



Balalatha's



CSB IAS ACADEMY

The Road Map to Mussoorie...

Mains iMPACT – 08/10/2024

CONFLICT IN WEST ASIA

SYLLABUS:

GS 2 > International relations > India and Global Regions > India & West Asia

REFERENCE NEWS:

- As tensions escalate between Iran and Israel in West Asia, with Iran launching missiles at Israel and the region on the brink of war, India, with its strategic ties to both nations and extensive economic and energy interests in the region, finds itself in a delicate position.

MORE ON NEWS:

- In October 2023, Israel declared war on Gaza after Hamas's attack, leading to over 41,000 Palestinian deaths and a full siege that displaced 90% of Gaza's population. Israel launched a ground invasion, raided al-Shifa Hospital, and faced protests from Houthi militants. A brief ceasefire in December 2023 saw a hostage exchange, but fighting resumed with Israel expanding its offensive. In April 2024, Iran launched missiles at Israel after its embassy in Damascus was hit. By September 2024, Israel killed key Hamas and Hezbollah leaders, prompting Iran to retaliate with missile strikes in October 2024, escalating the conflict into a broader regional war.

WEST ASIA:



○ West Asia, a region of the Asian continent, is surrounded by Europe to the west, Central Asia to the north, South Asia to the east, and the Arabian Sea and Africa to the south.

○ It stands at a **crucial junction between continents, featuring diverse terrains like deserts, river valleys, and mountains.** This region is notable for its historical depth, cultural richness, and significant natural resources, particularly oil and gas.

WHY WEST ASIA IS IMPORTANT FOR INDIA

- **Energy Security:**

- A major aspect of West Asia's importance for India is energy security. India imports a substantial portion of its oil and natural gas from countries in West Asia, with Saudi Arabia and Iraq being major suppliers. For instance, **West Asia contributes nearly 40% of India's oil and a significant 70% of its gas needs.**
- **Economic Significance:**
 - West Asia is a key trading partner for India. Indian businesses have made considerable investments in this region, especially in sectors like infrastructure, construction, and technology. The economic ties are bolstered by various agreements and partnerships, such as the **India-UAE Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA).**
- **Indian Diaspora:**
 - There is a large Indian diaspora in West Asian countries, especially in the Gulf region. This diaspora plays a significant role in the economic and cultural spheres of these countries. For example, out of about 32 million non-resident Indians (NRIs), **nearly half are estimated to be working in Gulf countries.**
- **Cultural Ties:**
 - India shares a long history of cultural exchanges with West Asian countries. This includes the establishment of cultural centers in several countries in the region, which help in promoting mutual understanding and cooperation. Eg: **The Indian Cultural Centre in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, The Swami Vivekananda Cultural Centre (SVCC) in Tehran, Iran etc.**
- **Counter-Terrorism and Radicalization:**
 - Cooperation with West Asian countries is key for India in countering terrorism and radicalization. The geographical proximity and the **rise of terror outfits like the Islamic State** make this cooperation essential for regional security.
- **Strategic Location:**
 - West Asia's geographical location is strategically important for India, serving as a **gateway to landlocked and resource-rich Central Asia as well as Europe** and playing a key role in India's extended neighbourhood policy.
 - For instance, projects like the **Chabahar port in Iran**, which enhances India's connectivity to Central Asia.
- **Defence Cooperation:**
 - India has been deepening its defence cooperation with several countries in West Asia, such as the United Arab Emirates and Oman. This includes military-to-military exchanges, training, and defence production collaboration. For instance, Oman has granted India access to the **Port of Duqm for military purposes and logistical support**, which is a significant step in bolstering India's presence in the Indian Ocean Region.
- **Political Challenges:**
 - The internal security situations in countries like Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, and the broader regional tensions, require careful navigation by India to maintain balanced relations.
- **Balancing Relations:**
 - India strives to balance its relations with key players in the region, such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Israel, despite their rivalries. This balancing act is crucial for maintaining India's strategic interests in the region.

CHALLENGES IN INDIA-WEST ASIA RELATIONS:

- **Regional Crisis:**
 - Despite these strong ties, the region's political instability and complex geopolitical dynamics pose challenges for India.

- For instance, the **expansion of the Israel-Hamas conflict** into a broader regional crisis has significantly **complicated the geopolitical landscape of West Asia**, impacting India's foreign policy considerations.
- **Balancing Relations with Rival States:**
 - India maintains a balanced diplomatic approach in the region, managing relations with **countries that have historically been in conflict, such as Israel and Iran, or Saudi Arabia and Iran.**
- **Lack of a Comprehensive Policy:**
 - Unlike the Act East policy, India has not established a comprehensive West Asia policy despite the regions having similar geopolitical significance.
- **Impact of External Powers:**
 - The influence of major powers like **the USA, Russia, and China in West Asia** affects India's interests. The dynamics of these external powers can complicate India's foreign policy decisions in the region.
- **Cultural and Religious Sensitivities:**
 - Given the diverse cultural and religious landscape of West Asia, India often finds itself managing sensitive issues that may arise, impacting bilateral relations. For instance, **Balanced Stance on Israel-Palestine Conflict.**
- **Terrorism and Security Issues:**
 - The threat of terrorism, originating from or supported by elements within some West Asian countries, remains a concern for India.
- **Energy Dependence:**
 - India heavily relies on West Asian countries for its energy needs, especially oil and gas. **Fluctuations in oil prices or disruptions in supply due to geopolitical tensions** can significantly impact India's economy. For instance, **the 2019 Aramco attacks** indeed highlighted the vulnerabilities and risks associated with India's heavy reliance on oil imports, particularly from a geopolitically volatile region like West Asia.

Regional Players in West Asia: Their Influence and Interests

West Asia is a critical geopolitical region where several influential players shape the dynamics through diplomacy, security interests, and economic strategies. Here's a breakdown of the major players:

- **Qatar: A Regional Mediator:**
 - Qatar plays a pivotal role in the region due to its ability to engage with all sides. It has provided substantial aid to Palestine, hosted Hamas leaders, and mediated between the US, Israel, and Iran. Qatar's regional influence is also amplified through its media network, **Al Jazeera**, which shapes public opinion across the Arab world.
- **Egypt: Israel's Neighbor:**
 - As Israel's immediate neighbor, Egypt holds significant sway in the conflict. Egypt has historically mediated ceasefires between Israel and Hamas and remains concerned about the possibility of a refugee influx from Gaza. Under President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, Egypt has focused on countering terrorism and maintaining regional stability.
- **Saudi Arabia: A Leader of the Islamic World:**
 - Saudi Arabia, under the leadership of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, has been positioning itself as a peace broker and is a key player in connectivity initiatives in the region. However, its relations with Shia-majority Iran remain tense, and peace talks with Israel have been put on hold amid the current conflict.
- **UAE: Stability and Economic Growth:**
 - The UAE is keen on maintaining stability in the region, particularly in light of its economic ambitions. The UAE signed a normalization agreement with Israel

in 2020, known as the **Abraham Accords**, and has been actively pursuing initiatives to boost economic cooperation and connectivity across the region, including the IMEEC.

- **Turkey: A Key Diplomatic Channel:**
 - Turkey, despite its critical stance on Israel's actions, has been a backchannel between Israel, its allies, and Iran. Turkish officials have direct lines of communication with Hamas, Iran, Israel, and the US, giving it a crucial role in de-escalation efforts.
- **United States: Traditional Arbiter:**
 - The US has traditionally been the mediator in the region, with deep ties to Israel. However, its credibility has waned in recent years, and it is now seen as firmly on Israel's side. US efforts, led by envoy Amos Hochstein, are focused on preventing further escalation but are met with mistrust, especially from Iran.
- **China: A Rising Mediator:**
 - China has increasingly positioned itself as a potential mediator, especially after brokering the **Saudi-Iran deal**. China's interest in West Asia is driven by its economic and geopolitical ambitions in Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. Beijing's growing influence underscores its rising global profile as a potential alternative to the US in regional mediation.

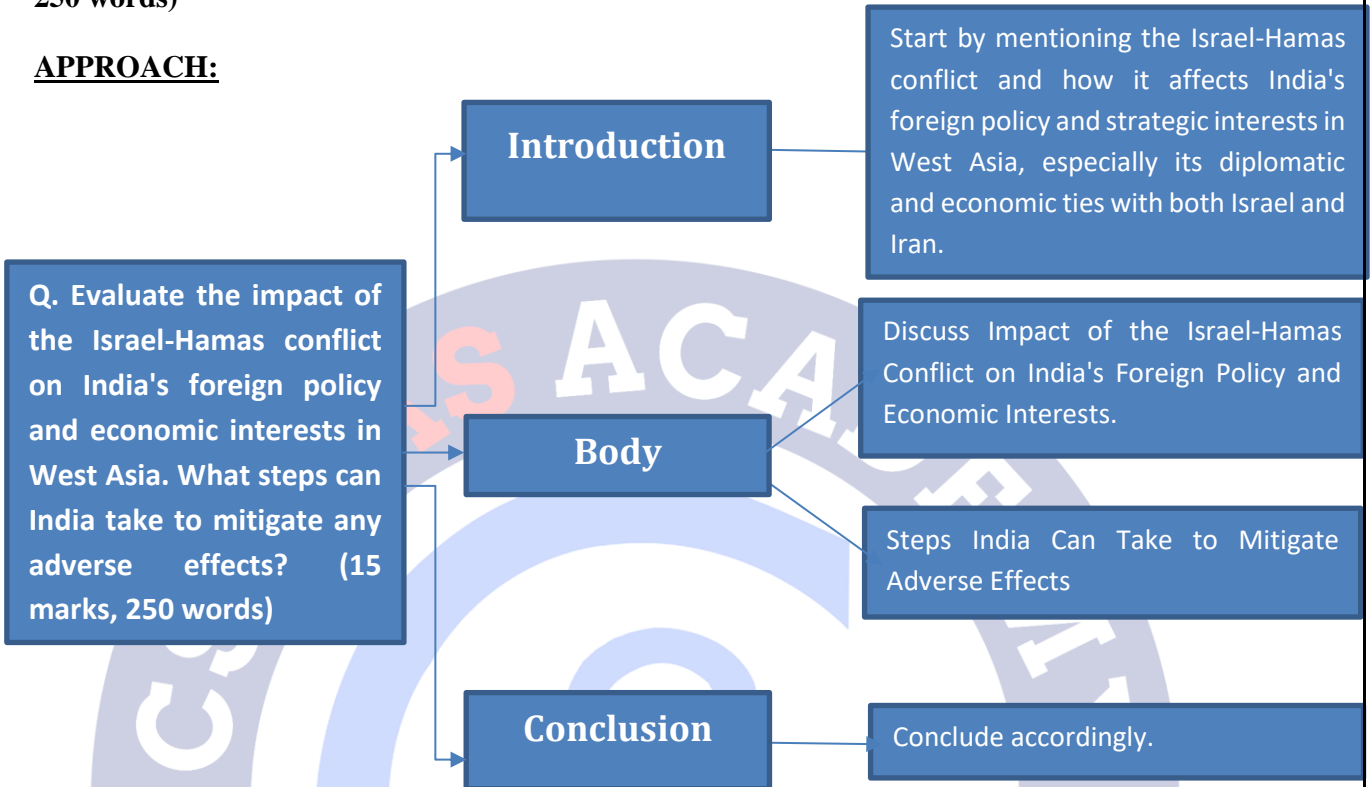
WAY FORWARD:

- **Developing a Comprehensive West Asia Policy:** Formulating a comprehensive and coherent policy towards West Asia, akin to the Act East policy, can provide a structured framework for India's engagement with the region.
- **Diversifying Energy Sources:** Given the heavy reliance on West Asian countries for energy, India should further diversify its energy sources to reduce vulnerability to regional instabilities.
- **Counter-Terrorism Collaboration:** Deepening counter-terrorism cooperation with West Asian countries is vital. This includes intelligence sharing, joint training exercises, and collaborative efforts to combat radicalization and terrorism financing.
- **Balanced Approach to Conflict Resolution:** India should continue its balanced approach to regional conflicts, avoiding taking sides in internal conflicts while advocating for peaceful resolutions. This approach helps in maintaining good relations with conflicting parties.
- **Investment in Regional Infrastructure Projects:** India should invest in strategic regional infrastructure projects, like the Chabahar port in Iran, to improve connectivity and strengthen its geopolitical position.
- **Cultural and Educational Exchanges:** Promoting cultural and educational exchanges can enhance mutual understanding and goodwill, which is essential in a region with diverse cultural and religious backgrounds.
- **Strategic Defence Cooperation:** Strengthening defence ties with key West Asian countries, through joint military exercises, defence technology collaboration, and strategic military agreements, can enhance India's security presence and capabilities in the region.
- **Monitoring and Adapting to Geopolitical Shifts:** Continuously monitoring the region's dynamic geopolitical landscape and being ready to adapt its strategy accordingly is crucial for India to safeguard its interests and respond effectively to emerging challenges.

PRACTICE QUESTION:

Q. Evaluate the impact of the Israel-Hamas conflict on India's foreign policy and economic interests in West Asia. What steps can India take to mitigate any adverse effects? (15 marks, 250 words)

APPROACH:



MODEL ANSWER:

The ongoing **Israel-Hamas conflict**, which escalated after Hamas' attack on Israel in October 2023, has put India in a complex foreign policy dilemma. With over **41,000 Palestinian deaths** and significant geopolitical repercussions, India's balancing act **between strategic allies Israel and Iran** has become even more precarious, particularly after Iran's missile strikes on Israel in October 2024. Given India's extensive energy and economic interests in West Asia, this conflict significantly impacts its foreign policy and economic strategies.

Impact of the Israel-Hamas Conflict on India's Foreign Policy

- Balancing Relations with Israel and Iran:** India has historically maintained close ties with both Israel and Iran. Israel is a key defense partner, while Iran is crucial for India's access to Central Asia via the Chabahar Port. The current escalation complicates India's diplomatic efforts to balance relations with both nations, especially with **Iran launching missiles at Israel in retaliation** for Israeli actions.
- Pressure to Take Sides:** As the conflict intensifies, global powers, particularly the **USA** (a staunch supporter of Israel), may press India to openly support Israel. Simultaneously, India needs to manage its relationship with the **Arab world** and Iran, both of which are crucial for India's energy security and large diaspora.
- International Mediator Role:** With **China's rising influence** as a mediator, particularly after brokering the Saudi-Iran deal, India's traditionally neutral stance could be sidelined unless it takes proactive diplomatic steps. India might be forced to step up its diplomatic outreach to maintain relevance in **West Asia's peace processes**.
- Counterterrorism Partnerships:** India has expanded its **counterterrorism cooperation** with Israel and other West Asian nations to address regional security threats like **ISIS** and other radical groups. The conflict, involving entities like Hamas and Hezbollah, underscores the need for continued security collaborations to counter extremist threats that could spill over into the region.

5. **Diplomatic Strain with Arab Countries:** Supporting Israel too overtly could strain India's relations with Arab nations such as Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Qatar, who are key economic partners. As mentioned, these countries are significant players in shaping public opinion across the **Arab world**, which could impact India's broader diplomatic standing.

Impact of the Conflict on India's Economic Interests

1. **Energy Security Threats:** West Asia supplies **40% of India's oil** and **70% of its gas needs**, making any disruption in the region highly detrimental. Escalation between **Iran and Israel** could threaten shipping routes, leading to price volatility and affecting India's energy imports, as seen during the **2019 Aramco attacks**.
2. **Impact on Indian Diaspora:** With nearly **50% of India's 32 million NRIs** working in the Gulf, heightened conflict in the region could affect the safety of these expatriates, leading to possible evacuations and loss of remittances. India will need to closely monitor the situation and ensure the safety of its diaspora.
3. **Trade and Investment:** The region is a significant trade partner for India, with substantial investments in infrastructure and technology. Rising tensions could destabilize trade routes, affecting sectors such as **construction** and **technology** where Indian businesses have major stakes, especially under agreements like the **India-UAE CEPA**.
4. **Logistical Challenges:** The **Chabahar Port** project in Iran, crucial for India's access to **Central Asia**, could face delays or logistical setbacks if the conflict escalates further. This would negatively impact India's connectivity goals in the region, impeding trade flows and strategic projects.
5. **Fluctuations in Oil Prices:** Any intensification of hostilities would likely lead to fluctuations in global oil prices, directly impacting India's economy. The current crisis demonstrates the vulnerabilities India faces due to its reliance on oil imports from a **geopolitically volatile** region like West Asia.

Steps India Can Take to Mitigate Adverse Effects

1. **Pursuing a Balanced Diplomacy:** India must continue its **balanced approach**, neither siding openly with Israel nor with Iran. By advocating for peaceful resolutions through **diplomatic channels**, India can protect its relationships with both nations and avoid alienating other regional players like **Saudi Arabia** and UAE.
2. **Diversifying Energy Sources:** India should expedite efforts to diversify its energy portfolio by increasing investments in **renewables** and engaging in energy partnerships beyond West Asia, such as in **Central Asia** and **Africa**, to reduce dependency on the volatile West Asian region.
3. **Strengthening Defense Cooperation:** Enhancing military ties with key partners like **Oman** and **UAE**, particularly with **access to strategic ports** like Duqm, will allow India to bolster its security presence in the region and safeguard maritime routes, especially in the **Indian Ocean Region**.
4. **Engaging in Regional Infrastructure Projects:** India should deepen its involvement in infrastructure projects like the **Chabahar Port** to enhance its strategic foothold in the region, even amidst rising tensions. Such projects will ensure that India's trade and connectivity goals are not compromised by the conflict.
5. **Promoting Cultural and Educational Exchanges:** To build long-term goodwill, India should continue promoting **cultural and educational exchanges** with key nations in West Asia. Strengthening soft power can help India maintain positive relations even amid geopolitical challenges.

The **Israel-Hamas conflict** has presented serious challenges to India's foreign policy and economic interests in West Asia. However, by adopting a pragmatic, **balanced approach**, diversifying energy sources, and enhancing defense cooperation, India can navigate the complexities of the conflict while safeguarding its national interests.