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# Indian Diplomacy in Practice: Building a Strategic Partnership between India and the Gulf

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## Executive summary

- ◇ This Insight presents a case study related to Indian diplomatic practice, namely pursuing the shaping of the strategic partnership with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf.
- ◇ The Insight is a practitioner's perspective, narrating the first-hand experience of the events that occurred at different times between 2001 and 2010 and the rationale behind the moves that culminated in diplomatic success for India.
- ◇ It documents the process that facilitated the reshaping of Indo-Saudi relations – moving from reopening political interactions in 2001 to achieving a 'strategic' partnership in 2010. It sets out the diplomatic assessments relating to the prevailing circumstances made by the author that facilitated this crucial shift in bilateral ties.
- ◇ It highlights the significance of good knowledge of the politics, society and culture of the state to which an ambassador is accredited, the importance of personal relationships, and a deep sense of empathy with the host country and its people which enables a diplomat to assess the opportunities available to promote bilateral ties.
- ◇ The main aim of the personal account, analyses and observations in this Insight is to add value to the existing pedagogy of diplomacy.

## The Issue

The divide between India and Pakistan has been consistently reflected in both countries' dealings with the Gulf and has led to the shaping of two very different relationships in terms of focus and content. In the early period after independence in August 1947, the Arab states preferred India as a political partner: they welcomed India's non-alignment policy and were uneasy about Pakistan joining the Baghdad Pact in 1955, which included Iran, Iraq and Turkey. India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, received a warm welcome in Saudi Arabia in 1956 as a "messenger of peace".

The situation changed with the republican revolutions in the Middle East, starting with Egypt in 1952, followed by Iraq, Yemen, Syria, and Libya. India found itself ideologically more in tune with the revolutionary governments that espoused nationalism, secularism and socialism, compared to the Arab monarchies.

The Cold War had its reverberations in the Middle East: the monarchies joined Pakistan in the western alliance led by the US, while the Arab republics and India, were more comfortable with the Eastern bloc, with the Soviet Union emerging as their principal political, economic and defence partner.

After the 1967 war, the balance of influence in the Middle East shifted from Egypt in favour of Saudi Arabia, which then sought to affirm its leadership on the basis of its guardianship of Islam's holiest mosques. It convened a summit of Islamic leaders at Rabat in 1969. India was invited to this conclave, but, on Pakistan's insistence, the credentials of its delegation were withdrawn.

This humiliation led to India's long-term estrangement from the Jeddah-headquartered Organisation of Islamic Conference, which institutionalised the platform of the Islamic countries.

## India-Pakistan Divide in the Gulf

Through the Cold War, Pakistan developed close political and military relations with the monarchies in the Gulf: as the Sheikdoms assumed statehood from the 1970s, Pakistan, on the basis of Cold War solidarity, became their security partner and helped modernise their armed forces. Pakistani troops were also located in most of the Gulf nations – there were 15,000 Pakistani soldiers in Saudi Arabia between 1968 and 1988, with other countries having Pakistani personnel for training and maintenance purposes.<sup>1</sup>

The financing and management of the mujahedeen struggle against Soviet occupation in Afghanistan, which became a "global jihad" from 1986, fostered a solid strategic partnership between the US, Pakistan and the Gulf monarchies that, from 1981, had come together to form the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). This alliance provided the funding and weaponry for the struggle, with Pakistan managing the logistics, indoctrination, training, and military support during conflict.

India was neither part of the mujahedeen struggle nor did it countenance the 'global jihad': in principle, it opposed the use of religion to serve political interests. Thus, during the Cold War, while Pakistan became the political and defence partner of the GCC monarchies, India had hardly any political interactions with these states.

But India was not entirely excluded from the region. From the 1970s, as the Cold War raged, the oil producers of the Middle East obtained a massive inflow of revenues following the dramatic rise in oil prices which were then used to fund the extensive development of infrastructure and welfare services. This required human resources on an unprecedented scale – and it is to India that the Middle East nations turned, despite India being on the opposite side in the Cold War divide and having practically no political links worth the name.

In the 1980s, despite the ongoing jihad in Afghanistan, the demand for Indian manpower soared. This is confirmed by contemporary figures – in 1982, expatriate communities in Saudi Arabia were: Yemeni, over three million; Egyptian, about one million; Pakistani, about half a million; and Indian, about a quarter of a million. By 1990, the situation had drastically changed: Yemenis had been expelled, while Indians were nearly a million-strong and ahead of all other expatriate communities.<sup>2</sup>

Indian workers were appreciated for their technical skills, their sense of discipline and their non-involvement in local politics. Thus, India made up for the absence of political and defence ties with the confidence vested in its nationals across the GCC region.

## Indira Gandhi's Visit in 1982

The one exception to the absence of high-level political interactions between India and Saudi Arabia took place in 1982, when prime minister Indira Gandhi visited the Kingdom on the invitation of then crown prince Fahd bin Abdulaziz, who was also the country's prime minister. The visit took place against the background of momentous events in the region – the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the

Iran-Iraq war, and the Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan. The occupation was then being opposed by the Afghan mujahedeen who were backed by Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and the US, while India had refused to publicly criticise the Soviet military presence in the country.

During the visit, a major effort was made by Saudi Arabia to reverse the earlier estrangement, re-engage with India politically and discuss matters of common concern. The most significant outcome of this interaction was the following paragraph in the joint communique:

“The Crown Prince particularly welcomed the visit of Prime Minister Mrs Indira Gandhi to Saudi Arabia at this critical juncture when the prevailing hostilities and tension in the region posed a very grave threat to regional and international peace. The Crown Prince and the Prime Minister recognised that the stability and security of the Gulf region and that of the Indian Sub-Continent were closely interlinked. (Emphasis added.) In this context they emphasised the need for and importance of closer and regular contacts as also of deeper and more diversified exchanges between India and Saudi Arabia.”

This paragraph not only saw a seamless connectivity in the security of South Asia and the Gulf, but it was also a signal to other Gulf countries to build fresh ties with India.

Again, the paragraph relating to India-Pakistan ties said:

“The two sides ... underlined the importance of maintaining an atmosphere conducive to further negotiations between India and Pakistan to attain the objectives of non-aggression and non-use of force through mutually acceptable arrangements. It was agreed that the consolidation of India and Pakistan relations would serve the interests of the peoples of the two countries and would contribute to security, stability and peace in South Asia and in the entire region.” (Emphasis added.)

Here, the Saudis projected a balanced approach and emphasised the positive impact that good Indo-Pakistan ties would have on both South Asia and West Asia. Again, though the visit took place during the Iran-Iraq war and the early stages of the mujahedeen struggle in Afghanistan, there was no effort by the Saudis to insist that India take sides.

While the paras from the joint communique indicate the possibility of important changes in regional relationships, Indira Gandhi’s assassination on 31

October 1984 put an end to this attempt to recalibrate ties. Saudi Arabia, the US and Pakistan consolidated their ties on the battlefields of Afghanistan, with the ‘global jihad’ in Afghanistan continuing till 1989 and the destructive Iran-Iraq war unrelenting until 1988. These events, which saw India and Saudi Arabia on opposite sides, also meant their remaining politically estranged for another 20 years.

## Rebuilding Political Ties

The end of the Cold War opened opportunities for new political postures and alignments. But in the Middle East this took another decade to become viable. The 1990s saw the Middle East mired in conflict and regionwide uncertainty due to Iraq’s occupation of Kuwait, the First Gulf War, the subsequent sanctions-inspections regime in Iraq, and the US-led “dual containment” of Iraq and Iran. In India, too, there was political turbulence, domestic contentions and grave economic uncertainty.

In January 1998, I became the head of the Gulf Division<sup>3</sup> in the Ministry of External Affairs. Within a few months, in May 1998, India tested its nuclear weapons capability. We had, for some years, been describing the Gulf as our “extended neighbourhood”, the implication being that events in the region would impinge on India’s interests. After the nuclear tests, I concluded that the reverse was also true – what happened in South Asia would also have implications for the Gulf.

Hence, I suggested to the government that we engage with the Gulf countries at vice-minister level (secretary-level, in India) and explain the background to the tests, reassure the region of our peaceful intentions, and explore how we could develop our bilateral relations. The government responded to my proposal positively. I accompanied my senior colleague to the six GCC countries in June and July 1998. These were the first senior officials’ interactions with most of these countries in several years. Many Gulf leaders complained that India had neglected the region and allowed our historic ties to flounder.

On our return from these tours, I used the inputs obtained from different countries to prepare a strategy paper that set out a plan to develop ties with the Gulf in political, energy, economic, and community-welfare areas.

The paper called for specific initiatives to build the sinews of bilateral relations with each country – regular high-level visits, conclusion of important agreements (for example, the Bilateral Investment Protection and

Promotion Agreement, the Double Taxation Avoidance Agreement, Culture Agreement, etc.), activation of joint commission meetings, institutionalisation of the bilateral strategic dialogue at officials' level, regular exchanges of business delegations and cultural troupes – thus imparting a regular rhythm to bilateral engagements.

The paper also included a two-year Action Plan for each country, which was to be refreshed with new inputs and updates annually. This paper was examined by senior officials, and, after it was approved by the minister concerned, it became government policy. The nuclear tests, thus, had the unintended consequence of creating an opportunity to shape a new and active approach to India's ties with the Gulf countries.

## Re-opening Political Ties

The first indication we had about Saudi interest in re-opening political ties with India was the welcoming remark made by Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdulaziz to a visiting Indian minister who had gone to the kingdom to finalise the Hajj agreement in 1997: "Why has India forgotten us?" Though I spotted this in the record of discussions as soon as I became head of the Gulf Division, follow-up action could not be taken immediately because India was then experiencing political uncertainty with short-lived minority governments – three between 1997 and 1999.

With the formation of a credible coalition government in New Delhi in 1999 under Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, Saudi Arabia extended an invitation in early 2000 to the Indian external affairs minister, Jaswant Singh, to visit the kingdom.

The visit of Jaswant Singh to Riyadh in January 2001, the first-ever by an Indian foreign minister, marked the beginning of a political engagement between India and Saudi Arabia that imparted a new substance and momentum to political relations.

At his meeting with the Indian minister, Saudi foreign minister Prince Saud Al-Faisal first cleared the cobwebs that had blighted bilateral relations for several decades. He cogently set out the kingdom's position on the Kashmir issue which the Indian minister found completely acceptable. Prince Saud particularly emphasised that the Kashmir issue was a bilateral matter between India and Pakistan and needed to be resolved through negotiations between the two countries. The prince then stated that Saudi Arabia valued its ties with India on their own merits and would not view India through

the prism of its relations with any other country – an obvious reference to its ties with Pakistan, nurtured through the Cold War.

Having cleared the air, the two ministers conversed freely on regional and global issues and found a remarkable congruence in their perceptions. Crown Prince Abdullah consolidated the goodwill between the two countries by personally gifting two Arabian horses from his stables to the Indian minister.

The positive impact of the opening with India was felt within a few weeks: an Indian business delegation that visited the Kingdom in May 2001 was approached by several hundred businesspeople in the cities of Riyadh, Jeddah and Dammam; two years earlier, this same team had met no more than 10 persons in each city.

High-level political interactions were briefly interrupted by the events of 9/11 later that year when Saudi Arabia had to use all its resources to re-engage with the US and other Western nations.

In January 2006, King Abdullah was the chief guest at India's Republic Day celebrations, the first visit of a Saudi monarch to India since 1955. On arrival, the king said that India was his "second home" and proceeded to sign with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh the "Delhi Declaration" which stated that India and Saudi Arabia were "strategic energy partners".

This re-opening of the political relationship took place alongside other developments: India began to register high growth rates, became a significant global energy consumer and major importer of oil and natural gas from the Gulf countries. The first decade of this century also saw a significant expansion in India's trade ties with the GCC: the latter became one of India's top three trade partners and the largest export destination.

By 2010, Indian manpower in the GCC countries expanded to over five million, while its profile diversified to include an increasing number of professionals, particularly engineers, architects, chartered accountants, and business managers. Indians were not only the largest expatriate community in every country of the GCC, but they were also the majority community in three countries – the UAE, Qatar and Bahrain. Businesspeople of Indian origin also became important figures in the local economies, with a major presence in the areas of retail, real estate, health, education, and financial services.

## Mumbai Attacks

Even as India's ties with the GCC countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, flourished in the years after the Cold War, there was one area in which hardly any progress could be achieved: from the early 1990s, the violence in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir was increasingly fuelled by the cross-border infiltration of extremists from Pakistan and had acquired the character of a jihad.

However, a carry-over from Pakistan's close political ties with the Gulf's leaders through the Cold War meant that the latter failed to be persuaded that these were attacks by violent extremists, and continued to believe that the violence was linked with the unresolved Kashmir issue. It needed the attack on Mumbai in November 2008 to finally change this perception.

During this period, I was the Indian ambassador to the UAE (2007-10) and witnessed at first-hand the impact of this horrendous assault on popular opinion and the concerns it generated among UAE leaders and officials. I made a few presentations on the attacks before UAE security officials and realised that the attacks had made the whole region feel vulnerable and unsafe.

### Mumbai Attacks, 26-29 November 2008

These were a series of coordinated attacks on 12 targets in Mumbai over four days. The bombings and shooting attacks were carried out by a ten-member team comprising members of the Pakistan-based extremist group Lashkar-e-Tayyaba. The principal high-profile targets were: the iconic Taj Mahal Hotel, the Chhatrapati Shivaji Railway Terminal, the Oberoi Trident Hotel, the Leopold Café, and Nariman House – a Jewish religious centre. While nine of the attackers were killed by security personnel, one of them, Ajmal Kasab, a Pakistani national, was captured alive. In all, 174 persons were killed in the attacks and over 300 were wounded.

Subsequent investigations revealed full details of the planning and execution of the attacks. A detailed account of the attack is available in: Cathy Scott-Clerk and Adrian Levy, *The Siege: The Attack on the Taj* (Penguin, 2013).

I pointed out to my UAE interlocutors that the Mumbai attack had certain undeniable features: it was a jihadi attack and was carried out by extremists based in Pakistan; it was very likely that their movement from Karachi to Mumbai had also been organised by Pakistani agencies. The attacks clearly had no connection with the Kashmir issue: these were terrorist attacks, with

the extremists carrying out wanton killings at different targets selected at random across Mumbai.

It soon became evident that our engagement in the aftermath of the Mumbai attacks helped GCC countries see the true nature of the terror threat to India and identify the country as a valuable partner in the area of counter-terrorism.

## 'Strategic' Partnership

In January 2010, I was posted back to Saudi Arabia as ambassador, primarily to handle the visit to Riyadh of prime minister Manmohan Singh, his reciprocal visit to the kingdom after King Abdullah's visit in 2006. In preparing for this visit, I was guided by what I had learnt during my Abu Dhabi posting – that the Kingdom was now ready to elevate its ties with India to the level of a "strategic" partnership.

I titled my official approach paper for the ministry: "Towards a 'strategic partnership' with Saudi Arabia", and pointed out that, while cooperation in counter-terrorism would be the driver of these new relations, it would open the door to a substantial expansion of political and security ties.

That this perception was accurate was reflected in the protocol arrangements made by the kingdom for the Indian prime minister. All the major streets of Riyadh were decorated with the Indian flag and placards of warm welcome. Dr Manmohan Singh was welcomed at the airport by the three senior royals – Princes Sultan, Naif and Salman bin Abdulaziz. The prime minister addressed the Shura Council and received a standing ovation on arrival and several times during his speech. He spoke to students at the King Saud University. And the king conferred on him the kingdom's highest award, the King Abdulaziz Sash.

Saudi Arabia's commitment to the "strategic partnership" was reflected in the 'Riyadh Declaration'; its subtitle said: "A New Era of Strategic Partnership". Nearly 30 years after the Indo-Saudi joint communique of 1982 and nine years after external affairs minister Jaswant Singh's visit, the Declaration said:

"Keeping in view the development of relations between the two countries, and the potential for their further growth, the two leaders decided to raise their cooperation to a strategic partnership covering security, economic, defence and political areas."<sup>4</sup>

Besides reiterating their commitment to jointly combat terrorism, the two leaders signalled that the proposed

bilateral ties would go beyond counter-terrorism to include defence.

The impact of the changed relationship was immediately felt across the Kingdom, particularly in the security and business sectors. Very substantial and actionable information on the movement and planned activities of extremists in the region was exchanged by the agencies concerned. Saudi business delegations, which for long had been wary of going to India, now travelled frequently and in large numbers, looking for opportunities for trade, investments and joint ventures. (At least twelve Saudi delegations have visited India in the last few years.)

From the embassy's side, our challenge was to maintain the momentum of the relationship in all areas of bilateral cooperation. In the area of culture, we mounted a major exhibition at the National Museum in Riyadh of the works of Indian women artists, who showcased their works with Saudi women artists. We also organised an "international film festival" at the embassy auditorium where we screened the best works from India and other countries for Saudi audiences who, at that time, had no access to cinema. My colleagues and I travelled extensively to different parts of the Kingdom so that the message of the changed relationship was carried outside the capital, both to Indian and Saudi audiences.

The solid foundations laid in 2010 prepared the ground for the flowering of India's relations with Saudi Arabia and other GCC countries. Prime Minister Narendra Modi thereafter paid particular attention to ties with these countries through frequent exchanges of visits. In August 2015, Modi started his Middle East engagement with a visit to the UAE, which has laid the basis for an extraordinary enhancement and rapid growth of bilateral ties.

In fact, the Indo-Saudi template of strategic ties found expression in the "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership" agreement concluded between the two countries in January 2017. This has included an expansion of bilateral interactions in the energy field – leading Indian conglomerate, Reliance Industries, plans to establish a major oil and petrochemicals trading unit in the UAE, while the UAE's national oil company, ADNOC is reportedly at the top of the list of foreign companies that would be considered to buy a substantial stake in the high-profile privatization of major Indian refiner, Bharat Petroleum.<sup>5</sup>

Every visit of the prime minister to the Middle East capitals emphasised the centrality of strategic partnerships, founded on the high degree of shared perceptions and approaches on security issues. The joint

statement with Saudi Arabia of April 2016 recalled the words of the joint communique issued in Riyadh in 1982, after prime minister Indira Gandhi's visit, and noted "the close interlinkage of the stability and security of the Gulf region and the Indian sub-continent and the need for maintaining a secure and peaceful environment for the development of the countries of the region". Flowing from this, it spoke of the two countries' responsibility to promote peace, security and stability in the region. It also called on the two countries "to strengthen maritime security in the Gulf and the Indian Ocean region".<sup>6</sup>

The two countries have since set up a 'Strategic Partnership Council, headed by the Indian prime minister and the Saudi crown prince. This council met in Riyadh in October 2019 and set up two bodies at ministerial level: one dealing with political, security and socio-cultural matters, and the other dealing with economic and investment issues. These bodies are backed by several working groups that meet regularly.

India's strategic partnership with the UAE is today managed by two high-level committees – the High-level Joint Task Force on Investments that meets at minister-level and the Annual Defence Dialogue – defence cooperation is steered through a Joint Defence Cooperation Committee at the Ministry level, while Naval Staff Talks take place between senior naval officers of the two countries. The ninth meeting of the Joint Task Force took place in Dubai in October 2021, when the two ministers affirmed their "ambitious goals to expand trade and investment activities" between the two countries.

Exemplifying the close defence relations that India now has with the region, the Indian Navy has conducted exercises with the navies of both Saudi Arabia and the UAE.<sup>7</sup>

## Concluding Observations

As highlighted earlier, the 2001-2010 period saw a significant change in Indo-Saudi and Indo-Gulf relations. This was largely the result of diplomatic effort, i.e., the ability to read changes in the understanding of external situations by regional leaderships and seize the opportunities offered in prevailing circumstances to promote the national interest.

Students of diplomacy may be interested in the following observations on this subject:

One, the importance of regional specialisation: long residence in a particular region, the study of its history, politics, economics and culture, and keeping oneself

updated even when not posted in the area – these are essential bases to discover the shifts in perceptions of local leaders and opinion-makers. The interactions with local populations should be with diverse segments, not just with senior officials, and should include media-persons, academics, business persons and religious leaders.

Two, the need for patience. Foreign leaders' perceptions and attitudes change very slowly – they are the product of their understanding of the dynamics of a particular situation or issue that has been shaped over a long period and will not be changed in a few meetings, regardless of the strength or persuasiveness of an ambassador's presentations. After all, from the foreign leader's perspective, a diplomat is merely doing his job – making a one-sided argument to suit his position!

Three, the diplomat must never forget that, in foreign affairs, there is no zero-sum result of one's efforts. Merely because I helped improve Indo-Saudi ties and worked on taking them to the "strategic" level does not mean that Saudi-Pakistan ties got eroded. The principal lesson here is that countries have different relations with different countries based on their understanding of their interests.

I had no difficulty in understanding, for instance, that Saudi Arabia's ties with India have different bases and interests as compared to its ties with Pakistan – its leaders and diplomats make every effort to keep these ties separate and, when there is a clash, also make every effort to minimise the negative fallout on their relations with the two contending countries.

While this case study of diplomacy in action has a long timeframe of over a decade, the first one narrated earlier lasted just a month, even as it affirmed the value of certain basic lessons of diplomacy mentioned in this case.

## Endnotes

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2. Personal assessment of the author who was Indian Consul General in Jeddah in 1987-90, based on embassy records and discussions with local officials and prominent employers.
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