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UAE-India Relations: Expanding 'Strategic' Vistas

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Executive Summary

- The United Arab Emirates and India have expanded their relationship beyond the traditional areas of energy, trade and community. Instead, they are tapping new opportunities in investments, infrastructure development, cooperation in space, nuclear and renewable energy technology, arid agriculture, and, above all, enhanced defence and security links.
- The two countries have framed these new relations in a 'Comprehensive Strategic Partnership' agreement that was signed in New Delhi in January 2017. Going beyond the 'bilateral', the agreement envisages a wider engagement to address regional and global challenges.
- This EDA Insight examines three specific areas of collaboration envisaged in the agreement: food security; enhanced maritime security cooperation in the Indian Ocean; and the promotion of regional stability through confidence-building measures among contending parties and shaping, over time, of cooperative security arrangements in the Middle East.
- It points out that UAE investments in the technological upgrading of India's food storage capabilities, as part of a 'farm-to-port' project, will avoid extraordinary wastage in the country's agricultural produce, and food thus saved could be used to partly meet the UAE's requirements.
- It notes that the central importance of maritime cooperation for the security of the Indian Ocean is not just for the two nations' food security, but also for the long-term shared interests of the littoral countries to expand logistical connectivity projects and tackle climate change issues.
- The article suggests that the UAE and India could shape and lead a diplomatic initiative to put in place government-to-government dialogue and policy coordination mechanisms that would embrace the Indian Ocean community.
- Finally, drawing from the shared vision of bilateral cooperation to promote peace and stability in the region, as set out in the public statements of the leaders of the two countries, the article recommends a joint role in the promotion of security and development in Afghanistan.
- It also urges both countries to increase their collaboration in the new and challenging area of promoting peace and stability in the Middle East
- The Insight also advocates that India and the UAE, perhaps in tandem with other major Asian powers, such as China, Japan and South Korea, could begin Track II dialogues, with a long-term view towards shaping cooperative security arrangements in the region.

The Issue

India's ties with the countries of the Gulf go back several millennia, when their ancestors jointly traversed the waters of the Indian Ocean and set up commercial, religious, intellectual and philosophical interactions that shaped a common civilisational identity, which remains vibrant to this day.

One key factor in the resilience of these relations has been the fact that these ties have been constantly refreshed to meet contemporary needs. If India has been the traditional provider of foodstuffs, textiles and items of elegant living to the region, it also, after the oil boom of the 1970s, became a major source of human resource to facilitate the dramatic expansion of infrastructure, industrial and welfare facilities in the oil-producing countries of the Gulf. Indians, thus, are the largest expatriate community in the region.

In turn, as India's economic growth has risen to between 6-8 percent per year, it has become a major market for the energy resources of the Gulf, with the Gulf suppliers currently meeting nearly 80 percent of India's oil imports.¹

Now, with the dawn of the new century, with attendant changes in world order, the powerful implications of technological innovation and globalisation, and the simultaneous expressions of national and sub-national identities and aspirations, there is a need to reshape Gulf-India relations. It is important that mutual interests are safe-guarded and the region is better prepared to cope with the contradictory pulls of globalised connectivity and national assertions, amidst emerging conflictual scenarios, particularly in the Middle East.

These new challenges call for a fresh look at how the UAE and India can work together to define and pursue a new role for mutual advantage and regional interest. This EDA Insight is an exploration of this new role.

Relevance

The robust engagement initiated by the leaders of the UAE and India over the last two years and the far-reaching agreements they have committed their nations to, suggest that the ground has been prepared to shape a new bilateral relationship. It elevates their "friendly relationship to a comprehensive strategic partnership."² This promotes not just their interests but also the security of the region, with which the welfare and even the destinies of the two countries are deeply enmeshed.

Besides the domestic challenges posed by the aspirations of the youth, which have been shaped in a technologically connected and globalised world, the

Middle East is engulfed in primordial conflicts shaped on ethnic, sectarian and religious identities. These emerge from security vulnerabilities and camouflage traditional strategic competitions that endanger the well-being of the states and people of the Middle East and, indeed, the rest of Asia, which is crucially dependent for its progress on its energy, economic and community links with the region.

Since no regional or external power seems to be effective in promoting a peace process, this EDA Insight proposes that India and the UAE attempt initiating a diplomatic effort to promote peace and stability in the region. It notes that this would be a new role for the two countries, but argues that they are well placed to lead this initiative.

In order that the security concerns of the Middle East are addressed on a long-term basis, the article also recommends that the two countries work towards encouraging a new 'regional' security arrangement.

Shared Interests

When Prime Minister Narendra Modi landed in Abu Dhabi on 16 August 2015, he became the first Indian premier to visit the UAE in 34 years. His two-day engagement with the political and business leaders of the UAE, headed by His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and Deputy Supreme Commander of the UAE Armed Forces, began to shape a new relationship between the two countries.

They moved into areas not envisaged earlier: those of security and defence cooperation and collaboration in the areas of frontier technologies such as space, renewable energy and sustainable development, arid agriculture and desert ecology, advanced healthcare and urban development.

The two leaders also envisioned their ties well beyond the bilateral. They noted shared threats to regional peace and stability, mainly through the scourge of religious extremism and terrorism. Based on their "natural strategic partnership,"³ they agreed to jointly endeavour to realise "the vision of an Asian Century".⁴

The depth of shared interests between the countries and the personal warmth between the two leaders were reflected in the quick return visit to India of Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed in February 2016, and later his presence in New Delhi as chief guest at India's Republic Day celebrations in January 2017. The joint statement finalised during this visit fleshed out many of the ideas and initiatives that had been envisaged in earlier interactions.⁵

The 'Comprehensive Security Partnership' agreement signed during this visit not only highlighted the two countries' concerns relating to the regional security scenario, it also set out specific action points to promote their interests.

Among the several items flagged for cooperation, three ideas identified for joint pursuit stand out for their novelty and implications for long-term benefits to their own interests and the interests of the neighbourhood that the two countries share: food security, maritime cooperation in the Indian Ocean region, and the promotion of regional security and stability.

Food Security

In the 2017 joint statement, the two countries agreed that "ensuring food security remains an area of high priority". The statement then set out certain specific proposals to be pursued in this area, such as food security parks, food processing, and use of technology in storage, preservation, packaging and marketing. Together, it covers the full food value chain and binds the two countries for all-round efforts in this new area of cooperation.

Given the scarcity of water and arable land, the UAE imports nearly 90 percent of its food requirements. As a result, it attaches the highest priority to its long-term food security interests. It is particularly concerned about the possibility of food supplies being disrupted by market or political volatilities. This was most acutely experienced during the 2007-08 world food crisis, when world prices of rice, for example, rose by 217 percent.⁶

The crisis was exacerbated by restrictions on exports by major suppliers to the UAE, such as India, Russia, Vietnam and Argentina. This brought home to the

leadership the country's vulnerability on the food front and led to it viewing food security as a national concern.

In response to this challenge, the UAE and some other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries considered gaining exclusive access to farm produce by buying or obtaining arable land on long lease in certain African and Asian countries, such as Sudan, Ethiopia and Pakistan.

But, this was not a completely successful venture. While the lands were fertile, they were poorly served in terms of logistical infrastructure and legal frameworks and governance, even as foreign control over farmlands raised serious local sensitivities and violent opposition on occasion.⁷

Given these and other concerns associated with the possible impact of climate change on agriculture, the UAE has undertaken several initiatives, including the October 2017 appointment of H.E. Mariam Al Muhairi as Minister of State for Food Security.

The UAE has now moved to investing in agricultural companies in relatively developed countries, such as Serbia, Poland and Ukraine. Being surplus in food production, these countries do not generate local concerns relating to foreign ownership of arable land.⁸ The UAE has also attempted to augment its domestic food production through use of modern and efficient irrigation systems, but with limited results.

Farm-to-Port Project

This background throws up interesting opportunities for the UAE and India to cooperate in the sensitive area of food security for mutual benefit. A start has been made with the pioneering 'farm-to-port' project, which envisages a special corporatised farming zone

Box 1: Food Security-for-Energy Security

Interestingly, this food security project could be viewed as a reciprocal gesture for the UAE's recent contribution towards India's quest for energy security.

Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC) and the Indian Strategic Petroleum Reserves Ltd. agreed in January 2017 to establish a strategic crude oil storage in Mangalore, south India. ADNOC will store about 6 million barrels of oil at the facility, taking up about half the site's capacity.

Guarding against energy security risks as it imports most of its oil needs, New Delhi is building emergency storage facilities to hold 36.87 million barrels of oil, which is about 10 days of its average oil demand per day.

According to the UAE Minister of State and ADNOC Group CEO, H.E. Dr Sultan Al Jaber: "We will utilise the Mangalore facility to not only build on our existing business relationships across India but also to explore new downstream opportunities for ADNOC's expanding range of refined and petrochemical products."¹³

While the deal allows India to have first rights to the stored crude in case of an emergency, ADNOC would be able to move cargoes to meet any shift in commercial demand.

where crops are grown for the UAE market, with dedicated logistics infrastructure to the port.⁹

This farm will also house agro-industries facilities. In fact, given India's huge fruit and vegetable produce and vast quantities that are wasted due to poor storage, the food processing sector has the greatest potential for UAE-India cooperation, especially investments.

This partnership potential assumes relevance in the backdrop of the following pointers related to India's inadequacies in the food storage sector.

- India loses about 21 million tonnes of wheat annually, the equivalent of Australia's entire produce, valued at US\$ 8.3 billion, due to inadequate storage and distribution facilities. According to the national auditor, India lacks appropriate warehouses to store 33 million tonnes of food grains procured from farmers.¹⁰
- Similarly, India loses about 21 million tonnes of vegetables and 12 million tonnes of fruits annually due to the absence of requisite cold storage amenities.¹¹
- Overall, analysts estimate that 13 percent of India's national GDP is wasted annually due to wastage of food grains in the supply chain.¹²

These realities in both countries open several opportunities for UAE investment in India's farm-related logistics sector. This technological cooperation could yield extraordinary quantities of cereals and processed food that would boost domestic stocks and partly meet the needs of the UAE as well.

Box 2: SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region)

New Delhi is promoting the idea of ocean-based 'blue economy', wherein sustainable economic development could be linked to security as well. Introducing the vision of SAGAR (which means ocean in Hindi) in Mauritius in March 2015, India Prime Minister Narendra Modi said: "We seek a future for Indian Ocean that lives up to the name of SAGAR...Our goal is to seek a climate of trust and transparency; respect for international maritime rules and norms by all countries; sensitivity to each other's interests; peaceful resolution of maritime security issues; and increase in maritime cooperation."²⁵

One aspect of food security that is gaining increasing salience in the GCC countries is 'chokepoint risk'. This means food imports reach these countries by traversing through maritime chokepoints, which are vulnerable to geopolitical and climate change risk.

These concerns, among others, have brought to the fore the importance of India-UAE maritime cooperation.

Maritime Cooperation

The 2017 joint statement expressed the resolve of the two countries to cooperate to counter piracy "in their shared maritime domain in the Gulf and the Indian Ocean regions". It added that the two countries would "exchange experiences in maritime security, including joint anti-piracy training and exercises".

Elsewhere in the statement, the two leaders referred to cooperation on security issues, including counter-terrorism, maritime security and cyber-security, as "a key pillar of the bilateral strategic partnership."¹⁴

One of the most significant aspects of the Indian Ocean scenario is the steady expansion of energy and economic ties between the GCC countries and the rest of Asia. Economic connectivities across the Indian Ocean region, including energy, trade, investments, and human resources, are already so substantial and diverse that it would be accurate to describe them as constituting the "New Silk Roads" of the 21st century.¹⁵

Some important aspects of these links are as follows.

The bulk of the Gulf hydrocarbon production is now consumed in Asia. The Gulf states' exports to China, India, Japan and South Korea are more than three times larger than those to the United States and the European Union, and are projected to increase steadily over the next two decades.¹⁶

- Currently, 55 percent of Middle Eastern crude is being consumed in Asia, as is 95 percent of the gas. By 2040, 90 percent of Middle Eastern oil production will be consumed in Asia.¹⁷
- While India presently gets 80 percent of its oil from the Gulf, China gets 70 percent, and Japan and South Korea get over 90 percent of their requirements from the region.¹⁸
- 30 percent of global trade is now South-South and 40 percent of the total GCC trade is with Asia.¹⁹
- Almost 90 percent of the GCC food imports pass through the maritime chokepoints in the region – the Suez Canal, the Bab Al Mandab and the Straits of Hormuz.²⁰

These factors provide the basis for building UAE-India cooperation in maritime security. And, this is being proposed at a time when the UAE is seeking to

establish a place for itself in the turbulent region of the western Indian Ocean.

In October 2016, President Ahmad Mohammed Silanyo of the self-declared republic of Somaliland, which is formally a part of Somalia, announced that his government had concluded a memorandum of understanding, which enables the UAE to set up naval and air bases at Berbera. This agreement followed an agreement between Somaliland and the UAE's DP World, wherein the latter would invest US\$442 million for the development of the Berbera port.²¹

In 1855, British traveller Richard Burton described Berbera as "the true key of the Red Sea, the centre of East African trade, and the only safe place for shipping" along the East African coast. It retains its geopolitical and commercial importance to this day.

The base in Berbera is aimed at ensuring that the Houthis in Yemen do not obtain external assistance, and complements the UAE's naval presence at Assab in Eritrea.²² This base ensures that the UAE will effectively forestall any attempts to interrupt the free flow of maritime traffic in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, through the Bab El Mandeb by political rivals, extremist groups or pirates. The UAE is also training Somaliland's forces in anti-terrorism capabilities to confront the extremists from Al Shabab in Somalia.

Though India has a much larger footprint in the Indian Ocean and broader concerns about recent developments in the region, particularly from the activities of the Chinese navy in these waters, the two countries have enough shared interests to work together for maritime security.

The Indian Ocean, which is so crucial for the livelihood and wellbeing of billions of people, is today in the throes of competition and conflict, where failed and failing states have bred dangerous forces for discord and destruction. Its geo-economic importance has also caused geo-political tensions and confrontations that are simmering under the surface at present but could easily flare up into wider and destructive conflicts.

The absence of a comprehensive security management system has meant that no effective platforms are available for dialogue and conflict amelioration. This also means that some of the long-term areas of concern, such as climate change and environmental degradation do not receive the high-level and focused attention they urgently deserve. As Lee Corder has noted succinctly:

It is in the marine domain that the interests of IOR [Indian Ocean Rim] states largely converge, and it is at sea that the need for cooperative security is most pressing. It is also at sea that the best opportunities lie to develop mechanisms, and ultimately habits, of security cooperation that may in the future have applications to more controversial security agendas.²³

The Indian Ocean has two pan-oceanic institutions of which both India and the UAE are prominent members: the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), a platform to promote economic cooperation among its 21-member countries; and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), which brings together the naval chiefs of 35 member countries to discuss maritime security issues. However, there are no institutional arrangements in place in either organisation to discuss and coordinate policies and action plans for ocean-wide security and stability.

Indian Ocean Diplomatic Initiative

India, in association with the UAE, could shape and lead a diplomatic initiative to put in place government-to-government dialogue and policy coordination mechanisms that would embrace the Indian Ocean community. This initiative would have three attributes:

1. it would be diplomatic in character in that the armed forces of participating nations will not play any role in promoting the initiative, though the participating governments could assign them specific roles when the need arises;
2. it will be inclusive – ultimately, all the IOR littoral states should become members of the initiative; for ease of decision-making, membership could be limited in the initial stages; and
3. the initiative will be evolutionary in terms of its security role – this will enable quicker consensual decision-making and help participants shape the content and mode of functioning of the new institution.

The lead players of the initiative should be the members and observers of the IORA, with the distinction between members and observers being done away with. Membership of the initiative may be expanded to bring in additional members from the different sub-regional groupings.

The principal responsibilities of the reformed IORA would be:

- preserving freedom of navigation for commercial shipping;
- sustainably and equitably harnessing the Indian Ocean's natural resources;
- establishing protocols for enhancing disaster prevention and relief as well as search and rescue operations;
- countering piracy, terrorism, smuggling, and illegal weapons proliferation; and
- managing international naval competition.²⁴

The UAE and India are well placed to shape and lead this initiative. Both are active members of the IORA and the IONS, even as their long-term energy, economic and security interests are crucially linked to stability across the Indian Ocean Rim, particularly in South and West Asia.

Again, India's geo-strategic location gives it a central place in Indian Ocean trade and security, while the UAE is a major role-player in the affairs of the Gulf, the Middle East and the Horn of Africa. India has solid naval and sea-going merchant navy capabilities, while the UAE is a leading hub for regional energy, trade, finance and logistical links.

Both countries also share concerns about the implications of climate change and environmental degradation. The same is true about safeguarding the resources of the ocean. Since the 2004 tsunami, India has also built up an excellent record of ocean-wide disaster relief and humanitarian assistance.

Above all, both the UAE and India have the best possible diplomatic, energy, economic and strategic ties with almost all the principal nations within and outside the IOR littoral. The UAE – with its global humanitarian assistance programme and the well-earned perception of being a moderate, modern and forward-looking nation that is committed to technology and welfare – has a positive image across the region.

India is closely linked with the countries of the Gulf, even those in contention with each other. It has also built strong bilateral and multilateral ties with the IOR island nations, such as Sri Lanka, Mauritius, Seychelles and the Maldives, and has close ties with the principal Indian Ocean players – Saudi Arabia, South Africa, Indonesia and Australia.

However, for maritime cooperation to yield long term value, the two countries would need to work together to address the competitions and confrontations nearer home – in the Middle East itself.

Regional security and stability

Since the disruptive events of 2011 that led to the fall of some Arab regimes and opened the doors to civil conflict in Syria, Libya and Yemen, as also the proliferation of extremist elements in Iraq and Syria in the shape of Daesh, the security scenario in the Middle East has deteriorated considerably. Now, the two major regional powers, Iran and Saudi Arabia, are engaged in proxy wars on two fronts, in Syria and Yemen, and have shaped their strategic rivalry in sectarian terms.

Box 3: Joint aircraft production plan

Beyond maritime security, another area of strategic UAE-India engagement lies in the defence sector – for example, joint manufacturing of defence equipment and aircraft, especially Rafale fighter jets. According to Indian Ministry of External Affairs official Amar Sinha: "We are looking at armaments, we are looking at armoured personnel carriers. We are looking at joint production of aircraft...For example, as in the case of Rafale, which we are buying and the UAE is also using, there is some interest. This is something that we can do together in terms of a portion of the Rafale that would be built in India. These are the areas that we are identifying and will work together."²⁹

During this period of crises, the UAE has been reshaping its role in regional and world affairs. Analysts have pointed out that the UAE has done this through an astute combination of soft, hard and 'smart' power – by utilising humanitarian assistance to over 150 countries and military force in Syria, Libya and Yemen in defence of its interests and in counter-terrorism operations.²⁶

In the use of smart power, the UAE's principal approach has been multilateral, based on its membership of important regional and global organisations, its world-wide economic engagements and its commitment to diplomatic solutions, wherever possible.

The UAE's outreach to India should be seen in this background. The joint statements of 2015 and 2017 envisage a larger, region-wide security-promotion role for the two countries.

In 2015, the two leaders spoke of the "need for a close strategic partnership" in these "uncertain times". They also set out the content of the "comprehensive strategic partnership" that included the need to "work together to promote peace, reconciliation, stability, inclusiveness and cooperation in the wider South Asia, Gulf and West Asia region."²⁷

Similarly, in the 2017 joint statement, the two leaders “resolved to expand the India-UAE partnership for the benefit of their countries, for peace, stability and prosperity in their region, and for the betterment of the world”. In the statement, the UAE also looked forward to India “playing an increasingly important role in regional and global affairs”. New Delhi reciprocated by stressing: “Our convergence can help stabilise the region.”

In fact, Singapore-based scholar Mohammed Sinan Siyech views the participation of UAE troops in India’s Republic Day parade in 2017 not just as expression of the strategic partnership, but also as a “shedding of political inhibitions” on the part of the two countries.²⁸

Calming the Crises

This sets the stage for a strong UAE-India initiative to address the divisions in the Middle East and promote security in the region, to implement the visions of the leaderships of the two countries.

Afghanistan would be a good starting point. Both India and the UAE have a long-standing commitment to the unity, integrity and welfare of the country. Since the events of 9/11, the UAE has contributed to the security of Afghanistan with its troops and has also provided very substantial development assistance.

It paid a heavy price for this engagement when the UAE ambassador, H.E. Juma Al Kaabi, and other officials were killed in a terrorist attack in Kandahar in February 2017, the first such attack on Arab diplomats in nearly four decades.

India too has a deep interest in Afghanistan’s unity and development, and shares the UAE’s concerns relating to the influence of the Taliban and their extremist affiliates in Pakistan and in Afghanistan itself. In fact, the 2017 UAE-India joint statement “condemned efforts, including by states, to use religion to justify, sustain and sponsor terrorism against other countries”, and then called on all states “to control the activities of the so-called ‘non-state actors.’”

The UAE and India could work together to combat extremist elements in Afghanistan and coordinate their development assistance and infrastructure and logistics projects in the country. This would make a positive contribution to Afghanistan’s fight against the Taliban, contribute to capacity-building of the Afghan security forces, and promote national unity by strengthening the government in Kabul.

However, it is the deteriorating situation in the Middle East that urgently calls for a collaborative role between the two partner countries to promote security and stability. On the face of it, this is a daunting challenge – the Middle East is riven with conflict and disputes between states, and India has so far been reluctant to involve itself diplomatically in intra-regional disputes.

However, India no longer has the option of sitting on the fence. Given its long-term interests, crucially linked with its energy security, economic well-being and the welfare of its eight million-strong community, India has every incentive to pursue diplomatic initiatives that could contribute to promoting stability in the region.

Simultaneously, given the importance of stability to pursue its path-breaking development, the UAE could work with India to find innovative ways to pursue regional peace at a time when no regional or extra-regional power seems capable or even willing to stem the tide of conflict.

A first step towards exploring out-of-the-box initiatives could be a UAE-India conclave, initially on Track-II basis, that also associates some of the principal Asian powers – China, Japan and South Korea, among others, who have shared concerns, interests and objectives regarding the Gulf.

This effort could be a prelude to a larger, more ambitious enterprise in the long term – the realization of a new collective security arrangement, involving the regional players, Asian and European powers, as well as Russia and the United States. Such a diplomatic initiative would obtain considerable heft and credibility with the association of all major players of the world.

There is a special urgency for pursuing such peace initiatives since this is a time of serious disruptions in the regional order, coupled with challenges emerging from the post-oil era, technological incursions, and new aspirations being articulated across the Middle East.

Conclusion

Peace and stability in the Gulf and Middle East will have significant positive implications for the region and the western Indian Ocean region in general, both in terms of regional food security and logistical connectivities.

The UAE and India will be able to promote region-wide food connectivity, with upgraded food production, storage and distribution facilities and upgradation of food quality through research and development inputs, thus increasing food production and reducing possibilities of supply disruptions.

Another benefit of peace and stability in the region will be the ability of the Indian Ocean countries to pursue the expansion of regional logistical links as trans-Asian projects. This means embracing not just the China-initiated proposals included in the Belt and Road Initiative, but also the projects that India is pursuing through Iran to Afghanistan, Central Asia, Russia and Western Europe, such as the International North-South Transport Corridor.

The UAE-India initiative will bring to the region, for the first time in a century, a non-military approach to regional security that is based on the active participation of the regional states themselves as key role players. Equally, it would not exclude other nations, including Western powers, that have a stake in regional security.

A cooperative security arrangement that embraces the entire Middle East will ensure that intra-regional differences, that today, in the absence of viable platforms for dialogue, spin out of control and even become "existential threats", would be effectively addressed at early stages. Over time, confidence-building processes, institutionalised in specialised joint working groups, would improve region-wide stability and promote cooperative developmental projects.

This would be the most significant achievement of the 'Comprehensive Strategic Partnership' that the leaders of the UAE and India envisioned in January 2017 for their peoples and the neighbourhoods they share.

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