



De-hyphenation as Grand Strategy: Evolution and Limits of India's Multi-Alignment in West Asia Under Modi

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ABSTRACT

Since 2014, Indian foreign policy toward West Asia has been organized around the doctrine of “de-hyphenation”: the deliberate decoupling of India's bilateral relationships with regional actors — most visibly Israel and Palestine, but also Iran and the Gulf Arab states — from one another, so that each may be pursued on its own transactional merits. This paper traces the doctrine's intellectual and historical lineage from Nehruvian non-alignment through the 1991 recalibration and the Manmohan Singh-era “Look West” policy, before examining its operationalization under Narendra Modi across three parallel tracks: Israel, Iran, and the Gulf Cooperation Council states. It then subjects the doctrine to two acid tests — the Israel-Hamas war that began in October 2023 and the far more disruptive 2026 Iran War — to assess whether de-hyphenation constitutes a durable grand strategy or merely a euphemism for asymmetric alignment with Israel and the United States (US) dressed in the language of strategic autonomy. Situating the empirical record within the broader theoretical literature on hedging and multi-alignment, the paper argues that de-hyphenation has been a materially successful but normatively costly strategy: it has allowed India to accumulate defense, energy, diaspora, and connectivity dividends across a fractured region, but at the price of diminishing moral credibility on Palestine, growing vulnerability to great-power sanctions regimes, and a widening gap between the rhetoric of sovereign choice and the reality of constrained maneuver when regional crises escalate to the level of direct US-Iran-Israel confrontation.

1. Introduction

“De-hyphenation” entered the working vocabulary of Indian diplomacy after 2014 to describe a specific analytical move: the deliberate severing of policy linkage between two or more regional relationships that had previously been treated, implicitly or explicitly, as a single package. In the West Asian context, the term refers above all to the decoupling of India's relationship with Israel from its relationship with the Palestinian cause, but the underlying logic extends to Iran and the Arab Gulf states as well, and by extension to India's broader post-2014 foreign policy grammar of parallel, non-mutually-conditioning bilateral tracks. The Ministry of External Affairs and its allied strategic community have generally presented de-hyphenation as an advance in diplomatic maturity: a move from an ideologically encumbered posture toward one grounded in the pursuit of discrete national interests on their own terms. As Kabir Taneja of the Observer Research Foundation put it, the “historical baggage over keeping Israel and Palestine hyphenated” had, in this reading, been “correctly brought to an end,” with the policy aimed at “maximizing

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the advantages of the unique power-play in the larger West Asian region” while still notionally preserving New Delhi's relationship with Ramallah (Taneja, 2018).

It is important, however, to distinguish de-hyphenation analytically from two precedent concepts with which it is often casually conflated: Nehruvian non-alignment and Cold War-era balancing. Non-alignment, as practiced from 1947 into the late 1980s, was at root a normative and civilizational claim: India presented itself as the moral custodian of a Third World solidarity project that refused subordination to either superpower bloc, and its West Asia policy was an extension of this project rather than a series of discrete bilateral calculations. India's refusal to establish full diplomatic relations with Israel until 1992, its consistent votes in favour of Palestinian self-determination, and its vocal support for Arab positions in the 1967 and 1973 wars were justified not primarily in terms of Indian material interest but in terms of anti-colonial and anti-imperial solidarity, in which the Palestinian struggle was read as continuous with India's own struggle against the British Raj (Kumaraswamy, 2004). Cold War-era balancing, by contrast, was a narrower geopolitical response to superpower rivalry: India tilted toward the Soviet Union from the 1971 Indo-Soviet Treaty onward not out of ideological conviction but because Washington's tilt toward Pakistan and China left New Delhi with few alternatives, and this in turn constrained its West Asia posture, since a closer relationship with Israel would have complicated ties with Arab states that were themselves aligned with Moscow.

De-hyphenation, as practiced after 2014, inverts both of these logics. It is not a normative claim about international justice, nor a response to bipolar superpower competition; it is an explicitly transactional and compartmentalized approach in which each relationship is judged, and pursued, on the basis of what it yields for India in security, energy, technology, capital, and diaspora terms, largely independent of what pursuing it costs India in relations with a third party. Whereas non-alignment sought coherence — a single, principled position that could be applied consistently across the region — de-hyphenation deliberately tolerates, and indeed depends upon, incoherence: India can supply humanitarian assistance to Gaza while simultaneously importing record volumes of Israeli-origin defense technology; it can call for a two-state solution in UN fora while declining to condemn Israeli military operations in unambiguous terms; it can deepen defense cooperation with Israel while maintaining energy and connectivity investments in Iran, notwithstanding the fact that Israeli and Iranian security establishments regard one another as existential adversaries. This is the sense in which de-hyphenation can be described as a doctrine distinct from what preceded it: it converts what had been treated as a zero-sum regional triangle (Israel, Palestine, and the Arab-Iranian world) into a set of parallel, non-fungible bilateral ledgers.

1.1. From Nehruvian Solidarity to Post-Cold War Recalibration

India's West Asia policy under Jawaharlal Nehru was shaped by three overlapping commitments: anti-colonial solidarity with Arab nationalist movements, the desire to secure Arab and broader Muslim-world support (or at least neutrality) on Kashmir, and the ideological architecture of non-alignment itself, which required India to avoid relationships that could be read as complicity with a Western-aligned Israel. This produced a policy that was, in relative terms, more pro-Arab than pro-Palestinian in any granular sense — India's stance was driven substantially by considerations of Arab-Muslim opinion rather than by close engagement with the Palestine Liberation Organization as such but the net effect was a durable diplomatic asymmetry in which Israel was kept at arm's length for over four decades. The costs of this asymmetry became visible during the 1962 and 1965 wars, when Israel discreetly supplied India with military matériel even as most Arab states remained neutral or leaned rhetorically toward Pakistan, and again during the 1971 and 1999 conflicts, when Israeli assistance in the latter case, laser-guided munitions and artillery ammunition during the Kargil conflict proved more forthcoming than that of India's ostensible non-aligned partners (Kuo, 2024, as cited in Ranjan, 2025).

The end of the Cold War forced a recalibration. The collapse of the Soviet Union removed the geopolitical logic that had underpinned India's tilt against Israel, the Gulf War of 1990–91 devastated the remittance economy that hundreds of thousands of Indian workers in Iraq and Kuwait depended upon, and the broader liberalization of the Indian economy after 1991 created new incentives to engage Israel's technology and defense sectors on commercial terms. The result was the establishment of full diplomatic relations with Israel in January 1992 under P. V. Narasimha Rao itself an early, understated act of de-hyphenation, since it was not accompanied by any diminution of India's declared support for Palestinian statehood. Defense and technology ties expanded steadily but quietly across the 1990s and 2000s under successive governments of different political complexions, largely outside public view, giving rise to what several analysts have termed a “closeted” or semi-covert relationship (Kumaraswamy, 2010).

1.2. Manmohan Singh Interregnum: “Look West” as Proto-De-hyphenation

The Congress-led United Progressive Alliance government under Manmohan Singh (2004–2014) is generally treated in the literature as a transitional phase in which the practical logic of de-hyphenation was already operating beneath a still-cautious public posture. In 2005, Singh explicitly designated West Asia as India's “extended neighbourhood,” formalizing what came to be called the “Look West” policy: a systematic effort to deepen economic relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council states, to negotiate an India-GCC free trade framework, and to treat energy security and diaspora welfare as first-order strategic concerns

rather than incidental byproducts of trade (IDSA, 2011). Singh's government pursued closer ties with Israel in defense procurement — India had by the mid-2000s become one of Israel's largest arms export markets while simultaneously investing in the Chabahar port project with Iran from 2003 onward and voting for International Atomic Energy Agency resolutions against Iran's nuclear programme in 2005, 2006, and 2009, a sequence that drew criticism from the Indian left for appearing to subordinate the relationship with Tehran to Washington's preferences as part of the concurrently negotiated US-India civil nuclear agreement (Look West Policy, IAS Express, n.d.).

What distinguishes the Modi-era doctrine from this earlier practice is less substance than form: Modi's government made explicit and public what the Congress governments had pursued quietly and with rhetorical caution. Modi's tri-nation visit sequencing becoming the first Indian prime minister to visit Israel as a standalone destination in July 2017, having visited Palestine earlier that same year, and having visited Iran and the Gulf states repeatedly across his first two terms — was designed precisely to communicate that these relationships no longer needed to be balanced against one another or explained away. The shift, in other words, was substantially performative and rhetorical, converting a *de facto* practice into a named and celebrated doctrine, even as the underlying material logic asymmetric dependence on Gulf energy and remittances, growing defense reliance on Israel, and residual but shrinking strategic interest in Iran remained continuous with the preceding two decades.

1.3. “Link West” and the Institutionalization of Parallel Tracks

Under Modi, “Look West” was gradually rebranded and thickened into “Link West” (and, in some official usage, “Act West,” in deliberate echo of the Act East policy toward Southeast and East Asia), signalling an ambition to move beyond transactional economic engagement toward embedding India in the region's evolving security and connectivity architecture. This included membership in new minilateral formats such as the I2U2 grouping (India, Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and the US, established in 2021–22) and sponsorship of the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), unveiled at the New Delhi G20 summit in September 2023 (Yahoo News, 2026; MEI, 2026). These initiatives illustrate the operational meaning of de-hyphenation at the multilateral level: India could now enter security and connectivity architectures with the Gulf Arab states, the US, and Israel simultaneously, without needing to reconcile this participation with its stated commitments to Palestinian statehood or its residual relationship with Iran, both of which were pointedly excluded from IMEC's founding membership (MEI, 2026).

This section has argued that de-hyphenation should be understood neither as a return to Nehruvian principle nor as a mechanical continuation of Cold War bloc politics, but as a distinct grand-strategic innovation: the substitution of issue-based, compartmentalized bilateralism for either ideological solidarity or bipolar alignment. The remainder of this paper examines how this doctrine has actually functioned across India's three principal West Asian relationships, before asking whether it has survived contact with the region's most severe crises since 2023.

2. Modi Doctrine in Practice: Three Parallel Tracks

2.1. Israel: From Covert Supplier to Open Strategic Partner

Of the three tracks examined in this paper, the India-Israel relationship has undergone the most visible transformation since 2014. Where the relationship had operated for two decades under a kind of diplomatic camouflage — substantial defense trade conducted with minimal public acknowledgement, in deference to Arab and domestic Muslim opinion the Modi government moved deliberately to normalize open engagement. Modi's July 2017 visit, the first standalone trip by a sitting Indian prime minister, was reciprocated by Benjamin Netanyahu's visit to India in January 2018, and the relationship was formally upgraded to a “Strategic Partnership” with agreements spanning cyber security, space cooperation between the Indian Space Research Organisation and the Israel Space Agency, agricultural technology, and information and communications technology (Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses [IDSA], n.d.). A Bilateral Innovation Agreement between India's Defence Research and Development Organisation and Israel's Directorate of Defense Research and Development followed in November 2021, alongside a Multi-Sectoral Agreement intended to institutionalize cooperation on defense technology, intelligence sharing, and counter-terrorism (FINS, 2025).

The material scale of this relationship is considerable and has grown substantially in the period under review. Figures from Israel's Ministry of Defense International Defense Cooperation Directorate (SIBAT) indicate that India's Israeli arms purchases rose from roughly \$300 million in 2012 to more than \$3 billion in the year of Modi's 2017 visit, and that cumulative Israeli arms sales to India over the subsequent period totalled approximately \$20.5 billion, making India Israel's single largest arms export market, accounting for close to 37 percent of Israel's total arms exports in some recent years (Jerusalem Post, 2026; New Internationalist, 2026). During and after the Israel-Hamas war that began in October 2023, this supply relationship proved strikingly resilient: Israel continued uninterrupted deliveries of military equipment to India even as it delayed more than \$1.5 billion in arms exports to other clients, a signal of the priority New Delhi commands in Israeli strategic calculations (New Internationalist, 2026). Deals concluded in this period included Elbit Systems' Hermes 900 unmanned aerial vehicles, formally

inducted into India's defense inventory in 2023, Rafael's SPICE precision-guidance kits, Elbit's Rampage air-to-surface missiles, and Israel Aerospace Industries' Air LORA supersonic missile system, with agreements reported in 2026 alone worth some \$8.6 billion (JNS, 2026; Jerusalem Post, 2026).

Counter-terrorism cooperation has been the normative anchor of this relationship, allowing both governments to frame an otherwise conventional arms-and-technology trade in the language of shared civilizational threat. Following the 2008 Mumbai attacks, India rapidly acquired Israeli aerostat radars, thermal imaging systems, and satellite imaging capability through the TecSAR and RISAT-2 platforms (The Diplomat, 2024). Modi has repeatedly invoked Israeli counter-terrorism doctrine as a template, and Indian commentary on cross-border militancy has increasingly borrowed Israeli rhetorical and operational frames; the 2019 Balakot airstrikes, for instance, employed Israeli-manufactured SPICE-2000 precision-guided munitions (The Diplomat, 2024). This convergence deepened further during Operation Sindoor in May 2025, when Israel publicly supported India's stated right to self-defense and India employed Israeli-origin equipment in operational contexts, with Netanyahu subsequently praising the effectiveness of Israeli systems in Indian service (Middle East Forum, 2026). External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar's December 2025 visit to Israel further entrenched this framing, with both sides affirming a "zero tolerance" posture toward terrorism and discussing deeper intelligence-sharing arrangements (Middle East Forum, 2026).

This normalization has not been without domestic and international critique, much of it directed at the ideological affinities that appear to underlie the relationship's rapid deepening. Critics have argued that the Hindu nationalist political formation governing India since 2014 has cultivated not merely a strategic partnership with the Israeli state but an affective identification with what one critical account terms "the idea of Israel," a religiously inflected ethno-nationalist state-building project that resonates with the ruling party's own conception of India as a civilizational, majoritarian polity (Arab Reform Initiative, 2026). Whatever the merits of this reading, it is difficult to deny that the relationship's expansion has outpaced, and in important respects displaced, India's traditional rhetorical commitments to the Palestinian cause: Modi's 2017 visit to Israel was not reciprocally followed by comparable high-profile engagement with Palestinian statehood diplomacy, and the "reduction" in Palestinian salience within Indian foreign policy discourse that followed is noted even by relatively sympathetic observers of the relationship (Middle East Institute, 2019). India's continued rhetorical support for a two-state solution and its formal ties with the Palestinian Authority persist, but as subsequent sections will show, they have increasingly taken the form of ritual statements issued alongside and functionally subordinated to an operational relationship whose center of gravity lies squarely in Tel Aviv.

2.2. Iran: Energy Interests Between Sanctions and Suspicion

If the Israel relationship demonstrates de-hyphenation's capacity to generate rapid dividends, the Iran relationship demonstrates its structural fragility. India's engagement with Iran rests on three overlapping interests: energy security, given Iran's historic role as a crude oil supplier; regional connectivity, chiefly through the Chabahar port project, which offers India a maritime and overland route to Afghanistan and Central Asia that does not require transit through Pakistani territory; and a residual, if diminished, security interest in cultivating an alternative axis of influence in Afghanistan and Central Asia. Indian involvement at Chabahar dates to an intergovernmental memorandum of understanding signed in May 2015, ahead of Modi's own visit to Iran in 2016, and culminated in a ten-year operating contract signed by India Ports Global Limited (IPGL) with Iran's Ports and Maritime Organisation in May 2024, under which India committed approximately \$120 million for port equipment and machinery alongside a proposed \$250 million credit line for surrounding infrastructure (IMPRI, 2026; Business Standard, 2026).

This investment has existed under the permanent shadow of US sanctions policy. Washington granted India a project-specific sanctions exemption for Chabahar in November 2018 under the Iran Freedom and Counter-Proliferation Act, framed explicitly around the port's role in Afghan reconstruction, and this carve-out allowed India to develop the facility without formal exposure to secondary sanctions for over six years (Marine Insight, 2025). That insulation ended abruptly in September 2025, when the second Trump administration, pursuing a renewed "maximum pressure" campaign against Tehran, revoked the exemption effective September 29, 2025, placing India's investment and the personnel administering it at risk of sanctions designation (Marine Insight, 2025; Newsonair, 2025). India secured a temporary six-month waiver from October 29, 2025, while continuing to negotiate a broader bilateral trade agreement with Washington, but by mid-2026 reports indicated that IPGL-nominated directors had resigned and the company's public web presence had been withdrawn, suggesting a substantial though not yet formalized retreat from day-to-day management of the terminal even as the underlying ten-year contract remained nominally in force (Newsonair, 2025; IMPRI, 2026).

The 2026 Iran War, examined in greater detail in Section 3, exposed the deeper vulnerability of this entire posture. India's crude oil import dependence on the wider Gulf region — historically on the order of 85 percent of total crude imports, with Gulf Cooperation Council states alone supplying roughly 35 percent of crude and 70 percent of gas imports even before the 2026 crisis (CNBC, 2026; Deccan Herald, 2022) meant that any disruption to Strait of Hormuz shipping carried direct and immediate consequences for Indian energy security, consequences that Iran itself, rather than any external adversary, ultimately helped

trigger through its closure and mining of the strait during the conflict. India's historic reliance on Iranian crude had, in any case, already been effectively extinguished well before 2026: US secondary sanctions reimposed after Washington's 2018 withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action had compelled Indian refiners to cease Iranian oil purchases altogether from May 2019 onward, a decision New Delhi accepted with minimal public resistance despite Iran's status as India's third-largest crude supplier prior to that point. This is the central paradox of the India-Iran relationship under the de-hyphenation doctrine: India has been prepared to absorb the diplomatic and connectivity costs of maintaining a residual relationship with Tehran at Chabahar, while simultaneously acquiescing, with comparatively little contestation, to Washington's demand that it forgoes the far larger economic relationship, oil imports that had originally justified the tilt toward Iran. What survives is a relationship reduced almost entirely to its connectivity dimension, sustained less by shared strategic vision than by India's residual desire to avoid total dependence on Pakistani and Chinese-linked routes (via Gwadar) into Afghanistan and Central Asia.

2.3. The Gulf Cooperation Council States: Energy, Diaspora, and Maritime Security

The Gulf Arab states constitute the most economically substantial, and least politically contentious, leg of India's West Asia policy. The Indian diaspora in the GCC numbers approximately nine million people, and this workforce underpins a remittance relationship of extraordinary scale: Gulf countries contribute roughly 38 percent of India's total inward remittances, a flow the Reserve Bank of India and independent analysts have estimated at over \$50 billion annually, a sum comparable in magnitude to India's entire trade surplus with the US (CNBC, 2026; Kotak Neo, 2026; Voronoi, 2026). India has, in turn, become an indispensable source of both skilled and semi-skilled labour for Gulf economies undergoing rapid post-oil diversification, while bilateral trade and investment flows between India and the GCC now exceed \$300 billion when remittances, trade, and investment are aggregated together (Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, n.d.). The UAE alone accounts for roughly 18 percent of India's total remittance inflows, a relationship reinforced by the February 2023 Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement, which established frameworks for local-currency settlement and cross-border payment interlinkage between the rupee and the dirham (Business Standard, 2024).

Strategic partnerships with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Oman have been formalized and deepened considerably under Modi, with the Indian Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs noting in a December 2023 report that while India maintains close economic and political ties across the GCC as a bloc, only these three states have been designated full strategic partners (PRS Legislative Research, 2023). Several Gulf monarchies have conferred their highest civilian honours on Modi personally a form of symbolic diplomacy that critics read as evidence of the personalization, rather than institutionalization, of India's Gulf outreach (Middle East Forum, 2026). Maritime security cooperation has grown correspondingly, encompassing joint naval exercises, information-sharing arrangements to counter piracy and smuggling in the western Indian Ocean, and India's increasing role as a net security provider for regional shipping lanes upon which its own energy imports depend.

A further dimension of Gulf engagement lies in the connectivity architecture built around the I2U2 grouping and the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor. I2U2, comprising India, Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and the US, was established through a virtual leaders' summit in July 2022 and operates across water, energy, transportation, space, health, food security, and technology cooperation (I2U2 Group, n.d.; Model Diplomat, n.d.). IMEC, unveiled at the September 2023 G20 summit in New Delhi and encompassing India, the US, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Jordan, France, Germany, Italy, and the European Union, envisions an integrated rail and shipping corridor connecting India through the Gulf and Israel to Europe, framed explicitly by Western sponsors as a transparent, rules-based alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative (MEI, 2026; JNS, 2025). It is telling, for the purposes of this paper's critical argument, that both frameworks pointedly exclude Iran and, with the partial exception of Qatar's mediating role, much of the wider non-Gulf Arab world from their core architecture (MEI, 2026). De-hyphenation, in other words, operates asymmetrically: India is free to pursue Iran and the GCC states in parallel bilaterally, but the multilateral institutions through which its Gulf policy is increasingly channelled are themselves built around an implicit hyphenation of Israel with the Gulf Arab states and the US, from which Iran, and any deeper commitment to Palestinian statehood, are structurally absent. The corridor's momentum, moreover, slowed considerably within weeks of its announcement, as the October 2023 Hamas attack on Israel and the subsequent regional wars complicated the Saudi-Israeli normalization track upon which IMEC's northern route ultimately depends (MEI, 2026).

3. Stress-Testing the Doctrine: The Post-2023 Regional Crises

If de-hyphenation is to be judged a genuine grand strategy rather than a rhetorical convenience available only in periods of relative regional calm, it must be evaluated against precisely the kind of acute crises in which parallel, non-conditional bilateral tracks become difficult to sustain simultaneously. Two episodes since October 2023 provide such a test: The Israel-Hamas war and its associated diplomatic fallout, and the considerably more disruptive 2026 Iran War. Both cases reveal a consistent pattern an initial rhetorical equivocation designed to avoid antagonizing any single partner, followed by policy choices that, on balance, tilted toward the preferences of Israel and the US rather than toward Iran, the Palestinians, or the wider Arab and Islamic world.

3.1. Israel-Hamas War and India's UN Voting Record

India's response to the Hamas-led attacks of October 7, 2023, and the subsequent Israeli military campaign in Gaza illustrates the doctrine's central tension with unusual clarity. Modi's initial reaction, posted within hours of the attack, condemned the killing of Israeli civilians without qualification and made no reference to the Palestinian cause a marked departure from the more balanced formulations of previous Indian governments confronting Israeli-Palestinian violence. Within days, the Ministry of External Affairs issued clarifying statements reaffirming India's longstanding support for a negotiated two-state solution, a corrective widely read as a response to concern within India's own diplomatic establishment, and from Gulf Arab partners, that the initial statement had abandoned even the pretence of balance (Deccan Herald, 2023).

This ambivalence became structurally embedded in India's subsequent voting behaviour at the United Nations. On October 27, 2023, India abstained on a Jordanian-drafted UN General Assembly resolution calling for an immediate humanitarian truce, explaining its abstention on the grounds that the resolution failed to explicitly condemn Hamas or reference the taking of hostages; India's deputy permanent representative to the UN, Yojna Patel, stated in the explanation of vote that "terrorism is a malignancy and knows no borders, nationality or race" and that "the world should not buy into any justification of terror acts" (Tribune India, 2023a, 2023b). The resolution passed regardless, with 120 votes in favour, 14 against, and 45 abstentions, leaving India grouped with a small minority of states alongside the US, several European holdouts, and a scattering of Pacific and Latin American states that declined to support it (Tribune India, 2023b). India subsequently voted in favour of a Canadian-sponsored amendment condemning Hamas explicitly, and in December 2023 supported a separate resolution calling for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire, indicating that its objection had been narrowly procedural rather than a wholesale rejection of ceasefire diplomacy (Deccan Herald, 2023).

India's voting pattern across 2024 and 2025 continued to oscillate in ways that domestic critics characterized as incoherent rather than principled. India supported a December 2024 UNGA resolution demanding an immediate, unconditional, and permanent ceasefire in Gaza, joining 157 other states in a vote that saw only nine states, including the US and Israel, opposed (Newsonair, 2024). Yet in June 2025, India again abstained on a further ceasefire resolution, citing consistency with its prior voting record even though it had voted affirmatively on a comparable measure only six months earlier an inconsistency that the opposition Indian National Congress seized upon, with party president Mallikarjun Kharge describing Indian foreign policy as being "in shambles" and noting that India stood among only nineteen countries, out of 149 in favour, declining to back the resolution (Deccan Herald, 2025; The Wire, 2025). India's eventual vote in favour of a September 2025 UNGA resolution came only after an Israeli strike on Hamas political representatives in Doha, Qatar an attack that struck at the heart of Gulf Arab sovereignty and appears to have been the proximate trigger for India's departure from its prior pattern of abstention, rather than any independent reassessment of the humanitarian toll in Gaza, which by that point exceeded 67,000 deaths by most international estimates (Tribune India, 2026).

Read cumulatively, this voting record substantiates a critical rather than celebratory account of de-hyphenation's performance under crisis conditions. India's Government has been consistently more responsive to developments that directly threatened Gulf Arab partners such as the Doha strike or that risked domestic political cost, than to the underlying humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza itself. The government's decision to restrict domestic distribution of the documentary film chronicling the killing of a six-year-old Palestinian girl, Hind Rajab, on the stated grounds that it could damage relations with Israel amid the concurrent Iran war, is a further illustration of how directly Palestinian narrative and advocacy space within India has come under pressure precisely at the moments when de-hyphenation's costs to Palestinian interests are most. Domestic opposition parties have consistently invoked India's Nehruvian legacy of "non-alignment and moral diplomacy" to attack these choices, suggesting that de-hyphenation's departure from principled non-alignment remains a live and contested question in Indian domestic politics rather than a settled cross-party consensus (Deccan Herald, 2025).

3.2. The 2026 Iran War: Strategic Autonomy Under Acute Pressure

The far more severe test of India's de-hyphenation doctrine arrived with the outbreak of full-scale war between Israel, the US, and Iran on February 28, 2026, when American and Israeli forces launched coordinated strikes against Iranian nuclear, missile, and military infrastructure, killing Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, in the opening phase of the campaign (Britannica, 2026). India's official response was carefully hedged: New Delhi condemned strikes on American diplomatic and military installations without naming the US, Israel, or Iran as the responsible party, issued advisories urging Indian nationals in Israel and the wider region to exercise caution, and otherwise avoided taking any explicit position on the legality or wisdom of the initial Israeli-American strikes (Wikipedia, 2026; Newsonair, 2026). The Indian National Congress publicly criticized the government for declining to condemn the US-Israeli attack on Iranian sovereign territory, framing the silence as a further symptom of the erosion of India's traditional non-aligned voice on questions of unprovoked military aggression.

The costs of this rhetorical neutrality became concrete once Iran, in retaliation, closed and mined the Strait of Hormuz beginning in mid-March 2026, prompting a US naval blockade of Iranian shipping from April 13, 2026, and a sustained campaign of strikes

and counter-strikes that persisted, with intermittent ceasefires, through much of the year (Wikipedia, 2026a, 2026b; CFR, 2026). Approximately 46 to 50 percent of India's crude oil imports and roughly 90 percent of its LPG imports transit the Strait of Hormuz under normal conditions, and the closure directly threatened millions of Indian household's dependent on subsidized cooking gas as well as the broader economy's exposure to spiking global crude prices (Modern Diplomacy, 2026). On April 19, 2026, Iranian forces fired upon two Indian-flagged vessels transiting the strait, an incident serious enough that the Ministry of External Affairs summoned Iran's envoy in New Delhi for an explanation, though Tehran subsequently characterized the shooting as unintentional (Wikipedia, 2026a). India's petroleum ministry sought to reassure domestic audiences by emphasizing diversification achieved under duress: by March 2026, officials reported that roughly 70 percent of India's crude imports were being sourced from outside the strait, drawing on a broadened base of some forty supplier countries, alongside new long-term LNG contracting (Newsonair, 2026).

The Chabahar predicament, examined in Section 2.2, deepened in parallel: the war compounded the effects of the September 2025 US sanctions revocation, and by mid-2026 India appeared to be moving toward a negotiated, face-saving divestment of its operating stake in the port to an Iranian entity rather than a formal exit, a step one commentary described as risking the appearance that India was "meekly caving in to increasing US pressure" rather than defending an investment it had spent over two decades cultivating (Countercurrents, 2026). A ceasefire was eventually brokered with Pakistani mediation and formalized in a June 2026 memorandum of understanding, though subsequent violations and further exchanges of fire meant that a durable settlement of the underlying disputes over Iran's nuclear programme, the status of the Strait of Hormuz, and sanctions relief remained elusive well into the second half of 2026 (CFR, 2026).

Taken together, the two crises examined in this section suggest that de-hyphenation survives regional turbulence only at the level of declaratory policy, where India can continue to maintain simultaneous diplomatic relations with all parties and to avoid formally taking sides. At the level of material interest and operational choice, however, both crises reveal a consistent asymmetry: India's actual behaviour its silence on the initial US-Israeli strikes on Iran, its readiness to entertain winding down its Chabahar stake under US pressure, its pattern of UN abstentions that required an attack on a Gulf Arab capital before it shifted has tilted markedly toward accommodation of American and Israeli preferences, even when this accommodation has come at direct and substantial cost to India's own energy security and connectivity interests. This is the doctrine's central limitation: de-hyphenation promises symmetrical treatment of all regional partners, but delivers, under pressure, an asymmetrical bandwagoning that non-alignment's original architects would scarcely have recognized as autonomous.

4. Theoretical Implications: De-hyphenation and Multi-Alignment

The empirical record assembled in Sections 2 and 3 invites a broader theoretical question: what kind of grand strategy is de-hyphenation, and how does it relate to the concepts of hedging and multi-alignment that have come to dominate scholarly analysis of Indian foreign policy since the mid-2000s? The literature offers several overlapping frameworks. Ian Hall's influential account identifies three constitutive elements of Indian multi-alignment under Modi: broad-based membership in multiple, sometimes ideologically incompatible multilateral forums (the Quad and BRICS, or I2U2 and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, being paired examples); the cultivation of parallel strategic partnerships with states that themselves stand in tension or rivalry with one another; and "normative hedging," meaning the avoidance of robust, binding normative commitments that would foreclose future flexibility (Hall, 2016, as cited in Oxford Academic, 2021; Kara, 2025). De-hyphenation in West Asia is, in this framework, best understood as the regional instantiation of the second and third elements: India pursues concurrent strategic partnerships with Israel, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE (element two), while deliberately declining to take binding normative positions on the underlying political disputes Palestinian statehood, the legitimacy of Iran's nuclear programme, the wisdom of Israeli military operations that would otherwise force it to choose among these partnerships (element three).

This connects naturally to the broader concept of hedging as developed in the international relations literature on secondary and middle powers navigating great-power competition. Hedging, in its canonical formulation, describes a strategy that avoids the binary choice between balancing against a threatening power and bandwagoning with it, instead pursuing a portfolio of measures — economic engagement, limited security cooperation, institutional participation, and rhetorical ambiguity that preserve future strategic options across multiple possible outcomes (Pant & Super, 2015; Kara, 2025). Harsh Pant and Julie Super's account of India's post-independence quest for strategic autonomy through what they term "semi-alliances fashioned under the cover of non-alignment" anticipates much of the analytical vocabulary later applied to the Modi era, suggesting a substantial continuity between the instruments of Cold War non-alignment and the instruments of contemporary multi-alignment, even as the underlying justificatory rhetoric has shifted from ideological solidarity to pragmatic national interest (Pant & Super, 2015).

Applied to the specific triangulation of US-China rivalry that increasingly overlays West Asian geopolitics, de-hyphenation can be read as India's attempt to avoid a second-order entanglement: not merely the historic India-Pakistan-linked hyphenation that Indian diplomacy has long sought to escape, but a newer risk of being pulled into a West Asian theatre of US-China strategic

competition on terms not of India's choosing. IMEC's explicit framing by American officials as a "rules-based alternative" to China's Belt and Road Initiative situates India's Gulf and Israeli engagement squarely within this contest (MEI, 2026), yet India has simultaneously preserved economic and diplomatic channels with China-aligned Gulf infrastructure projects and has continued limited engagement with Iran notwithstanding Beijing's own deepening strategic partnership with Tehran, formalized in a twenty-five-year cooperation agreement in 2021. The proponents of the multi-alignment thesis would characterize this as evidence of considerable strategic sophistication: India retains optionality across a fracturing regional order precisely by refusing to fully commit to either the American-led connectivity architecture or a China-Russia-Iran axis.

A more critical reading, however, and one this paper endorses, holds that the sophistication of the multi-alignment framing obscures a less flattering reality: that de-hyphenation functions less as a genuinely balanced hedge than as a permissive vocabulary for what is, in practice, an increasingly asymmetric alignment with Israel and the US, rationalized after the fact as strategic choice rather than acknowledged as structural dependency. The evidence reviewed in Section 3 is difficult to reconcile with a model of true multi-directional hedging: a state genuinely maximizing optionality across all its regional partnerships would not have remained silent on unprovoked strikes against Iranian sovereign territory, nor would it have entertained divesting a two-decade infrastructure investment in Chabahar principally because Washington willed it, nor would its UN voting pattern have shifted only after an attack on a Gulf Arab capital rather than in response to the humanitarian toll in Gaza itself. Rajesh Rajagopalan and other realist critics of the strategic autonomy discourse have long argued that India's declared autonomy is frequently a rhetorical overlay on choices that are, in substance, heavily conditioned by asymmetries of power and dependency that India's own policy community prefers not to name explicitly (Rajagopalan, 2020). Applied to West Asia, this suggests that de-hyphenation is not so much a coherent alternative to alignment as it is a linguistic device that allows India to describe an asymmetric, US-and-Israel-leaning posture using the vocabulary of sovereign, multi-directional choice a vocabulary whose persuasiveness depends heavily on the absence of a crisis severe enough to force the underlying asymmetry into view. The events of 2023 through 2026 have been precisely such a crisis, and the doctrine's performance under their pressure has been considerably less impressive than its performance in the permissive, low-stakes conditions of the preceding decade.

This is not to say that de-hyphenation is wholly without strategic content, or that it collapses entirely into disguised bandwagoning. India has continued to derive real, material benefits from relationships with the Gulf Arab states in particular that would have been far harder to sustain under a more rigidly ideological non-alignment doctrine, and its willingness to maintain even a residual Chabahar presence under sustained US pressure, however diminished, does indicate some genuine, if modest, capacity to resist complete subordination to Washington's preferences. The more accurate characterization, therefore, is that de-hyphenation constitutes a graduated, asymmetric hedge: a strategy that preserves meaningful autonomy in low-stakes, primarily economic domains — energy contracting, diaspora management, trade diversification while yielding substantially more ground to Israeli and American preferences in high-stakes domains involving direct military confrontation, UN Security Council-adjacent diplomacy, and formal sanctions compliance. Whether this graduated pattern constitutes a durable grand strategy for a rising power, as its proponents claim, or merely a sophisticated euphemism for a widening strategic dependency, as this paper's critical reading suggests, is likely to be settled less by further theoretical elaboration than by how India navigates the next, inevitably more severe, iteration of West Asian crisis.

5. Conclusion

This paper has traced the evolution of India's West Asia policy from the ideologically anchored non-alignment of the Nehru era, through the pragmatic but still cautious "Look West" recalibration of the Manmohan Singh government, to the explicit and celebrated doctrine of de-hyphenation pursued under Narendra Modi since 2014. Across three parallel tracks — Israel, Iran, and the Gulf Cooperation Council states the doctrine has delivered substantial and measurable dividends: a defense and technology relationship with Israel now worth tens of billions of dollars and central to India's own counter-terrorism and precision-strike capabilities; a diversified energy and remittance relationship with the Gulf that anchors nearly nine million Indian workers and tens of billions of dollars in annual inflows; and, notwithstanding growing strain, a residual connectivity foothold in Iran that preserves at least the possibility of a Pakistan-independent route into Central Asia.

Yet the stress tests examined in this paper the Israel-Hamas war from October 2023 and, still more severely, the 2026 Iran War expose limitations that proponents of the doctrine have generally understated. De-hyphenation's central promise is that India can pursue each of these relationships on its own merits without one constraining or compromising the others; the record instead shows that when the relationships come into genuine tension, as they did dramatically in early 2026 when Israel and the US went to war against Iran, India has not so much balanced among them as quietly deferred to the preferences of Israel and Washington, accepting real costs to its energy security, its Chabahar investment, and its moral standing on Palestine in the process. The doctrine's UN voting record across 2023 to 2025 further suggests that India's stated even-handedness bends more readily in response to threats against Gulf Arab partners than in response to Palestinian civilian casualties, a pattern that domestic critics have persuasively characterized as inconsistent with the moral-diplomatic legacy the government still selectively invokes.

Whether de-hyphenation can survive an era of intensifying regional polarization is therefore an open and genuinely uncertain question. The doctrine was conceived and refined during a period, roughly 2014 to 2023 in which West Asia's fault lines, while real, rarely forced outside powers into binary choices with immediate material consequences for India. The compounding crises since October 2023 have made such binary choices considerably more frequent and costlier to avoid, and there is little evidence in the record examined here that India possesses instruments — short of accepting the asymmetric costs already described capable of insulating it from future rounds of the same dilemma. A rising power seeking genuine strategic autonomy in West Asia would need either to develop a more credible capacity to resist great-power pressure at moments of acute crisis, or to accept more openly that its West Asia policy is not, in fact, autonomous in the sense its own diplomatic vocabulary claims, but is instead an increasingly tightly bounded space of manoeuvre defined by its deepening security dependence on Israel and its economic dependence on a Gulf order that itself remains substantially shaped by American security guarantees. Until India resolves this tension, de-hyphenation will likely continue to function less as the coherent grand strategy its architects describe than as a resilient but fraying rhetorical accommodation to a set of dependencies India has not yet found the means, or perhaps the will, to escape.

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