dilemma:** India’s \$85 million investment in Iran’s Chabahar Port gives strategic access to Afghanistan and Central Asia — but US sanctions pressure makes continued engagement diplomatically costly
- ❸ **Diaspora vulnerability:** Indian workers in Yemen, Oman, and parts of Saudi Arabia face conflict proximity; any escalation triggers evacuation requirements
- ❹ **Israel-Palestine:** India’s traditional position (two-state solution, Palestinian rights) conflicts with deepening India-Israel defence ties — creating diplomatic incoherence

INDIA’S STRATEGIC OPTIONS

OPTION	BENEFIT	RISK
Side with US-Israel	Strengthens Quad/IPEF; defence cooperation	Alienates Arab states; Iran sanctions complicate Chabahar; diaspora in Arab countries at risk
Lean toward Iran/Russia	Protects Chabahar; energy at discount	Damages US relationship; complicates IPEF; Israel defence imports threatened
Strict non-alignment	Preserves optionality; protects diaspora	May satisfy no one; India’s voice not heard in peace process
Active mediation	Builds India’s global stature	Requires credibility both sides lack — India has not cultivated this role

INDIA’S HISTORICAL WEST ASIA DOCTRINE

India’s West Asia policy has rested on three pillars:

- ❶ **Non-interference:** No taking of sides in intra-regional disputes (Saudi-Iran, Israel-Palestine)
- ❷ **Diaspora-centric:** Policy calibrated to protect Indian workers’ welfare and remittance flows
- ❸ **Energy pragmatism:** Maintain supplier diversification to avoid single-source dependence

The 2026 crisis tests all three simultaneously — non-interference is untenable when the strait is threatened; diaspora welfare requires active engagement; energy pragmatism requires accelerated diversification that hasn’t happened fast enough.

UPSC RELEVANCE

GS Paper 2 – International Relations:

- India’s “Look West” policy – strategic importance of Gulf
- India-Iran relations – Chabahar, INSTC (International North-South Transport Corridor)
- India-Israel defence ties – post-1992 normalisation; \$2+ billion annual defence trade
- India-Saudi Arabia – oil, remittances, Vision 2030, I2U2 grouping
- India-UAE CEPA – comprehensive economic partnership since 2022

GS Paper 3 – Security and Economy:

- Energy security – West Asia dependence; diversification strategies
- Strait of Hormuz – chokepoint geography; India’s exposure
- Remittances – economic significance; diaspora policy

UPSC RELEVANCE

“Strategic autonomy in West Asia is not a luxury India can afford to define in abstract – it must translate into concrete energy alternatives, evacuation readiness, and a diplomatic voice credible enough to matter when the region is in crisis.”

FACTS CORNER

- **I2U2 Group:** India, Israel, UAE, USA – launched 2022; focuses on food, energy, water, health cooperation; not a security alliance
- **Abraham Accords (2020):** UAE, Bahrain, Sudan, Morocco normalized relations with Israel – first major Arab-Israel normalization since Jordan (1994)
- **Operation Ajay (2023):** India evacuated ~1,600 citizens from Israel-Gaza conflict zone via chartered flights
- **Operation Kaveri (2023):** India evacuated ~3,800 citizens from Sudan civil war – largest evacuation since Kuwait 1990
- **INSTC:** International North-South Transport Corridor – 7,200 km **multimodal** route connecting India to Russia through Iran; Chabahar is the sea-rail junction
- **Chabahar sanctions waiver:** US granted India a specific waiver for Chabahar development – but the waiver has periodically faced political pressure in Washington

- **Kuwait evacuation (1990):** India airlifted 170,000 citizens following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait — the world's largest civilian evacuation at the time; Air India was central
- **Indian diaspora in UAE:** ~3.5 million — the single largest Indian diaspora concentration in the world

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