
FROM MOSSADEGH TO MULTIPOLARITY: TRACING COLD WAR STRATEGIC LOGIC IN THE IRAN–ISRAEL–US CONFLICT

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ABSTRACT

The Iran–US–Israel rivalry should not be read as a break from the past, but rather as a modern iteration of Cold War strategic dynamics recast for today's multipolar world. Cold War-era interventions were most decisively. Operation Ajax worked in embedding lasting structures of dependency and foreign interference into West Asian politics, shaping the postwar regional order in ways that persist to this day. The evolution of Iran's place in this order and the dramatic shift in Iranian identity in the 1979 Revolution created an Iranian axis and paved the way for the US-Israel-Iran triangle that still exists today. A brief overview of the current conflict in this context brings to light a series of Cold War paradigms: the use of alliances and strategic balancing between regional and global powers, proxy warfare and secret intervention as instruments of statecraft, and a changing security dilemma with the involvement of nuclear deterrence issues. These older mechanisms now operate alongside new pressures introduced by multipolarity with the chief among them being, the diffusion of power across competing global actors and the erosion of the bipolar discipline that once constrained regional escalation. The paper also places India in this context, examines its energy security concerns, oil price volatility, interest of its diaspora and aspirations of connectivity with its neighbours, and shows the need for India to engage in a delicate balancing act between competing powers. Based on realist, neo-realism and liberal perspectives, the analysis suggests that the current crises in the region are rooted in their Cold War heritage despite a change of actors and instruments, and that multipolarity has been more of an imprint of these inherited structures than a dissolution.

Keywords: Cold War legacies, West Asia, security dilemma, multipolarity, India's strategic balancing.

Introduction

The modern dispute between Iran, Israel and the United States has often been explained as an outcome of religious hostility, nuclear desire or post-9/11 geopolitics. Nevertheless, these kinds of accounts ignore the structural origins that lie beneath the surface and trace back to the Cold War. This paper contends that the ongoing conflict in the region is not a new rivalry but a continuation and transformation of the old dynamics of rivalry and geopolitical competition in the region, shaped in the context of the Cold War in West Asia.¹

Using the case of Iran in the Cold War and the theories of international relations, this paper will analyse the current conflict and look at the consequences of these developments to Asian regions, especially India.

1. The Cold War and the Strategic Making of West Asia

West Asia occupied a position of exceptional strategic significance during the Cold War owing to its vast hydrocarbon reserves, its maritime chokepoints like the Strait of Hormuz and the Suez Canal. Iran occupied a central position here due to its geography, oil resources, and political alignment. As *George Kennan's 'Doctrine of Containment'* took institutional shape through the *Truman Doctrine* and the *Baghdad Pact of 1955*, the United States sought to construct a regional architecture designed to prevent Soviet expansion southward.² The region thus became not merely a theatre of local politics but a zone of superpower contestation what scholars identify as a *shatterbelt*.

On the centre of this rivalry was Iran, which had a long border with the Soviet Union and was located at the northern littoral of the Persian Gulf. Besides its geographical significance, Iran also had huge oil deposits, which grew important for the Western economies after the Second World War. Great powers accordingly treated Iran not as a sovereign agent but as a strategic asset to be secured, aligned, or neutralised. This logic directly shaped the most consequential act of external intervention in modern Iranian history the *1953 Iranian coup d'état*.³

¹ Abrahamian E, *Iran Between Two Revolutions* (Princeton University Press 1982) 12–18.

² George Kennan, 'The Sources of Soviet Conduct' (1947) 25 *Foreign Affairs* 566, 575.

³ Mark J Gasiorowski, 'The 1953 Coup D'état in Iran' (1987) 19(3) *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 261 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/163655>.

1.1 Operation Ajax

The US-sponsored Operation Ajax, which overthrew the democratically elected Prime Minister **Mohammad Mosaddegh** and reinstated **Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi**, exemplifies Cold War power politics with precision.⁴ Mosaddegh's nationalisation of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company threatened Western economic interests and, risked opening Iran to Soviet influence.⁵ The coup was, therefore, the meeting of the interests of capitalist economy and the policy of Cold War containment whereby Iran became a major ally in the Western bloc.

2. Iran's Role in the Cold War Order

Before 1979, Iran occupied a pivotal position in the US-led regional security architecture. Washington armed the Iranian military to which it supplied advanced weapons systems, and used Iran as a surrogate power which under the **Nixon Doctrine**, is termed as '*regional policemen*'.⁶ This was done to maintain direct American military presence in the gulf. Iran's collaboration with Israel during this period, formalised through covert intelligence-sharing under the framework known informally as the '*alliance of the periphery*' was a product of Cold War.⁷ Both were non-Arab powers in a region dominated by Arab nationalism, and sought security through alignment with Washington.⁸

2.1 The 1979 Islamic Revolution

The 1979 Islamic Revolution was transformatory, turning Iran from a pro-Western monarchy into an anti-Western theocratic state. The overthrow of the Shah and the establishment of the Islamic Republic constituted a rupture not merely in Iranian domestic politics but in the entire structure of US strategy in West Asia.⁹ From a constructivist standpoint, drawing on **Alexander Wendt's** insight that "*anarchy is what states make of It*" Iran's new identity as an

⁴ Mark Gasiorowski and Malcolm Byrne (eds), *Mohammad Mosaddegh and the 1953 Coup in Iran* (Syracuse University Press 2004) 3.

⁵ Mostafa T. Zahrani, *The Coup That Changed the Middle East: Mossadeq v. the CIA in Retrospect*, 19 World Pol'y J. 93 (2002).

⁶ Ray Takeyh, *Guardians of the Revolution: Iran and the World in the Age of the Ayatollahs* (Oxford Univ. Press 2009).

⁷ Trita Parsi, *Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran, and the United States* (Yale University Press 2007) 19–22.

⁸ Trita Parsi, 'Israel-Iranian Relations Assessed: Strategic Competition from the Power Cycle Perspective' (2005) 38(2) *Iranian Studies* 247 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4311724>.

⁹ Ali Ansari, *Confronting Iran* (Basic Books 2006) 78.

Islamic revolutionary state reshaped its foreign policy.¹⁰

2.2 The US-Israel Alliance and Regional Restructuring

Israel's strategic relationship with the United States was also consolidated during the Cold War. After the Arab and Israel war, the US strengthened its relations with Israel and the *Camp David Accords (1978)* also rearranged the geopolitics of West Asia by disengaging Egypt with the Arab nationalist bloc. These developments left Iran and Israel on opposite sides, from Cold War alignment into an existential rivalry.¹¹

3. The Contemporary Conflict: Old Patterns in New Forms

The contemporary Iran-Israel-US conflict, while marked by new proximate causes Iran's nuclear programme, Israeli strikes on Iranian assets in Syria, Hezbollah's missile arsenal, US sanctions can be analytically understood as the continuation and transformation of these older Cold War structures.

3.1 Alliance-Making and Strategic Balancing

Firstly, the US-Israel alliance retains the structural character of a patron-client relationship. The *Abraham Accords (2020)*, which normalised relations between Israel and several Arab Gulf states, reflect the persistent and shared feeling of states anxiety about Iran are being drawn together through US facilitation, reconfiguring regional alignment around a new anti-Iran axis.¹² From a realist balance-of-power perspective, this is a classical counter-coalition against a perceived revisionist power.

3.2 Proxy Competition and Covert Intervention

Second, there is intervention and proxy competition. Similarly to how the Cold War was characterized by the US and USSR backing rival forces in the region, the current conflict is characterized by Iran being supportive of non-state armed forces such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza, the Houthis in Yemen, and militia groups in Iraq as a tool of strategic depth. Israel's sustained campaign of strikes against Iranian military infrastructure in Syria, and the US killing of *Qasem Soleimani* in January 2020, are acts of intervention that echo Cold War-

¹⁰ Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge University Press 1999) 246.

¹¹ John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (Norton 2001) 34–37.

¹² Shmuel Trigano, *The Abraham Accords: Contrasting Reflections* (Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies 2021) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep29695>.

era operations. The tools have changed but the structural logic of proxy wars continues.¹³

3.3 Nuclear Deterrence

Third, the nuclear programme of Iran creates the very security dilemma which realists see as part and parcel of anarchic international systems. The JCPOA (2015) that limited enrichment rates and introduced IAEA inspections as a way of sanctions relief was a rare instance of arms-control collaboration.¹⁴ Its failure after the withdrawal of the Trump administration in 2018 caused an expected vicious cycle – Iran enriched more to sixty percent and limited IAEA oversight.

This underscores the classic security dilemma: Iran's escalation reflected coercive signalling under sanctions pressure rather than offensive intent. The following US-Israeli attack on Iranian nuclear sites in 2026, within just two days after the indirect talks at Geneva,¹⁵ broke the diplomatic process completely in the Cold War tradition in which great-power competition destabilised arms-control systems.¹⁶

4. Asian Dimensions: India's Stakes and Strategic Dilemmas

4.1 Energy Security and Oil Prices

The Iran-Israel-US conflict generates profound implications for Asia, and particularly for India. On energy security, India is among the world's largest importers of crude oil.¹⁷ Iran has historically been a major supplier, and disruptions to Gulf oil flows translate directly into inflationary pressures on the Indian economy. India's decision to continue importing Iranian crude after the reimposition of sanctions, illustrates paralleling of the Cold War dilemma of non-aligned states navigating between competing blocs.

4.2 Diaspora, Connectivity, and Balancing

There is a large Indian diaspora in Gulf Cooperation Council states estimated at over nine

¹³ George Perkovich, 'Iran Is Not an Island' (2020) 62(3) *Survival* 65, 70.

¹⁴ Colin Dueck & Ray Takeyh, 'Iran's Nuclear Challenge' (2007) 122 *Pol Sci Q* 189.

¹⁵ Broad WJ and Sanger DE, 'History of Iran's Nuclear Programme' *New York Times* (New York, 2025).

¹⁶ Nick Shepley, 'The Iranian Revolution and the Cold War: The Unraveling of a Client State and the Birth of a Revisionist Power' (Explaining History, 5 September 2025) <https://explaininghistory.org/2025/09/05/the-iranian-revolution-and-the-cold-war-the-unraveling-of-a-client-state-and-the-birth-of-a-revisionist-power/>.

¹⁷ Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money and Power* (Simon & Schuster 1991) 450.

million persons.¹⁸ The escalations in West Asia risks not only the welfare of Indian nationals but disruption of remittance flows critical to India's balance of payments. India's connectivity interests, exemplified by the Chabahar Port project in Iran developed as an alternative route to Afghanistan and Central Asia, are directly imperilled by US sanctions.¹⁹ This creates a structural tension between India's strategic aspirations and its security partnership with Washington.

From a theoretical perspective, India's position can be analysed through the lens of Nehru's original non-alignment philosophy, India seeks to maintain beneficial relations, a 'multi-alignment' strategy that is structurally analogous to the balancing acts of non-aligned states during the Cold War, suggesting once again the persistence of older structural logics in new configurations.²⁰

5. Theoretical Perspectives

The international relation theory takes the analysis beyond the narrative of the events and exposes the forces of structure and ideation that perpetuate the conflict over decades. Realism gives the clearest perspective as in an anarchic system, states are aggressors to secure survival. The nuclear aspirations, proxy groups, and obstinacy to foreign pressure by Iran are not instances of irrational ideology but logical reactions to unfavourable security climate developed through decades of intrusion and encircling.

Neorealism refines this by locating explanation at the systemic level. Waltz's insight that structure compels self-help behaviour illuminates why Iran's strategic choices have remained consistent across two radically different regimes. It is the architecture of the system, not the ideology of the government, that reproduces the conflict.

The institutional focus of liberalism, though normatively attractive, reveals its limits of analysis in this case. The unsuccessful experience of multilateral diplomacy since the collapse of the JCPOA to Geneva negotiations left on the eve of military action indicates that institutional arrangements are doomed when power asymmetries are not settled, and hegemonic actors

¹⁸ Harsh Pant, 'India's Iran Dilemma' (2011) 14(6) *Asian Security* 533, 540.

¹⁹ Sonia Sarkar, 'India in a Fix Amid US-Israel War Against Iran' (*The Loop*, 20 March 2026) <https://theloop.ecpr.eu/india-in-a-fix-amid-us-israel-war-against-iran/>.

²⁰ C Raja Mohan, *Samudra Manthan: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Indo-Pacific* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace 2012) 88.

exercise international norms selectively.

Conclusion

The recent events in West Asia show that the conflict has been escalated into a developing and active geopolitical conflict. Targeted strikes, retaliatory drone and missile strikes, and the increasing tension throughout the region, including Lebanon and the Red Sea, show that the conflict is now working in several interdependent theatres.²¹ These trends are indicative of the continued existence of proxy warfare and indirect confrontation despite increasing instances of direct engagement.

Although these modern changes have taken place, the rationality of the conflict is typical of the Cold War. The conflict in the case of Asia, and India in particular, is also viewed through prism of Cold War-era concerns, namely the vulnerability to energy, the exposure of the diaspora, and the limitations of connectivity, and the long-term challenge of not sacrificing strategic autonomy to the competing great powers. Finally, the war shows how the historical geopolitical systems still determine current realities in West Asia.

²¹ Arab Center Washington DC, 'The US-Israel War on Iran: Analyses and Perspectives' (Arab Center Washington DC, 2 March 2026) <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/the-us-israel-war-on-iran-analyses-and-perspectives/>.