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Book Review

**“The East Moves West - India, China, and Asia’s
Growing Presence in the Middle East”
by Geoffrey Kemp** 

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Introduction

The author of the book, Geoffrey Kemp, is an expert analyst of global security and political economy, and his aim is to illustrate the state of the Indian and Chinese involvement in the Middle East.

While the Western economies were dealing with crises in banking, housing, and employment, industrial growth and economic development have been exploding in China and India. The world's two most populous nations are the biggest reason for the growing footprint of the Asian continent on other global regions, something that is now becoming especially important in the Middle East.

East Moves West describes the growing interdependence between the Middle East and Asia, and the likely ramifications that this evolving relationship will bring, by detailing the many bilateral relationships between Middle Eastern countries on the one hand, and Asian powers on the other, namely India and China.

The author shows that, although India has substantially more familiarity and interest in the region, thanks to its embedded historical dimension, both nations are clearly on the rise and leaving a strong mark on the Middle East, and this enhanced influence has international ramifications for the United States and throughout the world. The emergence of these Asian giants with their increasingly huge need for energy might evolve in increasing cooperative security, particularly in the maritime arena given that safe and open sea-lanes are an essential component of intercontinental trade, with India and China more and more dependent on the safe passage of oil tankers. On the other hand, a different development might lead to traditional competition and possibly even conflict, given that the major Asian powers have so many unresolved

problems of their own and that today the future of the US presence in the region is uncertain. The author believes that, although the United States will remain the dominant military power in the region, they will eventually have to share some security responsibilities with the Asians, especially in the Indian Ocean.

India and the Middle East

India is not new to having an important role in the Middle East. When Britain ruled the Indian subcontinent, and exercised power over much of the Middle East, it did it from Bombay, not Cairo or London. Most civil servants who carried out British policy were Indians, and many of the soldiers who enforced it were Indian volunteers in Britain's Indian Army. India became involved in nearly all major armed conflicts or wars in which Britain took part and this fact has important implications for present and future relations between India and the Middle East.

Both in World War I and World War II Indian troops were sent to fight or serve as noncombatants with the allies in the Middle East with significant forces and logistical support which proved instrumental in the defeat of the German forces in the Western Desert, the Vichy French forces in Syria, the pro-Nazi government in Iraq, and the Shah of Iran's forces in the 1941 invasion of Persia. When Britain left the subcontinent in 1947, it left behind two weak states, India and Pakistan, which were more preoccupied with their own security and huge economic challenges, so the role of the subcontinent in regional affairs diminished dramatically, not being able to exert much influence on its neighbors in the West. Today, all this has changed and India is emerging as a great power and an important political player in the Middle East.

India's economy has been growing steadily and is now under pressure to secure long

term access to oil and natural gas resources from the Persian Gulf. Also, Indian firms and policymakers are pursuing opportunities in investment, sale of goods, tourism, and even education¹ throughout the region. Potentially important as well, the military to military contact between India and the Gulf states, while still at a low level, is a factor that could become significant for the overall Gulf security environment.

India has been very successful in nurturing good relations with all of the key Middle Eastern countries, being able to work closely with Muslim countries while also developing important military connections with Israel, including the purchase of advanced Israeli military technology.

Within the Middle East, India's relations with the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)² members have been the most obvious, although until recently Indian-Saudi Arabian ties were cooler if compared with those between India and the five smaller Gulf states, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, and Bahrain.

The reasons for those ties are varied but the first is clearly geography. Mumbai is closer to Dubai than Cairo, Amman, or Damascus, and only 967 miles away from Muscat. Many in the West separate India from the Middle East failing to see their proximity, but to India, the region is actually “West Asia” and not “Middle East”.³ India and the Member States of the GCC have historic ties that go back not just decades, but centuries with the earliest contacts between the Gulf States and India

¹ India has agreements in place with almost all Gulf countries regarding programs for students to pursue postgraduate and doctoral studies at Indian technical institutions.

² Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman

³A number of organizations, including the UN and the Indian and Chinese foreign policy establishments, regard the term “Middle East” as Eurocentric and instead refer to the region as West Asia. The term “Middle East” is usually attributed to American strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan, who was one of the key geopolitical thinkers of the nineteenth century.

based on trade, when dhows and sail ships were crossing the Arabian Sea.

Then there are the demographics. There is a sizable Indian diaspora residing in the Gulf countries, with about 8.5 million Indian citizens⁴ currently working in the GCC countries, making them the largest expatriate community in the region representing one of the largest concentrations of migrants in the world. These migrants serve as an important source of income for India through the transfer of remittances whilst also playing an important role in the economic development of the Gulf States.


Remittances from those workers are an important contribution to the economies of Indian states, in 2003 remittances contributed as much as 22% to Kerala's GDP, and in 2007 the amount totaled approximately USD 7.3 billion. These workers are essential for the economic growth and well-being of the Gulf states, also allowing Indian culture to penetrate the Gulf. The mutual dependence of the Gulf states and India with respect to security, given their increasing interdependence regarding labor and energy, has also drawn them closer together. An evolution of closer GCC-Indian military ties could also be possible. Finally, India's growing investment in the Gulf parallels its improved relations with the United States, the Gulf's current guardian. For most of the cold war period, relations between US and India were cool, however, starting in the late 1980s, relations improved dramatically.

To sum up, today India has strong and growing ties with key Middle Eastern countries, particularly in the Gulf. It has a unique relationship with Israel. Until now, it has managed to avoid being drawn into the complexity of regional conflicts and has been able to maintain good relations with virtually all states in the region. India is

⁴ Representing 31,5% of the total of 28 million foreign workers in the Gulf countries

expanding its influence and shifting toward becoming a great power, which would involve accepting higher security responsibilities, but still encounters internal resistance from those who would like to maintain India's anti-imperialist tradition. This is why, despite its policymakers accept the realities of its growing influence in the region, India shows no open desire to play a more assertive role, certainly not to the point of taking sides in the region's many unresolved disputes or of becoming a strategic ally of the United States.

Nevertheless, a number of issues could eventually force India to become a more active player in Middle Eastern geopolitics, and even flex its muscles if needed. For example, the large number of Indian expatriates working in the Gulf might eventually become a source of friction between India and the host countries in some areas, such as the treatment of low-paid workers in the rich Arab states or the right to citizenship for Indians who have lived in the Gulf for generations. The tensions could grow especially if the boom times in the Gulf wind down for some reason and fewer workers are needed.

At a strategic level, there are a number of long-term questions that Indian planners must clearly be concerned about, such as India's role in the event of an escalation of conflict in the Gulf, US-Iran-Arab Gulf disputes, and the possibility that in the future China, in cooperation with Pakistan, might begin to project its presence into the Indian Ocean requiring possibly a more active US-India-Japan maritime cooperation 

China's return to the Middle East

For centuries, China's westward voyages of exploration were a visible manifestation of the status of China as a superpower. At its peak in the fifteenth century, the

Chinese fleet included as many as 300 vessels and 30,000 men, and traveled as far west as modern Tanzania with the last expeditions reaching Mecca and modern day Iran. Then, after his last expedition in 1432, China reordered its national priorities to focus on domestic issues and the land threats coming from Central Asia, and abruptly halted its naval explorations. The result was that China had little contact or influence in the Middle East for centuries afterward.

Then, right after achieving independence in 1949, the People's Republic of China began to show new interest in the Middle East, and, after China's emergence as a major economic power and the corresponding increased need for energy resources, its traders and diplomats have increased their westward activity.

Unlike India, which historically has had a comfortable relationship with the Middle East, especially the Gulf, China is a relative outsider in the region. Despite that, China now has productive and deepening relationships with many states in the Middle East, including Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and all the Gulf states.

During the 1980s it was arms sales to Iran, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia the primary link to the Middle East, but more recently China has become a major importer of goods from the region, particularly petroleum, but also military technology from Israel. The Middle East accounted for 44% of China's oil imports in 2006 , with Saudi Arabia and Iran being two of China's largest sources of oil, and there are some predictions that by 2030 China will have more cars than the United States and import as much oil as the United States does today.


China is a good customer and the country needs what Middle Eastern countries are eager to export. China also maintains a strictly “business only” approach to its

relationships with its trading partners, refraining from public comment on their domestic policies. This greatly appeals to states like Saudi Arabia, and allows China to maintain good relations with states in the region that are nominally opposed to each other. However, it is not clear how Beijing's influence will develop in the future, and at what point China's interests in the Middle East will force it to a more assertive role. Right now the main effort is on diplomatic and economic interactions, but in the long run, if China's westward development is sustained, it will open new road, rail, and pipeline routes that will eventually have direct influence on trade and politics in the Middle East.

Since the beginning of the current century, China has concentrated on a “soft power” approach with the aim to gain political influence in various regions of the world. The cornerstone of this approach is the assurance that China is not seeking ideological domination and that it has no territorial ambitions. The Chinese assume that their country's economic development and international trade are not a threat to their neighbors or to the world. China's “soft power” should appeal to the rest of the world by offering an alternative to the “hard power” of the United States and its parallel pretension of global hegemony. China's soft-power approach focuses on aid and investment without the demand for “good governance and human rights” normally associated with Western assistance.

In the end doubts remain about the sustainability of this approach, particularly in areas such as the Middle East, so complex and with many unresolved and emotional conflicts. While it is clear that China has shown the ability to be friendly with every political entity in the Middle East, including Israel, the Palestinians, and Iran, sooner

or later, if its involvement continues to grow, it will be drawn into the politics of the region and it remains an open question whether China's soft-power strategy will ultimately succeed.

China, like India, has been successful in expanding its political and economic ties with key Middle Eastern countries without having to “take sides” in the various unresolved regional conflicts or openly challenge the dominant, but highly controversial, role of the United States as hegemonic power. The Chinese see the US determination to change regimes in Afghanistan, Iraq, and possibly Iran as misguided and dangerous, and they believe that part of the problem of the Middle East derives from the US tendency to interfere. On the other hand, the unpopularity of US policy in the region gives China the chance to play a bigger role, in part to balance US influence. 

In the end, while the Chinese role is certainly growing and becoming more important, it appears unlikely that China will directly challenge US power and influence in the region. China has no interest in a serious confrontation with the United States in the Middle East and probably has no intention of replacing Washington as security guarantor of the region, nor has the capability to do so, yet.

China’s political role in the Middle East today can still be considered a marginal one, but things might change quickly in the next future.

Conclusions

The book’s arguments shows how India and China are “pushing westward” into the Persian Gulf and even into the Mediterranean, all while an almost inexorable swing of Gulf oil exports from the West to the East is occurring.

Probably a student of ancient and medieval history, would see this as the old silk road trade routes coming back to life after centuries of dormancy. India and China are former major regional powers, before their empires were carved up and their autonomy challenged by the Western colonial powers that came into dominance. Today, the actual driving factor is their return to economic vitality and centrality. The difference with the past is that, unlike the goods traded on the old silk road, the commodities now being traded include energy and resources, such as know-how and workers, as well as services, in particular the provision of major construction and infrastructure projects by Chinese and Indian corporations.

In place of sail ships and camel trains, today it is super oil tankers, huge container ships and transcontinental pipelines that cross the new silk road.

For the West, which has dominated the Middle East in the last two centuries, the question is how to adapt to the return to their old areas of influence of these two great Asian powers, which in the end may even end up actually replacing the West in the region.

The author concludes its work with an examination of various strategic scenarios of how the re-emerging powers of Asia will work with and/or against each other in the Indian Ocean and the Middle East. He speculates on how these powers will deal with each other as well the how they may engage with the tense politics of the region, noting that thus far, they have avoided any real involvement in regional issues, such as the Arab-Israeli conflict, at least for now. 