

# GROWING INDO-GULF DEFENCE COOPERATION AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

The historic relations between India and the Gulf countries have undergone a qualitative transformation and has created a new momentum in bilateral ties. The changing nature of the geopolitics in Gulf and South Asia and the increasing confidence among the Gulf nations to develop ties with India, the future of Indo-Gulf defence cooperation looks bright

By **DR. MD. MUDDASSIR QUAMAR**



The historic relations between India and the Gulf countries have undergone a qualitative transformation under Prime Minister Narendra Modi. His ability to engage in active diplomacy with the leaders of the Gulf has created a new momentum in bilateral ties. This is visible from the regular exchange of high level visits to and from the Gulf. Since first becoming prime minister in May 2014, Modi has visited the GCC countries seven times, including thrice to the UAE and once each to Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman and Bahrain. The only Gulf country the prime minister has not visited is Kuwait. In addition, Modi has engaged with the Saudi leadership at various multilateral forums, especially the G-20 meetings including latest in Osaka, Japan in June 2019. As reflected in the joint statements issued during the high level meetings, the emphasis is on enhancing business and investment ties and improving security and defence cooperation.

training of officers from the Royal Saudi Armed Forces at Indian defence training institutes and in December 2017 the first group of Saudi cadets joined the three-year training course at the National Defence Academy, Pune.

The two sides have also agreed to begin joint exercises between different branches of the military and it is expected to be operationalised soon. During the visit of Saudi Crown Prince

## GROWING DEFENCE COOPERATION

### SAUDI ARABIA

India and Saudi Arabia first signed a MoU on defence cooperation in February 2014 when then Crown Prince and Defence Minister (now King) Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud visited India paving the way for greater engagement between the security agencies and militaries of the two countries. The desire for improving defence cooperation was re-emphasised during Prime Minister Modi's visit to Riyadh

in April 2016 and Crown Prince and Defence Minister Mohammed bin Salman's visit to New Delhi in February 2019. As per the MoU, India and Saudi Arabia have formed a Joint Committee on Defence Cooperation (JCDC) and it held its fourth meeting in Riyadh in January 2019. Further, delegation level visits have taken place between the two armed forces in 2018. As a step towards improving military-to-military ties, India and Saudi Arabia agreed for



in February 2019, New Delhi and Riyadh “agreed to cooperate and collaborate in joint defence production of spare parts for Naval and Land systems as well as supply chain development.” Moreover, maritime security is considered a significant aspect of defence cooperation and the two sides have agreed to “work together with other Indian Ocean Rim Countries” to ensure security in the Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea. The Indian navy and coast guards hold regular interactions with their counterpart and Indian Naval Ships often undertake port calls to Saudi Arabia. In February 2018, India’s Chief of the Naval Staff Admiral Sunil Lanba visited the kingdom to discuss expanding maritime security cooperation and furthering of ties between the two navies.

## UAE

Defence cooperation has emerged as a key area of the growing bilateral ties between India and the UAE. It has emerged as a focus area with the renewal of the MoU on defence cooperation in 2014 and the formation of the Joint

Defence Cooperation Committee (JDCC) that has held regular meetings since. In January 2017, India and the UAE signed another agreement for cooperation in the field of defence industry. This has led to the participation of an Indian delegation led by Minister of State Subhash Bhamre in the International Defence Exhibition (IDEX) in Abu Dhabi in February 2017. Subsequently, a UAE delegation visited India to participate in Defence Expo in April 2018 held in Chennai. In October, a delegation led by Minister of State for Defence Affairs Mohammed al-Flasi visited India and called on then Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman to discuss state of defence and security ties. The two sides have agreed to develop defence cooperation to include regular joint exercises, exchange of visits by military officials and explore possibilities for cooperation in the area of defence manufacturing and space exploration.

Maritime security is an important area of mutual cooperation and Indian naval and coast guard ships go on regular port calls to the UAE.

In March 2018, India and the UAE navies conducted the first joint naval exercise “Gulf Star I” off the UAE coast. In May-June 2016, the Air Force of the two countries conducted the second joint exercise “Desert Eagle II” at the Al-Dhafra Air Base in Abu Dhabi. In December 2017, a delegation of the Air Force and Air Defence of UAE visited New Delhi “to discuss logistics and technology cooperation aspects related to air force equipment.” Furthermore, the UAE, along with Saudi Arabia, has emerged as India’s preferred partner in the Gulf for cooperation in counter-terrorism with better intelligence sharing and coordination between enforcing agencies.

## OMAN

Oman is the first GCC country with which India established a robust defence cooperation. The most important aspect of this cooperation is maritime security. Oman’s geostrategic location at the mouth of Persian Gulf and Arabian Sea makes it inevitable for guarding the SLoCs in the Indian Ocean. India and Oman have been cooperating in the area of anti-piracy operation in the Indian Ocean for a long time. Oman provides berthing facilities for Indian warships patrolling the Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea. Expanding the cooperation in this field, India and Oman signed an annex to the existing MoU on military cooperation to allow Indian warships to have access to the Duqm Port and use its facilities for maintenance of its military vessels. This will allow India to enhance its naval activity in the Indian Ocean region, significant given growing Chinese naval activity in the Indian Ocean region.

India - Oman defence cooperation have traditionally

**THE UAE, ALONG WITH SAUDI ARABIA, HAS EMERGED AS INDIA'S PREFERRED PARTNER IN THE GULF FOR COOPERATION IN COUNTER-TERRORISM WITH BETTER INTELLIGENCE SHARING AND COORDINATION BETWEEN ENFORCING AGENCIES**



India-Saudi Arabia ties have grown over the last two decades

# DEFENCE COOPERATION



**(Top) UAE gives highest civilian honour to Prime Minister Narendra Modi; PM Modi with his Bahraini counterpart Prince Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa, at Manama, Bahrain**

extended beyond the maritime domain. A number of Omani cadets and officers have been trained in India's National Defence Academy and all three branches of the armed forces — the army, air force and navy — of India and Oman conduct joint exercises. In March 2019, the Indian Army and Royal Army of Oman conducted the third edition of joint exercise Al-Nagah in Oman. In January 2017, the five-day joint exercise Eastern Bridge between two air forces was conducted in Jamnagar, Gujarat, while the two navies conducted the 11th edition of joint naval exercise

Naseem Al Bahr off the coast in Muscat in December 2017. Regular exchanges of high level visits including in September 2018 by the Omani minister responsible for defence affairs, Bader bin Saud al-Busaidi, underline the expanding defence ties. In May 2016, Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar had visited Muscat to discuss security and defence ties and signed four MoUs for cooperation in the sector.

## BAHRAIN

In addition to Saudi Arabia, UAE and Oman, Bahrain is another

GCC country with which India has defence ties. Though this is mainly focussed on internal security areas and not between the two militaries. The deputy NSAs of the two countries have been holding "security dialogue" at regular intervals to have better coordination in the fields of cyber security, combating terrorism and countering radicalism. The two sides have expressed interest in developing ties in space technology and maritime security. Bahrain though tiny in size is significant because of the presence of the US Navy's Fifth Fleet which is key to the security of the Persian Gulf vital for India's energy security.

## LOOKING AHEAD

There are three key aspects where there is scope for further strengthening cooperation. Firstly, given the growing tensions in the Gulf and the impending security threats, India has been forced to send its Naval Ships to accompany its oil and cargo carriers. This requires regular cooperation and exchanges with the Gulf countries as well as better understanding with the US Navy which has a strong presence in the region. The key is to have a regular exchange of ideas with Saudi Arabia and the UAE as well as Iran for better understanding of the security situation in the region and also safeguard India's interest in this vital region. Growing military cooperation is key for India to better secure its interests in the region.

Secondly, there is significant scope for widening the military-to-military ties, especially with Saudi Arabia. The key is to enhance confidence between the two militaries and this can develop through regular exchanges of military delegation



PM Modi with Omanese leader Sultan Qaboos

and increased interactions among defence officials and security analysts. The most important aspect is to have a better understanding of each other's threat perceptions. The planned joint exercises need to begin sooner while the existing exercises need to be expanded. There is immense scope in developing ties by inviting Saudi, Emirati and Omani military cadets and officers for training courses in Indian military schools.

Thirdly, there are potentials to enhance cooperation in defence manufacturing and exports. Given the nature of security threats in South Asia and Gulf, both India and the Gulf countries import large quantities of defence equipment and weapons from third countries. Given the evolving nature of India's defence industry, the Gulf can be an attractive market. The key would be to showcase manufacturing capacity and develop confidence in the Indian defence industry. To begin with



Maritime Cooperation: India-Oman conduct bilateral naval exercise Naseem-al-bahr

India can start by inviting Saudi and Emirati companies to invest in the Indian defence industry sector and explore the possibility of cooperation with proven international defence companies from third countries to be able to have a more effective partnership.

During meetings with Saudi and Emirati counterparts, Prime Minister Modi has emphasised on the need to develop cooperation in this area within the framework of Make in India, Saudi Vision 2030 and UAE Vision 2021. This requires sustained efforts and investments

but the scope for cooperation is immense given the growing intent and burgeoning needs on both sides. There are some challenges, especially the Pakistan factor, but given the changing nature of the geopolitics in Gulf and South Asia and the increasing confidence among the Gulf nations to develop ties with India, the future of Indo-Gulf defence cooperation looks bright. ■

**Note:** Views expressed are of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the IDSA or of the Government of India.

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EXPANDING THE COOPERATION IN THIS FIELD, INDIA AND OMAN SIGNED AN ANNEX TO THE EXISTING MOU ON MILITARY COOPERATION TO ALLOW INDIAN WARSHIPS TO HAVE ACCESS TO THE DUQM PORT AND USE ITS FACILITIES FOR MAINTENANCE OF ITS MILITARY VESSELS. THIS WILL ALLOW INDIA TO ENHANCE ITS NAVAL ACTIVITY IN THE INDIAN OCEAN REGION, SIGNIFICANT GIVEN GROWING CHINESE NAVAL ACTIVITY IN THE INDIAN OCEAN REGION