



THE VIEW FROM INDIA: THE IRAN WAR FORGES A NEW INDO-PACIFIC

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The US-Israel-Iran war was initially regarded in India as a West Asian crisis with global implications, but that description is no longer valid. The war is reconfiguring geopolitical and geoeconomic alignments across the Indo-Pacific. In the last decade, all debates on the Indo-Pacific have been centered around China's rise, military balances in the Western Pacific, and the diplomatic interpretation of a "[free and open Indo-Pacific](#)." However, this war has made clear that one cannot understand the Indo-Pacific by looking at the region from the South China Sea or Western Pacific because its western anchor is in the Gulf and the Arabian Sea, where energy supplies, important sea lanes, and naval deployments bind West Asia to the Indo-Pacific's economic jugular.

The war tests the political and strategic foundations of the Indo-Pacific order where three vulnerabilities now converge in a single crisis. First is the structural dependence of Indo-Pacific economies on Gulf oil and gas. Second is the finite capacity of the US to fight in West Asia while preserving maximum deterrence against China. Third is the fragility of multi-alignment strategies through which middle powers, particularly India, seek to balance competing relationships without being trapped in blocs.

These factors make the war a strategic stress-test for the Indo-Pacific.

US strategic distraction and erosion of Indo-Pacific deterrence

The immediate effect of the war is that US naval assets are drawn down from the [Indo-Pacific command and moved toward CENTCOM](#). The Western Pacific is left relatively thin when deterrence relies on visible reassurance. This is not to suggest that overall US commitments to the Indo-Pacific are unraveling but

does suggest the availability of a limited pool of high-end naval assets. The credibility of alliance systems is judged not only by the language of treaties, but whether forces can show up in the right place and right time. China watches this very closely, and will likely treat the crisis as hard evidence of the limits of American bandwidth. Despite overall US military and naval strength the practical problem of maintaining deterrence at two places at once is real when one theater begins absorbing aircraft carriers, missile-defense assets, surveillance platforms, and senior policy-level attention.

Energy security and chokepoint vulnerability

Approximately [20 million barrels of oil](#) pass through the Strait of Hormuz every day and nearly 90% heads to refineries in Asia or the wider Indo-Pacific. The closure of the Strait is a core Indo-Pacific energy security challenge and, to tackle it, the Indian Ocean should not be treated as a secondary or supporting maritime theater. The Indian Ocean is a single, integrated strategic space, in which turbulence in the western Indian Ocean is rapidly transmitted across the Arabian Sea, along important shipping lanes, through the Malacca Strait, and out into the wider Indo-Pacific region.

Once the ships started re-routing from Strait to other shipping lanes after the start of the war the ripple effects spread across the Indo-Pacific, because re-routing added time and fuel consumption, leading to an increase in insurance premiums, more need for naval escorts, along with disruption in commercial ship schedules and thus bottlenecks at all major ports and other critical maritime chokepoints. These problems [directly impact inflation, freight rates](#), industrial planning decisions, and the confidence of stock markets across the Indo-Pacific. Although the Indo-Pacific region has developed a sophisticated diplomatic vocabulary around Indo-Pacific strategy, an equally robust architecture has not been developed for protecting the sea lines of communication on which the economic prosperity of the Indo-Pacific depends. [Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan remain exposed](#) to acute vulnerabilities largely due to Gulf crude and LNG continuing to underpin their electricity generation, heavy industry, and macroeconomic stability. Strategic petroleum reserves for countries in the Indo-Pacific offer a short-term buffer during crisis but are not enough to shield economies from the inflationary and fiscal impact of an extended disruption. If the Strait of Hormuz remains blocked, the consequences will bite through higher electricity prices, manufacturing costs, and

increasing political pressure on governments across the region, many of whom already struggle with fragile growth and tough economic conditions.

China's exposure to the war, however, is far more complicated and multi-faceted than any simplistic win or loss accounting for Beijing. China profits from a distracted US, freeing up space for Beijing in the Western Pacific and in regional diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific. But China is also [deeply dependent on Gulf hydrocarbons and oil flows from Iran](#), and any serious disruption in the Gulf threatens China's energy security and economic stability; this leaves Beijing facing a paradox where it can profit from America's distraction and overextension, but is simultaneously and materially exposed to any major disruption in the energy supply.

India's multi-alignment test

India, however, is at the analytical epicenter because no other major power has a comparable dependence on Gulf hydrocarbons, a 9-million-strong diaspora in the GCC countries with high remittance exposure, and a declared ambition to operate as a [net security provider](#) in the western Indian Ocean. India is arguably the country that best straddles the intersection of energy risk, maritime vulnerability, and diplomatic opportunity. The ongoing war is a genuine test of Indian statecraft. For years, New Delhi has pursued multi-alignment policy through building close relationships with Tehran, Tel Aviv, Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, and Washington simultaneously, and the strategy has largely paid off. India has acquired a broad diplomatic space without getting locked into one camp, but this war now puts that entire multi-alignment calculus to test. The challenge for India in the current crisis is no longer about maintaining its relationships in balance, but whether New Delhi can use its relationships to gain real strategic benefits on three fronts: securing energy supplies, protecting its diaspora, and contributing meaningfully to regional stability. Diplomatic flexibility is no longer enough; India must complement its strategic autonomy with real capabilities on land and at sea if it is to function as a major Indo-Pacific power. This means building bigger strategic petroleum reserves, having credible plans for large-scale evacuations of Indian nationals during crisis, and strengthening maritime domain awareness. This would require a more persistent naval presence, and creating enough naval escort capacity in the western Indian Ocean to secure India's most critical shipping routes and firmly establish India as a net security provider in the western Indian Ocean.

Regional diplomacy and order building

The ongoing conflict in the Middle East also exposes the limitations of regional institutions in the Indo-Pacific. For example, the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue's core agenda is cooperation on technology, supply-chain resilience, and humanitarian assistance but it has not formed any response to the current crisis, whose center of gravity is in the western Indian Ocean. ASEAN has also fallen back on its default [call for restraint](#) by all parties. Other groupings like the Indian Ocean Rim Association and Indian Ocean Naval Symposium carry diplomatic heft, but do not possess the structures, mechanisms, or capabilities to conduct large-scale escort operations or meaningful maritime stabilization efforts across the wider Indo-Pacific. These dynamics are moving the Indo-Pacific further toward a truly multipolar order. In the future such multilateral or minilateral Western-led frameworks and initiatives in the Indo-Pacific will no longer hold de facto primacy in shaping the Indo-Pacific region's strategic landscape and we may witness the emergence of new minilaterals.

Some effects will be temporary. Carrier battle groups will be recalled, shipping lanes will resume accustomed routes, and stock markets will claw back lost ground but the war's structural impacts will be more lasting. This war may thus be a turning point; the first real-world sustained test of whether the Indo-Pacific can stick together strategically when the United States is preoccupied. This test will determine whether Indo-Pacific prosperity can withstand real coercion at in the Strait Hormuz, while assessing whether middle powers can continue hedging without investing much more in hard military capability, and whether regional institutions can finally move from declarations to real tools of crisis management on the ground and at sea.

Conclusion

For India, policy implications are immediate: accelerate the build-up and expansion of strategic petroleum reserves, operationalize connectivity projects like India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor as a hedge against volatile sea routes, and institutionalize regular maritime coordination in the western Indian Ocean with capable, like-minded partners like France and Japan etc. New Delhi should use its unique diplomatic access across rival camps not just to keep everyone on its side, but demonstrate that a major Indo-Pacific power can influence the course of a crisis, rather than simply bear its costs.

India should start the process by initiating a common understanding on safe passage for commercial tankers through the Strait, decoupling it from the ongoing war or ceasefire. India can propose a maritime rules-of-the-road instrument to maintain merchant traffic through the Strait because New Delhi alone holds working channels with Tel Aviv, Tehran, Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, and Washington. The Indian Navy can provide enforcement and deconfliction protocols. This deliverable, while seemingly small, be disproportionately large as it will help in overcoming energy crisis in Indo Pacific.

However, the larger lesson for the Indo-Pacific from ongoing war is that West Asia and the Indo-Pacific are not two separate strategic theaters connected by trade, but form a single strategic system in which a war in one arena swiftly reshapes deterrence, energy security, and alignment behavior in the other. The Indo-Pacific that emerges from this war will be more multipolar, more vulnerable to maritime and energy coercion, and more reliant on shared distributed energy-security cooperation than the one before. The war will, eventually, end but the strategic indivisibility it has exposed is here to stay.

The Pilot commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged. Please write to rob@pacforum.org for more information on how to contribute.