

REPORT

Webinar on “Global Geopolitics and Regional Security Environment in West Asia” organised by the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA) and the Strategic Studies Centre (SSC), Cairo, on July 27, 2021.

The Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA), in collaboration with the Strategic Studies Centre (SSC), Cairo, organised a virtual Webinar on “Global Geopolitics and Regional Security Environment in West Asia” on July 27, 2021. The Webinar was led by Amb. Sujan R. Chinoy, Director General MP-IDSA and Staff General Adel Mohamed Hassan Eldeeb, Director Strategic Studies Centre, Cairo.

The Webinar began with opening remarks delivered by the Amb. Sujan R. Chinoy, who emphasised on the historic ties between India and Egypt and the warm friendship between Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and President Gamal Abdel Nasser. He said that Non-Aligned Movement was a natural outcome of our shared perceptions emerging from colonial shackles and the two countries share a multi-faceted and multi-dimensional partnership. High level visits have led to cooperation in the areas of defence, strategy and economy; and Egypt is a key commercial partner for India in the African continent. Amb. Chinoy emphasised that the world is experiencing a major global geo-economic shift and COVID-19 pandemic has acted as an accentuating factor. The scale and intensity of change in balance of power in Asia is astonishing. China’s economic rise has unfortunately been accompanied by unilateralism and a military assertiveness that is bound to be resisted by all peace loving nations. Technology, particularly in fields of telecom, Artificial Intelligence, cyberspace and data security are the new battle grounds.

Amb. Chinoy said that the Indo-Pacific is gaining currency as a vastly more inclusive concept in terms of economic prosperity in a much wider region. However, the economic progress has not been matched by the progress in security. There is a lack of overarching security architecture. Legacy of territorial disputes, high military expenditure have prevented Asia from realising its full potential. He underlined that the pressing need of developing countries for better infrastructure, connectivity and capacity building are being met through competing models of openness and transparency vis-à-vis opacity and self-interest and it is a polarising moment for many countries. Even amidst the pandemic, the spectre of terrorism is challenging many countries including India and Egypt. Regional energy dynamics are evolving. The US reliance on the Gulf region for energy needs stands greatly reduced today while other powers are seeking stronger role like resurgent Russia, recalcitrant Iran and ambitious Turkey and an opportunistic China. For India the goal is to achieve rapid and inclusive economic growth in a stable and peaceful environment. Our strategic autonomy is better today. India is non-permanent member in UNSC that has given it a fresh opportunity to engage with partners including Egypt and to help strengthen multilateralism.

Staff General Adel Mohamed Hassan Eldeeb, Director SSC, thanked MP-IDSA for organising the Webinar and expressed his gratitude to the Ambassador of Egypt to India and the Ambassador of India to Egypt for the initiative. He outlined the functions of the SSC and said that it assists the Egyptian Ministry of Defence in policy formation on contemporary strategic issues. It also provides the decision makers recommendations and alternatives pertaining to issues that affect the

Egyptian national security. It holds meetings and panel discussions, provides inputs to military advisors and the corresponding study centres. He underlined that like MP-IDSA, the SSC aims to look for solutions to global challenges posed by contemporary political, military, economic and social issues. He introduced the other members of the Centre who participated in the dialogue including Staff General Magdy Foad Sadek, Staff General Emad Abdelmohsen Awad, Staff General Dr. Wael Abdelhakeem Rabie, Staff General Dr. Osama Ibrahim Mohamed, Staff Brigadier Mohamed Abdelhameed Elnaggar and Staff Brigadier Khaled Fahmy Abdeltwab.

Special Remarks were delivered by Amb. Dr. Heba Salah Eldin El Marassi, Ambassador of Egypt to India and Amb. Ajit Gupte, Ambassador of India to Egypt. Amb. El Marassi said that the Webinar will provide an opportunity to address complex political and security challenges prevailing in the international politics. The diverse set of challenges mandates a revisit of issues and assessment will not be possible without such dialogues. She underlined that Egypt traverses multiple regions; being an Arab, Mediterranean and African country that is affected by regional challenges. She mentioned that the birthplace of one of the oldest civilization, Egypt is facing existential crisis due to the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam that is going to impact the downward population and intends to seek cooperation from Ethiopian side that has been following exclusive policies. Egypt has supported the Libyan government to rid the country of terrorist organisations and some militias and helped it put an end to interference of some flagrant regional parties. Egypt also supports the Libyan National Unity government for political settlement.

Amb. El Marassi underscored that Egypt has always supported lasting solution to the Palestinian cause that is lingering for decades. It supports solution based on 1967 lines with East Jerusalem as the capital of the Palestinian state. As a result of mediation by Egyptian officials, Israel and Palestinians in Gaza came to a ceasefire in May 2021. Egypt's support to Palestinians is not only political as it has allocated US\$ 500 million for reconstruction in Palestine.

On India-Egypt bilateral relations, she stated that counter-terrorism is one of the leading areas of cooperation and there are several mechanisms including regular cooperation between the Ministry of Defence of two countries and the joint cooperation committee's regular meetings between senior officials from both sides. Egypt believes that conflict resolution, peaceful approach and consideration for the people will lead to solution to regional and international problems.

The first session of the Webinar focussing on the global geopolitics was chaired by the Amb. Sujan R. Chinoy, Director General, MP-IDSA. Dr. Ashok K Behuria, Senior Fellow, MP-IDSA and Dr. Jagannath P. Panda, Research Fellow, MP-IDSA, spoke on US-Russia relations, US-China relations, US policies towards Asia, especially towards North Korea and Afghanistan. The chair introduced the subject saying that the world is watching US-China with considerable interest as the US is an established power while China is rising and geopolitical contestation exists today along multiple axes of trade, technology and tenets. The world is divided and there is greater need for multilateralism and multipolarity. The US under President Biden is re-asserting its presence in the Indo-Pacific; while the two Koreas have a hotline in place now. In Afghanistan, as the US is receding, there have been instances of growing violence in the country.

Dr. Behuria said that during the pandemic the world is passing through a flux as it posed a threat to the global economy. The geoeconomic issues have been exacerbated in West Asia and South Asia due to the sectarian and fundamentalist tendencies. It poses challenges to the security of the state and they have to divert attention and energy at a time when the need is to focus more on health and medicine. It is a pity that the countries have to spend on counter-terrorism when the pandemic is the bigger enemy. He added that the competition between US and China is a matter of concern for the global community. The Chinese bid to bring trade diplomacy in South Asia has brought a new challenge in India's neighbourhood. The most challenging aspect of the security is the unfolding situation in Afghanistan. Taliban is coming back with great momentum and is trying to establish its hold in Afghanistan in a violent manner. As per the UN report, the instances of violence increased substantially surpassing records of 2014 and civilian population is paying the price with life. Regional cooperation is needed to contain this issue but Pakistan is not on board. Afghanistan is relapsing into days of 1990s and there is a fair chance, that if the issue is not contained, the region will become breeding ground for fundamentalism which will further increase the security challenges. There is a need for India, Egypt and other countries to come together and discuss these issues through dialogues.

Dr Panda stated that there is a larger geopolitical shift taking place and international politics shall be understood in that context. He said that the US policy to Asia is largely a continuation of Trump's policies due to which the focus is largely on Indo-Pacific. In fact President Biden has taken a more engaging outlook to Indo-Pacific. There are four major changes in Biden's policies to Asia including more focus on multilateral mode of engagement with respect to climate change, trade, connectivity and development. Secondly, Biden is focussing on building a responsive partnership with Japan and South Korea. Thirdly, the US rivalry with China is to continue as it will continue to preserve its core values and culture. Lastly, the US will remain engaged in the Korean peninsula. Basically, Biden is following Trump's policies with some tactical changes.

The Egyptian scholars raised two questions related to Afghanistan and North Korea. As far as Afghanistan is concerned they mentioned that US did not gain anything during its stay in Afghanistan except adding to the mortality; and asked about how India looks at these variables in the region. In response Dr. Behuria said that greatest achievement for US is the absence of any major attack on the US since their presence in Afghanistan. However, violence in the region will lead to security concerns and provide Pakistan with an opportunity to divert the attention of domestic Jihadi groups towards India. Tehrik-e-Taliban militant commander said that once Taliban takes over Kabul, Pakistan will make safe havens free from state control for them. It is to be noted that the phenomenon will be disastrous not only for New Delhi but also for Islamabad. The second question posed by the Egyptian side was how does India maintains strong relations with various countries in the region despite contradictory concerns and interests especially with regard to US and North Korea? Dr. Panda responded by saying that India's approach to North Korea is independent of its ties with the US; and that Washington is not a pressure point. New Delhi's relations with North Korea is part of the Act East Policy and North East Outreach program. The two countries support de-nuclearisation policy for security of the Korean peninsula.

The second session focussed on the regional security environment in West Asia and was chaired by the Staff General Adel Mohamed Hassan Eldeeb, Director, SSC. The Chair proceeded the session by highlighting the pressing issues in the region such as Iranian nuclear deal, Israel-Iran relations, the development Libya and Yemen, Turkey's role in Horn of Africa and its impact on the international maritime navigation and the US-West Asia relations.

Scholars from the SSC examined the ongoing negotiations in Vienna to revive the Iranian nuclear deal. The previous US administration's maximum pressure policy that pushed Iran to the corner in areas such as nuclear deal, imposing sanctions on its oil and other sectors, the assassination of General Qassem Suleiman etc. has affected the regional security and stability in their view. On the other hand, the activities of Iran-backed proxies or armed groups increased in the region, particularly in Syria and Yemen and has caused serious security concerns for the regional countries. In this framework, for the Biden administration, and the American strategic community, the case of Iranian nuclear deal remains a top priority. However, the tensions between US and Iran remains high. There are divergences in their policies and perspectives towards each other and the region. Also, Iran in the beginning refused to negotiate with the US. And it was through Russia, China and Europe that both the parties are engaging in Vienna at the moment.

Participants from the SSC argued that given the change of behaviour from both the parties, an amended nuclear deal is possible, if Iran adheres to the JCPOA and the US removes sanctions on Iran. But other concerns related to Iran's missile and arms development is not covered in the talks. While Biden insists on a step by step approach, Tehran does not seem to be ready to curtail its missile program. Also, Iran using sectarianism to increase its regional power is another cause of concern in West Asia. These factors has pushed Egypt to multilateral co-ordinations to contain Iran's negative influence in the region. Cairo has supported international and regional efforts to prevent Iranian nuclear activities and ballistic missile program.

The ongoing tensions between Israel and Iran was also discussed in the session. The speakers from SSC stated that Israel wants to be the only state with nuclear power in the region. Its policies ensure that no other state possesses such power. Israel does not acknowledge its own nuclear capacity but forces other nations to give up their nuclear aspirations. This was evident in 1981 when Israel attacked Iraq's nuclear facility, followed by targeting Syria's nuclear facility from 2007 onwards. Israel has also reportedly assassinated many renowned nuclear scientists in the region, the latest target being Iranian scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh. Israel has tried to sabotage Tehran's efforts to become a nuclear power by declassifying documents related to Iranian nuclear programme and attacked its nuclear reactor at Natanz in 2020. Israel is also working with the US, and other Western countries to ensure sanctions on Iran to continue so as to force Iran to abandon its nuclear programme. In the light of this, Israel-Iran relations is full of frictions and it is likely to remain so. A possibility of direct confrontation between both the parties can push the region into chaos. International community must make sure that such confrontations does not take place. Egypt will cooperate with international community and is willing to take necessary measures to ensure peace and stability in the region.

Dr Prasanta Kumar Pradhan, Associate Fellow and Coordinator, West Asia Centre, MP-IDSA, highlighted the US-Iran relationship and stated that the US and Iran along with other signatories – Russia, China and the European countries -- are having discussion on reviving the Iran nuclear deal. So far there have been a few positive developments in the talks in Vienna. However, there are a number of crucial issues that need to be resolved such as Iranian compliance with the JCPOA and the lifting of sanctions on Iran. He stated that it needs to be seen how the President-elect Ebrahim Raisi, given his conservative stand, approaches the US and other powers in the area of nuclear and other issues in the region. Speaking on Israel-Iran relations, Dr. Pradhan stated that the situation between Iran and Israel will continue to remain tense. Israel feels that its national security is being challenged by Iran. Tehran's support to Assad regime, and groups like Lebanese Hezbollah and Hamas will continue to challenge Israel's national security. On Libyan front, there have been few positive developments lately. But the upcoming elections to be held in December 2021 has the potential to change the course of the country and can bring peace and stability.

Dr. Muddasir Quamar, Associate Fellow, MP-IDSA spoke on the role of US and Turkey in the region. Underlining that the US is the most important global power ensuring security in West Asia, he argued that it is significant for the regional countries, including Egypt, Saudi Arabia and others, to play a constructive role in tandem with the US to ensure regional security and stability. On Turkey's role, he pointed out that Ankara is following a Neo-Ottoman policy in West Asia which has alarmed other key regional players. Its policies have led to several problems in the African countries especially in Libya. Also, with its new maritime ambitions, Turkey intends to expand its naval presence in the Horn of Africa, Red Sea and the Persian Gulf region. Recently, it has taken steps to enhance its naval capacity in the region, especially in Africa which has led to serious frictions between Turkey and other regional powers like Saudi Arabia, UAE and Egypt. Finally, he argued that there is a need for India and Egypt that have common interests in security and the stability of West Asia to strengthen their partnership. Hence, it is imperative for both the countries to cooperate and coordinate on regional security and other bilateral issues, including in the area of economic and strategic cooperation.

The second session was followed by Special Remarks by the Indian Ambassador to Egypt, Amb. Ajit Gupte, who shed light on India-Egypt bilateral ties and Egypt's emergence as a regional power. He stated that India and Egypt, two of the world's oldest civilizations, have enjoyed a history of close contact from ancient times. Mahatma Gandhi and Saad Zaghloul shared common goals on the independence of their countries, a relationship that was to blossom into an exceptionally close friendship between Gamal Abdel Nasser and Jawaharlal Nehru, leading to a Friendship Treaty between the two countries in 1955.

He stated that in last few years, both the countries focused to enhance their cooperation in security area. Deputy National Security Advisor Dr. Arvind Gupta visited Egypt in July 2015 and held talks with his Egyptian counterpart. Egyptian NSA Ms. Faiza Abou El Naga met NSA and Defence Secretary at New Delhi in December 2015 and a MoU on cooperation between the Secretariats of NSCs of both countries was signed during the meeting. The first Joint Working Group on Cyber Issues was held in New Delhi in December 2016. The 2nd India-Egypt Joint

Working Group on Counter-terrorism held in Cairo in January 2018. Both countries are also closely cooperating multilaterally in international forums.

Amb. Gupte stated that Egypt's role has become more significant since Arab spring and it has steadily evolved as a major regional power in Africa. Egypt has taken a number of steps to stabilise the region by rooting out terror groups, minimising internal conflicts and preventing regional turmoil in Libya and Palestine. Egypt's interventions also limits foreign mercenaries in Libya. Terrorism has indeed become a menace for entire region and West Asia has become a hot spot. Egypt efforts in rooting out various terrorist groups is particularly praiseworthy.

He noted the recent modernisation drive Egypt has undertaken for the armed forces. For instance, Egypt's military has ordered 30 Rafale jets from France. In naval front, the delivery from Italy to Egypt in December 2020 of the first of two multi-role FREMM frigates marked the first step towards completing an order that could herald a much larger deal between the two countries. Also, Germany's ThyssenKrupp Marine Systems (TKMS) is to supply a submarine to Egypt. The modernisation has enabled Egypt to become part of joint-exercises with regional and international powers in the maritime arena. India is looking forward to strengthen its cooperation with Egypt's defence sector and encourages more dialogues between the academic think tanks of both sides.

Maj. Gen. Bipin Bakshi, Deputy Director General MP-IDSA, concluded the Webinar by reiterating that the two ancient civilisations have long historical and cultural links. He stated that India and Egypt have always shared values but now increasingly both the countries are sharing their concerns particularly in the area of terrorism, cyber security and over the violence in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. India and Egypt must continue to engage in bilateral and multilateral platforms and try to promote a peaceful economic growth and prosperity in both South and West Asian regions.
