

India is successfully juggling three triangles of relations in the Middle East : Ambassador Abhyankar

Friday, 24th July 2015

“India is simultaneously juggling three triangles of relations in the Middle east : Iraq - Iran and India, Israel - Iran and India, and US – Iran and India. Even though serious limitations exist, India is maintaining these relations very well. However, there is a constant struggle to decide where we stand, and we cannot overlook what our primary interest is”, explained Ambassador Rajendra Abhyankar (IFS Retd.) during a lecture on ‘Current Developments in the Middle East and India's policy towards the region’ held recently at The International Centre Goa. This programme was part of Distinguished Lecture by Eminent Persons organised by The International Centre Goa and UGC Centre for Latin American Studies at Goa University in collaboration with the Public Diplomacy Division of the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. The lecture was co-chaired by Yatin G Kakodkar – President, The International Centre Goa and Dattesh Parulekar – Assistant Professor, Centre for Latin American Studies, Goa University.

Amb. Abhyankar, Professor of Practice of Diplomacy and Public Affairs, School of Public and Environmental Affairs, Indiana University; elucidated “ India's relations with the Middle East, i.e. West Asia and North Africa, has many dimensions; the importance comes from the fact that India has the second largest muslim community in the world. It is important to know that the first three foreign policy decisions taken immediately after independence were all related to this region.” He further explained, “essentially, policy with this region evolved with some cardinal points; having relations based on shared history and culture. India has been consistent in its support to the Palestinian cause, on regional conflict we have tried to remain equidistant, and we have always opposed exclusivist religious ideology and fanaticism”.

Amb. Abhyankar, former Indian ambassador to the European Union, Belgium and Luxemburg, Azerbaijan, Turkey, Syria, and Cyprus; explained “the Arab spring in 2010; largely steered by youth rebellion against decades of authoritarian regime started in Tunisia and spread rapidly to the entire region. In the initial few months, they thought that this is the way things are going to change, but once the unrest reached Syria the same protests were ruthlessly suppressed. This set behind the whole process and lead to the rise of the Islamic State. The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 opened up a pandoras box to sectarian divisions, the same were then further accentuated. Today the region is in a state of flux and is causing a lot of agony at every level”.

“Another important development,” Amb. Abhyankar elaborated further, “is that long standing adversaries have become allies; classic example is the recent alliance between Saudi Arabia & Israel; after Iran's signing of the nuclear deal with the US. An ideological rivalry representing the Suni and Shia strains of Islam; is increasingly seen by Saudi Arabia and Iran's interference in uprisings in

Bahrain, Yemen and in Syria”. He opined, “there is no immediate end to this strife that has become increasingly violent. As a result of this, the Palestinian cause to which the region has its primary interest is being successively negated, not only by Israel, but by Arabs also”.

A constellation of circumstances had taken place at the turn of the millennium. Consistently high rate of growth from 1997 onwards, made people look at India differently. From 2 % to achieving 6 & 8%, everyone wanted to get into the Indian market. Previous to 2000, India depended on gulf states for oil and employment, but that view changed and Arab countries then began to speak about mutual economic, strategic partnership. Also 9-11 attacks and its aftermath put the Arab and muslim world under tremendous pressure and they looked at India for investment security.

There are 3 million Indians staying in Saudi Arabia, this largest proportion is of major interest and concern. Saudi Arabia is also having close proximity with Pakistan; and its foreign policy is based on resolutions made Islamic countries, one that is influenced by Pakistan's anti-India atmosphere. At the same time, Israel is India's largest supplier of military equipment since 1992, and both countries have a special relation. But now, the alliance with Saudi Arabia, will be a conduit to Israel's relation with Pakistan. India fears the consequence if these two adversaries meet.

Amb. Abhyankar raised some serious questions, “do we need to change our stand on Palestine, and if so what will it get us? On the assumption that it cannot be dismantled, suppose Islamic State creates a new radical state of its own and if other countries do business with it, what will India's stand be? He concluded, “although based on history & culture; in today's scenario, relationship between countries are merely transactional.

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