

Description

The United States and China are frequently brought up when discussing other regional powers in the Middle East, however, India also plays a role in the geopolitical dynamics within the region. With its long-standing linkages in economics, culture, and religion, India has long had a significant presence in the area. But as New Delhi has been interacting on political, diplomatic, and security fronts lately, this has taken a more strategic tone. In this episode, we are joined by C. Raja Mohan, a Senior Fellow with the Asia Society Policy Institute in Delhi. He will share with us his knowledge about India's role in geopolitics in the Middle East as well as the perspective of New Delhi on the influence of the US-China tug-of-war within the region. He will also discuss India's relations with some states in the region and provide some insights about maritime security in the Indian Ocean and the growing influence of mixed cultures in the Gulf.

Takeaways

An overview of India's interest in the Middle East and the shift toward the Gulf region
New Delhi's viewpoint on the India-US-China triangle in the Middle East
The India - China relationship in the recent decade
The geopolitical play of Iran, India, Pakistan, and GCC in the Indian Ocean
The growing partnership between India and the Gulf
The perspective of geopolitical forces in Asia

Quotes

We'd rather have the Americans sit on our hands for good than the Chinese. - Raja Mohan

India faces challenges from China's growing presence in the Himalayas and the Indian Ocean, where China has established relationships with key island states. This requires India to work with Western partners. - Raja Mohan

Featured in the Episode

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Transcript

Jonathan Fulton: Welcome to the China Mena podcast. I'm your host, Jonathan Fulton, a nonresident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council and a political scientist at Zayaad University, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. When we talk about extra-regional powers in the Middle East, we tend to focus on the U.S. and China. But don't take your eye off India. With historically long religious, cultural, and economic ties, India has always had a deep presence in the region. In recent years, however, this has taken a more strategic turn as New Delhi has been engaging across political, diplomatic, and security issues as well. To tell us more about India's footprint in the Middle East and the larger geopolitical consequences, I'm delighted to be joined by C. Raja Mohan. Raja is a senior fellow with the Asia Society Policy Institute in Delhi, a division of the Asia Policy Center in Mumbai. He's a visiting research professor at the Institute of South Asian Studies at the National University of Singapore, where he previously was a director. Raja, thanks so much for joining us.

Raja Mohan: Wonderful being with you.

Jonathan Fulton: Okay, So, Roger, can we just start with a brief overview of what India's interests in the Middle East are? How have they changed in recent years? And are there any countries in particular that are more strategically important to India?

Raja Mohan: Look, I think as you mentioned in your initial remarks, India has had a very close link with the Arabian Peninsula, with Iran, the Levant, and North Africa. So it's a long-standing relationship. There are three things that have changed, I would say, in the last 40, or 50 years. One, India is a major importer of energy, so therefore India's dependent on almost 90% of imported energy. So therefore what we saw happen from the seventies was a dramatic surge in oil imports as well as the value and the cost of those imports. This, of course, has remained a major challenge for India, because India is inflation-sensitive and inflation is sensitive to energy prices. So therefore what happens in the Gulf has a direct bearing on the Indian economy. The second factor, I think is partly compensated by the fact that India exported a large number of,

you know, working people into the Gulf. But today close to 8 million Indians are living in the Gulf alone. I'm not the whole of the Middle East in the Gulf alone. And the remittances to send home partly compensate for the high price, but we pay for the oil. So in a way, while it pays for oil, India also benefits from the construction and economic activity because of the Indian support, a key component of the labor market in the Gulf. A third aspect which has been less understood because India had a historically security role in the Gulf under the British Raj, that much of the security of the Gulf and the Arabian Sea and the not forgotten quadrant of the Indian Ocean was done from Bombay, but Nehru quite deliberately withdrew from the draw. But as we discovered over the last 40 years, the security of the Arabian Peninsula and India are deeply interdependent. That the radical ideas that are most out of the Arabian Peninsula have had a great effect on the subcontinent. The forces of religious, violent religious extremism have encouraged a whole lot of new thinking in the subcontinent, partly accelerated by the Afghan jihad, Pakistan's adoption of Islamic Instruments. So this produced, it led to the conflict naturally existing between India and Pakistan. So therefore, the impact of the Gulf politics, ideas about religion and politics, religion and society have a deep impact on South Asia. So combating violent religious extremism and terrorism is a main challenge for India. And there I think what we've seen happen is really the beginnings of an expansive cooperation with the moderate Gulf Arab states, which includes UAE, and Saudi Arabia. As we speak, the president of Egypt, el-Sisi, is in India. Terrorism, and extremism, are at the top of the conversation between Mr. Modi and Mr. el-Sisi. And I think what we're seeing is that India in the past was so focused on supporting Arab nationalism against the West and Israel. But today is actually working with the moderate Gulf states, which are today engage Israel themselves. So that contradiction is no longer there. Second, I think they're also close partners for India in battling religious extremism. And finally, the economic links between the subcontinent, between India and the Gulf, mainly through the UAE and Saudi Arabia, are growing rapidly and in the hopes that the Gulf capital, which has grown in large volumes, will play a big role in India's acceleration of India's economic growth. So I would say at this point, the moderate Arab states are major partners. And over the last few decades, India has also built up a good relationship with Israel. And now we have the I2U2, to India, Israel, the Emirates, and the United States. It's interesting that these were the three forces we tried to keep away from, away from the United States, away from Israel, and away from the Gulf Arabs. Today, I think they're also close partners. And luckily for us, they were close to Egypt. They work closely with Israel. So I think we are in a very, very different framework in dealing with the Middle East.

Jonathan Fulton: That's a really great overview. One of the points you brought up, I think, is really important that there are 8 million plus Indian residents in the Gulf alone. That really complicates or gives more depth, I guess, to the strategic side of things, on the defense side of things, when Indian leaders have to think about the Gulf, you know, security or insecurity here has a deep impact I'm sure on the domestic political narratives within India itself. I'm sure everybody in India has family here. Everybody here has family back in India. It's a very deep enmeshment, I'd say.

Raja Mohan: Yeah, it's huge. As you rightly said it's an opportunity. There's always a danger of injury. When Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990 and they had to evacuate, you know, thousands of

Indians from Kuwait. And later, when things were happening in Libya in 2016, if I recall right, India had to evacuate close to 30,000 Indians from Libya. So I think the presence of such a large number of Indians also has increased responsibility in India for security, and for welfare. So in a way, the use of the Indian army, which Nehru shunned in the post-independence years. Today, Indian, you know, security forces become critical for evacuating in crisis and increasingly also work with the Gulf countries to improve the lives of the Indian workers in the Gulf. You know, giving them better rights, giving them better insurance. A whole range of factors, because, unlike the previous governments, Mr. Modi is deeply committed to the welfare of the Indian diaspora. So I think that that brings it to a whole new dimension where he's taking it up directly. And I think he's had some success with the UAE, with Saudi Arabia, which are the two largest hosts of the Indian population, to respond more positively to the concerns of the Indian workers.

Jonathan Fulton: Oh, yeah. Well, here in Abu Dhabi, we see it. I mean, they're building an Indian temple here. You know, the Indian community is acknowledged as being a really important pillar of society here. I think something like 40% of the UAE is South Asian. So, you know that interdependence works both ways, I would say. You mentioned a lot about the Gulf, and I think that it's really interesting for me living here in the UAE and focus a lot on Gulf international politics. There's been a bit of a shift for India, you know, as the GCC has become more important and it's kind of backed away from Iran, which traditionally has been a little closer to India, at least in terms of strategic affairs. Is this about the economic opportunity? Is it about like you describe the population shift where there are so many Indian residents living in the GCC countries, or is there a larger geopolitical logic at play as well?

Raja Mohan: Yeah, I think there's been a lot of talk about India's partnership with Iran, but it doesn't get anywhere because Iran is locked in a confrontation with its neighbors and it's locked in a confrontation with the US, and the West. So while Iran is important for India, surely because it has a huge border with Pakistan and Afghanistan and it also provides access to India, to Central Asia. So, therefore, from a long-term geopolitical perspective, Iran is important. Its location and its population all make it important. But right now, there is not very much we can do with Iran. There was some coordination with them when Taliban was in power. Hopefully, there'll be more today again. But the 8 million people, the remittances, the oil we get from the Gulf, I mean, you know, is very much about what we do with Iran. And while ideally, we would like to do business with Iran, I mean, it's constrained, as I said, there are limits to what we can do with them. So I think Iran the talk is more than the actual action. While the Gulf I think in the past we tended to look at it very in a mercantilist fashion, merely looking at oil and export of labor. One of the things Mr. Modi has changed is to take a more strategic view of the Gulf so that we can do things with them. And I think we are beginning to get a recognition that the kind of capital or some of the scholars in the Gulf, the collegiate, the volumes of collegiate capital, are so large that actually for an India that's looking for capital for its own growth, it's going to be the Gulf is going to be the great partner. And my sense is we're just beginning to explore those possibilities and you'll see a lot more of that happen. We've just signed an FTA with the UAE, as you know. Hopefully, we can do something similar with the GCC. as a whole. And a little more difficult would be why there are talks about India playing a security role that I think we'll have to work

out in greater detail how we do this in the days ahead. I think one of the problems with the focus on the Gulf in the last few years has been that we tended to neglect the western part of the Arab world. Our relationship with Israel has dramatically improved under Mr. Modi, but the western part of the Levant, North Africa, Egypt was neglected. And I think I would see an el-Sisi visit really as a way of getting back to Egypt because Egypt was a great partner in the fifties and the sixties. So in some sense, as you know, getting back to them because it's Egypt that has the heft, a large population, a large standing army, and its pivotal position in the region. So for us, getting back to Egypt brings back some balance into our policy, which is not just limited to the Gulf.

Jonathan Fulton: Yeah. I mean, it's interesting because that leads into, you know, my next question. You mentioned, you know, India's rising presence in the Levant. And I was in Israel recently and there was a lot of talk about Israel, India ties. Pretty much everybody I spoke with were becoming, you know, kind of experts on India very quickly because they were realizing that things have changed pretty dramatically, especially over the past year with this I2U2 that you mentioned this configuration of the two I's of Israel and India and the two U's of the UAE and the U.S. So I'm still surprised it doesn't get as much notice here as I thought it would. I'm not sure how people in other places are thinking about it. So could you give our listeners just a quick description of what I2U2 is? And how have the Abraham Accords reconfigured India's approach to the Middle East?

Raja Mohan: Yeah, I think for us, for India, given its champion of Arab nationalism and its support for Palestinians in the past, there was a problem of how do we normalize relations with Israel while at the same time keeping up our traditional positions in the Arab world. And I think the Abraham Accords have actually made it easier for us to not have to constantly look over our shoulders. So I think that opened a lot of space for India to work with Israel and the Gulf Arabs at the same time. The I2U2 to at this point, I mean, I think it's still really the beginnings of a major project. The initial focus is on economic issues. But I think the question is how soon would it acquire a strategic character. So I would say looking to take some more time, it's better to build slowly and strongly rather than rushing into grand security structures at this point. But the idea was to have the US as part of this and get the UAE and Israel to do a lot more things. So they just think we're at the beginning of a process.

Jonathan Fulton: Yeah. And I think it's been pretty interesting to watch at this stage because, as you say, the focus I think, has been very careful, you know, focusing on issues like food security, on development, on technology, you know, things that everybody needs more of and kind of keeping the geopolitics out of it. But of course, geopolitics is a big part of what we talk about on this show and I think it's kind of hard to not think about what those consequences might be. I mean, I think the I2U2 members have been really good at framing it as a Jew economic initiative. And it's not balancing against Iran. It's not balancing against China. There's no balancing. It is meant to be inclusive. But I imagine the view from Beijing is pretty different. I think they probably see this and associate with other Indo-Pacific many laterals like the Quad or AUKUS. And this seems to be yet another U.S.-centered approach to limiting Chinese gains in the region. So I imagine in Beijing, it's probably not perceived as an entirely positive

development. How are people in New Delhi thinking about the India-U.S.-China Triangle in the Middle East?

Raja Mohan: Yeah, I mean, you know, put it very bluntly. I mean, we'd rather have the Americans sit on the oil reserves than the Chinese. There's no question. I mean, there was a time when we were very anti-American. But I think today, given our contradictions with China, which have sharpened that, we would rather see the US remain a major player in the Gulf and I think in the Middle East as a whole, that suits our larger Indo-Pacific strategy as well because we need the US might to be able to produce a stable balance of power system in the East. And I think the same thing applies to the West. Unfortunately, the Biden administration's initial mistakes in the Middle East of framing, you know, too much of this democracy versus autocracy business. It's, you know, by targeting so much, fighting it. Mohammad bin Salman is there. I think they created problems for themselves and, you know, compelled, I think, the region to diversify away from the U.S. But hopefully, I mean, this is not a permanent rupture and the US would come back to be a part of the security structure and remain an important part of the security structure because there's too much talk about pivoting away or US burning its bridges with the Gulf but I think both sides will need each other. And for us, as we build our capabilities, we'd rather have the Americans for as long as we can rather than have Americans leave and we're not in a position to fill the vacuum. So, I don't think that there are any illusions in Delhi that if the U.S. leaves, we can simply step in. So, for us, I think to work with the US, with France and Britain, wherever possible, is to be able to have a structure there that is not left to Russia and China to simply walk all over. But my sense is I hope that the Biden administration will begin to make the adjustments necessary to make sure that there is no geopolitical vacuum.

Jonathan Fulton: Yeah, I think that's really accurate. I also think that they kind of have gotten their feet under them a little bit in the region in the past few months. You know, you saw everybody focused on the Biden trip to Saudi and the negative, you know, imagery that came of that or even the negative consequences of it. But on his trip to Israel, they signed this strategic dialogue on technology cooperation. They're really showing that commitment. We saw recently this \$100 billion development project with the UAE on clean energy. You saw them talking to Turkey just last week. And then in December, there was a report about how the U.S. had been with Saudi, to help them develop their national security strategy. So it does seem that they've got some success that they're building on. And like you said, I think that's really good for countries like India, like the U.K., like France, and Asian allies and partners that rely on this kind of U.S. security structure that allows these countries to have their interests in the region met with a pretty low-security cost.

Raja Mohan: Absolutely. And because I think the depth of the ties between US and the Embassy, let's put it more bluntly, the Anglo-American world and the Gulf is so deep that it'll be you know, it's not easy or wise for either side to simply walk away. But as you know, in Washington, you're right in the Beltway, I mean, there are always ideological groups seeking, you know, grand solutions. But I think common sense will come back because the scale of our interests, because it looked like Gulf oil did not matter when the Biden administration took

charge here later. It's all central to the world of energy security in dealing with the consequences of the war in Ukraine.

Jonathan Fulton: Yeah, absolutely. Just a recognition that, sure, the U.S. isn't reliant on Gulf energy, but everybody's affected by, you know, energy pricing. And of course, Gulf countries have a major role in this, right. So I think they've realized that they have to be involved politically, and that might require them to maybe swallow some things politically that they weren't willing to maybe this time last year, especially like you mentioned, the relations with Saudi, but I think it has been shifting. It's also interesting, too, because, like we were just saying with I2U2, with the quad, you know, as you described, India has really reconsidered how it approaches its relations with the U.S. a lot this century. In this show, of course, we talk a lot about China and I always see China as kind of an animating factor in that, that the strategic landscape in Asia has really changed with China becoming much more active throughout Asia. But for India especially, I mean, I think of what China's been doing throughout South Asia, you know, with CPEC with you know, it's its BRI projects in all of the smaller South Asian states. So it really does seem for India, it's a pretty difficult balancing act to consider how to, you know, cooperate with the U.S. without antagonizing China overtly. You know, how do you see this India-China relationship right now?

Raja Mohan: Now we have had a pretty rough relationship with China. We've had a series of military crises on the border in 2013, 2014, 2017, and 2020. So this idea that India should not get closer to the US because China will get upset, has been a powerful argument because of India's historic non-alignment and solidarity multipolarity, these kind of goals. It was a very deeply held view. But I think we should really thank Xi Jinping for pushing India to the other side, that whatever the ambivalence is that India has had, I think Chinese military assertiveness in the last decade in the Himalayas has really compelled them to take a fresh look. So I don't think there are any illusions of the kind that Mr. Nehru started with, that China is a natural partner for India in building a new order in Asia and in the international system, and those illusions are no longer there that it's quite clear that we need the US, we need the West is to, to deal with the China challenge. But at the same time, it's a fact that China's power has grown dramatically on the economic front and its power has been projected into the Indian Ocean and the first military base abroad is in Djibouti, right next to the Gulf. And probably they'll be looking around for new places to acquire a permanent military presence. So it's no longer a question of whether, but it is a question of when. Notwithstanding the current crisis in the East China Sea, in the South China Sea, I don't think China is going to give up the two ocean strategy that it'll continue to project power into the Indian Ocean. And I think for India this is really such a problem not just in the Himalayas, but also in the south, in the waters of the Indian Ocean. And the fact that China has cultivated special relationships with key island states like Sri Lanka, Maldives, Marshes, and Citians, I think the Chinese presence has grown. So this is really the long-term challenge for India. And that, again, I think makes it clear that India has to work with the Western partners. And that's why the Quad is so focused on maritime security issues and on doing a range of things to secure the ocean spaces from being, you know, Chinese are taking a much larger role in this part of the world. So that I think is set up. It is both in the Himalayas as well as in the Indian Ocean. India's problems with China are only going to rise. And for all the

talk about Xi Jinping's charm diplomacy, we haven't seen much in relation to India. They're doing a lot of sweet talk to the US finance capital in Davos. But with Japan, where they have a massive territorial dispute with India, there is no sign of any easing up of the pressures. So I don't see Xi Jinping giving up on the territorial questions where they think it is their right to unilaterally change the borders. So I think our problems, which are not only going to grow while in the US, there are sections which we'll continue to argue, look, there is room for guardrails, there's room for collaboration. All that is fine. My sense is for India, the contradiction with China will be the principal contradiction in the coming decades and addressing. That any answer that we produce will necessarily involve the U.S. and its allies, not only in Asia but also in Europe.

Jonathan Fulton: So, yeah, there's a lot of really good stuff in that. But one thing that I kept thinking about while you were describing this is you know, the China-Iran relationship, which seems very troubling to folks in Washington. And I always caution, you know, just by looking at the numbers and saying, I don't think that China's engagement with Iran is really as deep as it's often portrayed. I'm often asked to explain how, you know, China can have this good relationship with Iran and also have this good relationship with the Saudis and the Emiratis. And I think that a lot of folks seem to think that when China and Russia announced the strategic partnership, a comprehensive strategic partnership, it would somehow alter the balance of power in the Gulf. And I didn't think that was the case at all. But I did think it did alter or it has the potential to alter the balance of power in South Asia. You know, I thought that a deeper China-Iran relationship probably isn't going to mean much to Saudi in the big picture but for India, it actually could be problematic. Do you agree with that assessment or do you think that it's not really a big deal in South Asia either?

Raja Mohan: You are right. And I think we should also see this as part of a growing Sino-Russian partnership. So they've been enticing Pakistan and the fact that Pakistan's prime minister, then Prime Minister Imran Khan, showed up on February 23rd in Moscow just before Putin was ordering the invasion. A lot of people thought and speculation was that the Chinese encouraged him to go to Moscow. So this idea that you know, Russia, and China can draw in other partners in the greater Middle East to shore up their alliance and both Pakistan and Iran are natural partners there. But Pakistan still has a lot of links with the UK and the U.S. so I don't see whether they are very close to China, or whether they will actually be allowed in. They're trying to make some adjustments to the army now after Imran Khan, you know, resetting the relationship with the U.S., trying to reset the relationship with the U.S. With Iran, you know, it's always a difficult partner for anyone. I mean, you know, they're not easy to deal with. So it's not that the Chinese, just because they signed a declaration, it's automatically going to translate into something, you know, immediate outcome. They might be able to build a relationship for the period and that will certainly and if Russia and China do it together, it certainly could become a problem for India. And the fact is that Iran, if you know, unlike Saudi Arabia today or UAE, which are taking a more moderate position or which are doing social reform internally, we don't see Iran actually cracking down on war against the women, against the various forces. So I think that's also going to be a problem for us, though. Though ideally for us in Iran, peace with the West would provide us with a lot of opportunities, but that's not in our hands to produce.

Jonathan Fulton: Yeah, yeah. There's just so many moving parts here, Right? And you know, when you're talking about maritime security as being such an important consideration in the Indian Ocean region, I was thinking about Gwadar and how much China's, you know, put into this port in Pakistan and also thinking just up the coastline a bit in Chabahar and how India has been working, wanting to work on this for forever and starts making headway and then something happens in Iran or something happens with the Iran-U.S. relationship and it just keeps getting harder. But we saw a couple of years ago some Iranian officials talking about how they're very happy to engage much more closely with China on developing Chabahar. I think that would really change the maritime landscape for India if China were, you know, investing deeply into that port, investing into Gwadar, becoming a resident actor in a lot of other Indian Ocean ports. This could really be an issue for India, yeah?

Raja Mohan: No, no, absolutely. I think that we did build a terminal in, you know, Chabahar one terminal. But, you know, Iranians are not a classical trading nation of the type that the Gulf Arabs are. So the structure of their economy and the nature of their politics continue to prevent them from having the natural gateway to enrichment. But translating that beautiful line on the map into an operational corridor will be quite hard and I think that's a part of the problem. So and then if the Chinese do make a major presence in Iran, in Chabahar and to build a military relationship and I think that's why it's important for India to step up the security partnership with the Gulf Arabs. We need to do a lot more with them, and look for alternative routes. I mean, I think there are some people who have suggested we could work through UAE, Israel, and Greece, use routes into the Mediterranean, rather than being fixated simply on cutting through Iran into the north, because it doesn't look like the regime is changing on its own volition or is going to be forced out. Because if Iran remains blocked, its growing compulsion to align with Russia and China will grow and that will be a problem, a serious problem for India.

Jonathan Fulton: Yeah. You know, it's been really interesting to watch. I've been based in the Emirates now since 2006, and I've been watching this stuff for quite a while. And, you know, there's a point, maybe even, I guess in 2015 when there was so much talk about or 2016, where all this talk about CPEC. And I thought, you know, of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, it just seemed natural to me. I thought you'd see a lot more investment from the Saudis, from the Emiratis going into it. And I talked to a Pakistani official who said, actually, we haven't really seen the money from the Gulf that we were hoping for. And he said, well, you know, I kind of blame their closer economic engagement with India. And it just seemed to me a really fascinating kind of rectangle where, you know, historically the GCC and Pakistan lined up pretty neatly in Iran and India, lined up pretty neatly, and that kind of explained things. And just in the past few years, it doesn't anymore. And you just look at how those two very intense rivalries that span across these, you know, the Gulf and South Asia really does make for a very interesting geopolitical chessboard here.

Raja Mohan: If you sort of taken a longer view. I mean, when in fact, Iran and Pakistan and Turkey were part of the, you know, the CENTO, then, you know, Iraq left the Baghdad Pact. So we were closer to Iraq at that point. India was closer to the Baathists, the guys in the pinstripes, while the Turks, the Pakistanis, it was the Pakistanis who joined an anti-Arab alliance while

India was actually, you know, championing the Arab cause. It was Pakistan, the UK, that sponsored CENTO, but it didn't last too long. And the later in the seventies, we saw the Gulf Arabs come much closer to now, closer to Pakistan and India tending to take a very negative view and I think took a unidimensional view of the Gulf Arabs. And I don't think we fully understood their problems. In 79 I mean, not three, you know, three major things, as you know, happened in 79. You had the Russian intervention in Afghanistan at the end of it, the Iranian revolution, the attack on the Grand Mosque in Mecca, as well as the Arab, Israel, Egypt, Peace Treaty. So in a way, 79 dramatically altered the structure of geopolitics in the Middle East. And I think our Russia connection and our problems with Pakistan and the rise of Islamic terrorism, I think, made us lose our way in terms of how we deal with the Arabian Peninsula, which has historically been close to us. But I think we've overcome those hurdles today. I think India does not view Arabia through the lens of Pakistan or the lens of Islam. In fact it's very interesting that Mr. Shehbaz Sharif is one of the closest friends Mr. Modi has in the Middle East. So I think we are in a new situation, and I think there's a lot more sophistication today in terms of how India thinks about it. It's not because the Indian economy is, for example, ten times larger than Pakistan's. So the Gulf capital sees a lot more opportunities in India. And for Pakistan, it becomes, say, someone always seeking money to bail them out rather than it's not an investment opportunity. So I think those equations have changed. And Iran, which was very close to the West, I mean, is on the other camp today. But for India, I think the real prospect is the convergence with the Arab Gulf, with the moderates, with the west significantly increasing, and with Israel. That's where I think if we keep building up this relationship now, we should be able to counter any potential negative developments that would take place in Iran.

Jonathan Fulton: Mm. Yeah. It's funny what you're describing. I was just thinking I took my family on a vacation to Kerala in 2017, and we were driving across the province and it was beautiful. But I kept seeing these large banners with pictures of different sheiks from Saudi and from the UAE. And when I asked the, you know, the locals, why so many and they go, there's so much investment that has poured in from Dubai, from Riyadh, from Abu Dhabi into this province, it really just kind of hit home the deep interdependence between India and the UAE, India and Saudi.

Raja Mohan: It's interesting. I mean, the whole diplomacy that those always came from, you know, the crucial states, to the Indian West Coast. And after 73, we saw a dramatic expansion of Indian labor exports and Kerala was one major source of those exports. So in a sense, Kerala has a very special connection to the Gulf and you see them everywhere, though it's a tiny state by Indian standards, its presence in the Gulf is huge. But my sense is really the connections are much wider in many other parts of India. And again, I mean, I think the Gulf capital what it can do to the India's real estate, construction, and telecom sectors is immense. And space. For example, UAE has been very keen to develop space cooperation with India. So I think we are looking at a whole range of possibilities in a way that is positive when the story with Iran is always a negative one. How do we deal with the Taliban or how do we, you know, contain Pakistan's support for crazy forces and Taliban in Afghanistan? But I think the economic dimension with the Gulf Arabs is huge and as the Gulf opens up, it becomes more moderate politically and modernizes socially, the connections between India and the Arab Gulf will only

deepen. So I would say this is really just the beginning of, shall we say, the old line of a really beautiful relationship.

Jonathan Fulton: Yeah. I mean, it's a really fascinating time to watch this stuff. Before I moved to the Gulf, I'd spent most of my twenties living in East Asia. And when I came here, I had this in my mind, you know, I was going to a different place. I was going from Asia to the Middle East. And then, you know, having been here so long, I think of the Gulf as, you know, rather than the easternmost limits of the Middle East, I think of it as more of the westernmost limits of this bigger Asia. And, you know, you just see so much happening here in that space. You know, I had a group of students from the U.S. visit our campus last semester, and they were saying, wow, this is a really kind of westernized place. They were in Dubai. And I was like, this is very Asian. Look around. Everybody you see is from India or they're from Sri Lanka or they're from the Philippines. And it's really this kind of Asianization process, which the way you're describing, like all these opportunities and economic engagement and space and tourism, you know, you can see a lot of this stuff happening all the time, this really positive narrative, which, you know, frankly, in the West, we don't hear very many positive narratives about the Middle East. It's usually a problem to be solved. And that's just not the way its kind of described. You know this is late January that we're recording this. Just last week, the South Korean president was in town. They're talking about cooperation on nuclear, on defense, on security, on any number of things. It really is you're seeing a lot of these linkages between Asian countries and societies and these Gulf ones or Middle Eastern ones really intensifying in a very interesting way.

Raja Mohan: Absolutely. And I think I see even, you know, many people from the Gulf who land up in Singapore used to say, look, we are in Asia. The notion that the Middle East and Asia were different was partly I think the colonial era, where the divisions were identified in the foreign offices of the West, Near East, Far East, and the Middle East. I think those divisions are breaking down. I think because East Asia is an economic dynamo, West Asia has all the energy resources, has the capital now to transform the region. And then we see the integration of North Africa, the Horn of Africa. I think you see this fusing of East and West Asia. We said, look, West Asia, East Asia, but it had no economic component at the time. It was really a political idea. Today it has been driven by economics, by commerce, and by the movement of labor capital. This is where I think the real connections get established. And my sense is there'll be more and more of this where the Gulf capital contributes to the growth of the rest of the region, while the movement of people into these countries for labor and for other purposes of a lot of growth. So, I think we are going to see an Asianization of Asia in a sense.

Jonathan Fulton: No, absolutely. I couldn't agree more. But I also am somebody who spends a lot of time thinking about geopolitics. And you know why I love these positive stories, the cultural, the, you know, my students who are fascinated by South Korean, you know, cultural products and Japanese manga and, you know, Bollywood films. But I kind of also sees the, you know, the dark cloud on the horizon, too. And I do see there's a lot of tensions geopolitically across Asia, which often don't feature, you know, in this broader narrative of the Asian century, You know, nothing but bright skies ahead, economic growth, a focus on FTAs. Do you see like me, I know you think about geopolitics a lot. Do you see the potential for these Asian tensions

that are kind of beneath the surface spilling out into the Gulf in a way that folks here haven't had to think about very much at?

Raja Mohan: I think the Asian century was always a simplistic idea. I mean, you know, it's really still the colonial, post-colonial argument. I mean, if you think of the European century or European centuries, it was full of conflict, right? I mean, this European story was also brought intra-European conflict, both within the continent as well as for the colonies outside. So, I think the myth that Asia is one has been broken because of China's own assertiveness and its attempt to alter the territorial status quo across the region. But I think as I said, for commerce, I mean, it is producing new connections. I mean, both the movement of capital and labor produce new connections. I think over the longer term, we still need a security architecture. It can't just be built on ideas of the Asian century or Asian unity, because even after, say, 400 years after Europe's right, it still doesn't have a security architecture, as we discovered last year, that the notion that Europe has transcended geopolitics, I mean, has turned out to be utterly false. So similarly, in Asia, I mean, I think we have a long way to go. But I think if you can build on the positive forces and it's again, it can't be something exclusive. It should not be, that Asia for a long time, this framing Asia versus the West, East versus the West, a lot of it really was self-defeating because I think we need the Western powers if you will to be able to stabilize this region and Asia will increasingly contribute to the West as well. So, I think that if we can keep backing up the positive forces in the region while keeping in check the negative forces, those who want to establish hegemony, there's Iran trying to establish hegemony in the Gulf in the name of religion, of the Chinese trying to do it in the name of the great Chinese dream. Then I think the positive story can, you know, can be expanded, I would say.

Jonathan Fulton: That to me is a perfect note to end on. You know, we're ending with something positive that doesn't come up much on shows like this, where we're talking about a lot of Middle Eastern geopolitics. So thank you, Raj. I always enjoy talking politics with you. I always learn a lot from it. From your perspective. I mean, you've been based in so many fascinating places. You know, everybody you you've really looked at this from a lot of angles. Thanks so much for joining us on the show today.

Raja Mohan: Thank you. It was wonderful speaking to you, Jonathan.

Jonathan Fulton: Okay. And hopefully, I'll see you either here in Abu Dhabi soon or in India. To our listeners, thanks for joining us again. Please check us out on our YouTube channel or like and rate and subscribe and all that stuff on Stitcher, Spotify and iTunes, and all those great venues. And we'll see you next month. Thank you.

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