



# INDIA'S APPROACH TO WEST ASIA

Trends, Challenges and  
Possibilities

EDITORS

SUJAN CHINOY

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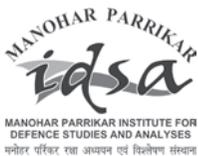


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*Trends, Challenges and Possibilities*

*Editors*

Sujan Chinoy  
Prasanta Kumar Pradhan



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## PREFACE

India has a long-standing historical connection with the West Asian region, dating back to ancient times. Due to their close geographic proximity and maritime connectivity, the Arabian Peninsula and the Indian subcontinent have historically fostered significant mercantile and cultural contacts. After India's independence, ideological considerations and the political dynamics of the Cold War hindered its relations with the West Asian region. The end of the Cold War led to a recalibration in India's foreign policy, opening up new opportunities and engagements for re-establishing connections with the countries of the region.

India describes the region as its "extended neighbourhood" and "economic hinterland." As part of its efforts to enhance collaboration and engagement with neighbouring nations, India under Prime Minister Narendra Modi has embraced the "Neighbourhood First" policy, which places a particular emphasis on India's neighbourhood including the West Asian region in the extended neighbourhood. Under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India has adopted a proactive approach since 2014 towards its neighbouring countries. This approach has helped bring about a significant transformation of India's relations with countries of the region and strengthened bilateral ties with regional partners. This positive change is evident in the increased frequency of political and diplomatic engagements and the deepening cooperation in various sectors including trade, investment, security and defence. Notably, the recent collaboration between India and West Asian countries in combating the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly India's generous delivery of vaccines and other medical assistance, underscored the deep-rooted bonds of friendship that exist between them.

Furthermore, India's foreign policy has placed a renewed emphasis on its Western neighbourhood through the implementation of the "Think West"

policy, aimed at accelerating engagement with countries in that region. This policy has become a crucial pillar of India's foreign relations in recent years. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) States hold particular significance for India due to various factors. Foremost is the fact that India continues to rely on the Gulf region for its energy security. The GCC states are home to a considerable diaspora of around nine million Indians who contribute substantial inward remittances. Additionally, given their geographical proximity, there exists a mutual interest between India and the region in promoting maritime security and combating international terrorism and religious radicalism. Given the natural linkages between the South and West Asia regions, India's interest lies in working with like-minded countries to ensure peace and stability as a foundation for common progress and prosperity.

Today, bilateral trade between India and the region amounts to over US\$ 200 billion, highlighting the economic significance of the relationship. The welfare of the nine million Indians living in the region is of paramount concern to New Delhi. Any disruption in the regional security situation or economic instability in West Asia would directly impact India's economic and security interests.

India participates extensively in multilateral fora involving countries of the West Asian region. India is engaged in dialogue with the UAE, Israel, and the USA in the I2U2 format. The objective of such engagement is to leverage the collective resources and expertise of all the participating countries and to enhance mutually beneficial economic cooperation.

While India's engagement with the region continues to expand, it is crucial for India to effectively address the challenges posed by regional tensions, ideological polarisation, deteriorating humanitarian conditions, terrorism and religious radicalism. Despite the passage of a decade since the outbreak of popular Arab unrest, the consequences of the regional upheaval continue to have a lingering effect on the politics, security and economy of the region. Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India has skilfully navigated the turbulence and continued to engage various stakeholders in the region, including through personal relations between leaders at the highest levels.

India's regional initiatives and outreach have been well received. Countries throughout the region admire India's democratic traditions and its rise as the

world's fastest-growing economy. India's soft power, including Indian films, dance, music and yoga are widely accepted by these societies. They see enormous opportunity in collaborating with India in trade, climate change, renewable energy, health, security, defence and strategic sectors.

During India's G20 Presidency, every effort was made to ensure the participation of West Asian countries. Egypt, Oman and the UAE were invited as guest countries to the New Delhi G20 Summit. G20 engagement groups, especially the Think20 (the "ideas bank"), provided every opportunity to experts from think-tanks and academia from West Asia to participate in deliberations and to share their recommendations. This was truly in keeping with the motto for India's G20 Presidency – "One Earth One Family One Future" and leaving no one behind. India's outlook towards West Asia is shaped by its ancient civilisational ethos of "*vasudhaiva kutumbakam*" which is predicated on regarding the "world as one family."

To further understand the issues between India and the region, the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA), New Delhi, organised its 5<sup>th</sup> biennial West Asia Conference on "India's Approach to West Asia: Trends, Challenges and Possibilities" on March 29-30, 2022, on a virtual mode. Scholars from India and West Asia participated in the Conference and put forward their views on the subject. This volume is a collection of select papers presented at the Conference.

Mehmet Seyfettin Erol in his paper "Middle East – Central Asia – South Asia Triangle and the New Spice Route in the Changing Geopolitics of West Asia" delves into the concept of the 'New Spice Route' connecting the three regions and its implications for regional connectivity, trade, and regional stability. He argues that this New Spice Route has the potential to turn West Asia into an area of prosperity, security and stability. The paper also highlights the role of regional and global actors in the New Spice Route such as China, India and Russia and the geopolitical competition between them.

Joseph Kéchichian in his chapter "The Security of the Arab Gulf States and India's Growing Security Ties with the GCC Countries" explores some of the most promising areas of cooperation between India and member States of the GCC such as in energy, water conservation and food security and addresses an important question, whether India-GCC relations can go beyond "oil,

trade and expatriates.” The chapter highlights the need to forge a strategic partnership between India and the GCC moving beyond the transactional “buyer-seller” relationship, especially in the area of security.

Hasan Alhasan in his chapter “India’s Defence Cooperation with the GCC States under Prime Minister Narendra Modi” avers that India’s defence relations with the GCC countries have taken a qualitative turn during Modi’s tenure as the Prime Minister of India. He analyses the upward trajectory of India’s defence cooperation with the GCC countries in recent years and states that India’s challenging geopolitical and security environment, especially its troubled relationship with China, are key drivers of stronger India-GCC defence relations. He also states that Modi’s leadership has played a key role in strengthening India-GCC defence cooperation.

Md. Muddassir Quamar in his chapter “Armed Non-State Actors and Regional Stability in WANA” addresses the impact of armed non-state actors on regional stability and examines their ideological affiliations, objectives, and the complexities they bring into the geopolitical landscape in the region. This paper broadly classifies the armed non-state actors into four categories namely, transnational Salafi jihadist terrorists, cross-border sectarian and ethnic militia, localised rebels or insurgents and armed resistance movements.

Abdulla Alabbasi and Subha Haroon in their chapter “Exploring the Future of India-Gulf Ties in the Power Sector” discuss the prospects of cross border electricity interconnection between India and the GCC, thereby enhancing cooperation between the two in the power sector. They analyse the opportunities and challenges associated with energy cooperation, renewable energy projects and investment prospects, highlighting the potential for long-term sustainable partnerships.

Vrushal T. Ghoble in his chapter “India’s Energy Equation with West Asia since the Arab Unrest” discusses the geopolitical changes in West Asia and its impact on oil prices and oil supply, especially with respect to India and its energy security since the Arab Spring. The author highlights various factors impacting oil prices and its impact on India. He states that although India has taken steps to develop alternative sources of energy like solar and wind, but the oil and gas imports, especially from West Asia, still hold great significance in India’s energy security.

Dore Gold in his chapter “India and Israel in the New World Order” analyses the complex regional security situation in the region and suggests that India and Israel should further deepen their cooperation to face common challenges. He provides details of the threat posed by Iran to Israel’s national security and to the security of the West Asian region at large. He argues that India has an important role to play in the region and that both countries are cognisant of the risks to their national interests and realise the importance of joining hands together to overcome the current situation in the region.

Ezzat Saad El Sayed in his chapter “An Egyptian Perspective of India-Egypt Bilateral Relations” offers insights into the bilateral relationship between India and Egypt from an Egyptian perspective. He examines the historical ties, economic cooperation, cultural exchanges, and potential areas for further collaboration between these two ancient civilisations. The author argues for an expansive strategic partnership between India and Egypt to further strengthen the relationship.

Mandana Tishehyar in her chapter “Iran-India Relations: From Strategic Partnership to Paled Friendship” traces the trajectory of the India-Iran relationship and examines the factors that have influenced the relationship, including energy cooperation, regional geopolitical dynamics and the impact of international sanctions. She argues that India’s growing relations with the US have frustrated Iran, to a large extent. She suggests that there is a need for India and Iran to adopt new cooperative approaches for a fresh start to a dialogue aimed at reviving the relationship.

Prasanta Kumar Pradhan in his chapter “Indians in the Gulf during the Pandemic: Analysing Responses from India and the GCC Countries” provides an analysis of the experiences and responses of Indians residing in the Gulf countries during the pandemic. The chapter sheds light on the challenges faced, government initiatives, healthcare provisions and the resilience of the Indian diaspora in the Gulf region. The author concludes that cooperation during the pandemic proved to be a test case that reaffirmed the strength of the India-GCC relationship. It was a time when both sides supported each other in their hour of need.

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to the invaluable contributors whose diverse perspectives have enriched this volume. Special appreciation goes to

Dr. Md. Muddassir Quamar, Dr. Deepika Saraswat and Dr. Jatin Kumar whose cooperation ensured the success of the Conference. Our sincere thanks are due to Mr. Abhishek Yadav, Research Analyst at the West Asia Centre, and to Ms. Priya Singh and Mr. Harshit Sharma, former Interns, whose insightful feedback helped refine this compendium. We are thankful to Mr. Vivek Kaushik, Associate Editor of *Strategic Analysis*, for his guidance in finalising this volume, and to Mr. Rajan Aryaa and Mr. Virender Negi of Pentagon Press LLP for their efforts in bringing this book to fruition.

This volume, containing diverse perspectives, aims to offer a comprehensive and contemporary understanding of the multifaceted dynamics that shape India's relationship with West Asia. It is our belief that it will serve as a valuable resource for scholars, students, academics and policymakers, and provide a comprehensive understanding of India's deepening engagement with countries of the West Asian region.

November 2023

**Sujan Chinoy**  
**Prasanta Kumar Pradhan**

## ABOUT THE EDITORS

**Amb. Sujan Chinoy** is the Director General of the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA), New Delhi since 2019. A career diplomat from 1981-2018, he held several important diplomatic assignments, including as Ambassador to Japan and Mexico. A specialist on China, East Asia and politico-security issues, he anchored negotiations and developed confidence-building measures (CBMs) with China on the boundary issue from 1996-2000. On deputation to the National Security Council Secretariat (NSCS) from 2008-2012, his expertise covered external and internal security issues, particularly South Asia and the extended neighbourhood of the Indo-Pacific. Among his diverse foreign postings, he also served as Counsellor (Political) in the Embassy in Riyadh, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. He is the Chair of the Think20 engagement group for India's G20 Presidency and a Member of the high-powered DRDO Review Committee.

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## ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

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# 1

## Middle East – Central Asia – South Asia Triangle and the New Spice Route in the Changing Geopolitics of West Asia

*Mehmet Seyfettin Erol*

### **Introduction**

In the context of international politics, the geographical definition of different regions of the world is determined by the geographical location, interests and objectives of the regional States. The defining of geography by a non-regional power means rejecting shared culture, history and boundary of the regional States, and therefore, the regional realities. Undoubtedly, this situation often restricts the geopolitical perspective, depth and perception of other countries and makes it difficult to accurately identify and solve problems and crises encountered by them. For this reason, the historical experiences, current developments and common welfare of the countries of the region, apart from the general acceptance, need a new conceptual definition on the basis of risk and opportunities. The point is also valid for the “New West Asian Geopolitics.” This expanded new geography that will include the Middle East, Central Asia and South Asia, requires a new geopolitical definition in accordance with the spirit of the region, its dynamics and the realities of the new international system under construction. It is seen that the new geopolitical definitions centred on the region push us to a new evaluation in the context of land and sea geopolitics. In this context, it would not be wrong to evaluate the South-

Sea Corridor, which is based on Indian Ocean-centred geopolitics, on the axis of “Sea Geopolitics”, and also the Caspian-centred geography called “Middle Corridor” on the axis of “Land Geopolitics.” The corridors in these two geopolitics will be able to turn “New West Asia” into an area of prosperity, security, and stability with its complementary dimension. Defining these two geopolitical lines as the “New Spice Route” would be the most accurate name for the search for a new future within the scope of the historical reference of the region. Therefore, the “New Spice Route Project” will come into prominence as “New West Asia” as a much stronger regional integration movement to the new world order under construction.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century is witnessing a global power struggle, which once again puts geopolitics and security at the forefront and brings hybrid warfare to the fore. The possibility of Western powers, which have been influential in the last 300-350 years, to lose or share their monopoly position in the process of building the international system with Asian powers, brings Asian geopolitics to prominence in a multi-dimensional way. In this context, the picture that will emerge from Europe to the borders of China in the construction process of the new international system, which tries to find a place for itself between unipolarity and multipolarity, is of great importance. This area can be called “Western Asia” with a much broader geographical definition. Although this narrative is outside the generally accepted definition of “West Asia”, it obviously does not contradict the spirit of the new geopolitical environment, which has a US-China-centred appearance; on the contrary, it makes it more understandable. In this conscious use, it adds a political dimension by emphasizing the decisive role of other actors in the construction process of the new international system, which has begun to show a US-China centred appearance as well as the geographical framework, and introduces a more inclusive “West Asian Geopolitics.”

As is known, geographical definitions are determined by the dominant actors in the global system and the perceptions of the countries are shaped accordingly. This situation often creates a restrictive effect on the histories, cultures and past practices of the regions; moreover, they prevent them from properly discussing their positions, interests, demands and expectations regarding the current problems and opportunities, and prevent them from

putting their actions into practice. For this reason, it is of great importance for countries to develop a win-win narrative with regional States and other geographies, starting from their near abroad, and to use concepts that do not reject the accumulation of the past that reveal regional and global realities, requirements, values and common goals.

While determining the geographical concepts that reflect the spirit of the region and based on historical references and practices, it is important to understand the structure of International Relations, the direction in which economic and political developments will evolve, and the essence of conceptual discussions, for a more accurate definition. In fact, geographical definitions and geopolitical competition move forward in a dynamic process and require revision based on the political decisions made. This situation has accelerated because of the development of technology, the increase in human mobility, the widespread use of communication tools and the formation of new revolutions, faster than in the past. This process has become more significant, especially after the Cold War. After the second half of the 1990s, the “Emerging Asia” reality, which is identical to the call for a “multipolar” world, pointed to the necessity of building a new global order. This call also led to the return of the “New Great Game” and placed the West Asian region at the centre of the geopolitical and geostrategic power struggle.

This region, which can also be called the Middle East – Central Asia – South Asia triangle in the New Eurasian geopolitics, has historically been the natural route of the power struggle, especially in the construction processes of empires centred on Asia. Therefore, this region, besides its underground and above-ground riches, with its history, culture and traces left by powerful civilizations, emerges as a geography dominated by differences and diversity.

Today, West Asia stands first among the regions that come to the fore in geopolitical and geostrategic terms. This region, with its history, culture and traces of civilizations, has a geography dominated by diversity and variety. In particular, the area, which includes Central Asia, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India and Pakistan, has always attracted attention with its pioneering role in history, culture and commercial collaborations, especially in science and technology. Located in the centre of the Eurasian continent, this is a geographical entity where non-regional actors also interact. Russia in the north

of the region, China in the east and the European Union (EU) in the west are aware that the economic potential of the region, especially energy and trade lines, will play a vital role in the control of the international system. For this reason, it is possible to see the traces of the powers, as a pole in the global system, in the region.

The aim of this chapter is to bring a new definition and conceptualisation to West Asia, which is one of the regions where economic mobility accelerates and global power struggle is experienced, taking into account its historical roots, cultural activity and current geopolitics. Contrary to artificial and non-regional concepts, definitions reflecting the spirit of the region increase both the efficiency of the region and the cooperation between countries.

### **West Asian Geopolitics and Possible Options**

The movements, strategies and national goals of the great powers in the region lead to geopolitical ruptures. When we look at today's Asia-centred geopolitical developments, it would not be wrong to say that West Asia, Central Asia and South Asia are at the centre of power struggles. While the regions in question are characterized by concepts such as instability, the spread of terrorism and underdevelopment, on the other hand, it is at the centre of dynamism, regional and global peace, as well as economic and cultural projects. The developments in these three regions are very essential for the future of West Asia in particular and the Eurasian geography in general because the developments in the region have the capacity to affect other neighbouring areas as well.

In the face of this new geopolitical uncertainty that poses a security risk, the countries of the region have three options: the first is to take a side in the power struggle based in West Asia. In this option, although States pursue a goal that centres on their own interests and survival, they eventually become part of a strategy that supports the interests of a regional or non-regional global actor in West Asia. The second option is to adopt an isolationist policy, following one's own agenda or trying to achieve national goals alone. In this option, States do not engage in any other State's policies and do not get involved in regional issues and pursue neutrality. However, the actors who can follow this policy must have nuclear power and deterrent power. Therefore, considering the situation in these three regions, the number of States that

meet this definition does not exceed more than a few. In the last option, countries want to increase regional cooperation and have a strong standing in the new world order by developing win-win projects by peacefully resolving conflicts with other countries and crises in conflict areas. In this option, countries create a balance between both domestic and foreign policy, and focus on economic projects and the welfare of the people. In this case, it is of great importance to determine the areas of cooperation and security rather than highlighting the problems. In this context, it is important to evaluate new opportunities against new threats. Corridors offer a new opportunity area for the whole world. At this point, trade routes become more effective and these routes appear as a significant cooperation corridor that creates its own economic, political and cultural geopolitics.

### **Two Rising Corridors in Western Asia: The Middle and the Southern Sea Corridor**

Currently, two geopolitical lines emerge in Western Asia. The first line is “the Southern Sea Corridor”, based on the Indian Ocean geopolitics. This Corridor is located in the centre of what is now called the Indo-Pacific. The Indo-Pacific accommodating 65 per cent of the world’s population, accounts for 63 per cent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and where more than 50 per cent of the world’s maritime trade takes place, has emerged as an area of great power competition in recent years.<sup>1</sup> Since the view that the Indian and Pacific Oceans should be seen as a single geopolitical entity as expressed by former Japanese Prime Minister late Shinzo Abe in his speech in the Indian Parliament in 2007, policies that see the two oceans as such, have gradually increased.<sup>2</sup> During Donald Trump’s presidency, the concept of the Indo-Pacific, with a harsh rhetoric against China, has further securitised the region and turned attention to the Indo-Pacific.<sup>3</sup>

The Indian Ocean, which is at the centre of the east-west maritime trade flow of the Indo-Pacific, offers geographical advantages to countries such as India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. The Indian Ocean is the common intersection plying oil and gas tankers from the Mediterranean, the Middle East and Africa, and commercial ships departing from Far Asia, Southeast Asia and South

Asia. This makes it necessary for the region to cooperate on an economic basis.

The second line is the region defined as the Middle Corridor, which includes India-Pakistan-Afghanistan-Central Asia-Caspian Sea-Caucasus-Turkiye and Europe. This line, which starts from India, is shaped through geopolitics that will extend from Pakistan and Afghanistan to Central Asia, from there to the Caucasus and Turkiye with the Caspian passage, and from Turkiye to Europe. Gas from Central Asian countries will reach Pakistan and India in the southern direction, and Turkiye and Europe in the west through this line. Likewise, the flow of inter-regional trade roads will follow a path parallel to the energy supply routes. Projects reflecting the cooperation between countries on these lines are currently under construction. The Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India Pipeline (TAPI) Project, which will deliver Turkmen gas to India, the CASA-1000 high-voltage power line project, which will carry electricity from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to Pakistan via Afghanistan, and Mazar-i-Sharif – Kabul – Peshawar railway line, that will provide access to the Indian Ocean are among the prominent projects of the region.

The Middle Line increases its importance day by day due to the intensity of maritime traffic, Russia's intervention in Ukraine, security problems on the northern route and lesser cost. "Route security", which is the most significant need of trade routes, provides important opportunities not only to the region but also to non-regional actors, thanks to the cooperation-based approach of Central Asia, the Caspian Sea region and Turkiye. Moreover, it can be said that the recent winds of peace within the scope of the normalisation process in the Caucasus and the brave steps taken to solve the problems will offer a long-term security architecture rather than the thought that the middle line has gained conjuncture importance.

### **The New Spice Route as a Peace-Prosperity Corridor in Western Asia**

The "Southern Sea Corridor" and "Middle Corridor" geopolitics, which are based on a win-win basis, do not reject the practice of the past and are inclusive, appear to be complementary rather than being competitive. The "Southern Sea Corridor" stands on an unstable line, considering the geographical location.

Likewise, the Middle Corridor offers the shortest route to Europe. Labelling these two lines, which emerged from Western Asia, as the “New Spice Route” does not emerge as a stable and safe line, considering the instability and rivalry in the region (i.e., Sri Lanka, Myanmar).

As it is well known, the Spice Route represented a trade line from India to the West in the past.<sup>4</sup> This road, which combines the unique resources of the East with the West, is not only a commercial line, it preserves its place as a route where different cultures meet and where peace, development and wealth are represented. Considering routes stretching from Central Asia to the Caucasus and then to Europe through Turkiye, and the Spice Route stretching from India to the Red Sea and then to the Middle East, Mediterranean and Europe, it can be said that today’s geopolitics reflects past cooperation.

In the recent period, India’s commercial cooperation with the Gulf region, the new processes started by countries such as Turkiye, Israel, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Egypt, which are the stakeholders of the Eastern Mediterranean for peace and stability, and foreign policy based on cooperation, will enable a secure supply chain to become functional from India-Pakistan to Europe. The fact that this region does not have any difficult geographical barriers and that the security risks are lower than in other regions provides an opportunity for investors who keep the profit-loss balance intact. Investments that will start on a win-win basis will offer significant economic advantages to the countries while reducing the economic burdens on the region. The countries of the region, which have increased the welfare of their people by creating job opportunities and have started on the path of economic independence, will be able to take more courageous steps to solve some of the chronic problems.

In this case, when the rise of both regions is taken into account, the current conjuncture can be called the “New Spice Route” based on today’s realities. Since this nomenclature does not have a geographical meaning, it will also appear as a more inclusive concept that will facilitate the gathering of regional and non-regional actors under a common platform.

### **Regional-Global Actors’ Approach to the New Spice Route**

These two lines, which are witness to the majority of the world’s economic development, young and dynamic population, underground and aboveground

resources, and are complementary to each other, appear as the most important area of the new power struggle. Control of this geographical line will determine the fate of the new global hegemony. For this reason, States that demand more rights in the global order, that want to transform from a regional to a global power, and that desire to maintain their current hegemony, apply new strategies and engagements in order to control the dynamics of the region and shape them in line with their own interests.

In this context, first, it can be said that the West Asian region has greater geopolitical-strategic importance due to the Belt and Road Initiative, which China put into practice in 2013 as one of the most fundamental tools of the "Go West Policy". This line is also on the route where the New Spice Route passes. West Asia is one of Beijing's priority regions along the route through which China, known as "the world's factory", intends to transport its products to Europe. The long-standing diplomatic, cultural and economic investments by Beijing have made China the most influential country in the region since this is the key region of China's policy of opening up to the West. Starting from China's Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, trade lines pass through the heart of Central Asia and reach beyond the Caspian Sea. With its export-based economy, China sees Central Asia as a geography that ensures the continuation of its global power today, where the supply chain is becoming increasingly important and transportation safety is significant.

Another indicator of the importance China attaches to the region is that Central Asia has rich energy resources and mines. As is known, China has succeeded in attracting many foreign investors with the economic reforms it has implemented since the 1980s. From this point of view, it can be said that Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are indispensable for Beijing's energy security. In short, Central Asia plays an important role in energy security and supply chain lines, which are the two goals China has set for maintaining and increasing its power. At this point, the question of how much and to what extent Russia will be satisfied with China's increasing influence in Central Asia, is of great importance.

West Asia also has a serious impact on Russia's policies. Central Asian States, which gained their independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union, continued their relations with Russia. Trade and security relations from the

past, the presence of Russian citizens in the region and Central Asia's role as a bridge with South Asia can be counted as the main reasons for the continuation of Central Asia-Russia relations. Russia also has important relations with South Asian countries. In particular, the relations between India and Russia, which have historical roots, continue to thrive today. Geographically located in a cold climate, Russia's goal of reaching warm seas is also among the priorities of its foreign policy.

On the one hand, Russia wants to develop close relations with the South Asian States and diversify its commercial lines, and on the other hand, it wants to increase its own energy-demand security by meeting the energy needs of the region. There is no doubt that the recent developments in Ukraine have led Russia to either look for new partners or expand relations with existing partners. The two most significant resources of Russia – natural gas and oil – are natural resources that are very difficult to stock and whose production cannot be stopped. The fact that these two resources, which meet a significant part of Russia's national income, cannot be used due to the decline in demand, will mean that Russia's future strategies will be shelved. Considering the possibility of Moscow's closing of the European market in the future – both in terms of trade and energy – the energy-sapped countries of South Asia will be seen as more important partners by Moscow.

## **New Spice Route and India**

With its geographical power, cultural background and dynamism, India is considered a rising power. In particular, the containment strategy of the West against China has highlighted India's weight in the global system and has led to explanations that it will be the new factory of the world after China. India has also focused on increasing its production infrastructure and improving its relations with the countries of the region. Central Asia is one of the regions where India has deepened its relations. India's ties to Central Asia have grown steadily since Prime Minister Narendra Modi took office in 2014. In fact, Modi visited five regional States in 2015, showing the importance he attached to these countries, and became the first Indian Prime Minister to visit all States in the region.

Despite having rich underground and surface resources, the difficulty of

Central Asian countries in accessing the oceans where trade takes place, is a limiting factor in the development of commercial projects. At this point, the development of relations between India and Central Asian countries creates an opportunity for cooperation through which all parties will gain. On the one hand, Central Asian countries are landlocked; while on the other hand, India, which is poor in terms of energy resources, needs to access the riches of Central Asia. In this way, both Central Asia and India will have the chance to consolidate their economic engagements. At the same time, this situation will turn into an opportunity that could pave the way for rapprochement between Pakistan and India and the resolution of existing problems based on regional cooperation without foreign intervention.

Although the apparent aim of the US, which came to the region in 2001, was to overthrow the Taliban as part of its war on terror after the September 11 attacks, Washington wanted to settle in the centre of Eurasia geopolitically and to prevent Asian countries that could compete with it, by controlling the flow of energy and trade. However, this strategy of the US went down in history as a mistake with the rise of China and Russia. The US, which has turned its direction to the Pacific and Oceania in global politics, has carried on subtle diplomacy against the countries of the region recently. To avoid being seen as a party to the problems in the region, Washington supports initiatives that will create an alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative. It should be noted that the US wants to carry out a similar containment policy against China in Western Asia, just as in the Indo-Pacific. Knowing that West Asia is essential for China to reach Europe, Washington abandoned its past military interventions and the crises it created, and adopted an approach based on cooperation and normalisation. In this sense, the attitude of the US is in conjunction with the geopolitics of peace emerging from the region.

The process started with the withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan while creating opportunities for cooperation; on the other hand, it has led to new geopolitical fluctuations in terms of security. The developments in Afghanistan have led Central Asian countries, Russia and China to turn to security-based policy, especially in the Fergana Valley and Wakhan Corridor. Moreover, the process in Afghanistan is likely to have a destabilising effect in a region that includes Pakistan, Myanmar and even Bangladesh.

## **The Taj Mahal Process**

Conflicts arising due to various ethnic and religious reasons for years have limited the historical and cultural diversity of the region. Countries are often stuck with the competition of great powers and forced to act in accordance with the policies of non-regional actors. However, the new geopolitical reality that has emerged in the new period has opened the door of opportunity for the countries of the region. At this point, it will be a vital step to initiate a new “Taj Mahal” process based on common interests and a win-win policy for the prosperity and peace of the region by India and Pakistan in particular, and South and Central Asia in general. In this sense, the speeches of the leaders and their emphasis on regional cooperation at the conference on “Central and South Asia: Regional Connectivity, Opportunities and Challenges” held in Tashkent, on 14-16 July 2021 should be noted seriously.<sup>5</sup> Based on the cooperative messages, the development of regional projects by the Central Asian States, especially Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, including Afghanistan, Pakistan and India, will be a critical step for the beginning of peace, stability and prosperity process.

The joint response of India and Pakistan to these projects will create an opportunity for the solution of the problems both between the two countries and in the region. Undoubtedly, Afghanistan, geographically at the crossing point of regional projects, holds the key to multinational economic, transportation and energy projects. The political solution to Afghanistan will be the most important step that will unlock peace.

## **Conclusion**

When the events in the region in recent years are examined, it is seen that hard power is used intensively. It is also understood that this method does not work. The use of soft power is the most reasonable method that will contribute to the solution of problems because integrated economic development will increase wealth and decrease proliferation of arms.

For the realisation of an economic corridor, a dialogue process initiated in the region based on cooperation is essential because regional problems mostly hinder the economic development of the India-Pakistan-Afghanistan line. Projects that begin with economic centrality will also bring political solutions.

At this point, the Alsace-Lorraine problem between Germany and France in the past and its resolution later, appear as a guiding example. The rapprochement between France and Germany, one of the events that led to the birth of the EU, was resolved with an approach that puts the differences aside and places a common future at the centre. This crisis between the two countries was resolved by mutual consent and as a result, both countries emerged as the strongest economies in Europe. Unlike France and Germany, who set aside their many differences and made peace, India, Afghanistan and Pakistan are countries with a common culture and identity. Considering the Franco-German example, the day will not be far when India, Pakistan and Afghanistan, will retrace their relationship on the basis of mutual respect. The international order that will be shaped in the future depends on the steps that will be taken now. For this reason, all stakeholders in the region have important responsibilities.

#### NOTES

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## 2

# The Security of the Arab Gulf States and India's Growing Security Ties with GCC Countries

*Joseph Kéchichian*

### **Introduction**

In 1981, Arab Gulf countries formed the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) alliance to defend themselves, though they chiefly relied on traditional Western allies for security guarantees. This was certainly a given within the larger oil-for-security axiom and within the Cold War environment that prevailed for decades and that saw the conservative monarchies in the Western camp. In the aftermath of several wars and the more recent expressions of withdrawal from the region by the United States, ostensibly because the Cold War was allegedly over, GCC leaders increasingly turned to Eastern powers to fill apparent security vacuums. Even if some wished to see China gradually replace the United States, GCC leaders were wary of the global struggle for power that emerged in the aftermath of the Russian attacks on Ukraine that literally redrew the world's maps.<sup>1</sup> For many, ongoing reappraisals necessitated an expansion of bilateral and multilateral ties with other countries, which is where India was poised to play a far larger role than many contemplated. Indeed, and as a neighbouring power with a stake in its energy markets – as well as a significant human presence with financial remittances that were critical for the country's economic health – New Delhi was well positioned to contribute to the stability of the region, though it was unclear whether such a presence was perceived as an entanglement.

What were the main concerns that hovered around the nascent India-GCC condominium, and could these strengthen security ties? At least four principal areas of importance can be identified, though subtle socio-cultural features cannot – and indeed must not – be overlooked. Notwithstanding relative proximity and centuries-long ties that sealed the two peoples' perceptions of each other, these four fundamental concerns – (1) energy ties, (2) GCC societies' perceptions of India, (3) the weight of political Islam on relations between the two sides; and (4) Indian politico-religious entanglements that threatened to upset recent gains – deserve attention.

### **Beyond Energy Ties**

The first concern must truly be whether the security of the Arab Gulf States and India's growing security ties with GCC member-states can go beyond energy ties. In other words, it is fair to ask whether for India, the Gulf region is merely a reliable partner for energy security, admittedly in exchange for close trade accords that allow it to augment water and food security for the region (see below). Naturally, there are a whole group of questions that raise important issues, led by the critical matter regarding the direction of the relationship, but few should be shy to affirm that what matters is the existence of political will to make things happen. It is thus fair to ask: has the relationship moved, or if it has not, whether it can move beyond mere transactional values. In 2020, India's economic power and trade with GCC States was estimated to be valued at around US\$ 90 billion, and while it may be true that this granted New Delhi some leverage with GCC societies, the far more critical issue was the desire to broaden bilateral and multilateral relationships.<sup>2</sup> One can no longer exclusively focus on economic ties alone, given that India's growing strategic importance is now vital for most regional powers, which GCC States acknowledge. For the conservative Arab Gulf monarchies, it is especially pertinent to note the importance on how best to counter Iran's influence throughout South Asia that Arab analysts believe, adds to India's responsibility. This is a very important development for Saudi Arabia, which is keenly interested to counter Iranian influence in India and elsewhere in the region and towards that end, Riyadh is determined to invest in diplomatic initiatives, heavily capitalise on various economic agreements, and otherwise cajole New Delhi to distance itself from Tehran.<sup>3</sup> Riyadh wishes to further spread its

influence among India's Muslim populations that, clearly, is a further illustration that non-economic factors can and often do, drive India-GCC relations.

Moreover, Arab countries are aware that India and Iran share civilisational ties, Arab leaders understand that contemporary relations between the two States concentrate on India's energy security – reflected in trade contacts between the two countries – where the balance tilts in Iran's favour through its oil sales.<sup>4</sup> Riyadh is thus keen to address this issue as well as forge its own civilizational relationships with New Delhi, even if most of its vision is geared towards the future. What Riyadh and its GCC allies wish to accomplish is to make inroads in this established course, perhaps to win New Delhi over, by emphasizing mutually beneficial arrangements to better serve both sides. Of course, India enjoyed traditionally cordial relations and cooperation with the GCC, though increasing imports of oil and gas, growing trade and investment, and the presence of approximately 10 million Indian workers in the region, were all vital pieces of the puzzle that facilitated mutual assistance. Saudi opinion, for its part, evaluated how India's economic linkage with the GCC increased steadily, especially due to growth in oil imports as the “sheer size of this diaspora” not only made this “a massive responsibility for Indian diplomacy,” but it also created both responsibilities as well as opportunities for host nations. Inasmuch as Indian communities across the world sent large amounts of remittances – totaling US\$ 83 billion in 2019 – it was critical to note that more than 55 per cent of these funds originated in the Gulf region.<sup>5</sup> These ties grew steadily precisely because of major oil imports from, and India's exports to, GCC countries that reached US\$ 28.06 billion in 2020. The bilateral two-way trade during the 2020-2021 period, thus at the height of the coronavirus pandemic, was US\$ 87.36 billion, registering a decline of about 27 per cent over the previous year, but bound to grow once again as the world gradually returned to normal.

It is therefore important to summarise the key trade and oil dimensions of the GCC-India relationship, led by the presence of nearly several million Indian nationals in the GCC States who remit most of their earnings into the Indian economy, to better answer the above question, namely, whether they can go beyond energy ties. Most projections estimate that this reality was bound to remain steady because – and this must be acknowledged openly – India's growing economy will require access to secure sources of energy for the

foreseeable future. India's demand for oil alone, which was about five million barrels a day in 2022, was slated to reach about 8.7 mbd by 2040. Likewise, demand for LNG was set to rise four times, to more than 124 billion cubic metres per year by 2040 too. In 2022, India imported 55 per cent of its LNG from the GCC and one can only anticipate those requirements to grow if the economy improves as it is bound to. India will thus be dependent on the Gulf countries for its oil and gas needs for the foreseeable future even if everyone was working to boost alternative energy sources too.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, it was fair to state that there was a lot riding on the two regions' collective stability – the GCC alliance with a combined GDP of US\$ 1.4 trillion, while India's hovered around US\$ 2.9 trillion – which necessitated reciprocal cooperation to prosper.<sup>7</sup> In short, the two poles needed each other, especially now that a GCC-India FTA was under negotiations, likely to be finalised before too long.<sup>8</sup>

### *Water Conservation*

Perhaps the two most promising areas of cooperation that went beyond energy ties are water conservation and food security, which India and the GCC countries were keen to pursue. While parts of India are blessed with plenty of available water for human and animal consumption, some other areas are arid, a climate that is prevalent in GCC States. Both parties looked to sustain a better quality of life over the long-term. According to the World Resources Institute Report, 18 of the 22 Arab States suffered severe water shortages in 2019, with ten experiencing “extremely high” water stress, including all six GCC countries, along with Lebanon, Jordan, Libya, and non-Arab Israel.<sup>9</sup> The Report noted some scope to take remedial action, and pointed out that 82 per cent of the region's wastewater was not reused, though some initiatives were introduced to address core concerns. The Sultanate of Oman, for example, treated 100 per cent of its collected wastewater and reused 78 per cent of it, but this was the exception. Astonishingly, about 84 per cent of all wastewater collected in the GCC countries in 2018 was treated to safe levels, but only 44 per cent were reused. Among the more interesting items in the Report was a discussion of India, which was listed at number 13 – out of 18 countries assessed – in terms of water stress. Countries that experienced water stress withdrew 80 per cent of their available fresh water every year for agriculture, industry and urban needs, which was catastrophic since their eco-systems did

not allow for natural transformations when so much water was being used in single modes. Interestingly, the Report quoted a NITI Aayog statement from 2018, which affirmed that India was “suffering from the worst water crisis in its history, and millions of lives and livelihoods are under threat,” which placed the country at the bottom of 122 countries in the Water Quality Index – at 120 – with nearly 70 per cent of its water sources contaminated. Recent heat waves and drought conditions confirmed these trends and highlighted future dilemmas.<sup>10</sup>

Severe water shortages affected GCC States too and while an estimated 50 million people lived on the Arabian Peninsula in 2022, that number was expected to increase by around 15 million, to reach 65 million by 2050. Annual freshwater consumption rates for the GCC are predicted to be 33.7 billion cubic metres around the mid-century, outstripping projected future storage levels by almost 8 billion cubic metres, which anticipated serious challenges. To meet some of these inevitable trials, the region will continue to rely on desalinated water, and may have little choice but to further boost desalination capacity to increase water supplies.<sup>11</sup> While an estimated 18.18 million cubic metres of potable desalinated water were produced every day by dozens of plants throughout the region in 2020, much more would be required in the 2025-2030 period to keep up with demand, perhaps boost total output to over 25 million cubic metres per day. Still, what GCC countries wished to ensure was to obtain new supplies with minimum ecological impact, something that India shared as well. Towards that end, both sides were interested to adopt innovative approaches to meet their needs, which may include the purification of water. This technology was increasingly relied upon in India and could be used in GCC countries as well. Similarly, even in desalination facilities, new technologies were being researched to reduce the huge amount of energy that desalination plants consume – about 4 kwh of energy for every cubic metre of water – that are prohibitive to say the least. According to one analyst, “smart technologies are being investigated to monitor water leakages that wastage of 60 per cent of water globally and managing water use with computer algorithms and modelling,” presumably since “using technology to process wastewater for industrial and personal use” would significantly reduce wastage.<sup>12</sup> It remained to be determined whether potential cooperation would be pursued in these areas, though water conservation, processing of wastewater

and making water safe for drinking should be no-brainers. Whether the political will can be there is an entirely different matter.

### *Food Security*

Just as important as cooperation on water management was the question of food security, a priority concern for all GCC States. At the height of the 2007-2008 global financial and food crises, the Arab Gulf monarchies experienced supply disruptions, which officials were determined to avoid in the future. In fact, food imports skyrocketed with various commodity prices reaching unheard-of levels, including hikes for a common staple like rice. At the time, major suppliers like India, Russia, Vietnam and Argentina placed restrictions on their food exports that naturally increased prices astronomically. To meet this serious challenge, GCC States adopted several new initiatives, invested in agricultural companies in relatively developed countries like Serbia, Poland and Ukraine, all under the assumption that ownership might provide intrinsic security. Saudi Arabia purchased arable land in Sudan and other African countries – even in the United States – while attention turned to agribusinesses that concentrated on staples like rice, flour, fruits and vegetables, along with animal feed. A leading Saudi sovereign wealth fund secured food supplies by investing in an Indian group, Daawat Foods, which guarantees rice supplies to the Kingdom.<sup>13</sup>

Inasmuch as these opportunities were bound to increase, prospects for cooperation between GCC States and India in this vital sector were bound to be beneficial to all, as creativity kicked-in. For example, pioneering “farm-to-port” projects were established, with UAE companies investing in Indian enterprises that lacked food storage capacities to quickly market their products.<sup>14</sup> Presumably, such investments would transform the UAE into a regional food-bank, as Emirati companies quickly import, stock and redistribute goods that would otherwise be wasted. By all accounts, “farm to port” projects, which other GCC States emulated, promised to make India a worthy partner that benefitted all concerned.

### *Strategic Partnership*

Yet, both sides seem to have finally realised that the reigning “buyer-seller” relationship must morph into something more meaningful, perhaps aim for

the new mantra of “strategic partnership,” which would serve everyone concerned. What would be the imperatives that could make the relationship strategic? Must it focus exclusively on the security parameter or could it encompass equally pertinent interests? Are India and the Gulf countries ready to move out of their comfort zones and explore uncharted terrain?

As several observers identified, “the genesis of strategic economic engagement can be traced to the aftermath of September 11, 2001, when the GCC countries adopted a ‘look East’ policy, which included India.”<sup>15</sup> Equally important was the desire to put “aside religious ideology and dealing with India as they did with Pakistan, [after] GCC states conveyed that economic sense is common sense.”<sup>16</sup> In the security realm, and after several key meetings, the partnership was elevated to the strategic level that, truth be told, included hard as well as soft security features, including cooperation between New Delhi and several GCC countries on counter-terrorism matters. Even on hard security questions, the India-Qatar defence cooperation pact recorded substantial gains, and the India-Saudi Arabia defence agreements produced significant progress. Still, what was the outlook for future military engagements between the GCC States and India?

First, there was the GCC preference to look East, even if the search for genuine security alliances was fraught with uncertainties. Indeed, this was not new as the GCC States adopted such a policy nearly two decades ago, given the disastrous repercussions of the Barack Obama Administration that gave the Arab Gulf States the cold shoulder.<sup>17</sup> A second reason was the GCC’s preference to deliberately forge a strategic economic engagement in terms of food storage, investments in infrastructure projects and creating effective water production security, along with similar efforts to ensure socio-economic stability. This preference was confirmed in the aftermath of Russia’s war against Ukraine that severely curtailed Ukrainian grain exports, and whose repercussions remained unpredictable in late 2022. Third, and despite their reliance on key Western powers for security, the GCC States were wary of false commitments by the heightened negligence that some preferred to practice in Washington. Towards that end, Riyadh, Abu Dhabi and even Doha, all looked to neighbouring powers to extend their respective protective dragnets to ensure long-term safety. Naturally, the GCC States hoped that China and to a lesser extent, Japan and South Korea, would step up to the plate but many

also hoped that India would rise to the occasion and assume its fair share of responsibilities to protect vital oil and gas supplies and by assimilation, guarantee regional stability.

While the purpose of this chapter is not to list the many reasons why the United States opted to scale-back its presence in and around the Arabian Peninsula or for its undeniable failures in Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran and elsewhere, the record of the past few decades on these scores stood as less than stellar, which led the GCC States to seriously look elsewhere even if no other countries volunteered to replace Washington by openly investing in the defence of the Gulf region in toto. A timid China took its time, while Japan and Korea weighed the consequences of additional burden-sharing measures, all of which created unique opportunities for India, where leaders conceded that the time was perhaps long overdue to open a chapter that envisaged post-economic engagements. As New Delhi gained the confidence to affirm its will to power in a nascent international security architecture, the GCC States were keenly interested to forge the type of ties that would bring India closer to them, beyond the prevalent energy concern.

### **GCC's Perceptions of India**

The second major security concern is associated with the GCC societies' perceptions of India. While we all assume to know what the logic of the rapprochement between India and the Arabian Gulf may be, analysts need to get a grip on this fundamental issue to add as much clarity as possible. We rightly focus on China's engagement with Gulf countries through the Belt and Road Initiative, formerly known as the One Belt One Road global infrastructure development strategy, but how about India's presence and equally important, how about GCC societies' perceptions of those manifestations? Interestingly, while analysts concentrated on the Indian government's own strategic ties with the GCC States, particularly with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, few examined the other side of the coin. Beyond the obvious economic motivations identified above, and as hinted at already, the GCC-India contacts now included advanced security cooperation, and there were many reasons to believe this rapprochement would redefine the nexus between the Arabian Peninsula and South Asia in the foreseeable future.

There were, to be sure, serious roadblocks but none of them were perpetual and most could be addressed, alleviated and anchored in far more solid relationships that went beyond the old-fashioned “buyer-seller” formula. Perhaps the most critical issue that needed to be addressed was the India-Iran partnership that, for obvious reasons, was not shared by GCC societies. Iran remained a neighbouring country with which the GCC States would have to invent a *modus vivendi*, cooperate as best as possible, and otherwise engage with. Such contacts would avoid escalations that could hurt all concerned, but the contrast between Tehran and GCC capitals was simply too prevalent to make them return to the pro-Islamic Revolution era when monarchies could co-exist, even if Shah’s preponderant power was as despised as the Mullahs’ hegemonic aspirations. Under the circumstances, the GCC governments adopted specific Iran policies, which encompassed a slew of critical measures to prevent Tehran from harming the conservative Arab Gulf monarchies. Likewise, the GCC governments invited India to consider its strategic choices, not only by protecting its long-term interests and positioning itself as a neutral interlocutor but also by providing solutions to best determine how it envisioned its long-term regional role. Admittedly, this was easier said than done, but going beyond the energy factor would, inevitably, create a conundrum that Indian leaders may have to confront if they are to protect their nascent strategic partnerships with the GCC States. Simply stated, one cannot maintain the kind of equidistant relationship between GCC societies and their Iranian counterparts [for there are many societies in Persia], unless one is a prestidigitator. In other words, sooner or later, choices would need to be made, especially as China and other Asian powers raced to fill the security vacuum – should one finally emerge – in the Gulf.

This choice was vital because the dynamics of “oil, trade, and expatriates,” which “have sustained historic ties between India and the Gulf,” were no longer sufficient ingredients, and it behooved New Delhi to benefit from the opportunities that have been created by America’s nonchalance, Russia’s bravura and China’s negligence.<sup>18</sup> These opportunities increased after King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz visited New Delhi in 2006, which first spurred a rapprochement between the Kingdom and India. In fact, this visit paved the way to the signature of the *Delhi Declaration* that provided a strategic framework for the India-Saudi relationship.<sup>19</sup> At the time, King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz was the chief

guest at India's Republic Day, the first visit to India by a Saudi monarch since 1955, when the ruler signed with former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh the seminal document that committed the two countries to a strategic energy partnership, recognizing India's status as a major global oil importer, with over 50 per cent of its needs being met by the GCC countries. Remarkably, this was followed by the February 2010 *Riyadh Declaration* in the aftermath of the attacks on Mumbai in November 2008, which affirmed that the two countries shared threats from extremist elements nurtured by Pakistan.<sup>20</sup> Presumably, both of these seminal steps enjoined the two sides to pursue the expansion of ties in political, security, defence, economic and cultural areas, even if the nascent partnership remained dormant for lack of an urgency to accelerate and introduce meaningful projects.

In time, however, an important change of perceptions vis-à-vis India occurred after 9/11 and the American "war on terrorism" that forced Riyadh and Abu Dhabi to hedge their bets instead of putting all of their eggs in Western baskets. The election of Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2014 gave Indian-Gulf relations a new direction too, and it was under the Modi premiership that the Indian government developed a solid strategic vision for the Arabian Peninsula. After Modi entered his second term, there were strong reasons to believe that the rapprochement, far from being temporary, redefined the nexus between the GCC States and India for the duration.<sup>21</sup> As stated above, but worth repeating because it is such a defining development, the GCC's efforts to counter Iran in India have taken two primary forms: added diplomatic overtures along with serious economic outreach towards India to limit Tehran's influence, as well as spreading their own sway among India's Muslim population. This did not mean that India's economic strength was unimportant for the GCC States. Rather, it clearly meant that Arab Gulf monarchies shared other factors in their ties with India that needed to be taken into consideration. As Prime Minister Modi discovered after 2019, his government's outreach over the last five years towards West Asia was widely regarded as New Delhi's most successful diplomatic accomplishment. And while it may be seen as an anomaly that a government led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), often labelled as a Hindu nationalist party, would do well in its West Asia policy, larger strategic considerations tamed reactions. Indeed, during Modi's first term, New Delhi's outreach to West Asia – with its multi-

dimensional challenges, from security to religion – has arguably been one of the government's biggest successes in foreign policymaking. In fact, by 2019, Prime Minister Modi's policies were feted and received warm welcomes from the then Heir Apparent of Abu Dhabi [now President of the UAE], Sheikh Muhammad bin Zayed. In addition to a congratulatory telephone call, Modi was awarded the UAE's highest civilian honour, the Zayed Medal, and in 2016, during his visit to Riyadh, the Saudis also conferred on him the King 'Abdul 'Aziz Sash, their highest civilian honour. The Prime Minister returned to Abu Dhabi in late June 2022, to offer his condolences on the death of Sheikh Khalifah, as well as congratulate Sheikh Muhammad bin Zayed on his election as President of the UAE. Importantly, Muhammad bin Zayed praised the UAE's Indian community for its role in strengthening cultural and economic ties between the two countries and their people.<sup>22</sup>

It is critical to raise this sensitive matter as the topic is widely discussed, albeit privately, within decision-maker circles throughout the region. Notwithstanding Prime Minister Narendra Modi's alleged Hindu nationalist preferences, GCC rulers – especially those of Saudi Arabia and the UAE – perceived his security-driven approach towards political Islam as being consistent with their own perspectives, which was certainly promising. Speaking at a ceremony in New Delhi during a visit to India in 2019, Saudi Arabia's Heir Apparent Muhammad bin Salman portrayed Prime Minister Modi as his "elder brother" whereas Muhammad bin Zayed, then the Abu Dhabi Heir Apparent, became the first non-head-of-state to be the chief guest at India's Republic Day in 2017.<sup>23</sup> What was at stake was old-fashioned realpolitik that fascinated Saudi and Emirati officials. Consequently, increases in military exchanges were recorded with the UAE, Oman, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, as GCC navies engaged in maritime security initiatives with the Indian Navy. Importantly, the Indian Military Academy started a training programme for Emirati sailors, as similar bilateral programmes were under consideration with other GCC member-states. In addition, security cooperation increased further, especially with the UAE, on tracking and arresting individuals tied to Indian organised crime, which resulted in the deportation from Abu Dhabi of Indian members of terrorist cells, in 2018.<sup>24</sup> In fact, this is an area of special interest as the UAE and Saudi Arabia considered Islamist movements – and in particular the Muslim Brotherhood – as one of their biggest threats, something that

resonates well in Delhi. Parenthetically, while some might assume that the GCC States would prefer Pakistan over India on account of their common religious identity, and the significant role the Pakistani military and intelligence services played in the building of Gulf security institutions, Islamabad's refusal to participate in the Saudi-led coalition in the War for Yemen in 2015, tainted Pakistani-Gulf cooperation.<sup>25</sup> Arab leaders forgave Pakistani leaders for what they deemed to be particular choices, but they did not forget.

It, thus, becomes clearer why the Arab Gulf monarchies embraced Modi despite his nationalist record. The GCC governments weighed the benefits of secure economic ties with India, instead of lumping various concerns in the same basket. GCC economies sought to secure their own future financial interests, whereas New Delhi positioned itself as a reliable partner that conducted business without political fallouts. Moreover, Modi's persona – that of a strong-man – appealed to his counterparts throughout the region, where centralised power was widely admired. Gulf leaders and Modi alike perceived their interactions as customary dealings that surpassed ethnic or religious considerations. For Abu Dhabi, for example, the Modi Government represented robust Indian economic growth, and perhaps even political stability, as the UAE welcomed him as the harbinger of positive change. Similarly, Riyadh perceived the Modi Government as a model of stability, a leadership that encouraged economic growth, secured the realm against extremists, and projected decisiveness under duress.<sup>26</sup>

Ultimately, the success of Modi's West Asia outreach will test Indian diplomacy to balance global economic changes with epochal political transformations that seem to usher in multipolar power structures, which further mobilised Arab Gulf monarchies in these uncertain times. Few ought to doubt that Arab Gulf governments are determined to deploy diplomatic skills to secure and advance their own societies. Likewise, and while it will take time to record how successful these long-term trade and strategic partnerships will be, GCC States are favourably disposed towards India, even if reciprocity was a given requirement.<sup>27</sup>

### **The Weight of Political Islam on Relations Between the Two Sides**

Regardless of these perceptions, a Damocles Sword hanged over the India-GCC relationship, namely, India's perceptions of, and dealings with, its 200

million Muslims. To be sure, the Modi Government's active diplomatic outreach to the Gulf States and the increasing acknowledgement of India's growing economic opportunities had, until recently, shielded India from official criticism over the discriminatory nature of India's new citizenship law. Whether India's approach towards its own Muslim population would remain an internal affair or it will now become a matter of grave concern to Arab Gulf monarchies, was worthy of attention. Arab Gulf governments have expressed their indignations at perceptions of discrimination and the treatment of Indian Muslims, urging New Delhi to protect the rights of all minority populations.<sup>28</sup>

### **Is an Indian Involvement Perceived as an Entanglement?**

The fourth concern, which is related to the third, is whether an increased Indian involvement is perceived as an entanglement, especially by those who focus on issues related to Islam, overlooking Delhi's secular legacy. Of course, these questions go well beyond any discussions of religion in India, which is a vast subject well beyond the geopolitical parameters analysed in this chapter, but to simply raise the question of perceptions with respect to India's 200 million Muslims and their critical roles both at home and throughout the Gulf region. If there is a perception of entanglement, this could mean that India's diplomatic feat, raised earlier, may be at risk. Can it jeopardise investment commitments that are over US\$ 170 billion coming from Saudi Arabia and the UAE? GCC leaders, and to a lesser extent, GCC societies look with great interest to India but can New Delhi mangle its long-term securities by embarking on peculiar policies that go against its own norms and legacies?

To his credit, and given the importance of India's relations with the Gulf, Prime Minister Modi focused on the region from the beginning of his term with a series of visits to all the major regional capitals in 2015-2016 and encouraging return visits. These exchanges have included Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain and Oman.<sup>29</sup> However, it is clear that Saudi Arabia has been attempting to exert greater influence in India, indicating that its strategy went beyond leveraging the country's economic strength. As stated above, Saudi Arabia deepened its ties with India through growing defence and counter-terrorism cooperation, since Al Saud leaders believed that connecting with a growing world power and counteracting Iran's influence in India necessitated an expanding and evolving relationship beyond the thin prism of trade.<sup>30</sup>

## Conclusion

Since geography determines the destinies of nation-states, the conservative Arab Gulf monarchies and India are predestined to cooperate in every field. One need not share a metaphysical certainty when one affirms that the GCC States have intrinsic interests in the Indian subcontinent. What is suggested here is that these ties, limited in the past, are likely to grow in the near future – especially in the security field – notwithstanding severe reservations that both sides have of each other. Likewise, some are assuming that the globe is on the brink of a new era, hoping for multilateralism to help define nascent international coalitions. This may indeed be the case but we will not know that for several more years. It is facile to predict what will happen next, including in the Gulf region, though the GCC States are examining all of their options and would look favourably to non-Western assistance. Finally, it is important to state that there are deep cultural transformations underway throughout the Arab World that will most likely take a few decades to develop. The Arab World went from empires to the colonial period to the post-Second World War era of relative Republicanism that was dominated by various isms: Nasirism, Baathism, Arabism and similar failed systems. Regrettably, the isms evolved into dictatorships, both of the military type as well as of the benign authoritarian variety. Except in the GCC States where tribalism gave way to paternalism and now, with the rise of new leaders with clearer visions, into Cosmo-Arabism [*al-awrabah*] as a pre-eminent thinker has dubbed it.<sup>31</sup> As globalisation guaranteed to further advance the gains secured during the past few decades, we should all assume that a normal evolutionary process may well redraw the post-Westphalia paradigm, with nation-states and/or the surviving or replacement entities, to come to terms with epochal changes. Whether alliances may be able to supplant globalization is difficult to foresee as international trade and modernization will continue to flourish, bringing with them non-ideological ideas and far more responsible goals. Industry, trade, agriculture, tourism, and just about every other human activity will flourish, including in the Arab world, which cannot remain aloof if Arabs are to survive and prosper. The potential for much better Indian ties with the conservative Arab Gulf monarchies is self-evident. Uncertain are the will-power mechanisms – not the will-power itself for most decision-makers – to translate most intentions of cooperation into long-term investments in each other's visions, to seal stability and usher in mutually beneficial prosperity.

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# 3

## India's Defence Cooperation with the GCC States under Prime Minister Narendra Modi

*Hasan Alhasan*

### **Introduction**

India's defence relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) States – Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) – appear to have finally broken free from the straitjacket of Indian non-alignment. Despite their geographical proximity and extensive trade, migratory and energy ties, India's bilateral defence relations with the GCC States were, until recently, severely underdeveloped.<sup>1</sup> Even as India developed defence – especially maritime – partnerships with the United States, Japan and several Southeast Asian nations from the early 2000s, the GCC States were largely absent from India's defence outreach.<sup>2</sup> India's reluctance to engage with the GCC States on defence can be explained by a host of factors, including the GCC States' close relations with Pakistan and India's concern over appearing as an interventionist power or being perceived as taking sides in regional rivalries, notably between the GCC States and Iran.<sup>3</sup>

Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, however, India seems to have overcome its traditional inhibitions on cooperating more closely with the GCC

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States on defence.<sup>4</sup> Since Prime Minister Modi assumed office, India has exchanged visits between defence and military officials at higher levels more than ever before, dispatching its Chiefs or Vice Chiefs of the army and navy staff to the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Qatar. India has also conducted its first naval exercises with Saudi Arabia's Eastern and Western Fleets and has broadened its cooperation with the UAE to the land and air domains. India, moreover, is exploring defence industrial partnerships with the UAE and Saudi Arabia, though bureaucratic and technological impediments have held back progress. In parallel, the 2019 attacks on commercial shipping in the Gulf of Oman and the COVID-19 pandemic have prompted the Indian Navy to take on a greater role in ensuring the freedom of navigation in the Strait of Hormuz and cooperating on emergency humanitarian assistance with the GCC States.

This chapter seeks to explain the upward trajectory of India's defence cooperation with the GCC States under Modi. It argues that India's determination to expand the scope of its defence cooperation with the GCC States stems partly from its geopolitical environment, notably the rise in tensions with China. India's increasingly troubled relationship with China, especially in the wake of the 2017 and 2020 border clashes, have pushed New Delhi to adopt a more forward-leaning approach to the Gulf region as a means of denying China a larger foothold in the Indian Ocean. In addition to geopolitical factors, this chapter argues, Modi's leadership has played a key role in solidifying India's defence cooperation with the GCC States. Modi, who has visited every GCC capital except Kuwait, has devoted more attention to the GCC States than any of his predecessors and built strong connections with their leaders, especially in the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Although India's defence relations with the GCC States had benefited from the incremental steps taken by Modi's predecessors, they have taken a qualitative turn during Modi's tenure.

### **India's Core Interests in the Gulf Region**

India's main interests in the Gulf region are its trade, diaspora, and energy links with the GCC States. India has a large trade deficit with the GCC States as its imports, which stand at US\$ 55.3 billion (2020), overshadow its exports, estimated at US\$ 29.7 billion (2020), according to the Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC). India's imports from the GCC States are highly

concentrated, consisting mainly of mineral products, including crude petroleum and petroleum gas, and precious metals, notably diamonds and gold. By contrast, India's exports to the GCC States are diversified, consisting of refined petroleum, precious metals, machinery, vegetable products, textiles, metals, chemical products, and others. The UAE and Saudi Arabia are India's fourth and sixth-largest bilateral trading partners, respectively. As a bloc, the GCC States are India's largest trading partner, capturing 13 per cent (2020) of India's total trade with the world, according to OEC data.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to the overall quantity of their trade, India sources most of its imports of hydrocarbons from the GCC States. India purchases 38 per cent (2020) of its crude petroleum imports from the six GCC States – mostly Saudi Arabia and the UAE – and up to 60 per cent (2020) from the Gulf region if Iraq is taken into account, according to OEC data. India is even more heavily dependent on the GCC States for its imports of natural gas in both liquid and gaseous forms. It sources 73 per cent (2020) of its natural gas imports from the six GCC States where Qatar tops the list, according to OEC data. In addition, India is heavily import-dependent in oil and gas. Its net energy import dependence in 2020-21, according to the Indian government, reached 86.7 per cent for crude oil and 53.4 per cent for natural gas.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, to help India mitigate its energy risk, the UAE's and Saudi Arabia's State-owned oil companies, Adnoc and Aramco, signed MoUs with the Indian Strategic Petroleum Reserves Limited (ISPRL) in 2018 and 2019 respectively, to lease parts of India's strategic petroleum reserve facilities to store crude oil.<sup>7</sup> Although India has sought to diversify its sources of imports of oil and gas away from its traditional suppliers in the Gulf region, it remains heavily dependent on the GCC States, especially Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar, however, for its energy security.

India's large diaspora in the GCC States is another one of its core interests in the region. Of about 13.1 million non-resident Indians (NRIs), at least 8.5 million reside in the GCC States, according to the Ministry of External Affairs' 2018 figures.<sup>8</sup> The GCC States were the source of more than 50 per cent of India's total inward remittances in 2016-17, but following the COVID-19 pandemic, their share dropped to about 30 per cent in 2020-21, according to the Reserve Bank of India.<sup>9</sup> The GCC States, especially the UAE, have become an attractive destination for high net worth Indian businessmen, including

Yusuff Ali MA, Micky Jagtiani, B.R. Shetty, and others. The UAE and Bahrain have created 'golden visa' schemes to attract high net worth individuals, both awarding an Indian businessman, Chairman of the Lulu Group Yusuff Ali MA, their first golden visas.<sup>10</sup>

India's economic and migratory ties with the GCC States have significant implications for defence. India relies on the free flow of maritime shipping and container traffic through the Strait of Hormuz to obtain its oil and gas supplies from the GCC States. A rise in tensions affecting the freedom of navigation in the Strait would therefore have a direct impact on India's energy security. As a result, a series of attacks, widely attributed to Iran, targeting oil tankers and commercial vessels in the Gulf of Oman in May and June 2019, prompted India to deploy two naval vessels, *INS Chennai* and *INS Sunayna*, and aerial surveillance capabilities to the zone.<sup>11</sup> India has also mobilised its naval and aerial assets to exfiltrate Indian nationals from conflict zones, including Kuwait (1990), Lebanon (2006), Libya (2011), Yemen (2015) and Afghanistan (2021). India repatriated its nationals during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021, using its naval vessels to evacuate 3,000 Indian citizens by sea as part of Operation Samudra Setu.<sup>12</sup> India also used its naval vessels to transport emergency medical equipment between India and the GCC states at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. As these examples suggest, India's military assets would likely play an important role in the assistance and evacuation of its large diaspora living in the GCC States, should a conflict or humanitarian crisis afflict the Gulf region.

Nevertheless, India's interests in the Gulf region are insufficient to explain the variations in the pace and scope of its defence cooperation between the GCC member states over time. Since the 1991 Gulf War, India has been able to rely on the United States to ensure the freedom of navigation in the Gulf and Strait of Hormuz. India's interests in the region, in other words, are important background factors that underpin its defence cooperation with the GCC States, but they are incapable on their own of explaining the ebbs and flows of India's defence outreach in the region.

## **China as a Geopolitical Driver of India's Defence Outreach in the Gulf**

China's growing military and economic footprint in the Indian Ocean has created a geopolitical imperative for India to engage in greater defence outreach in the Gulf. China's own dependence on the Gulf region for energy imports, which must traverse the Strait of Hormuz, the Indian Ocean, the Strait of Malacca, and finally the South China Sea before they reach Chinese shores, creates an energy security challenge for Beijing.<sup>13</sup> China has sought to mitigate the risk by combating piracy in the Gulf of Aden, building alternative energy corridors, and developing ports in Pakistan, Myanmar, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, the Maldives and Djibouti, China's first overseas military base.<sup>14</sup> Such moves have given rise to the view that China is cultivating a 'string of pearls' or a series of port facilities along the Indian Ocean littoral that it could militarise in the event of conflict to exercise control over vital sea lines of communications (SLOCs).<sup>15</sup>

Although India had long been suspicious of China's growing defence and economic footprint in the Indian Ocean littoral, the heating up of border tensions during the Doklam (2017) and Ladakh (2020) standoffs, has confirmed in the minds of Indian strategists Beijing's belligerent intentions. The Sino-Indian border, which had been peaceful since 1975, became the site of militarised crises during these standoffs.<sup>16</sup> Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh had already allocated US\$ 15 billion to modernising the Indian Armed Forces to respond to Chinese threats, including an expansion of India's offensive capabilities along the border. In other words, India has begun to shift its posture towards the territorial threat posed by the PLA, from defence to deterrence.<sup>17</sup>

Under Modi, India has pursued a coalition-building strategy in the Indo-Pacific, to counter China's influence and naval ambitions.<sup>18</sup> This was one of the primary motivations that led India to join the Quad alongside the US, Japan, and Australia first in 2007 and again in 2017.<sup>19</sup> In the Gulf, India has sought to nurture its defence ties with GCC member states as a means of isolating Pakistan and hedging against New Delhi's 'long-term worry [...] that the Chinese Navy will project force right up to the Gulf, with facilities in the Indian Ocean states [...] and perhaps even the Gulf itself'.<sup>20</sup> China's aggressive disposition along the Sino-Indian border and its growing economic

and defence footprint in the Indian Ocean, including the inauguration of the People Liberation Army's Navy's (PLAN) base in Djibouti, have encouraged India to shed its inhibitions and adopt a proactive defence diplomacy in the Gulf.<sup>21</sup> India has also upgraded its naval cooperation with the US in the Gulf by gaining admission in July 2022 into the US-led Combined Maritime Forces which are based in Bahrain, as an associate member.<sup>22</sup>

India's defence outreach in the Gulf under Modi must therefore be situated in the context of its rivalry with China and the latter's ambitions in the Indian Ocean. India's pursuit of stronger defence ties with the GCC member states is part of a broader strategy of denying China a greater foothold in the Indian Ocean.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, because of differences in size, capabilities, and location, the GCC States are not equal in their strategic value for India. India's defence cooperation with Oman, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia has progressed at a quicker rate than with the northern Gulf States of Bahrain, Qatar or Kuwait. Unlike these northern Gulf States, Oman, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have signed strategic partnership agreements with India. Moreover, from a geostrategic perspective, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE enjoy an advantageous geographic location that brings them closer to the two maritime chokepoints of the western Indian Ocean, the Strait of Hormuz and Bab El Mendeb Strait. These three States also enjoy the advantage of geographic size and military capabilities by comparison to the small, northern Gulf States.

### **The Leadership Factor: Discerning the 'Modi Effect' in India's Defence Ties with GCC States<sup>24</sup>**

Leadership significantly matters in the constructing of a State's foreign and security policy. Leaders affect the State's foreign policy behaviour in several ways, including their ability to 'perceive and interpret' the State's domestic and international environments, overcome domestic constraints on foreign policy, build an understanding of other leaders' intentions and constraints, and choose from the multiple strategies or options, among others.<sup>25</sup> Depending on their personalities, moreover, some leaders are more prone to respecting constraints, domestic or international, in the pursuit of their foreign policy goals than others.<sup>26</sup> A State's foreign policy is, therefore, likely to be shaped to varying degrees by its leader's personality and attitudes.

In the Indian case, Modi has made a distinctive contribution to India's

foreign policy, injecting energy and dynamism into India's foreign relations.<sup>27</sup> Modi's strong majority in the Indian parliament has also strengthened his hand in pursuing foreign policy change.<sup>28</sup> The jury is still out, however, over whether Modi has transformed Indian foreign policy on the basis of a new doctrine or Hindu nationalist ideology, or simply reinvigorated India's pursuit of its longstanding foreign policy goals.<sup>29</sup> In any case, he has indisputably treated India's foreign relations as a priority, overcoming many of the political, ideological, and institutional hurdles that had often stood in the way of his predecessors.

In the Gulf region, Modi has pursued a set of foreign policy goals similar to those of his predecessors. Former External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj continued to express the view supported by the governments of Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh that the Gulf region was part of India's 'extended neighbourhood'.<sup>30</sup> Modi has deepened India's strategic partnerships with Oman and Saudi Arabia, both signed under the Manmohan Singh government, and extended the pool by concluding a strategic partnership agreement with the UAE in 2015.<sup>31</sup> India's joint statements with the GCC States, moreover, repeat similar themes to the ones expressed in previous declarations, notably energy security and the diaspora, albeit with a greater emphasis than in the past on defence and security cooperation and attracting GCC investments into Indian infrastructure projects.<sup>32</sup> Besides its material interests, India has also used the recurrent displays of its growing naval capabilities in the Gulf since the *INS Viraat*, India's only aircraft carrier in the time, first visited the region in 1999 as a means of supporting its broader claim to rising power status.<sup>33</sup> Despite the greater emphasis on defence and security cooperation, India has not sought to overhaul its role in the Gulf region by positioning itself, for instance, as an external security guarantor. Overall, India under Modi has continued to defend the same core interests as those defended by Vajpayee and Singh by building bilateral partnerships with the key regional players.

Nevertheless, Modi has devoted greater attention to India's relations with the GCC States. He paid more visits to Middle Eastern capitals in his first term than his four predecessors combined.<sup>34</sup> He has recalibrated India's foreign policy in the Middle East by privileging Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Israel as India's main partners.<sup>35</sup> He has paid visits to every GCC capital except Kuwait,

becoming the first Indian prime minister to visit Bahrain. In 2014, Modi announced a 'Link West' policy, a twist on Singh's 'Look West' policy, to signal his government's commitment to engaging more robustly with West Asia, especially the Gulf region.<sup>36</sup> Modi has also pursued a more energetic engagement with India's diaspora in the GCC States by devoting greater consular attention to their concerns, illustrated by External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj's prolific use of Twitter. Modi's visits to mosques and temples in Abu Dhabi, Oman, and Bahrain carry important electoral dimensions as the prime minister seeks to attract Indian Muslim voters living in the GCC States and appear as the advocates of Hinduism globally for his Hindu nationalist base.<sup>37</sup>

When it comes to the UAE and Saudi Arabia, Modi's personal connection with UAE President Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud have played an important role in expanding the scope of their nations' defence cooperation with India. Modi, who has generally been adept at establishing personal connections with foreign leaders such as Barack Obama, Angela Merkel, and Shinzo Abe, has succeeded in developing warm interpersonal relations with Emirati and Saudi rulers.<sup>38</sup> Some in India also believe that defence diplomacy is a particularly effective means of building closer relations with the GCC States which value security cooperation highly.<sup>39</sup> Given the outsized role that GCC leaders play in shaping their countries' foreign policies due to the fewer domestic political and institutional constraints that they face, Modi's ability to build strong personal connections at the top is therefore of particular importance to the state of India's relations, including in the area of defence cooperation, with the GCC States.

## **Comparing India's Defence Cooperation with the GCC States Before and After Modi**

### *Defence Cooperation under Vajpayee and Singh, 1998-2014*

Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Manmohan Singh took the first steps in laying the groundwork for India's defence partnerships with the GCC member states. During their terms, India signed its first defence cooperation agreements with Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. Shortly upon assuming office,

Singh dispatched a flotilla to the Gulf in September 2004 that included 'a submarine, two Delhi-class guided missile destroyers and the Russian-built stealth frigate, *INS Talwar* on visits to the ports of Oman, UAE, Bahrain and Iran.'<sup>40</sup> Despite the show of strength, India's defence relations with its GCC defence partners, with the exception of Oman, remained immature, lacking regular high-level engagements between defence and military officials and joint training exercises.

Oman is arguably the GCC member state that has the oldest defence relationship with India, predating Modi's term in office. Oman began conducting joint naval exercises with India, Naseem Al Bahr, in 1993.<sup>41</sup> In December 2005, Oman signed a MoU with India on defence cooperation, though details of the memorandum remain scarce.<sup>42</sup> In 2008, Oman began to provide berthing facilities for Indian naval vessels deployed in the Gulf of Aden and the Arabian Sea on anti-piracy missions.<sup>43</sup> Oman was also among the first States in the region to procure Indian defence equipment. In 2010, Oman purchased the Indian Small Arms System (INSAS) assault rifles from the Ordnance Factory Board (OFB), though the size of the deal was not disclosed.<sup>44</sup> In 2011, India and Oman agreed to extend their 2005 military cooperation agreement to 2015.<sup>45</sup>

India's defence cooperation with the UAE can be traced to the visit by Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, then Chief of Defence Staff of the UAE, to New Delhi in June-July 2003. During the visit, India and the UAE signed a defence cooperation agreement covering training, exchange of visits, and joint exercises.<sup>46</sup> The agreement established a Joint Defence Cooperation Committee to oversee defence cooperation at the levels of the defence ministries. In addition to speaking at the level of the defence ministries, India and the UAE also inaugurated talks at the naval staff level in 2007.<sup>47</sup> Since 2013, India has appointed a defence attaché to its embassy in Abu Dhabi to facilitate Indo-Emirati bilateral defence engagement.<sup>48</sup> The UAE joined and hosted the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium's annual meeting in 2010, assuming its chairmanship for the period between 2010 and 2012.<sup>49</sup>

India's defence cooperation with Saudi Arabia is more recent, dating back to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to Riyadh in February-March 2010. During the visit, Saudi Arabia and India issued the "Riyadh Declaration: A

New Era of Strategic Partnership” which identified defence as an area for future cooperation.<sup>50</sup> In February 2012, A.K. Antony became India's first defence minister to visit Saudi Arabia. During his visit, the two sides established a Joint Committee on Defence Cooperation to facilitate visits and explore the signing of a MoU on defence cooperation in the areas of hydrography, training, and defence industrial cooperation.<sup>51</sup> The two sides also reached an agreement in principle on Saudi Arabia's playing a larger role in the India-led Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) to combat piracy. The year 2014 was a landmark year in Indo-Saudi defence cooperation. During the then Crown Prince Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud's visit to New Delhi in February 2014, India and Saudi Arabia signed a MoU on defence cooperation which, according to Prince Salman, would ‘allow for shared use and exchange of defence-related information, military training and education, as well as cooperation in areas varying from hydrography and security to logistics.’<sup>52</sup>

Despite signing a landmark defence agreement, India's defence cooperation with Qatar also remained underdeveloped. In 2008, India and Qatar signed a defence cooperation agreement that included joint exercises, training, and maritime cooperation. The pact, whose substance has remained undisclosed, has reportedly been described by Indian officials as falling ‘just short of stationing [Indian] troops’ on Qatari soil.<sup>53</sup> According to the MEA, Indian naval vessels conducted regular port calls at Qatari ports at the time.

### *Defence Cooperation under Modi, 2014-2022*

Modi's connections and regular interactions with GCC leaders helped accelerate the pace of India's defence cooperation with the GCC States by creating political momentum at the top. As a result, high-level interactions among military personnel, joint exercises, and cooperation on humanitarian aid and defence industrial partnerships have become more recurrent in India's defence relations with the GCC States. Under Modi, India has managed to operationalise the MoUs and agreements that it had signed with the GCC States and to expand the scope of defence cooperation, in certain instances beyond what had originally been envisaged by Modi's predecessors.

Oman and India's defence cooperation under Modi has been facilitated by regular exchanges of high-level visits. India's then Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar paid a visit to Oman in 2016 and signed multiple MoUs with his

Omani counterparts on defence cooperation, crime prevention at sea, cooperation on maritime issues, and protocol on exchange of flight safety information.<sup>54</sup> Sayyid Badr Al Busaidi, Oman's then Minister Responsible for Defence Affairs, paid two visits to India in 2018 and 2020.<sup>55</sup> Since its creation in 2003, the Joint Military Cooperation Committee, which oversees Indo-Omani defence cooperation, has held 11 meetings, most recently in February 2022.<sup>56</sup>

These visits appear to have helped create political momentum for the conclusion of key defence agreements. In 2018, India and Oman signed an agreement for the provision of dry-docking and maintenance services at Omani ports, including Duqm, to Indian naval vessels.<sup>57</sup> In May 2021, the two sides renewed their MoU on cooperation on defence and maritime issues, indicating that Oman will continue to extend logistical services to Indian vessels.<sup>58</sup> India's defence cooperation with Oman has since extended to other domains beyond the navy. As of 2017, India and Oman conduct regular exercises on a biennial basis between all three services, the army, the air force, and the navy.<sup>59</sup>

Modi's arrival has had a remarkable effect on India's defence cooperation with Saudi Arabia. Until 2019, India's defence cooperation with Saudi Arabia was meagre, devoid of high-level engagement and joint exercises. Initially, the pace of Indo-Saudi cooperation under Modi was slow to pick up. When the Indian Navy embarked on Operation Raahat to evacuate Indian nationals from Yemen in 2015, the Saudi Royal Navy allowed Indian vessels to enter into Yemeni waters and extended them logistical support.<sup>60</sup> The following year, Prime Minister Modi paid a visit to Saudi Arabia and issued a joint statement with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman that reaffirmed their desire to cooperate on defence. The statement identified 'exchange of visits by military personnel and experts, conduct of joint military exercises, exchange of visits of ships and aircrafts and supply of arms and ammunition and their joint development' as initiatives.<sup>61</sup> But the expression of joint interest did not materialise concretely into cooperation for another few years.

In 2019, Indo-Saudi defence relations received a boost by leader-level visits. The Saudi Crown Prince's visit to India in February focused on nurturing trade and investment ties but made negligible progress on defence cooperation.<sup>62</sup> By contrast, Prime Minister Modi's return visit to the Saudi

kingdom in October laid emphasis on defence. The Saudi General Authority of Military Industries (GAMI) and the Department of Defence Production in India's Ministry of Defence signed a MoU to collaborate on 'military acquisition, industries, research, development and technology'.<sup>63</sup> Both the 'Make in India' campaign and Saudi Vision 2030 had identified the indigenisation of their defence industrial sectors as an avenue for economic growth.<sup>64</sup>

The momentum in Indo-Saudi relations paved the way for more frequent visits by senior defence officials. In February 2019, Vice Admiral Sunil Lanba, Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee and Chief of the Naval Staff, visited Saudi Arabia where he met with the Saudi deputy defence minister, the chief of the general staff, and the commander of the naval forces. In December 2020, India's Chief of the Army Staff General M.M. Naravane also paid a visit to the UAE and Saudi Arabia.<sup>65</sup> In February 2022, Saudi Arabia's Commander of the Royal Saudi Land Forces, Lieutenant General Fahd bin Abdullah Al Mutair paid a return visit to India.<sup>66</sup> In addition to exchanging visits, the Indian and Saudi military brass maintained communication through telephone calls.<sup>67</sup>

The growth in Indo-Saudi defence cooperation in recent years has also materialised in joint military exercises and port calls. In August 2021, the Indian Western Fleet and Saudi Eastern Fleet held their first joint naval exercise, Al Mohed Al Hindi, at the King Abdulaziz Naval Base in Saudi Arabia's Eastern province.<sup>68</sup> In May 2022, the Indian Navy's First Training Squadron held another exercise with Saudi Arabia's Western Fleet in Jeddah.<sup>69</sup> Saudi Arabia took part in Milan 2022, a multilateral naval exercise held in the Bay of Bengal, along with about 40 other nations in February.<sup>70</sup> In addition to naval exercises, Indian naval and coast guard vessels made 16 visits to Saudi ports between 2015 and early 2022.<sup>71</sup>

Prime Minister Modi's effect was perhaps even more visible in the case of the UAE. During his visit to the UAE in August 2015, the two sides elevated their relationship to a comprehensive strategic partnership. In their joint statement, India and the UAE expressed interest in strengthening defence cooperation through training and joint exercises and welcomed the UAE's decision to join India's 2016 International Fleet Review, a multinational joint

naval exercise held in India.<sup>72</sup> The UAE is now also engaged in a trilateral defence format with India and France. In April 2021, the UAE participated for the first time in the Varuna-2021 maritime exercise that India and France have held since 1993, though its contribution in terms of vessels is unclear.<sup>73</sup> More recently, the UAE has stepped up cooperation with India in the air domain. In 2021, the UAE Air Force conducted mid-air refuelling of three Rafale jets that the Indian Air Force had procured from France during their non-stop flight to India.<sup>74</sup> In 2022, the UAE again provided mid-air refuelling of a squadron of Su-30 MKI jets that were flying from India to Egypt for training.<sup>75</sup>

Modi's 2015 visit, moreover, provided political momentum for defence industrial cooperation. India and the UAE announced the creation of a US\$ 75 billion fund to produce military equipment, although it remains unclear whether any funding has been allocated.<sup>76</sup> In September 2015, Reliance Defence Ltd, a subsidiary of Reliance Infrastructure Ltd controlled by Anil Ambani, signed MoUs with the Emirates Defence Industries Company (EDIC), a state-owned defence platform in the UAE, and Abu Dhabi Ship Building for the construction of frigates and destroyers.<sup>77</sup> Again, it is unclear whether these MoUs have produced tangible outcomes.

During the visit of Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed, then Crown Prince of the UAE, to India in January 2017, the two sides signed a MoU on defence industrial cooperation.<sup>78</sup> Their joint statement noted the UAE's interest in India's coastal surveillance systems.<sup>79</sup> India's OFB also signed a US\$ 50 million deal to supply the UAE with 40,000 Bofors artillery shells. The UAE placed a second order, worth over US\$ 45 million, for 50,000 shells in 2019.<sup>80</sup> The UAE has however been less successful at securing Indian defence contracts. In 2018, the Indian Defence Ministry launched a Fast-Track Procedure to procure 93,895 carbines. Caracal, a subsidiary of the UAE's EDGE group, emerged as the lowest bidder at about US\$ 110 million. In an attempt to influence the Indian Defence Ministry, Caracal noted that 20 per cent of the CAR 816 rifle components were already being manufactured in India and that it would aim to localise 60 per cent of the manufacturing process in India to support the Make in India initiative.<sup>81</sup> The Indian Ministry of Defence finally scrapped the deal in February 2021 after it had stalled for three years, however, putting an end to the bid.<sup>82</sup> Although India and the UAE have demonstrated ample

political will in working together in the defence industrial sector, such cooperation tends to be complex, time-consuming, and often subject to domestic political or bureaucratic constraints.

Finally, India's defence cooperation with Qatar, though still modest, has nonetheless progressed under Modi. During Prime Minister Modi's 2016 visit to Qatar, the two sides signed MoUs on defence, though their scope has not been made public.<sup>83</sup> India and Qatar have also engaged more frequently through high-level visits and joint military exercises. In June 2018, Qatar's Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces Lt. Gen. Ghanim Al Ghanim paid a visit to India, meeting with the three service chiefs and the defence secretary.<sup>84</sup> In April 2019, Qatar's Commander of the Amiri Naval Forces also visited India and met with senior defence officials. In February 2020, Qatar's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of State for Defence Khalid Al Attiyah met with Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and toured the DefExpo 2020 held in Lucknow.<sup>85</sup> India's Vice Chief of Army Staff, Lt General C.P. Mohanty, paid a return visit to Doha in December 2021.<sup>86</sup> Since 2019, the Indian and Qatari navies have held two iterations of a bilateral naval exercise, *Zair Al Bahr*.<sup>87</sup> While Qatar lags behind the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Oman, Modi's overtures to Doha, a main source of India's gas imports, have nevertheless managed to deepen Indo-Qatari defence ties, perhaps laying the foundation for broader cooperation.

## **Emerging Areas and Challenges for India's Defence Cooperation with the GCC States**

### *Freedom of Navigation in the Strait of Hormuz and the Gulf of Oman*

The rise in tensions in the Strait of Hormuz and the Gulf of Oman in 2019 provided India with a strong incentive to bolster its naval presence in the area. In May 2019, four merchant vessels were subjected to sabotage attacks near the port of Fujairah, an incident that was widely attributed to Iran.<sup>88</sup> The following month, Iran shot down a US surveillance drone in the Strait of Hormuz which Iran claimed, had violated its sovereign airspace.<sup>89</sup> Since India relies on the free flow of maritime shipping through the Strait of Hormuz for its own energy needs, a rise in tensions in the area presents a threat to India's own energy security.

Concerned by the potential for such tensions to further disrupt maritime trade, India upgraded its presence in the Gulf of Oman. India deployed the *INS Chennai* and *INS Sunayna* to the Gulf of Oman on 18 June, launched aerial surveillance of the zone, and directed the Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region, established less than a year before, to monitor the region.<sup>90</sup> Between 2019 and 2021, the Indian Navy deployed at least 23 warships and escorted on average 16 Indian naval vessels a day under Operation Sankalp.<sup>91</sup> India also began deploying the P-81, a long-range maritime reconnaissance anti-submarine aircraft, on anti-piracy sorties from the port of Salalah, Oman.<sup>92</sup> As India is likely to continue to rely on Gulf energy exports in the long-term, ensuring the freedom of navigation in the strategic Strait of Hormuz will remain a priority for Indian defence planners and strategists.

Nevertheless, India's freedom of navigation operations in the Strait of Hormuz are likely to be constrained by its relations with Iran. Although Indo-Iranian relations have had their vicissitudes, India considers Iran as an important partner. Until US President Donald Trump revoked sanction waivers on purchases of Iranian oil in 2019, Iran was a major supplier of crude oil to India. In the early to mid-2000s, Iran was for India a potential source of natural gas if the technical and political hurdles of constructing an Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) pipeline could be overcome. India has built the Chabahar Port in Iran, moreover, as a node that would help connect India to Central Asia through the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and Afghanistan where India and Iran share similar goals. While India has an interest in ensuring that the Strait of Hormuz remains open, its defence posture in the Gulf of Oman may be constrained by its respect for Iran's sensitivities.

### **Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR)**

The COVID-19 pandemic created new opportunities for Indo-GCC defence cooperation in the area of health and disaster relief. In April 2020, India dispatched an Indian Air Force C-130J-30 Hercules aircraft with medical supplies and medics to assist Kuwait in its response to the health emergency.<sup>93</sup> The following year when India was hit badly by the pandemic, the GCC States returned the favour. India deployed seven naval vessels as part of operation

Samudra Setu II in April 2021 to assist with transporting liquid oxygen-filled containers and other medical supplies from foreign partners to India. On 30 April, *INS Talwar* docked in Bahrain and was loaded with 40MT liquid medical oxygen. *INS Kolkata*, meanwhile, docked in Doha and Kuwait to collect additional supplies.<sup>94</sup> During May and June 2021, India mobilised C-17 aircraft and additional naval vessels, *INS Tarkash*, *INS Trikand* and *INS Shardul*, to ferry liquid oxygen from all six GCC States to India.<sup>95</sup> Kuwait also used a military aircraft to dispatch 40 tonnes of medical equipment including ventilators, oxygen concentrators, and oxygen cylinders from the Kuwait Red Crescent to India in May 2021.<sup>96</sup>

## **Defence Exports and Industrial Partnerships**

India has sought to expand its defence industrial base by securing foreign contracts to fund and sustain local production. In May 2020, the Modi government launched the Atmanirbhar Bharat campaign in an effort to lessen India's reliance on foreign providers of arms and weapons systems. It also inaugurated the 'Make in India' campaign to boost local manufacturing and export sectors. Indian officials have reportedly identified multiple systems including drones, loitering munitions, helicopters, single-engine fighter aircraft, and battle tanks as items which the Gulf nations may be interested in procuring.<sup>97</sup>

India's track record in the area of defence exports however, fails to live up to these upbeat assessments. India captures a minute share of the global defence market, ranging from 0.01 per cent in 2011 to 0.17 per cent in 2018.<sup>98</sup> Even with India's sale of INSAS rifles to the Omani armed forces and Bofors shells to the UAE, India's defence exports to the GCC States have been negligible.<sup>99</sup> India's defence industry suffers from perennial difficulties in meeting deadlines and delivering on promises. It is often also faced with bureaucratic constraints that dampen the appetites of potential clients.<sup>100</sup> Nevertheless, the launch of a new defence export strategy by the Indian government in 2014 and the streamlining of licensing procedures may help bolster India's chances to acquire a larger share of the global defence market.<sup>101</sup>

India has also announced its desire to attract foreign investments into its defence industry. Despite its large appetite for defence procurements, which

usually places it as the world's largest arms importer, India has struggled to attract foreign investments into the defence sector partly due to protectionism and bureaucratic red tape.<sup>102</sup> The UAE-owned firm Caracal's bid to supply the Indian Army with rifles, for instance, which would have entailed producing some of the parts locally in India, stalled for three years before the fast-track procurement procedure was finally called off by the Defence Ministry. In the absence of a clear success story from the Gulf, India may find it difficult to convince GCC investors to invest funds in its local defence industry.

## **Conclusion**

Prime Minister Modi has broadened India's defence cooperation with the GCC States, bringing about a qualitative turn in Indo-GCC States' defence ties. While India's defence ties among the GCC States was heavily tilted in favour of Oman, Modi has rebalanced them by expanding defence cooperation with the UAE and Saudi Arabia. With Modi at the helm, India has built on the defence partnership agreements signed by his predecessors with the three GCC States, operationalising them through high-level talks among defence and military officials, joint naval exercises, and a broadening of cooperation beyond the naval domain into the air, land, and defence industry.

What explains Modi's success in broadening and accelerating India's defence cooperation with the GCC States, notably the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Oman? Modi's departure from India's balancing posture in the Gulf, which often had the effect of limiting India's defence ties to the lowest common denominator, allowed India to shed its inhibitions and engage more proactively with select regional partners, including the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Modi's ability to forge personal connections with GCC leaders, moreover, was instrumental to providing India's defence relations with the GCC states with the political impetus that they required to expand in scope. Beyond Modi's leadership, the ramping up of Chinese pressure at the Sino-Indian border in 2017 and 2020 and the rise in tensions with China in the Indo-Pacific created a strategic and political rationale for engaging the GCC States on defence as a means of denying China a greater foothold in India's extended neighbourhood.

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## APPENDIX

**Table 1: Indicative Elements of India's Defence Cooperation with GCC Member States**

<i>State</i>	<i>Defence Cooperation Agreement</i>	<i>Defence Industrial Cooperation MoU</i>	<i>Joint Bilateral Exercises (past 5 years)</i>	<i>Arms Purchases</i>
Bahrain	-	-	-	-
Kuwait	-	-	-	-
Oman	Yes (signed in 2005; renewed in 2011 and 2021)	-	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Naseem Al Bahr, Navy (2020)</li> <li>• Al Najah, Army (2022)</li> <li>• Eastern Bridge, Air force (2022)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• INSAS rifles (2010)</li> </ul>
Qatar	Yes (signed in 2008; renewed in 2018)	-	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Zair Al-Bahr I (2019)</li> <li>• Zair Al-Bahr II (2021)</li> </ul>	-
Saudi Arabia	Yes (signed in 2014)	Yes (signed in 2019)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Al Mohed Al Hindi, Navy (2022)</li> <li>• Naval exercise (2022)</li> </ul>	-
United Arab Emirates	Yes (signed in 2003)	Yes (signed in 2017)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gulf Star, Navy (2018)</li> <li>• Zayed Talwar, Navy (2021)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bofor artillery shells (2017, 2019)</li> </ul>

*Source:* Author's research.

# 4

## Armed Non-State Actors and Regional Stability in WANA

*Md. Muddasir Quamar*

### **Introduction**

The West Asia and North Africa (WANA) region has witnessed frequent intra- and inter-state conflicts. Consequently, tensions, chaos, disorder and geopolitical competition and rivalries have become endemic to the region raising questions about regional stability and security.<sup>1</sup> Often, these conflicts have attracted external interference either in the name of mediation, humanitarian intervention or simply for ensuring security and stability.<sup>2</sup> While at times, the external intervention has helped resolve or limit the conflict – such as the US-led international military action against Iraq and annexation of Kuwait in 1990-91<sup>3</sup> – at other times, they have bred more violence and chaos, as was the case in Iraq after the US invasion in 2003.<sup>4</sup> The cycle of violence and conflict in WANA is not new and has continued for decades, to the extent that it has developed a sense of normalcy in academic and popular discourse.<sup>5</sup> The chronic lack of a regional order goes back at least to the weakening of the Ottoman Empire in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and its eventual end after the First World War. In the inter-War period and during the Cold War era, the region remained a theatre for colonial and imperial interventions as well a hotspot for conflicts and tensions among regional States.

The end of the Cold War and the advent of the twenty-first century brought newer challenges to the WANA region. While the changing nature of international order from bipolarity to a brief unipolar moment onward to multi-polarity profoundly affected the regional geopolitics, this did not necessarily reduce conflicts, tensions and rivalries.<sup>6</sup> Being in a constant state of flux contributed to the weakening of States leading to the rise of non-state actors (NSAs) for charitable and other works as well as armed non-state actors (ANSAs) challenging the authority of the States. The ANSAs have emerged as a serious threat to peace and stability in the region as well as to the outside world.<sup>7</sup> The biggest announcement of the threat posed by the ANSAs at the global stage was the 11 September 2001 (9/11), attacks in the United States mounted by Al Qaeda (formally known as *Qaedat Al Jihad* or The Base for Jihad), a group formed of jihadist Afghan-Arab fighters based in Afghanistan at the time.<sup>8</sup> The group had already become notorious for its terrorist activities by the time it perpetrated the 9/11 attacks, spreading affiliates in different parts of the world, particularly in WANA. Notably, the group had its roots in the global geopolitical competition that ensued between the United States and the Soviet Union to dominate the Eurasia region with Afghanistan bearing the brunt of war, death and destruction that continues to haunt it until today.<sup>9</sup>

While the ANSAs existed in WANA even before the world came to see them as a major threat in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the extent of proliferation of ANSAs and their capacity to cause havoc was recognised in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings in 2010-11. A key development was the rise of the *Ad Dawlah Al Islamiyah* (Islamic State or Daesh),<sup>10</sup> which, by the swiftness of its rise and spread in Iraq and Syria between 2012 and 2016 and the brutality of its actions, terrorised the whole world.<sup>11</sup> Notwithstanding these global terrorist actors, the region has also witnessed a proliferation of other ANSAs including those backed and supported by State actors as well as those that are labelled as resistance movements against external occupation or intervention. Although the roots of many of them go back to the regional conflicts and wars during the twentieth century, the scale of accumulation of power, influence, authority and legitimacy has been unprecedented in contemporary times with serious implications for regional security and stability.

The proliferation of ANSAs not only threatens the security and stability in the region but also poses a threat to the world given the extent of global

economic and digital integration, physical connectivity and interdependence. They also pose challenges for external powers that have substantive economic and security interests in the region. This chapter analyses the phenomenon of ANSAs in WANA in the twenty-first century with a focus on understanding how different types of ANSAs pose a threat to regional security and stability. It analyses the issue within the context of regional geopolitics and external involvement in WANA. Finally, it underlines the threat from the rise of ANSAs to Indian interests and suggests policy options.

### **Armed Non-State Actors in WANA**

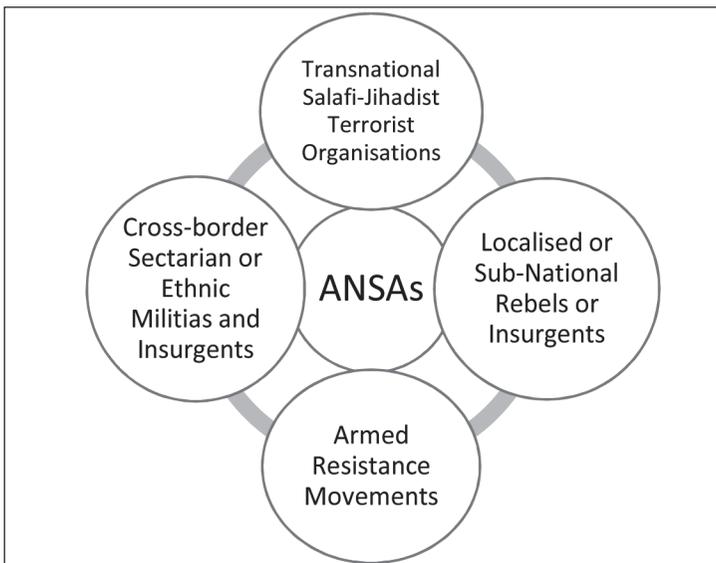
There is no consensus on how to define NSAs. From the point of view of international politics, a simple and straightforward definition could be “any actor on the international stage other than a sovereign state.”<sup>12</sup> However, as Andrew Clapham notes NSAs could mean different things to different people; for some, it could mean international terrorist organisations like Al Qaeda, and for others, it could mean international non-government organisations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, and for yet others, NSAs might mean international business corporations such as Apple, Huawei Technologies and Gazprom.<sup>13</sup> What is notable, howsoever one defines NSAs, is they increasingly wield more power and influence in international politics, security and economy. In the twenty-first century, the notion that international relations and politics is only the domain of sovereign States has been increasingly challenged by NSAs who in an ever more globalised and multipolar world are playing a greater role in determining policies and influencing events.<sup>14</sup>

An important aspect differentiating States and NSAs is the idea of the monopoly on the use of force as has been defined by Max Weber, often referred to as the father of modern sociology.<sup>15</sup> But what happens in case the State is weakened or is absent for any number of reasons – a scenario that is widely prevalent in WANA. This can lead to anarchy, chaos, breakdown of law and order, civil war, mass killings, displacements and refugee outflows – something the region has witnessed frequently in the past decades.<sup>16</sup> Such circumstances provide fertile ground for the emergence of ANSAs who start wielding power and gain legitimacy by use of force, either challenging the weakened or failed State or by cooperating or working in tandem with the State actors. In WANA, the conflicts and wars have weakened many States, leading to the rise of ANSAs;

while some have emerged in the form of armed militias due to the retreat of the State, others have modelled themselves as rebels and resistance movements for nationalist, ethnic or sectarian causes. Yet others have adopted terrorism as their method for ideological or other reasons. Resultantly, there is an unprecedented proliferation of ANSAs in WANA today.<sup>17</sup>

Before reflecting on the threats ANSAs pose to regional security and stability in WANA, it is important to understand the variety and versatility of these actors that can be consequential for the kind of threat they pose. The region has witnessed different types of ANSAs with different ideological, ethnic, sectarian affiliations and a range of causes and varied territorial expanses of their operation. Some have emerged because of recent churn and civil wars while others are a product of historical events and developments and have existed for longer periods. Accordingly, this chapter identifies four broad types of ANSAs prevalent in WANA.<sup>18</sup> These are: (1) transnational Salafi-Jihadist terrorist organisations; (2) cross-border sectarian or ethnic militias and insurgents; (3) localised or sub-national rebels or insurgent groups; and (4) armed resistance movements.

Figure 1: Types of ANSAs in WANA



Source: Made by the author based on classification in this chapter.

## Transnational Salafi-Jihadist Terrorists

Among the most prominent of the ANSAs present in WANA are transnational and global terrorist groups that subscribe to Salafist-Jihadist ideology including Al Qaeda and its affiliates, Daesh and its branches (termed by the group as provinces) Boko Haram and Al Shabab. These groups have similar ideological convictions and origins, share their primary objectives and are transnational in their operational expanse. Al Qaeda is among the oldest of these organisations with its origins going back to the Afghan-jihad movement in the 1980s. It was formed in 1988 by Osama bin Laden and Ayman Al Zawahiri who were mentored by the Palestinian Islamist scholar Abdullah Azzam, who in turn, was inspired by two major strands in modern Sunni Islamism – Wahhabism and Muslim Brotherhood.<sup>19</sup> Among the notable contemporary scholars who inspired Azzam were Egyptian Islamist scholar Syed Qutb, one of the proponents of Islamic revivalism and Islamisation of society and State, and Abdus Salam Faraj, the founder of Egyptian Islamic Jihad, that merged with Al Qaeda in 2001. After the Soviet retreat from Afghanistan, Azzam became a leading proponent of expanding jihad to other parts of the Islamic world and actively helped establish Al Qaeda affiliates in WANA including in Yemen and the Arabian Peninsula and Maghreb and Sahel regions. Therefore, Al Qaeda is recognised as the first global Salafi-Jihadi terrorist organisation.<sup>20</sup>

The Islamic State or Daesh has its roots in *Jama'at Al Tawhid wa Al Jihad* which was formed by Abu Musab Al Zarqawi, a Palestinian-Jordanian national who had participated in Afghan-jihad and returned to Jordan to form the group in 1999.<sup>21</sup> After escaping prison in Jordan and taking refuge in Iraq, in 2004, he pledged allegiance to Al Qaeda leader Bin Laden and renamed his organisation Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). AQI metamorphosed into one of the leading Sunni sectarian insurgent groups in Iraq during the course of heightened insurgency against American military presence between 2004 and 2006. It also gained some territorial control declaring the formation of *Ad Dawlah Al Islāmiyah fi 'l-'Irāq* (Islamic State in Iraq or ISI) in 2006. The group gained notoriety for inciting sectarian violence and bloodshed that gripped Iraq between 2006 and 2008. In the aftermath of the Arab uprisings and the withdrawal of US forces from Iraq in 2011, the ISI launched a major offensive against the Iraqi military, gaining swift success and taking control of vast territories in North, Central and Western Iraq, between 2012 and 2014. The

group also expanded its offensive in Syria through its Syrian branch namely, *Jabhat Al Nusra li Al Sham* (The Victory Front for Syria or Nusra Front).<sup>22</sup> In 2013, the leader of ISI, Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi declared the formation of *Ad Dawlah Al Islāmiyah fi 'l-'Irāq wa-sh-Shām* (ISIS or ISIL), and in June 2014 declared it a universal Islamic State (*Ad Dawlah Al Islāmiyah*). Baghdadi also announced the restoration of the Caliphate appointing himself as the new Caliph.<sup>23</sup> In the wake of Arab uprisings, the group emerged as one of the most potent global Salafi-Jihadist organisations, replacing Al Qaeda from its position, with a presence in almost all major countries in WANA, especially in the conflict hotspots such as Iraq, Syria and Libya.

Besides Al Qaeda and Daesh, Al Shabab and Boko Haram are other major transnational Salafi-Jihadist organisations who are mostly active in East and West Africa respectively. Al Shabab has its origin and base in Somalia and has been affiliated with Al Qaeda since 2012, and in addition to involvement in terrorist activities in Somalia, it has expanded its presence in Ethiopia and Kenya.<sup>24</sup> Boko Haram<sup>25</sup> has its origin and base in Nigeria and was affiliated with Daesh between 2014 and 2016, when the group split into two with Boko Haram becoming an independent organisation and Daesh continuing its presence in the form of Islamic State – West Africa Province (ISWAP). Both these groups jostle for space and influence in areas along Nigeria, Chad, Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. In addition to the above, there are many smaller and localised groups that either are the affiliates of Al Qaeda or Daesh or operate independently but none have gained the notoriety of the four and are mostly confined to smaller areas of operation.

### **Cross-border Sectarian and Ethnic Militias**

The second type of ANSAs active in WANA are the sectarian or ethnic militias or insurgent groups that are confined to territorial limits of a State or have limited cross-border presence. The most prominent of these groups are Shiite militias present across Lebanon, Syria and Iraq including Lebanese Hezbollah (Party of God) and its branches in the region, Iraqi *Kata'eb Hezbollah* (Battalions of Party of God), *Asa'ib Ahlulhaq* (League of the Righteous), Badr Organisation and other factions of *Al Hashd ash-Sha'bi* (Popular Mobilisation Forces or PMF) and Syrian Shabiha, *liwa' fatimiyun* (Fatimiyun Brigade) and *liwa' zaynabiyun* (Zaynabiyun Brigade). A common thread that binds these sectarian

militias is their relationship with the Islamic Republic of Iran and the ideological commitment to Khomeinism and *Velayat-e-Faqih* (Guardianship of an Islamic Jurist).<sup>26</sup> Besides ideological affinity, these groups work on the common objective of Shia revivalism and armed struggle against Israel and the United States and receive support from Iran that wishes to establish Persian-Shia dominance in the region.<sup>27</sup>

Besides the ideological affinity and similar objective that binds these Shiite militias, there are comparable factors when it comes to their origins and methods of functioning. Most of these groups represent a population that has endured years of negligence and discrimination within their countries mainly for political and sectarian reasons.<sup>28</sup> For example, Hezbollah emerged as the representative of the marginalised and under-represented Shia population of Lebanon who formed a majority in southern Lebanon and were one of the major victims of the Lebanese civil war and Israeli-Lebanese conflicts.<sup>29</sup> Hezbollah was founded with Iranian help in 1982 to resist the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and since then it has emerged as the leading representative of Lebanese Shias. Gradually, Hezbollah has become a State-within-a-State and a force to reckon with in the polity, economy and security of Lebanon. One of the key moments raising its global recognition came when it took credit for the withdrawal of Israeli forces from South Lebanon in 2000 and resisted the Israeli military operation in 2006.<sup>30</sup> Ever since, Hezbollah has tried to spread its influence and create branches in different Arab countries with the Shia population, including in the Arabian Peninsula where it has tried to establish a branch called *Hezbollah Al Hejaz* (Party of God in Hejaz) to capitalise on discriminated and disgruntled Shias in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia.<sup>31</sup>

The Shiite militias in Iraq emerged in the wake of the US invasion in 2003 and were formed with Iranian help to assert the rights of the majority Shia population who had endured decades of subjugation under Baathist Iraq and to resist American military presence.<sup>32</sup> They modelled themselves on the Hezbollah as a resistance movement against foreign military occupation and were one of the major perpetrators, along with ISI, fuelling the sectarian civil war in Iraq between 2006 and 2008. After the Arab Spring and the rise of Daesh, the militias fought against the terrorist group and played a key role, along with Iraqi armed forces and Kurdish Peshmerga, and the US military in defeating Daesh. However, they have also been accused of sectarian bloodshed

of the Sunni population in Iraq and are considered responsible for the fragmented and dysfunctional political system in the country, as they have refused to lay down arms or be merged with the Iraqi armed forces making them a State-within-a-state like the Hezbollah in Lebanon.

In Syria, the Shia militias do not necessarily have a social or political base but have been propped up by Iran and the Hezbollah, and are made up of foreign Shiite fighters, in support of the Syrian regime's war against the rebels, opposition and Daesh.<sup>33</sup> There are mainly two main factions, the Fatimiyun and the Zaynabiyun Brigades composed of Afghan and Pakistani Shias, respectively. Besides the foreign militias, there are the Alavite militias, known as Shabiha, that have come to the fore as a sectarian force fighting to save Bashar Al Assad and have been integrated into the network of Shia militias operating in WANA under the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps' (IRGC) and Hezbollah's patronage.<sup>34</sup> A key point that needs emphasis is the operational and military linkages and interdependence among these groups in terms of training, capacity building and supply of arms and ammunition that they have developed over the years under IRGC, the paramilitary organisation mandated to secure and expand the revolutionary ideals of the Islamic Republic.<sup>35</sup>

In addition to the Shiite militias, the other notable ANSAs in this category are Turkiye's Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan* or PKK). The group has a distinct ideology inspired by the communist workers' movement and has allegiance to the Kurdish people who have for long struggled to be recognised as a distinct ethnic group in Turkiye, Syria, Iraq and Iran.<sup>36</sup> Beginning as an insurgent movement to fight for the rights of Kurds in Turkiye with operations mainly in its southeast where Kurds are a demographic majority, the PKK has evolved into one of the major militant organisations in WANA with operational and training presence in northern Iraq, northern Syria, and connections with Kurdish population in Iran and in the diaspora in Europe.<sup>37</sup> The PKK has also incorporated the idea of Kurds as a separate nation in its agenda, developing links with the larger Kurdish populace and establishing branches in Syria and Iraq. In Syria, for example, it established its branch in 2003 in the form of the Democratic Union Party (*Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat* or PYD) that also maintains an armed wing, the People's Protection Unit (*Yekîneyên Parastina Gel* or YPG). The PYD-YPG combine forms the most

important component of the Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) that controls most of the autonomous Northeast Syria, which it calls Rojava.<sup>38</sup> This is one of the major factors that has led to Turkish military interventions in Northern Syria. Besides, the PKK has military and training camps in northern Iraq attracting action by Turkish, and sometimes, Iranian armed forces.

### Localised Rebels or Insurgents

The third category of ANSAs are localised or sub-national rebel or insurgent groups mostly active in conflict zones in Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Libya. Among the most prominent of these groups are the *Harakat Ahrāru š-Šām Al Islāmiyah* (Islamic Movement of the Freeman of the Levant) or simply *Ahrar Al Sham* (AS) and *Hay'at Tahrīr aš-Šām* (Organisation for Liberation of the Levant or HTS) which are both offshoots of Salafi-Jihadism and gained prominence after the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011-12. The AS was formed in December 2011 by former Syrian Islamist convicts who were released from prison in a general amnesty after the outbreak of protests and demonstrations. It emerged as a prominent Salafi-Jihadi rebel group against the Assad regime and became part of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) which gained significant external support from Western and Arab Gulf countries as a legitimate opposition force.<sup>39</sup> During most of 2012-13, the AS fought alongside the *Jabhat an-Nucrah li-Ahl ish-Sham* (Front of the Supporters of the People of the Levant) or the Nusra Front, but the two organisations had a fallout towards the end of 2013 leading to hostilities and fights between them. With the intensification of the Syrian civil war, Iran, Hezbollah and eventually Russia joined the war in September 2015 on behalf of the Syrian regime. The joint offensive by them led to weakening and a gradual disarray in the opposition ranks. Western and Arab support for the Syrian opposition also began to dwindle after it became clear that the Salafi-Jihadist groups have gained an upper hand among the opposition.

The Nusra Front, which began as a branch of Daesh in Syria, split from it in 2013 and pledged allegiance to Al Qaeda. In 2016, it split with Al Qaeda declaring it an independent jihadist organisation and gradually rebranded itself as HTS after its merger with other Salafi-Jihadist factions in Northwest Syria.<sup>40</sup> The HTS is one of the main factions in the Syrian Salvation

Government (SSG) that controls the Idlib province. On the other hand, the AS after several months of hostilities, fighting and efforts for reconciliation, eventually split completely from the HTS. The AS merged with other Salafi-Jihadist factions to become the Syrian Liberation Front (SLF) and has mainly become confined to Aleppo. In Idlib, the HTS and AS have intermittently fought against each other for ideological and operational reasons and gradually the HTS has emerged on top of the heap also due to Turkish support.<sup>41</sup>

The other sub-national insurgent or militant group is *Ansar Allah* (Supporters of Allah) or the Houthi movement of Yemen. The origin of the group dates back to the early 1990s when it started as a socio-political movement among Zaidi Shias in northern Yemen both against the class discrimination among Zaidis as well as against the political-economic marginalisation by the government in Sanaa.<sup>42</sup> The movement eventually armed itself in the early 2000s and waged an insurgency in response to the attempts by the Ali Abdullah Saleh government to use force to contain the movement as it became increasingly radicalised. The leader of the movement Hussein Badreddin Al Houthi was killed in an operation by the Yemeni forces in 2004 in Saada governorate and the mantle of the movement came into the hands of his brother Abdel Malik Al Houthi who has since steered the group. Before emerging as a major faction in the Yemeni civil strife in the wake of the Arab uprisings, the movement had signed a ceasefire agreement with the central government in 2010. The Houthis actively participated in the protests in Yemen along with other groups including Al Islah and youth protestors that eventually led to Saleh stepping down in February 2012 under mediation by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) that brought Vice-President Abd Rabbuh Mansour Hadi to lead a transition government to prepare for a more democratic and participatory government.<sup>43</sup>

The process for a new constitution and laying down of rules for government formation kick-started with the National Dialogue Conference (NDC), in which the Houthis participated with other Yemeni factions. The NDC came to an understanding for governance in Yemen in January 2014 but the Houthi movement changed their position and escalated street protests to pressure Hadi to accede to their demands, and eventually marched on and took control of the capital Sanaa in September 2014 and declared the formation of a parallel government in Yemen in January 2015.<sup>44</sup> This prompted Hadi to flee to Saudi

Arabia and seek help in restoring his authority leading to the Saudi-led coalition's military intervention in Yemen in March 2015. The Houthis proved to be much more resilient fighters than the Saudi-led coalition and Hadi government had anticipated.<sup>45</sup> With Iranian help, they have not only managed to survive but have also expanded their control to major cities and ports, as well as have posed security threats to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) by launching drone attacks on their oil and civilian infrastructures since 2019.<sup>46</sup>

Similar localised ethnic and sectarian groups are present in Iraq as well, but most of them are integrated either within the broader Shia militia network or the Salafi-Jihadist network. The only exception could be the Kurdish Peshmerga, which are the armed forces of the autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), and hence are more a paramilitary unit of a quasi-state entity. Nonetheless, the Peshmerga have their own history of fighting as an ANSA against the Iraqi State, especially under Saddam Hussein.<sup>47</sup> A similar situation has developed in Libya where hundreds of private tribal and foreign militias are active and fight for one or the other leader based on their ethnic and ideological allegiance or just for financial rewards. The most potent of the fighting units in Libya is the Libyan National Army (LNA) which is commanded by Khalifa Haftar and has been authorised by the House of Representatives (HoR) based in Tobruk in Eastern Libya. Their main opponents are the Government of National Accord (GNA) which was formed under international supervision and UN-led mediation. The GNA also maintains fighting units as part of its military force. In addition, there are other armed factions active in Libya including affiliates and branches of Daesh. Although both LNA and GNA cannot be termed as NSAs because they are quasi-state structures, both have enlisted numerous ANSAs active in the country to fight against each other and Daesh's Libya Province.<sup>48</sup> Besides these conflict zones, there are other localised ethnic, sectarian or Islamist militias that are active in different parts of the region including in Iran, Tunisia, Egypt and other regional countries.

### **Armed Resistance Movements**

The fourth type of ANSAs active in WANA is the armed resistance movements. These include Hamas and Islamic Jihad Islamist militant groups based in

Gaza Strip in the Palestinian territory. Both are armed offshoots of the Muslim Brotherhood and have mostly focused on fighting the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) in the occupied territories. These groups have attempted to expand their operation inside Israeli territory by engaging in terrorist activities but have mostly kept themselves confined to occupied territories due to the Israeli tactics of using disproportionate force in response to any terrorist action.<sup>49</sup> In the past, the Fatah and Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) also acted as armed secular and Marxist resistance movements respectively, but have gradually given up on armed struggle under the leadership of Yasser Arafat who controlled the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) until his death in 2004.

Among other such groups is the Polisario Front, which has been fighting for the establishment of an independent Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) in Western Sahara claimed by Morocco as its territory. The SADR is recognised by nearly 41 Member States of the UN and some members of the African Union but is not recognised by the Arab League or any Arab country except Algeria and Libya under Muammar Qaddafi.<sup>50</sup> As part of the deal for normalisation of relations between Morocco and Israel under the Abraham Accords, in December 2020 the Trump administration recognised Moroccan sovereignty over the entirety of the disputed Western Sahara,<sup>51</sup> thus evoking protests from the SADR and their main supporter Algeria. Consequently, the Polisario Front revived its commitment for an armed struggle for an independent Sahrawi Arab Republic.<sup>52</sup> Another group that comes under this category is the Southern Transition Council (STC) in Yemen which demands the restoration of South Yemen and has been participating in the civil war to advance its interest with the UAE emerging as its main supporter.

### **ANSAs and Regional Geopolitics, Security and Stability**

As is apparent from the above discussion, a wide range of ANSAs have gained influence in WANA challenging the authority of States, claiming legitimacy by use of force, gaining territorial control, creating mayhem in many countries and in the sub-region and posing serious threats to regional security and stability. However, the response of the regional States has been mixed, tentative and above all, partisan. Most regional powers have from time to time used the rise of ANSAs as a geopolitical tool to advance their interests and influence.

They have acted based on narrow interests and have at times supported, financed, trained and given them arms and ammunitions as part of their own geopolitical ambitions of gaining strategic influence and depth. Some of them have propped-up ANSAs as proxies as a geopolitical tool for external balancing while others have used them to advance security interests or for merely scoring brownie points in an extremely fragmented and fissured regional geopolitics.

The most prominent example of use of ANSAs for geopolitical purposes is Iran, which has supported, trained and armed groups such as Hezbollah, Hamas, Houthis, PMF and militias in Syria and other parts of the region.<sup>53</sup> The extent of relations between Iran and ANSAs that act as its proxies is unmatched compared to any other regional country. Tehran uses proxies as part of its strategy to mitigate any security threats emerging from US military presence in the Persian Gulf and against any possible confrontation or conflict with Israel or other regional States.<sup>54</sup> The idea is to avoid fighting directly, given the military mismatch and not fight any war within its territory, a lesson that Iranians learnt through the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-88. Therein, Tehran recognised the futility of fighting a war within its territory and the threats it faces from regional militaries and allies of the US, as well as from the direct military presence of the US close to its borders. As part of meeting these security threats, Tehran devised a long-term plan of developing ANSAs as its proxies. The revolutionary zeal in the Islamic Republic and the presence of marginalised and often suppressed Arab Shias in what has been termed as the Shia Crescent countries provided the primary ideological and demographic fodder for Tehran to realise this plan.<sup>55</sup>

Regional events and actions by rival external and regional actors have boosted the Iranian resolve and ability to prop up ANSAs in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria and Yemen wherein Tehran now wields significant influence through its proxies. In Lebanon, for example, in the aftermath of the Israeli invasion in 1982, Iran helped in the foundation of Hezbollah and aided in its rise to first make it a potent armed resistance movement against the IDF and later establish it as a pre-eminent socio-political and paramilitary organisation.<sup>56</sup> Similarly, the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 not only tilted the regional balance of power in favour of Iran by removing its regional rival but also created a fertile ground within Iraq for Tehran to use its sectarian and theological linkages to create proxies and wield influence. As other regional powers, especially Saudi Arabia,

Jordan and Egypt, did not attempt to bring the house in order in Iraq, it created a vacuum which Iran, and to an extent Turkiye, capitalised on.<sup>57</sup>

A repeat of the pattern was seen in Syria and Yemen after the Arab Spring. In Syria, Tehran came out in support of the regime and helped form armed militias composed of both Syrians and foreign fighters. In the process, Iran as of 2022, is the most important external power wielding influence in the Syrian conflict and has been fighting a proxy war with Israel, which has undertaken military action in Syria to limit any threat to its security due to the strong Iranian military presence, movement of arms and ammunitions and large-scale deployment of militants by Iranian proxies close to its boundary.<sup>58</sup> In Yemen, Iran has been able to develop a proxy with minimal financial or personnel commitment, capitalising on the presence of a favourable ANSA in the form of the Houthi movement and has completely outmanoeuvred the Saudi-GCC military and political moves in the country.<sup>59</sup> Notably, by keeping a hands-off approach in Yemen, it has also escaped the blame for deepening the humanitarian crisis in the beleaguered country, with the culpability largely falling on Saudi military action. Additionally, Iran has also used the militants in Yemen, and probably also in Iraq, to mount small-scale attacks inside Saudi Arabia and the UAE as a tactic for keeping them under pressure against supporting Trump's "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran.

Iran has also tried to crop up proxies in the forms of ANSAs in other regional countries such as in Bahrain and Arab Gulf in the form of *Hezbollah Al Hejaz*<sup>60</sup> as well as in North Africa by developing linkages with the Shiite population in the region.<sup>61</sup> Nonetheless, the Iranian tactics of supporting ANSAs for geopolitical objectives do not necessarily follow a sectarian pattern only; for example, Tehran has used support and funding for Sunni Islamist Hamas and Islamic Jihad in the Gaza Strip to keep Israel under pressure and as a tactic to keep them from attacking Iran.<sup>62</sup> Iran has attempted to replicate the pattern outside the region as well including in Central Asia and South Asia. For example, it has developed linkages with the Sunni Taliban movement in Afghanistan during the US-led war and military presence lasting until 2021. Although the Taliban are not an Iranian proxy and work more closely with the Pakistani military and intelligence establishment, Tehran has not shied away from engaging the group more openly after it stormed Kabul and took control of the country by force.

Besides Iran, other regional and extra-regional powers have also used ANSAs to advance their geopolitical interests and expand their influence. Turkiye, for instance, has done this in both Syria and Libya. In Syria, Turkiye was one of the major backers of the FSA that, among its ranks, also included Salafi-jihadist groups like AS. Ankara's policy of extending support to Syrian opposition was initially based on the idea of supporting the democratic uprising, however, it swiftly moved to change the objective to overthrow of Assad regime and as Iran, Hezbollah and Russia entered the civil war, it moved to resist their military presence but changed to join Iran and Russia through the Astana process. Gradually, it modified its position of resisting Kurdish military and political advances, defeating Daesh and extending humanitarian support in opposition-held areas.<sup>63</sup> Turkiye has militarily intervened in Manbij and Idlib on behalf of the Syrian opposition and to push back the advances of both the regime forces and the SDF. In Libya, Turkiye came out in support of the GNA and thwarted the LNA advance towards Tripoli in 2020.<sup>64</sup> This was mostly a response to the Egyptian-Israeli-Greek move to isolate Turkiye in Eastern Mediterranean and was to a large extent effective in keeping the GNA intact and in advancing Turkish economic and political interests both in Libya and Eastern Mediterranean. Ankara has also supported Hamas in its resistance against Israel.

Similarly, the GCC countries, especially Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar, and other Arab countries, including Egypt and Jordan, have extended support for one or the other ANSAs in different conflict zones. Saudi Arabia actively supported the FSA in Syria in the early stages of the Syrian uprising, it also tried to gain influence in Iraq by extending support to the Sadrists militants.<sup>65</sup> The UAE, on the other hand, has been involved in Libya and Yemen extending support respectively to LNA and STC. Egypt is involved in Libya supporting the LNA. Qatar has been one of the main supporters of Hamas along with Turkiye and Iran, and also supported the GNA in Libya and HTS in Syria along with Turkiye. Jordan too was supporting the FSA in Syria at least in the early stages of the uprising. Among external powers, the US has cooperated with the Kurdish fighters in both Iraq and Syria<sup>66</sup> while Russia has cooperated with regime-backed militias in Syria.<sup>67</sup> Strangely both the US and Russia have backed the LNA in Libya albeit in a limited manner, avoiding any possible cooperation between the two global rivals. In Libya, France and Italy two

members of the European Union (EU) have backed the two rival factions of the LNA and the GNA respectively.

Ironically, the ANSAs and regional geopolitical competition have fed on each other to thrive and grow. While State actors have supported and aided the growth of ANSAs as proxies to realise their geopolitical goals, the proliferation of ANSAs has further fuelled regional geopolitical rivalries. This has resulted in frequent military interventions by regional States in neighbouring countries either in support of or against the regime and ANSAs have acted as proxies for neighbouring States either to thwart or support their intervention based on political, ideological or simply operational affinities. External powers too have engaged in this geopolitical game involving ANSAs. Consequently, there is no consensus at the regional or international level on how to deal with ANSAs with the exception of the near unanimity in defeating the transnational Salafi-Jihadist terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda, Daesh, Al Shabab and Boko Haram. Even on localised Salafi-Jihadist groups such as HTS and AS, there is no consensus on how to deal with them, as some regional countries and external powers continue to cooperate with them.

Regional countries and external actors based on their narrow interests conveniently used different definitions and yardsticks to define ANSAs as either terrorists, resistance movements, proxies or those fighting for their rights. More often than not, the decision is based on partisan interests. For example, Hezbollah is defined as a terrorist organisation by Israel, the US and some Arab countries while Iran sees it as a legitimate actor in Lebanon and a resistance movement against Israeli occupation. The same can be true about Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Similarly, Houthis are termed as terrorist groups by Gulf Arab countries while Iran sees it as a legitimate force for resistance. In Syria, on the other hand, Iran views all opposition as terrorists while Turkiye, Saudi Arabia and the US view them as legitimate opposition forces or rebel groups. In the case of the Kurdish YPG, Turkiye terms it as a terrorist group because of its association with the PYD-YPG and PKK, while the US considers the PKK a terrorist group, and cooperates and works with the PYD-YPG in northern Syria.

Such a fragmented regional and international approach towards proliferation of ANSAs in WANA has created serious challenges for regional security and stability, and the ANSAs continue to undermine the authority of

the States, weaken them from within, and challenge the regional order without any significant regional or international scrutiny. The weakening of regional states due to conflicts has also created a fertile ground for the ANSAs to thrive and gain legitimacy in the eyes of their followers without any sense of accountability and has contributed to the deterioration of the humanitarian situation in conflict zones such as in Libya, Yemen and Syria. In weaker States such as Lebanon and Iraq, they have complicated the political process to the extent that these have come on the verge of becoming failed States. Besides, the ANSAs are a major factor in causing protracted conflicts in WANA. Besides other factors, the internal situation within a State is a major reason for the proliferation of ANSAs. The chronic lack of governance, poor services and the inability of the States to fulfil their responsibilities towards the citizens have provided the ANSAs with opportunities to mobilise people, work among them and gain their support and legitimacy. In some cases, the public has traded loyalty in favour of the ANSAs in exchange of security, as the State is either unable to provide security or has become a perpetrator of violence on civilians in which case the ANSAs model themselves as a protector and security provider.

This has created mayhem in regional sub-systems from the Persian Gulf to the Eastern Mediterranean and North Africa. There is a heightened sense of insecurity in the Gulf due to the prevailing situation in Yemen that has often threatened to spread to the Red Sea and inside Saudi Arabia and other GCC countries. On the other hand, the situation in Iraq, Syria and Libya has threatened regional instability in the Eastern Mediterranean and North Africa. That these are regional security complexes that are significantly interlinked further create fears of widespread regional instability if ANSAs are not dealt with in a more holistic manner. There is also a degree of negligence on the part of scholars, academics and analysts in studying and underlining the threats posed by ANSAs, as their focus is mostly on geopolitics, the role of regional States and external powers, State institutions, militaries, security forces, protests movements, lack of governance, democracy and rights and economic malaise. There are only limited studies and discussions on the proliferation of ANSAs in WANA to assess their role, ambitions, capabilities and threats posed by them to regional security and stability.

## **Challenges and Implications for India**

From an Indian point of view, the proliferation of ANSAs is detrimental to the security and stability of the WANA region. It not only poses a threat to regional security and stability but can also be harmful to the interests of regional and external countries. India has important interests in WANA, especially in the Persian Gulf region where it has significantly enhanced its bilateral engagements and pursues a policy of multi-alignment without taking sides in regional disputes and conflicts. India has maintained a principled stand of the need for peaceful resolution of conflicts in the region underlining the significance of regional initiatives to address problems, disputes and conflicts.<sup>68</sup> The ANSAs in WANA pose a direct security threat to India and South Asia when they spread their ideologies and terrorist network, as well as recruit vulnerable youth to wage jihad in the region. This is especially valid in the case of Al Qaeda and Daesh that have in recent years tried to establish a branch in India by announcing the formation of the Islamic State Welayat-e-Hind (IS–WH) and the Al Qaeda in Indian Subcontinent (AQIS).

Besides these terrorist threats, there are direct implications for India's maritime and energy security. India has considerable maritime trade with the Persian Gulf both for imports of oil and gas as well as for exports of manufactured goods, food and agricultural products and merchandise to the region. Therefore, any disruption by ANSAs of the regional waters can be detrimental for India's economic interest. Additionally, given the proximity of India's western coastal region to the Arabian Peninsula, there is always a possibility of threats to coastal security. The passage of ships through the Arabian Sea and Western Indian Ocean and Red Sea can also be disrupted due to activities by the ANSAs and this can be harmful for India's maritime security concerns, not to mention the rise in cost of shipping due to heightened security risks. Dependence on the region for energy security means that any disruption in supplies caused by regional instability or insecurity can be detrimental for India. In recent years, ANSAs have shown the capacity of targeting oil installations in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, two of India's leading oil suppliers. Finally, the safety of Indian nationals can also be compromised as was the case when a Houthi attack in the UAE in January 2022 killed two Indian workers.<sup>69</sup>

From a policy perspective, there is a need to develop a greater understanding of the phenomenon of the growing influence and proliferation of ANSAs in

WANA. A key question to be addressed is how can they determine the outcome of ongoing conflicts and affect the security and stability of specific countries and the wider region. This can be done by increased academic studies and interactions among analysts and think tanks based in India and the region. Special task forces can also be formed to develop greater understanding and policy recommendations. Secondly, India, which has the advantage of having a multi-aligned approach in the region and has strong bilateral relations with all countries in the region, should incorporate discussions on ANSAs in bilateral security engagements and talks emphasising on how the ANSAs pose a threat to regional security as well as Indian interests. Thirdly, there should be some mechanism for India to gather more intelligence and information about ANSAs, their structure, objectives, capabilities and views on issues pertaining to Indian interests and on India as a rising power, to be able to assess and understand any direct or indirect threat they pose to India. Finally, India can take the lead in starting a wider regional and international dialogue through multilateral forums such as the United Nations, and engagement with the GCC, the Arab League and other regional organisations, on the threats posed by the ANSAs to regional security and stability and interests of regional and external countries.

## **Conclusion**

The WANA region has witnessed a proliferation of ANSAs in the twenty-first century. They are mostly the result of the chronic regional conflicts and chaos that have contributed to the weakening of States and caused some of them to become failing or failed States. The Arab uprisings further accelerated the process with the number of ANSAs witnessing a significant increase, especially in the conflict zones such as Iraq, Syria, Libya and Yemen. The constant internal chaos in some countries with bad governance, crony capitalism and the inability of the State to provide economic and physical security to their citizens have also contributed to the proliferation of ANSAs. Broadly, the ANSAs can be divided into four categories, namely, transnational Salafi-Jihadist terrorist groups, cross-border sectarian or ethnic militias or insurgent groups, localised rebels or insurgents and armed resistance movements. The regional geopolitical competition has also been one of the contributing factors to their proliferation that many countries have used as proxies to advance their interests and expand

influence. This has, in turn, led to a fragmented and divergent response from the regional and external powers. From an Indian point of view, the ANSAs pose a challenge for Indian interests in WANA as a rising global power with significant economic and security interests in regional security and stability. India, thus, needs to carefully assess the phenomenon of ANSAs and devise its policies accordingly.

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# 5

## Exploring the Future of India-Gulf Ties in the Power Sector

*Abdulla Alabbasi and Subha Haroon*

### **Introduction**

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and the Republic of India have an ambitious agenda of promoting renewable energy and reducing carbon emissions. These plans are based on their international commitment and their need to reduce dependence on finite resources. All the GCC countries have announced mandatory targets for increasing the share of renewables by 2030. Similarly, India has also announced the initiative of ‘One Sun, One World, One Grid’, which envisions a globally interconnected electricity grid to complement the plans of the International Solar Alliance (ISA) for round-the-clock solar power production.<sup>1</sup> However, the integration of renewable energy technologies, particularly wind and solar, can affect the stability of the network, and they require a deep understanding of the electrical grid, consumption patterns, and operational aspects of electrical systems. For instance, renewable energy can increase the ramp in the load profile when the consumer demand is less than the renewables’ output. This effect of renewable production is often termed the “duck curve”, and it requires careful consideration through the planning stages and policy formulation.

One of the approaches for tackling the associated challenges of renewable energy is cross-border electricity interconnectors. The GCC countries have joined forces to develop an interconnected transmission grid, which will be

used mainly for supporting the GCC networks during blackouts and emergencies. Recently, the mandate of the GCC interconnector has been expanded to boost power trading in the region and increase cooperation with neighbouring countries.<sup>2</sup> India itself has a huge electrical grid which consists of five power grids: the Northern Region, Eastern Region, Western Region, North Eastern Region, and Southern Region grids. In addition to its local interconnection, India has cross-border interconnections with its neighbours, and it has a well-established mechanism for power trading called the Indian Energy Exchange (IEX), which aims to facilitate in-country and cross-border power trading.<sup>3</sup>

This chapter is an attempt to explore the possible cooperation between the GCC and India in the power sectors, particularly in developing an electrical interconnection between them. This interconnection can increase the deployment of renewable energy in GCC countries and India, and enhance the stability of the networks. It can also optimise the supply for dispatchable and non-dispatchable power plants in order to meet the growing demands in both regions. The chapter starts by explaining the energy mix for the electrical generation sector and renewable targets between the two regions, then highlights their electrical interconnection. Finally, it discusses the benefits of establishing an interconnection – a proposal that is realistic and achievable.

### **Electrical Profiles and Renewables Targets between GCC and India**

The formulation of any electrical grid is unique by its nature as it is developed over time, based on the evolution of the technologies and the distinctiveness of the country's natural resources. For example, the GCC countries' electricity generation depends on hydrocarbons, since this region has more than 30 per cent of the world's reserves of crude oil and 20 per cent of natural gas reserves.<sup>4</sup> In addition, the advancement of technologies has played a significant role in developing the electrical grid in every sector, including power generation, transmission, and distribution. This section will cover the energy mix for electrical generation in the GCC countries and India and their renewable targets.

### *GCC Electrical Profiles and Renewable Targets*

The GCC nations use natural gas as their primary source to generate their electricity, followed by crude oil, and the remaining fuel is made up of light oil, heavy fuel oil, diesel, and renewable energy sources.<sup>5</sup> However, the GCC countries set progressive targets and plans for integrating renewable energy sources into the total national energy mix, as shown in Table 1. Each country has set goals commensurate with its capabilities and vision for the future. At the end of 2020, the Gulf countries had installed an electric capacity equivalent to 146 gigawatts (GW), of which renewable energy constituted 3271 megawatts (MW). The investment in solar energy is considered the largest in the region as it represents 71 per cent of the projects, followed by concentrated solar energy (CSE) with 23 per cent; bioenergy and energy generated from waste represent four per cent while wind energy represents two per cent. The United Arab Emirates is one of the leading investors in renewable energy within the region, as the share of its investments constitutes 68 per cent of the total investments in the Gulf, followed by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia with 16 per cent.

**Table 1: GCC Renewables Targets**

<i>Country</i>	<i>Installed Capacity in 2020 [MW]</i>	<i>RE Share in 2020</i>	<i>RE Targets</i>
Bahrain	10	0.1%	5% for 202520 for 2035
Kuwait	106	0.5%	15% for 2035
Oman	159	1.3%	10% for 202530% for 2030
Qatar	43	0.3%	20% for 2030
Saudi	413	0.5%	50% for 2030
UAE	2540	7.2%	50% for 2030

*Source:* International Energy Agency (2022).

Looking closely at the UAE's power generation profile, we see that it has an installed capacity of 27 GW. In addition, the UAE is aiming to increase the production of electricity by interconnecting with other grids within the Emirates, including Etihad Water and Electricity, Department of Energy-Abu Dhabi, Dubai Electricity and Water Authority (DEWA), and Sharjah Electricity, Water and Gas Authority (SEWGA). DEWA declared in November 2013 that it planned to source 12 per cent of its electricity from nuclear sources

by 2030. Leading the sector's organization is the State-owned Emirates Nuclear Energy Corporation (ENEC), which in 2009, granted a US\$ 20 billion contract to a South Korean consortium to construct four nuclear facilities with a combined capacity of 5,600 MW. The UAE has also enacted a number of energy and climate change-related laws and made efforts to address the problem posed by carbon emissions. By using nuclear power, renewable energy, and energy-saving practices, the major goal is to lessen the UAE's overall reliance on fossil fuels. For instance, the Renewable Energy Development Strategy states that the deployment of renewable energy will increase to 25 per cent by 2030 and 75 per cent by 2050.<sup>6</sup>

Saudi Arabia is one of the few nations that directly burns crude oil to produce energy. Oil-fired generating units typically employ lower-priced fuel oil worldwide. With 58 gigawatts of total production capacity available, the State-owned Saudi Energy Company (SEC) is Saudi Arabia's largest electricity supplier in the region. The government invested over US\$ 53 billion in electricity generation between 2008 and 2015. This includes a US\$ 21 billion scheme for nine independent power projects that would increase capacity by 9,360 MW, and a US\$ one billion agreement to upgrade the Riyadh Power Plant with 30 gas turbines to generate an additional 2,000 MW. By 2032, when the anticipated growth in electricity demand will necessitate an increase in power-generation capacity to 120 GW, the King Abdullah City for Atomic and Renewable Energy (K.A. CARE) programme hopes to ensure that half of the electricity generated in Saudi Arabia comes from renewable sources.<sup>7</sup> In addition, the current trend of the Saudi leadership towards shifting to renewable energy, supporting sustainability projects and protecting the environment is moving in a positive direction. This was clearly shown when Saudi Arabia chaired the G-20 and proposed the adoption of the Carbon Circular Economy (CCE), which was embraced by all G-20 countries. The adoption of a circular carbon economy will create a major change in the energy sector as well as the whole economy.

It is also essential to mention that Oman is a major exporter of oil and gas, and all its energy needs are met by domestically produced natural gas and oil products. To encourage private solar PV adoption, the government recently introduced the "Residential PV Initiative". With a goal of generating at least 30 per cent of its electricity from renewable sources by 2030, Oman is seeking

to increase the capacity of its electricity-generation facilities through renewable independent power projects (IPP). The government-owned Petroleum Development Oman (PDO), an early innovator in large-scale solar power projects in Oman, seeks to reduce emissions by 50 per cent from 2019 levels by 2030. Ibra 2, Oman's largest utility-scale solar photovoltaic, independent power facility, commenced commercial operations in January 2022. By 2040, Oman wants to establish a hydrogen-based economy with annual green and blue hydrogen production of around 30 GW. Several gigawatt-scale green hydrogen projects have been announced by the government, including a 14 GW facility fuelled by 25 GW of wind and solar energy. According to the research firm MEED, Oman wants to invest over US\$ 45 billion in green hydrogen and green ammonia projects. To oversee hydrogen project management, Oman established an EDO subsidiary called Hydrogen Development Oman and a Directorate General for Clean Energy and Hydrogen under the Ministry of Energy and Minerals.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, Kuwait's sole source of energy is fossil fuels, and by 2030, the nation's energy requirements will have tripled. The country wants to diversify its energy mix by increasing the proportion of renewable generation to 15 per cent by 2030.<sup>9</sup> In 2015, Kuwait possessed five thermal power plants: Doha East, Doha West, Al-Subiya, Shuaiba South, and Al-Zour South, with a combined installed generation capacity of 15.7 GW. The Kuwait Electric Power System (KEPS) produces, transmits, and distributes electricity under the supervision of the Ministry of Power and Water. The only facility that is not connected to desalination plants is Al-Subiya. In northern Kuwait, Al-Subiya II produces 2000 MW. The Ministry of Electricity and Water, set a target of 15 per cent of total energy production from renewable sources by 2030 as part of the country's National Energy Strategy 2035. The strategy also aims to generate two GW of electricity from renewable sources by 2030 with the goal of reducing dependence on fossil fuels and increasing the use of renewable energy for power generation. Sidra is the country's first solar power plant with a 10 MW output capacity, but so far not much progress has been made in this area. There has been a rise in power demand, partly because of significant energy subsidies. Rolling blackouts are common throughout the busy summer months. Plans to cut subsidies, which made up 6.5 per cent of the GDP in 2015, have encountered resistance in the legislature.<sup>10</sup>

Gas generates nearly all of Qatar's electricity, and according to State reports, the country had an electricity generation capacity of about 8,800 MW in 2017. The Qatar General Electricity and Water Corporation (QEWCo), enjoys a monopoly in government transmission and distribution. Although currently there are independent water and power providers, the majority of Qatar's generation capacity is owned by the QEWCo, a partially privatized enterprise. Additionally, the QEWCo works with private investors on energy projects.<sup>11</sup> The Qatari government has announced its goal to integrate renewable energy in order to meet 20 per cent of the electricity demand. Yet there is no dedicated entity responsible for following up on this mission, and there are several stakeholders involved in renewable projects including the Ministry of Energy, the Ministry of Industry and Trade, the Qatar Electricity and Water Company (Kahramaa) and the Qatar National Research Fund.<sup>12</sup>

The Kingdom of Bahrain's generation capacity is 3150 MW. Thermal, oil, or gas-fired power plants produce the vast majority of that. It has five power plants; two of them are public-private partnerships (PPPs): the Al Hidd IWPP (integrated water and power plant), which provides the grid with around 1,006 MW, and the Al Ezzel IPP (independent power producer), which has a capacity of 946 MW. Currently, Bahrain's government has taken several steps to incorporate renewable energy in its energy mix. A significant milestone was achieved in January 2017, when the Sustainable Energy Unit (SEU) launched the National Renewable Energy Action Plan (NREAP). This plan is a roadmap for identifying the most appropriate renewable resources and their best technologies, which reconcile with Bahrain's privacy. The action plan set a target of 255 MW of renewable energy by 2025, with a generation of 480 GWh per year. It also sets another goal for 2035, which is to produce 700 MW, with 1460 GWh per year.<sup>13</sup> In 2019, the largest tender to produce 100 megawatts of renewable energy through solar panels was awarded to a group of companies led by ACWA Power.<sup>14</sup> A tender was also recently announced for a capacity of not less than 72 MW of solar energy systems, linked to the national grid on the roofs of buildings, parking lots and electric car charging stations.<sup>15</sup>

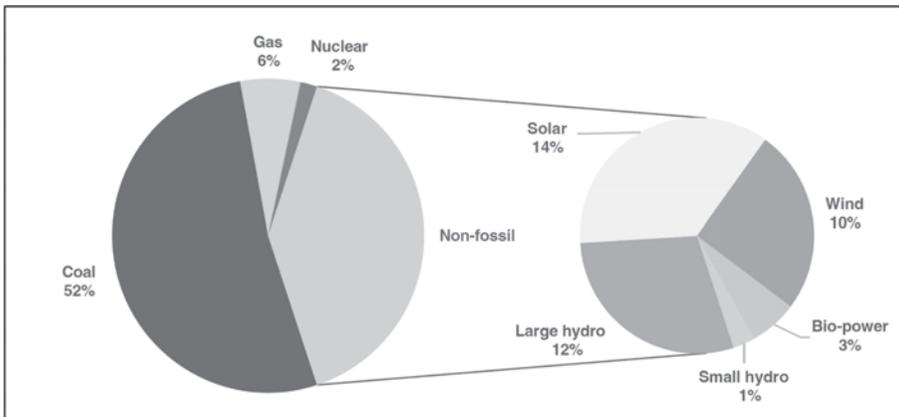
At the end of this section, it is important to highlight that even though the GCC countries have similar drivers to invest in renewable energy and diversify their energy mix, the progress of each country differs based on

individual availability of natural resources and having various economic challenges. Thus, it is not appropriate to put all GCC countries in one basket without understanding the indigenous difficulties of each nation. Despite these differences among GCC countries, the GCC interconnection that was completed in 2011, has provided the region with a solid base structure for formulating a holistic strategy for renewable energy investments and increasing the cooperation among both the member states and other neighbouring countries. For instance, the GCC interconnection is planned to be linked to the Iraq electrical grids and to connect to several more electrical grids in the future including Egypt, India, and Jordan.

### *India's Electrical Grids and Renewable Targets*

The majority of India's electricity is produced from coal-fired power plants. Coal continues to be the country's principal source of electricity, despite efforts to diversify. Electricity's proportion has increased since 2000, reaching 73 per cent in 2013. Except for renewables, the percentage shares of all other energy sources have fallen over that period. India produced 1078 TWh in total in 2015 from sources like coal, natural gas, oil, nuclear electricity, and hydropower.<sup>16</sup> As depicted in Figure 1, India has a total electrical installed production capacity of about 404 GW with 52 per cent based on coal-fired power plants and 40 per cent from renewables.<sup>17</sup>

**Figure 1: India's Electric Power Installed Capacity as of June 2022**



Source: Y. Bhatt and P. Kamboj, "India's Updated NDC: A Pathway to Net-Zero by 2070?", KAPSARC, 2022.

The development of alternative and renewable electricity sources like solar, wind, biomass and small hydropower (less than 25 MW) facilities are also advancing significantly. India's target is for 50 per cent of its installed generation capacity to come from renewables by 2030. This achievement will be based on the current development and potential in the country. It was anticipated in 2015 that non-utilities or independent power producers would produce about 185 TWh. Their growth rate over time has also been nine per cent. In order to meet its needs, India additionally bought five TWh of power from Bhutan in 2015.<sup>18</sup> The country can also produce up to 84,000 MW from hydro. Thus, the government intends to expedite a hydro development plan in which it seeks to construct 50,000 MW of additional capacity by 2026, with the majority of the capacity centred in the southern region. At the 2015 Climate Summit in Paris, a "Solar Alliance" was also proposed, with the objective of increasing its renewable generating capacity to 175 GW by 2022. According to the Ministry of New and Renewable Energy, India had achieved until now an installed renewable energy capacity of 137 GW, which includes 85 GW of solar power, 38 GW of wind power, 10 GW of bio-power, and 4 GW of small hydropower. In order to achieve the 175 GW target, India has taken several steps, including reducing tariffs for wind and solar power, providing financial incentives and subsidies, and implementing various policies and schemes to promote the use of renewable energy. India has also set a target of achieving 40 per cent of its total installed power capacity from non-fossil fuel-based energy resources by 2030 as a part of its National Action Plan on Climate Change. Despite the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, India continues to make progress towards its renewable energy targets.<sup>19</sup>

The Indian grid is connected with those of Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh already, and there are ongoing plans to be connected with Sri Lanka through undersea cables. There is also a plan for the interconnection of ten ASEAN countries and Southeast Asia that would eventually result in improving the accessibility of electricity and the economy of the countries involved. In such a huge interconnection plan, all parties will benefit from efficiency, dependability, and resilience by connecting smaller power systems to create a larger power pool or regional grid. The interconnected grids will ensure that resources are used efficiently and that the unexpected electrical demand is met without disturbing the networks. The excess capacity that must be set aside

for demand during peak hours can, in general, be drawn from another area where the peak may occur at other times in an interconnected system due to peak and non-peak hours in every power system. If two power systems are integrated, the capacity needed in the event of a power plant or transmission line failure, can be immediately supplied. In a large power pool, the likelihood of a grid collapse is far lower in the event of disasters, both natural and man-made.

Looking at the Indian and GCC interconnection, we can observe some similarities. Both regions have rapid growth potential in electrical demands and are planning to integrate more renewable energy into their energy mix. They also have electrical interconnections and are eager to expand them with other regions to maximise their benefits, which include reducing the cost and stabilising their electrical networks. In the following section, attention is drawn to the electrical interconnection between India and GCC in order to explore the possibility of future cooperation through cross-border connections between the two regions.

### **Future Perspectives for GCC and India Interconnections**

The development of an electrical interconnection is a strategic project that requires a deep understanding of electrical profiles of the parties involved. As for the GCC countries, the main reason behind their electrical interconnection is to support their electrical grids during emergencies and blackouts. The success of their cooperation boosts the mandate of its interconnection for further cooperation related to minimising the cost of spinning reserves and creating a power-trading platform between the member states. In the case of India, the cause of its rapid progress in establishing its interconnection with other countries is the need to increase the acceptability of electricity and to cover the growing electrical demands. This section will cover the electrical interconnection within the GCC and India, and attempt to shed some light on the benefits of a future interconnection between the two regions.

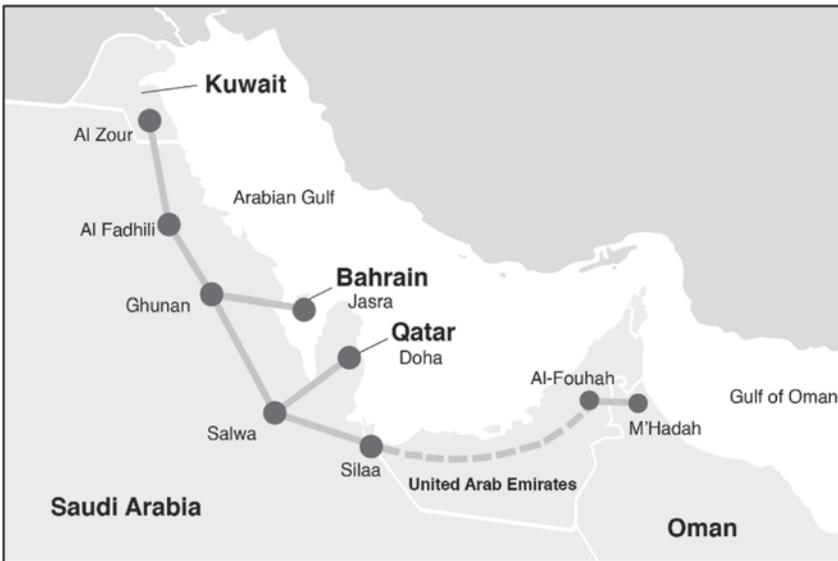
#### *GCC Electrical Interconnection*

The GCC nations had come up with GCC Interconnections to strengthen their local networks and reduce the possibilities of full or partial blackouts. Furthermore, the countries need to face the rising power demands brought on

by the rapid population, commercial, and industrial growth in their respective nations. In addition, the GCC governments have started to restructure their electrical market by encouraging the private sector to invest in this lucrative business. This is because they were aware of the financial burden of building utility projects to fulfil the growing demand. In order to maintain and operate the GCC power grid, the GCC Interconnection Authority (GCCIA), a power grid authority, was founded by the GCC nations in 2001. By lowering the quantity of reserves required in each nation, and by offering wheeling services and facilitating energy trading, the power grid will reduce the long-term investment costs of building generation plants.<sup>20</sup>

The GCC grid's interconnection architecture combines the "common link" which represents Phase I of the interconnection of Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, and the UAE, and the "neighbour-to-neighbour" connection between Oman and the UAE to produce the "hybrid link." Except for Oman, which will require all transactions with the other five GCC nations to use the UAE power system, this "hybrid link" will give all countries direct access to any other system.<sup>21</sup>

Figure 2: The GCC Electricity Grid



Source: Hassan K Al Asaad, Adnan I. Al Mohaisen, and S. Sud, "GCC power grid: Transforming the GCC power sector into a major energy trading market", *Cigre Conference*, Abu Dhabi, UAE, 2006.

The advantages of the GCC interconnection grid are extensive. Economic benefits include increased energy efficiency, greater supply security, and cost savings through sharing spinning reserves. For instance, the bilateral power trading between the member states exceeded 1.3 million MWh with a value of US\$ 161 million in 2016. Additionally, the link reduces the need for further expenditure on constructing a new power plant, as well as operational and maintenance costs. Saudi Arabia may be able to save more than US\$ 309 million by reducing its total installed capacity by two GW. It is also anticipated that the entire region will save US\$ 180 million in operating fuel expenditures.<sup>22</sup>

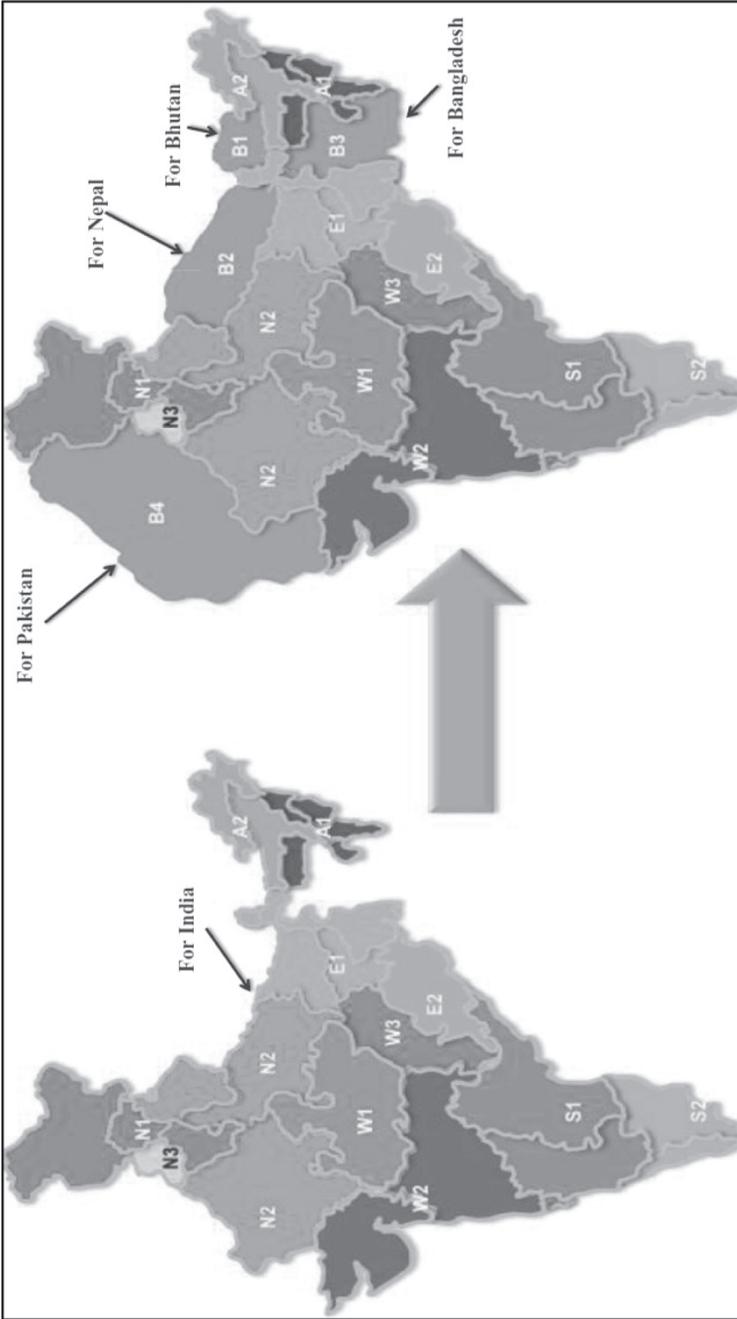
### *India's Electrical Interconnection*

India occupies a pivotal position in the South Asian region and has cross-border linkages with its neighbours, which significantly contributes to the efficient use of the region's resources. Additionally, on 18 December 2018, the Indian Ministry of Power released "Guidelines for Import/Export (Cross Border) of Energy-2018" to enable the import and export of electricity between India and its neighbours. The Indian Energy Exchange (IEX) platform, which is an automated trading exchange, is responsible for facilitating country and cross-border power trading. The power producers and buyers can participate in live bidding through the IEX platform, regulated by the Central Electricity Regulatory (CERC). Currently, India is subdivided into 12 bidding areas in five major zones. In the coming years, several interconnections will be structured between India and neighbouring countries such as Pakistan as shown in Figure 3.

Currently, the Indian grids are connected to Bangladesh, Myanmar, Nepal, and Bhutan. The details of the interconnection are as follows:<sup>23</sup>

1. **India-Nepal:** There are several locations where Nepal and India are connected by 11kV, 33kV, 132kV, and 220kV lines. A 400kV D/C transmission line from Dhalkebar (Nepal) to Muzaffarpur (India) has been built to connect India and Nepal for the transport of bulk power. Through these links, Nepal receives a total of 700 MW of electricity. Additionally, it has been decided to string the second circuit of the 132 kV lines from Kataiya (India) to Kushaha (Nepal), the 400 kV D/C Gorakhpur (India) to Butwal (Nepal), the 400 kV Dhalkebar (Nepal) to Sitamarhi (India), and the 132 kV Raxaul (India) to Parwanipur (Nepal).

Figure 3: Indian Bidding Zones and Cross-Border Interconnection



Source: S.K. Ray, and Shuvam Sarkar Roy, "Pan Asia Grid Interconnection Project (PAGIP)", in ISUW 2019: Proceedings of the 5th International Conference and Exhibition on Smart Grids and Smart Cities, pp. 295-306, Springer, Singapore, 2022.

2. **India-Bhutan:** Several 400kV, 220kV, and 132kV lines currently connect India and Bhutan, mostly for the import of roughly 2000 MW of power from Tala (1020 MW), Chukha (336 MW), Kurichu (60 MW), and Mangdechu HEP (720 MW) in Bhutan to India. Additionally, the Punatsangchu-I (1200 MW) and Punatsangchu-II (1020 MW) HEPs in Bhutan are expected to be operational by 2024-2025. There is already a transmission system in place for the transport of power from these projects to India.
3. **India-Bangladesh:** The Baharampur (India) - Bheramara (Bangladesh) 400kV D/C lines and the 2 x 500 MW HVDC back-to-back terminal at Bheramara provide high-capacity connectivity between the two countries. Another 400kV (run at 132kV) interconnection exists between Surajmaninagar (Tripura), India, and Comilla, Bangladesh. Together, these links make it possible to send 1160 MW of power to Bangladesh. Additionally, during the official visit of the Prime Minister of Bangladesh to India, in October 2019, it was decided to build a 765kV double circuit cross-border electricity interconnection between Katihar (India), Parbotipur (Bangladesh), and Bornagar (India) in order to facilitate more intra-regional electricity trade, including competitively priced power produced from hydro-electric power projects in India, Nepal, and Bhutan.
4. **India-Myanmar:** Through an 11 kV transmission line, India is providing almost 3 MW of electricity from Moreh in Manipur to the town of Tamu in Myanmar. It is being jointly developed to strengthen more low-capacity links along the border in diverse locations. Additionally, a high-capacity link between the nations is being proposed.

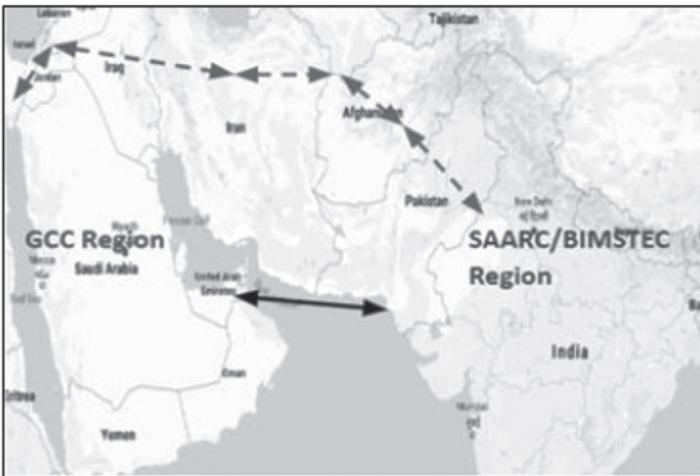
#### *Future Cooperation between GCC and India*

India used 980 TWh of power in 2015, and its annual growth rate has been 8.84 per cent. When compared to the world's average, which is 2728 kWh, and the Middle East's average, which is 3378 kWh, the electricity use per person in all GCC countries is regarded as one of the highest rates of energy consumption per person. In 2010, the electricity usage per person in these countries ranged from 5340 kWh to 17610 kWh.<sup>24</sup> The demand for electricity

is increasing rapidly with the growing development in both regions. With such a rapid increase in demand, India and GCC countries should consider other available options such as linking the GCC and India through a power grid that will provide energy security, safety, and reliability. It will also save millions which can be spent on the construction of new power generation plants otherwise, and both regions could benefit from this interconnection.

From a technical perspective, the interconnection between two regions is feasible and there are several studies covering the modelling and potential for such a project. For instance, Ray and Ro (2022) in their study proposed two approaches to connect the GCC to India. The first option is through Oman by submarine cables and the second is through Iraq, to Iran, to Afghanistan, to Pakistan, as presented in Figure 4. In addition, the announced projects – particularly the ones related to solar power plants with cross-border interconnection – provide a promising role model to encourage this investment. This could be shown in Singapore’s solar cable that will provide the country with 14GW from a solar power plant in the Australian deserts. The submarine cables between the two countries will be 4300 km long (high voltage DC). Another project with 3800 km of submarine cables will be between Morocco and the UK to supply the former with solar and wind energy.

Figure 4: Options for the GCC Interconnection to India



Source: S.K. Ray, and Shuvam Sarkar Roy , “Pan Asia Grid Interconnection Project (PAGIP)”, in ISUW 2019: Proceedings of the 5th International Conference and Exhibition on Smart Grids and Smart Cities, pp. 295-306, Springer, Singapore, 2022.

No doubt that the power exchange, if planned extensively, could potentially provide involved stakeholders access to a very dependable, carbon-free power supply. At the same time, it can spur the transition to a low-carbon economy and open new markets for renewable energy.<sup>25</sup> There are three main benefits of the proposed interconnection of the GCC and India: cheaper electricity costs, lower emission levels, and increased supply reliability. Such interconnection is also justified in providing reliable electricity and security. For instance, the sun sets on average at 18:00 hours in India, where the evening peak lasts from 17:30 hours to 21:00 hours. The remaining three hours' worth of electricity must still be transported. These additional hours would be available through interconnection with the Gulf region. The time difference would be much more advantageous if transmission lines were to be extended even further, for example, between North Africa and South Asia. Additionally, India may have a great export opportunity in renewable energy. There would be a surplus during the monsoon season when there are plenty of hydroelectric resources, which could be traded to the Gulf as necessary. With the potential to become a hub for the trade of renewable energy, India is in a unique position to gain from this type of electrical interconnection. Cross-border interconnections comprise a crucial component of the infrastructure required to make the transition to a net-zero planet. Thus, they provide motivation to achieve the initiative: One Sun, One World, One Grid.

Furthermore, this interconnection between the GCC and India could contribute positively to the deployment of renewables to neighbouring regions. As the proportion of variable renewable energy (VRE) resources on the grids has increased, interest has grown in the relevance of regional grid connectivity. If the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) interconnection have a common connection, then all regions will benefit by allowing for the sharing of electricity between them. This will provide demand flexibility and access to a variety of generation resources. In simple terms, it means that the interconnection will enable the two regions to better manage their electricity supply and demand by sharing resources, which will lead to more efficient use of energy and help to meet the varying electricity needs across the regions. Due to the diversity of demand profiles, opportunities for profitable energy exchange exist in both power shortage and surplus

circumstances. These variations are caused by seasonal variances, as well as varying weekend events and holidays in each connected country, in addition to the differing time zones.

There is a five-hour time zone difference between the western end of the GCC grid and the eastern portions of the ASEAN grid, which can be effectively utilised in the interconnected operations. Solar generation will be at its highest in the ASEAN and GCC regions as the evening peak begins in the ASEAN region. Later, the base load plants in the ASEAN grid might support it as the night-time peak load rises in the western part of India and the GCC region. Moreover, based load strategies in the SAARC area can support the morning peak in ASEAN. This system of interconnected operations aids in both the effective functioning of base load facilities throughout the world and the incorporation of renewable energy sources. When the GCC nations have tens of gigawatts of solar energy, the hydro generation in SAARC and ASEAN could also improve the quality of electricity in the GCC system. Through the supply of clean solar, wind, and hydro-electricity, the link may also have the ability to decrease the consumption of fossil fuels in these areas.

It is essential to mention here that there are several initiatives that could be suggested to increase the level of cooperation between the two regions in the power sector. At the moment, stakeholder engagement could initiate the project; stakeholders include transmission experts, politicians, public authorities, environmentalists, energy research institutes, regional/national NGOs and the public. Such engagement will not only allow doors to be opened for better innovative ideas but also reduce the gap between industries and the public. For instance, in some of the European countries, there are web links made for public consultations on power grid development plans.<sup>26</sup> It will also be beneficial to investigate the potential for more comprehensive and strategic cooperation, which will cover several sectors and strengthen the economic ties between the two nations.

## **Conclusion**

The GCC and India's electrical networks are on a long journey to develop their electrical grids and increase the share of renewables. The concept of cross-border interconnection between the two regions was discussed in this chapter with an emphasis on the potential benefits. The chapter also explored

electrical profiles and renewable targets, as well as the established interconnection in each area. Both cases are being developed with differing drives. They are heading to the future with similar visions for diversifying their energy mix and reducing their greenhouse emissions. Both regions are also facing rapid electrical demands, an increase in their populations and growing economies. The efforts should be directed towards increasing awareness about the benefits of the interconnection between the two regions and establishing a dialogue among the concerned stakeholders.

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# 6

## India's Energy Equation with West Asia since the Arab Unrest

*Vrushal T. Ghoble*

### **Introduction**

West Asia is experiencing some crucial political and economic transformation. The rentier arrangement that kept the regimes with its people connected for decades is corroding, as major challenges arrive at their doorstep. The revenue-based regimes through which the West Asian States were identified, face an unsteady ground today. The chapter highlights the geopolitical changes and points at the realigned strategic behaviour of the regional actors, which can be seen through their changing strategies and policies. In the midst of these geopolitical realities, Asia's energy transaction has increased. India's entry particularly is privileged by its access to West Asia's vast hydrocarbon resources and it continues to enjoy its energy trade with the region, including investments and assets. Apparently, a traditional mode of diplomacy is replaced by a proactive involvement. India's oil consumption has exceeded four million barrels per day (approximately) and is expected to increase in the coming years. India imports around two-thirds of its energy requirements from West Asia. The prevailing insecurities ascending from the crisis within and outside the region form a good case for revisiting India's policy options. In view of these conflicts, India's import of oil from other countries and its potential impact on imports from West Asia need critical scrutiny. The Russia-Ukraine crisis and discounted Russian oil is a reference in this regard.

## **Vital Changes in West Asia**

The transformation in West Asia is bearing some tangible results. As the region is changing, the challenges are being understood and scrutinised. The questions that are before the region to face, have managed to sacrifice the independence, autonomy and fertile environment for the region's growth. The fundamental political and social structure of the region is realigned with the economics of the region that is based on the rentier status. The endurance of the region rested on the oil trade that has managed to bring prosperity through revenues. The oil trade received setbacks, resulting in lesser revenues time and again, which also portrayed the fragility of the states being dependent on the commodity. Hence, the oil revenues in a way became a prerequisite for the countries to sustain their budgets. As the region was grappling with fluctuating oil prices, the consumer states were also endorsing the regional stability that would be conducive to their ventures in the hydrocarbon industry.

The region's significance as a world-class producer originated with its low cost of production as compared to any other part of the world. The outcome of this relationship between the consumers and the region went beyond the traditional mode of diplomacy, and the engagement was transactional. The events that unfolded in the region were conflict-ridden, and thereby, raised questions on security, making the investments riskier. The region feels compromised on a variety of issues, which has made geopolitics work at times against the process in which the region was conditioned. The geopolitical transition that the region is undergoing, factors a variety of issues. The countries are aspiring for newer sources of energy. It is believed that "renewable energy technologies are expected to account for some 18 per cent of global generating capacity, after the investment of some US\$ 2.4 trillion in new projects over the 10 years."<sup>1</sup> Due to the rising awareness of changing climatic conditions, the regional governments have adopted policies that are bound to shift their mode of energy consumption and adapt to the changing times. The global movement in favour of cleaner sources of energy has risen in recent times, and West Asia is remapping its usage of energy, redirecting it towards alternative sources. Greater emphasis is laid on solar and wind energy. Reports suggest that West Asia and Africa together had, "a 61 per cent rise in green energy capacity investment in 2018, to a record US\$ 16.1 billion. Solar took the

lion's share of the total, at US\$ 10.1 billion, up 19 per cent, but there was also a five-fold jump in wind investment.”<sup>2</sup>

The oil slump post-2014 has changed the equation of the region and its most-priced commodity, oil. Spike and fall in oil prices have occurred in the past, which compromised the strategic advantage that West Asia had. Over-reliance on oil revenues has affected the region. While, on the one hand, the higher oil prices have stimulated the growth and well-being of the States, low prices have stunted the economy. There is a geo-economic shift in the region, as the countries gear up to diversify their economies. The Arab uprisings had a very severe impact on the region. The unrest in a few GCC countries also demanded the withdrawal of taxes. The year 2014 also had an unprecedented impact on how the region was perceived by the extra-regional powers. From energy dependence to independence, the net importers of oil had now turned into net exporters of the commodity. Shale oil from the US changed the geopolitics of oil and West Asia's approach to the oil market. For the US, a consumer had turned producer that was a threat to the Gulf oil producers; predicting that there is going to be a substantial change in the equation between the two. Consequently, friends became competitors competing for a share in the oil market. Since the development of Shale oil in the United States, it has become its net exporter.

The uneven oil prices and its corroding impact on the countries can be seen from their strangled budgets. Perks and distribution of wealth within the population received a setback. Taxation in the form of Value Added Tax (VAT) was introduced as a consequence of the high oil prices in the GCC. For instance, “in June 2017, the price of a pack of cigarettes in Saudi Arabia doubled following the implementation of selective taxes in the kingdom, and the price of soft drinks rose by 50 per cent.”<sup>3</sup> The GCC member states like Bahrain had a different opinion with regard to VAT and taxes. According to the Golcer report, the Bahraini ministers emphasized on a five per cent duty on goods and services, within which more than 90 basic food commodities, medicines, and medical supplies would be exempted in February 2017.<sup>4</sup>

West Asia has been prone to conflicts and the challenges for the region have been due to various factors. The extra-regional players positioned themselves with the regional actors, as the former had their own interests. For

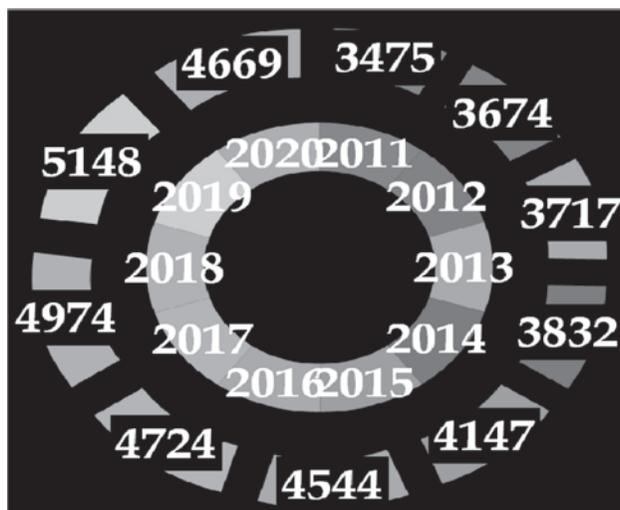
instance, during the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88), the US aligned alongside Baghdad and supported it with all that was needed. Later, the nuclear issue created a shaky ground for Tehran, resulting in a sluggish economy, as Iran could not sell its oil. Apparently, the winds of change were noticeable for Iran in 2015 with the Obama Administration after the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was signed. However, in spite of the American withdrawal from the deal, a few European countries held on to it, as they were seeking solutions to hedge sanctions. Britain, France and Germany introduced a payment arrangement that would act as an alternative and build a financial ecosystem enabling trade with Iran. The Instrument for Supporting Trade Exchanges (INSTEX) was introduced in 2019, to facilitate EU entities to trade with Iran. Interestingly, this fitted well with Iran and the European countries as potential buyers of Iranian oil. In the years to come, we may see that Iranian oil might find a legal way to the market.

Along with these, the region is witnessing a change as the dependence of smaller States on the bigger States is reducing day by day. The discourse of the big States' supremacy over small States is no longer relevant in West Asia. Stature and structural differentiation could be made in the case of small States; however, the changing political dynamics have managed to raise their spot in regional dealings. Due to many factors today, many small states have become important and are achieving significance in international affairs.<sup>5</sup> Small States like the UAE, Qatar and Oman have adopted independent foreign policy approaches which are not in conformity with other regional powers. Also, Egypt which has traditionally been known as a regional powerhouse, is also dependent on Saudi Arabia.

### **India–West Asia Energy Ties: Policies and Imports**

India's relations with the region have borne substantial results due to two variables, diaspora and energy. India's energy requirements are exponentially drawn from the region. The domestic oil production of the country has also been on the rise. The below Graph/Table shows the approximate figures, explaining India's energy consumption.

The investment in India's oil and gas sector is also quite substantial. India's energy policy primarily focuses on meeting its energy demands through hydrocarbon imports, acquire overseas hydrocarbon assets, and develop

Graph 1:<sup>6</sup> India's Oil Consumption (in '000 b/d)

Source: All Figures are Approximates. Data Drawn from *BP Statistical Review of World Energy 2021*, p. 23.

alternative sources of energy. As far as India's approach and steps taken in the alternative energy sectors is concerned, there is a steady growth and agreements are in the process. For Instance, "in February 2021, Indian Oil Corp. Ltd. signed a 'statement of intent' with Greenstat Hydrogen India Pvt. Ltd. to establish a centre of excellence for Hydrogen value chain and other related technologies such as hydrogen storage, fuel cells, etc."<sup>7</sup> Thus, it can be said that New Delhi is taking concrete steps towards a non-oil based energy infrastructure.

Table 1<sup>8</sup>: India's Natural Gas Consumption 2011–2020 (in bcm)

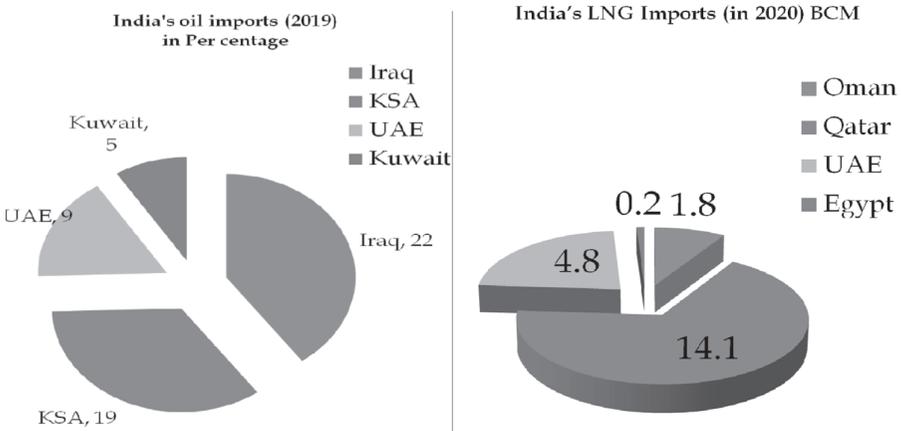
Year	Gas Consumption (bcm)
2011	60.3
2012	55.7
2013	49
2014	48.5
2015	47.8
2016	50.8
2017	53.7
2018	58.1
2019	59.3
2020	59.6

Source: *BP Statistical Review of World Energy 2021*, p. 38.

As the growth rate of the Indian economy is expected to increase, the energy demand is also expected to increase accordingly. To meet the demand, New Delhi is developing its own indigenous resources and plans to invest to boost its oil and gas production. “In July 2021, Oil & Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) announced to spend Rs. 300 billion (US\$ 4.03 billion) in FY22 to boost the oil & gas output.”<sup>9</sup>

A major challenge that is faced by India is the rising domestic demand for oil and gas and its supply deficit. The policy has an assertive impact, as the sources of import have been diversified from Africa, the US and significantly from West Asia. According to EIA, India imported a sizeable proportion of oil/gas from the region. In 2019, India's imports from Iraq were 22 per cent, Saudi Arabia 19 per cent, the UAE nine per cent, Kuwait five per cent and Iran two per cent, while, its liquefied natural gas (LNG) imports are also diversified from Egypt, Oman, the UAE, the US and Qatar.

Graph 2<sup>10</sup>



Source: All figures are approximates. Data drawn from Energy Information Administration (EIA) (30 September 2020), “Country Analysis Executive Summary: India”, p. 7; and, *BP Statistical Review of World Energy* (2021), p. 44.

While the growth of alternative and renewable sources of energy is expected to take some time, the domestic demand for oil and gas continues to grow. The oil and gas demand is expected to grow. To meet this demand, ONGC's overseas energy arm ONGC Videsh Limited (OVL) pursues its foreign oil/

gas stakes in numerous countries and regions. In West Asia and North Africa, OVL has stakes in oil/gas projects in countries such as Iran, UAE, Iraq and Libya. Moreover, India also maintains a Strategic Petroleum Reserves (SPR), which is intended as a backup to be adequate to meet the demand, in case of a crisis. Around 5.33 million metric tonnes (MMT) are stored at 3 locations in Vishakhapatnam Mangaluru and Padur.<sup>11</sup>

LNG terminals are built at Dahej, Hazira, Dabhol, Kochi and Ennore. "India received its first LNG shipment from Qatar at Dahej terminal in 2004. By 2023, India plans to bring another 2.5 bcf/d of LNG import capacity online."<sup>12</sup> New Delhi is also committed to develop alternative sources of energy, particularly solar and wind.

### **Oil Prices and its Impact**

The issues faced by the region have affected peace, making regional stability a remote dream. West Asia's relations and reliance on the outside world and vice-versa have hit a pause at numerous instances. Grappling with the change of events, West Asia has managed to persevere with their relationship with the extra-regional actors who are the potential buyers of hydrocarbons from the region. A decade ago, many issues emerged, which pointed to the changes in global oil prices and their impact. The crisis and wars in the region and around the global front also work on the geopolitics of the region. The Ukraine crisis is a good example of this. The Russia-Ukraine War and the Western sanctions on Russia have affected the global energy market scenario. All of these and other factors have proved fatal for the oil markets, leading to fluctuating oil prices.

### *Spending Capacity*

Volatile markets will have an impact on common people. Higher prices of oil expose people/communities to unpleasant economic situations, circumventing these elevated prices to other items of human consumption. As a result, any increase in the pricing of oil/gas acts as a predator for any other spending by individuals. The COVID-19 pandemic, which led to large-scale unemployment around the world, also compromised their stipulated expenses, curtailing their overall travel. Higher oil prices could drain people's spending capacity in countries such as India. It's a fundamental instinct of individuals that prevents

them from exposing to vulnerability. High oil prices will inevitably restrict overall demand.

### *Opportunities and Challenges for the Producers and Consumers*

Oil prices exhibit opportunities as well as challenges to the producers and consumers. Higher oil prices provide an opportunity for exponential growth for the oil and gas producers in West Asia. Soaring oil prices give substantial economic benefits to the producers, which indirectly provides an immense boost to the producer nations. As there is an increase in their production, the oil revenues are invested back into the country's hydrocarbon sector. Nevertheless, the increased oil price is being paid by oil-importing countries such as India. For example, "India is the world's third-largest consumer of oil and is heavily dependent on imports. In FY 2020-21, India produced 30.5 MMT of crude, while it imported 198.1 MMT of the commodity worth US\$ 62.7 billion during the same period."<sup>13</sup> This also puts a lot of pressure on the currency and indirectly affects stocks markets. Therefore, the soaring price paid for energy imports by countries such as India puts it under a financial burden; influencing the prices of other goods and commodities and causing inflation.

### *Government's Revenue Generation*

High oil prices are measured as a pessimistic factor, nonetheless, they indicate a higher collection of revenues. Rising crude oil prices have illustrated a constructive impact on the Indian economy. Revenue collection from the petroleum sector has been high for both the Centre and the States. To put things into numbers, "central excise duty collection has already touched Rs. 1,37,236 crore till August in FY 2022. This is a growth of almost 37 per cent over Rs 1,00,398 crore collected by the Centre in the first five months of FY 2021."<sup>14</sup> Higher crude prices will mean higher revenue for countries.

### *Speculative Markets*

One of the basic attributes of the fluctuating market is speculation. Apart from the demand-supply imbalance, oil prices fluctuate according to rumours and assumptions in the markets, and this works with almost all commodities. In the event of war or any other political and social upheaval, the economy

suffers, as the oil markets oscillate. Any threat or tension in West Asia (which is the largest exporter of oil) could create a burden on the global oil supply chain, contracting global growth and development. The oil shock is a good illustration of this. For instance, due to the 1973 oil embargo the “oil prices jumped by around 100 per cent from US\$ 4.75 per barrel in 1973 to US\$ 9.35 per barrel in 1974. Although the oil embargo was lifted in 1974, oil prices remained elevated.”<sup>15</sup> Future oil market predictions mostly generate an artificial threat that specifies inadequate oil supply to the consumers. For instance, in the wake of “the Iranian Islamic revolution of 1979 and the subsequent outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War in 1980 pushed up world oil prices dramatically from US\$ 14.95 per barrel in 1978 to US\$ 37.42 per barrel in 1980.”<sup>16</sup> The potential threat sets in speculation and results in the demand-supply imbalance, due to volatile conditions and also impacts the stock markets and investor gains. The volatility of the region has also impacted the commodities exports to the end users. For the oil-producing countries of West Asia, the growth and well-being of their citizens depend on these revenues. This has been quite evident from the past conflicts in the region. The low oil price regime also affected the budget of the oil-producing countries, leading to the introduction of taxation systems.

### *Discounted Oil*

West Asia, which owes its growth due to its hydrocarbon resources, has proved to be in favour of the regional geo-economics; the energy resources have engaged the producers and consumers alike. The lack of leverage among the producers during a crisis compels them to endorse decisions which could save them from economic doom. Discounting oil has been seen as an economically sustainable move for the producers. For example, due to US sanctions on Russia at the onset of the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the Russian oil trade has suffered. Moscow is unable to sell its oil to Europe; as a result, Russia has looked towards India. As a result, India's oil imports from Russia has increased significantly since the beginning of the Russia-Ukraine War.

### *Impact on Stock Markets*

Listed oil companies have been susceptible to the volatile market environment. These conditionalities are influenced by political and economic instability.

West Asia in particular, has undergone turbulent times. Conflicts and wars in the region have caused oil prices to fluctuate. Geopolitical shifts right from the oil shocks of 1973, the eight-year long war between Iran and Iraq (1980-88), the Iraq War of 2003 or the 2011 Arab uprisings and their aftermath – have all been bitter experiences for the region and world energy markets, indirectly affecting the financial markets. The COVID-19 pandemic further added to the already volatile stocks in the last two-three years. This affected companies and their stock market listings and also the portfolios of retailers. The anticipated fluctuations in the country of origin reflect on the stock's results and return on investment (ROI) to its investors. Oil stands as a base for any manufacturing and industrial process, which invariably increases transportation costs, causing the overall price of commodities to increase. These affect the markets most, particularly, the oil-intensive manufacturing units. This also increases inflation.

#### *Insurance Premiums and Oil Prices*

Oil has been a very volatile commodity. Its transportation to the global markets is a tedious process that contains economic and security challenges; and puts many transport vehicles (ships and tankers) at risk. On an everyday basis, billions of dollars worth of oil and gas are traded across the world. Over a period, demand has increased. This exponential growth, hitting an upward trend in the global oil and gas demand increased the flow of supply also leading to environmental and man-made disasters at sea, in turn causing billions in losses for the oil and shipping companies. Ships and tankers carrying oil are vulnerable to attacks from terrorists. In September 2019, two oil installations in Saudi Arabia were attacked. Terrorism along with piracy creates a challenge to peace and places the global energy trade at risk. Keeping these threats in mind, the insurance cover for these tankers has also gone up. "For a typical supertanker carrying about two million barrels of oil, the rate rose to US\$ 450,000 a trip from US\$ 150,000, adding about 15 cents a barrel to the delivered cost of the oil – and that is just for the ship; the cargo is insured separately."<sup>17</sup> An increase in the insurance costs increases the price for the end user.

## **Economic and Strategic Dividend**

### *Stable Prices*

The West Asian countries have been recipients of oil and gas revenues since its discovery. Sustaining the revenue flow has been an act of self-preservation for the producer nations. Apparently, West Asia's revenue-based governments' performance depends on the global oil and gas prices, as they are rentier States. Decreasing oil and gas prices bring these rentier regimes to a point of economic emergency. Similarly, increasing prices of hydrocarbons pinch consumer pockets. Therefore, the strategic stimulus is compromised in either of the scenarios for the world, as high prices hurt the consumers; the low prices hurt the producers. Mutually beneficial energy investments can provide strategic gains for both. And so, a more conducive environment for both will be stable oil prices that will enrich cooperation and smooth economic growth for India and the West Asian producers.

### *Diversification*

One of the policy options for any country pursuing its energy policy is diversification. For every country, be it a consumer or a producer, diversification is the most excellent option to secure energy supplies. The policy of diversification is not new; nevertheless, the outcome of the policy and increasing import patterns from diverse supply options could affect relationships between the producer and consumer countries. Retaining energy supplies from different countries explains diversification; it also declines dependency on a particular source.

### *Extra-regional Energy Engagements*

The agreements between countries on energy issues have a national interest perspective. While these fix the fundamental issue of energy security for countries in agreement; they do not bear an optimistic stimulus for other consumer States. To illustrate, Russia and China entered the Oil-for-Loans Agreement in February 2009. For instance, "China has agreed to lend Russian oil companies US\$ 25 billion in return for supplies from huge new East Siberian oilfields that will power its economy for the next two decades."<sup>18</sup> The Russian Deputy Prime Minister Igor Sechin commented, "we agreed on supplies of 15

million tonnes of oil every year over a period of 20 years.”<sup>19</sup> Long-term deals endorse trade and financial benefits to the players under agreement.

### *Geographical Proximity*

The region stands in close proximity to the Asian markets. Rising Asian economies like India and China have articulated their links and dependence on the region that have the largest hydrocarbon resources in the world. India's dependence on the region has been growing and has increasingly become reliant on West Asian oil and gas. More than half of its hydrocarbon consumption was met by imports from West Asia. A key rationale for this is the geopolitical relevance of the region based on its resource base, but also its geographical closeness to India. Although India has expanded its energy imports through a number of countries, its imports from the region are vital and cannot be replaced by another source. For instance, Qatar's relevance as a major LNG supplier to India is mainly due to its short transportation route. Owing to the shorter distance, an LNG tanker can reach India in three to four days from Qatar, while from other areas the length and route for travel can take a longer time. The geographical proximity is a strategic asset for India.

### *Discounted Oil and Best Terms*

The best terms of conditions and agreements from West Asia also give strategic leverage. Discounted oil or best terms of agreement like optional volumes in yearly supply contracts gives leverage to the consumer States. Additional time for payment for oil bought from West Asia gives economic and strategic leverage to India. For instance, “most oil exporters such as Saudi Arabia and Iraq provide a 30-day credit period – payment for oil bought has to be made in 30 days. Iran, before US sanctions halted its exports in 2019, provided a 90-day credit period.”<sup>20</sup>

The impact of oil prices – high or low, does put a dent on the economy in general and people's spending in particular. There needs to be an area of convergence between the consumers and producers, bringing both together and making them interdependent. The economic and strategic attributes have both causes and effects. The causes are broad connotations of the geopolitical changes in and around the globe. As new equations emerge, countries are attempting to solve and define problems and challenges in their own way.

Hydrocarbon dominates the world and certainly, West Asia holds a strong position due to its oil and gas holdings. The sustainability of India's energy projects in West Asia is also subject to sustained peace and stability in the region, thus, making mitigation of conflict a priority.

## Conclusion

Looking at the changing environment – global in general and India in specific towards the alternative sources of energy; it can be said that New Delhi is venturing strongly into the non-oil sector. Yet, some more time is needed for India to achieve a 100 per cent shift to the renewable sector; till then, its dependency on oil and LNG will continue. In this regard, New Delhi's relations with the West Asian region are important as a majority of its energy needs are fulfilled by the region. West Asia has proved to be a reliable partner and has met all the oil and gas requirements, despite the periodic regional tensions. This emphasises and makes the relationship between the two special. India's strategic and economic gains are many, which also points to its strategic autonomy and national interest such as buying Russian oil. Simultaneously, as the dependency between India and West Asian countries continues to grow; the relations will grow stronger and help enhance their strategic ties.

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# 7

## India and Israel in the New World Order

*Dore Gold*

Today, Israel is fully engaged with the world system much more than ever before, which is a very positive development. Israel's relations with Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Sudan and Morocco proceeding normally, is also a positive development; and this is just the beginning and Israel hopes it goes much further.

In 2021, the External Affairs Minister of India, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, visited Jerusalem. In the diplomatic protocol, it is a good practice to present a gift which a senior politician can take home with him. A department in Jerusalem Centre for Public Affairs deals in old photographs and a photograph of the Indian infantry coming into the gates of Jerusalem in 1917 with General Edmund Henry Hynman Allenby, the Commander of the British forces, reviewing the entry of these troops was found. They were unmistakably Indian; all of them wore turbans as their headgear.

The photographs shown here remind Israel of the pivotal Indian role in what Israel might call regional stability back at the time of the end of the First World War. So Israel gave India's External Affairs Minister the photograph of the Indian soldiers entering Jerusalem. It made Israel's point that India's role across the Middle East was huge. For that reason, Israel inserted photographs of Indian forces coming into Jerusalem, Baghdad and Damascus. Israel often calls it the British Empire, but the role of India in stabilising Mesopotamia and in the agreements that the British Viceroy in India had with the Sheikdoms of the Persian Gulf, was critical.

The question that arises is: Is India going to return to having a role in the Middle East? Is it going to be the same role? It is doubtful but it is something one should be aware of because a role is a reflection of interests. Today, there is a very large Indian community living in the Gulf region. In 2019, there were roughly a million-and-a-half Indian workers who had migrated to the Gulf, to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, predominantly. The Indian government feels a sense of responsibility in protecting its citizens that will influence Indian policy in the years ahead.

Now it is no secret that Israel has a difficult relationship with the Iranians which Israel did not seek. The statements made by the Iranian leadership have an extremely hostile attitude towards the State of Israel. Such an aggressive Iranian posture requires Israel to prepare for what Iran may be doing in the future. Everyone is talking about the Iranian nuclear programme and the role of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), but the issue has never ever been addressed adequately.

**Indian Forces Marching into Jerusalem, 1917. Field Marshal Allenby reviews the troops while mounted on his horse**



*Source: Jerusalem Centre for Public Affairs.*

There is also another side of the Iranian role in the region which is Iran's support for insurgents, largely the Shia militias that have been active across the entire Middle Eastern region. One of the unfortunate consequences of the JCPOA of 2015 was that when sanctions were lifted from Iran, the money

that became suddenly available to the Iranian treasury went to the hands of these insurgents; and this was one of the reasons for the escalation of violence throughout the region. It generated a surge in the number of organisations that were challenging the regional status quo. Israel had to deal with Hezbollah and Hamas, both of which received direct Iranian support.

Israel's southern neighbour, the Saudis, had to cope with a huge escalation by the Houthi forces in Yemen, including missile and rocket attacks, not only on military sites but also on civilian sites, including their capital city, Riyadh. So, Israel has had enormous instability introduced by Iran-backed militias since 2015. And any resolution to the conflict in the Arabian Peninsula will have to address that challenge.

#### Indian Forces Marching into Baghdad, 1917



*Source:* Jerusalem Centre for Public Affairs.

Israel does not have diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia, but Israel understands what they are facing because Israel has been facing the same challenges all the time in a different form, whether it comes from Hamas or from Hezbollah. Therefore, stability in the Middle East will include efforts to derive a solution to this challenge.

The challenge is not just limited to the areas that border Israel. Morocco, which is off on the Atlantic Coast, became part of the Abraham Accords. This

happened because Morocco was part of this alignment in the Middle East as the Iranians were directly supporting the Polisario forces in Western Sahara through the Iranian Embassy in Algiers. Therefore, Iran was identified by the Moroccans as a source of regional instability in North Africa. So, these are the regional circumstances that some countries faced and, hopefully, all the countries can bring about a change in Iranian behaviour. Change in the behaviour of the insurgent organisations, and with the stability that could result, Israel hopes to create a different order in the Middle East.

**Indian Cavalry Entering Damascus, 1918**



*Source:* Jerusalem Centre for Public Affairs.

The Middle East has become much more complicated, but that does not mean that all the countries have to pull back and not deliberate on how the region is evolving. There are a number of highly sensitive conflicts and conflict zones in the region. It requires that all countries discuss about a new regional order.

The problem Israel has with Iran is not because Israel wants to impose itself on the region. A number of other countries in the region, including Israel's partners, also face the same challenges from Iran. They face a problem which might even be worse because Israel has a very robust deterrence when Hezbollah operates against Israel. But other countries do not necessarily, and

that's why all the countries involved in the region, have to share Israel's impressions.

In 2015, Israel opened a channel of communication with a Saudi think tank. The Israeli team met in Rome, Italy, and laid out Hezbollah's strategy to the Saudis. At first, Saudis did not really want to hear about it, but over time, they understood that this could be applied against them through the Houthis in Yemen, and that is exactly what happened. So, this fundamental distinction needs to be drawn in international diplomacy between countries that engage in aggression and countries that engage in defence.

And what can be found is that the aggressors are still active, and they will undermine Israel's stability and security. If together all countries can take a common position, the latitude of the aggressors can be limited. That would make a great contribution to international stability. Morocco faced a problem from the Iranians who were using their relations with Algeria to undermine the security of the Moroccan kingdom, through the Western Sahara. Therefore, normalisation of relations between Israel and Morocco would help Morocco, because it would make the Iranian initiatives in the Western Sahara redundant.

China is a country with which Israel should have relations because it is a great power. A developmental gap is forming between Israel and China. A question to be raised is that if Israel is working hard to improve bilateral relations, how come China doesn't do anything in return? How is it that China votes consistently for anti-Israel resolutions at the United Nations that have no basis in fact? And does China not think that it should try and improve that?

Iran is threatening to "wipe Israel off the map." This has been repeated by the highest political echelons in Tehran and by senior military leaders like the Deputy Commander of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Brig. Hossein Salami. They put these statements on billboards which they feature in their military parades. The billboards are attached to missile carriers, which have surface-to-surface missiles, like the *Shahab-3*. According to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Tehran has been investing in giving the *Shahab-3* the capability to carry a nuclear warhead. In short, wiping Israel off the map is not just empty Iranian rhetoric; it is an operational concept.

Israel has followed the approach of staying strong, using deterrence and trying to understand the plans of the other side. But after studying Iranian statements, Israel needs to study the *fatwas* that are coming from Iran with respect to the Jewish people with respect to the State of Israel, and Israel has to understand who it is dealing with.

It is a belief that the Iranian people are friendly with the State of Israel and with the Jewish people. Israel has had very positive relations with Shias in the past, for example, in southern Lebanon during the pre-State period. So, Israel does not want to paint all Shiites with the same paintbrush as Iran is hostile to Israel.

Israel also knows from its recent history that the Iranian nuclear programme began with the transfer of Chinese technology to Iran. So, these are fundamental issues and Israel doesn't see how it can resolve them quickly. It is important to again find allies and know who your allies are; India is an ally of Israel, and Israel will respond to that special relationship in a special manner.

There are a large number of Shias living in India. The Indian Shiite Muslims are not hostile towards Israelis. A few years ago, an Israeli team visited Lucknow, a city with a huge Shiite presence, located in Uttar Pradesh. The Israeli team was greeted by a Shiite General who commanded Indian Forces who were fighting jihadists in Kashmir. So where does the deep ideological antipathy of Shiite Iran to Israel come from? This hostility comes from Ayatollah Khamenei and his various doctrines which influenced the elite, especially the IRGC. It presents a challenge to Israel's security, and to the security of Bahrain which some Iranians in the past have claimed as part of Iranian territory. It is also a problem for the UAE since Iran has occupied three of its sovereign islands in the Persian Gulf. It has also posed a problem for Saudi Arabia and many other countries, where pro-Iran militia groups have been active.

Structural changes to the world order are beginning to take shape already. On 14 July 2022, the heads of government of India, Israel, the UAE and the US formed the I2U2 group to work together on several issues including clean energy and food security. They also spoke about new initiatives in regional cooperation as well. These multilateral bodies are not going to replace the European Union (EU) or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), but they will have a greater role in world politics and economics in the future.

India was already an emerging great power back at the time of World War I, even though both countries still had a shadow of the British Empire. India's role is growing as a great power in the Middle East, and given the changing regional geopolitics and security situation, there is no way to avoid the reality of India's significant role, which Israel respects. Israel hopes that through dialogue both India and Israel can present each other with what the respective countries are learning about the risks to their vital interests that are becoming ever-evident in the current situation.

# 8

## An Egyptian Perspective of India-Egypt Bilateral Relations

*Ezzat Saad El Sayed*

### **Introduction**

Egypt-India relations are gaining special importance in light of the evolving international environment, and the multiple political, economic, commercial, and cultural dimensions of these relations. As for the political facet, the two countries share a common political understanding, based on a long history of regular contacts and cooperation on bilateral, regional and multilateral issues. Under the leadership of President Abdel Fattah El Sisi, Egypt has realised the importance of building deep-rooted bridges of cooperation with India as it is one of the key emerging powers and one of the economic poles in the world order, that is being currently shaped based on interaction between the two countries beginning with their struggle against colonialism, the formulation of non-alignment policies, reaching the actual stage when development agendas of both countries are similar, especially in 2014 when both President El Sisi and Prime Minister Narendra Modi took office.

The Egyptian President has visited India thrice: in October 2015 – to participate in the Third India-Africa Forum Summit, in September 2016 during a bilateral visit and in January 2023 when he was the Chief Guest during India's Republic Day celebrations. The Egyptian Foreign Minister has paid visits to New Delhi as well. On the other hand, Prime Minister Modi was expected to visit Egypt in March 2020, but the visit was postponed due to the

Coronavirus crisis. He finally visited Cairo in June 2023. During the visit, both the countries signed a strategic partnership agreement. Modi and El Sisi discussed a number of bilateral issues including economic, energy, defence and security ties between the two countries.

### **Economic Relations**

It is obvious that Egypt's approach to its relations with India is on emphasising the promotion of trade and investment between the two countries. This calls for a deeper involvement of the private sector, as it is a key engine of trade and investment. India – by virtue of its economic weight and international aspirations – is dealing with the West Asia and North African (WANA) region from an integrated strategic perspective. India aims to direct its bilateral relations with the countries of the region in favour of a broader regional perspective that achieves the “synergy” required in international economic relations at present. Perhaps the main features of this trend are the announcement of the establishment of the new Middle Eastern miniQuad, which relies on a “functional” approach according to the added value that each country can provide (Indian labour / Emirati capital / Israeli technology / American political cover).

Despite the numerous challenges and difficulties the world faced in 2021 due to the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic and the uncertain global environment, it was a very successful and fruitful year at the level of bilateral relations between India and Egypt. Both the countries have made important progress to further enhance and bolster bilateral relations based on mutual trust between the two sides. The two countries' Foreign Ministers met on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly meetings in September 2021 in New York, where they discussed the long-standing friendship between the two countries, and agreed to advance bilateral cooperation at all levels. The two ministers also exchanged views on pressing global issues, starting with the Renaissance Dam issue, down to developments in Afghanistan.

Bilateral trade remained strong even in a year when global economic activity declined and with restrictions on freedom of movement imposed by the pandemic. The volume of bilateral trade between the two countries reached US\$ six billion in 2021 (with a deficit on Egypt's side of US\$ 0.2 billion approximately), with an annual increase of 80 per cent with an increase in

Egyptian exports to India by 63 per cent during the same period.<sup>1</sup> India became Egypt's top liquefied natural gas export market and is second (after Turkiye) among its most important foreign markets. India ranked seventh on the list of Egypt's main export markets in 2021. India had excluded Egypt from the ban it imposed on its wheat exports in May 2022 due to the rise of local prices and severe heat that threatened local wheat production. During this year, eight trade delegations from India visited Egypt, and many Indian companies participated enthusiastically in exhibitions held in Egypt including those of paper, pharma, textiles and food processing. During the pandemic, a number of meetings between exporters and importers were held in 2022 virtually.

The Fifth Session of the Egypt-India Joint Trade Committee and the Fifth Meeting of the Joint Business Council was held in Cairo, on 25-26 July 2022. The volume of trade exchange between the two countries amounted to about US\$ 7.26 billion during the fiscal year 2021-2022. Both sides pledged to diversify and expand trade and investment relations and work to raise the trade exchange rate between them to US\$ 12 billion within the next five years.<sup>2</sup> In this context, the two sides agreed to hold expert-level talks to mutually consider removing non-tariff barriers imposed on exports, as well as settling some issues related to cooperation and trade in the field of pharmaceutical industries.

Indian investments in Egypt currently amount to more than US\$ 3.5 billion in multiple sectors including health, information and communication technology, new and renewable energy, defence, and higher education, with the presence of 52 Indian companies in Egypt, including companies working in the field of manufacturing and construction. These investments make use of new technologies and administrative expertise and contribute to increasing Egyptian export revenues and creating job opportunities. We hope that these investments will witness further growth in light of the recent economic reforms in Egypt.

### **Cooperation in the Field of Pharmaceutical Industries**

The pharmaceutical industry is considered one of the most promising sectors for economic cooperation between the two countries, especially with India being "The World's Pharmacy." Indian companies view Egypt as a major investment and commercial destination to promote their pharmaceutical

products locally and regionally. Therefore, the Pharmaceutical Export Promotion Council of India “Pharmexcil” participated with a large delegation of Indian companies in the “Pharmaconex” Exhibition organised in Cairo in October 2021. The Council also confirmed its participation as a partner and main marketer in the first African Medical Exhibition and Conference, “Africa Health ExCon” held in Egypt in June 2022. The Indian side expressed its desire for Egypt to recognise Indian medicines and pharmaceutical products that have been recognized by the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) or the European Medicines Agency (EMA).

In September 2021, a delegation from the Indian company Fabtech Technologies International Ltd. paid a visit to Egypt, which was arranged in coordination with the Holding Company for Biological Products and Vaccines “VACSERA”, to study and implement the vaccine factory project on the company’s land in the 6th of October City. In December 2021, the Drug Holding Company affiliated to the Ministry of Public Business Sector, signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with both the Indian company Syschem and the Egyptian Pharmaceutical Association, with the aim of localising active substances for antibiotics and developing national capacities to produce these substances locally through a joint company between the three parties, following the completion of the feasibility study. Consultations are underway between the two sides to consider signing a bilateral agreement on mutual recognition of Coronavirus vaccines in both countries, as the Indian side proposed signing a MoU, and the Egyptian side is studying this proposal. During the initial stages of the COVID-19 outbreak, Egypt sent to India 30 tons of medical supplies and 300,000 doses of vaccines.<sup>3</sup>

### **Cooperation in the Field of Communications and Information Technology**

The field of communications and information technology is one of the areas in which India enjoys a comparative advantage that can be used to enhance the capabilities of Egyptian cadres and attract Indian investments in this vital sector. According to some estimates, India makes up 75 per cent of the world’s digital talent hub, with four major Indian technology companies employing more than a million people. In this regard, the Information Technology Institute signed a MoU with the Indian National Association of Software and Services

Companies (NASSCOM) to cooperate in the field of capacity-building. A draft MoU was finalised between the National Egyptian Computer Emergency Readiness Team and its Indian counterpart in the field of cybersecurity. A draft framework MoU in the field of information technology and artificial intelligence is also being negotiated.

Within the framework of the State's plans to expand data centres and their services to take advantage of Egypt's strategic location between Asia, Africa and Europe, Telecom Egypt works closely with Indian telecom companies to operate the existing submarine cable systems (there are nine submarine cable systems connecting India to Europe via Egypt, including proprietary cables, private and consortiums) as well as the development of new cabling systems.

### **Civil Aviation and Tourism**

Egypt and India have an air transport agreement in place for passengers since 2002. Egypt operates flights to three points in India. Although a direct flight operates between Cairo and Mumbai only, Egypt operates a flight between Cairo and New Delhi via two parallel tracks: The first is by inviting Indian companies to play this role, as the Indian side has recently appointed IndiGo and Vistara companies for this purpose; and the second is by inviting EgyptAir to operate a direct flight to New Delhi in cooperation and coordination with its agent in India.

In March 2020, India announced the suspension of air traffic, and the decision is extended since then – as the last extension was until 28 February 2022, and in this framework, India replaced scheduled flights with non-scheduled flights in accordance with India's Air Bubble Agreement with various countries in the wake of the coronavirus outbreak. Egypt is considering the possibility of signing a similar agreement with the aim of reoperating the direct flight line between Cairo and the cities of Mumbai and New Delhi – even if the latter is tentative– to gauge the economic feasibility of operating scheduled flights on that line at a later stage.

The rates of Indian tourism to Egypt witnessed a remarkable increase during the years preceding the COVID-19 pandemic; the rates continued to increase from 60,000 tourists annually in 2014 to about 140,000 tourists

annually, according to 2019 estimates. These statistics, despite their growth, still represent a slight percentage, whether with regard to incoming foreign tourism to Egypt, or foreign trips for Indian citizens. On the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Egypt and India, the two countries plan to organise a number of events to mark the occasion.

### **Defence Cooperation**

Bilateral cooperation in the defence sector received considerable attention with the visit of the Indian Air Chief, Marshal V.R. Chaudhari to Egypt, and his subsequent meeting with the Commander of the Egyptian Air Force, Field Marshal Mohamed Abbas Helmy. The Indian and Egyptian Air Forces also conducted the first joint air force exercise between India and Egypt called the Desert Warrior, which also included aerial refueling operations. The Indian Naval Ship *INS Tabar* docked at Alexandria port in September 2021 and conducted joint exercises and operations with the Egyptian Navy. In November 2021, more than ten Indian companies participated in the Egyptian defence expo "EDEX-2021", where they displayed their latest defence systems. The strengthening of cooperation between India and Egypt in the defence sector attests to the increased level of trust and mutual understanding between the two countries.

Indian Defence Minister Rajnath Singh paid an official visit to Egypt as the head of a high-level delegation, from 18 to 20 September 2022, during which he was received by President El Sisi. According to the *Middle East News Agency*, on 19 September 2022, the Egyptian President affirmed, Egypt's appreciation for its close historical ties with India during his meeting with the Indian Minister, and its keenness to enhance bilateral cooperation, especially military and defence, and aspiration to activate the partnership between the two friendly countries to be in line with their potential in all fields. The Indian Defence Minister expressed India's interest in bolstering historical relations in keeping with the comprehensive development boom that Egypt is witnessing under the leadership of President El Sisi, as well as the pivotal and decisive Egyptian role in countering and defeating the threat of terrorism, which has positively impacted Egypt's security and stability and regional security.

According to the statements of the official spokesperson for the Egyptian

President, Ambassador Bassam Rady, the meeting explored means to enhance military and security cooperation between the two countries, especially with regard to cooperation in joint manufacturing, transfer and localization of technology, to exploit the capabilities and infrastructure available in both countries, as well as cooperation in the fields of training and rehabilitation, joint exercises, exchange of expertise and information. The Egyptian Minister of Defence and Military Production, Lieutenant General Mohamed Zaki, Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, held talks with his Indian counterpart, which tackled – according to a statement from the Indian Embassy – “bilateral defence relations, military cooperation initiatives, and further enhancement of cooperation in the field of defence industries. At the end of the talks, the two sides signed a MoU on defence cooperation between the two countries.”<sup>4</sup>

### **Cooperation in Counter-terrorism**

Counter-terrorism is one of the pivotal and strategic points in Egypt-India relations, based on the two countries’ common concept of the necessity of confronting this growing and transnational phenomenon, which cannot be linked to any religion, culture or civilization, and the importance for the international community to confront all terrorist organizations without discrimination, especially since they all belong to the same ideology inciting violence and hatred. Under the leadership of President El Sisi, Egypt has become one of the leading countries in the fight against terrorism, and adopts a continuous approach in supporting partner countries to benefit from the successful Egyptian experience, which adopts a comprehensive counter-terrorism approach, not limited to addressing just the security aspect of the phenomenon; rather, it addresses its economic, social, cultural, educational and developmental dimensions, as well as its core causes, including ideological and intellectual ones.

Accordingly, the two countries agreed on an institutional framework for cooperation in counter-terrorism, embodied in an Egypt-India joint working group on counter-terrorism. This joint working group held two sessions hosted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2016 and 2018 amid the participation of various ministries and security agencies concerned with countering terrorism in the two countries, in order to enhance cooperation and a participatory

approach in combating terrorist organisations that threaten international security and stability. At the beginning of February 2022, Ambassador Wael Hamed, Egypt's Ambassador to India, met with the Indian Deputy National Security Adviser, Ambassador Vikram Misri, at the National Security Council Secretariat in New Delhi. During the meeting, the Egyptian Ambassador addressed the national efforts to combat terrorism and extremist ideology in recent years, whether through military confrontation with terrorist groups, achieving economic and societal development, and intellectual and ideological confrontation through combating extremist and radical ideology with the aim of addressing the root causes of the crisis, as Ambassador Hamed commended the role of Al Azhar Al Sharif, the Egyptian Dar Al Ifta, and the Cairo International Center for Conflict Resolution, Peacekeeping and Peacebuilding (CCCCPA), in combating extremism and radicalism.

During the visit of the Indian Defence Minister to Egypt in September 2022, consultations between the two sides centred on Egyptian counter-terrorism efforts, whereby Minister Singh praised what he described as “the pivotal and decisive Egyptian role in countering and defeating the threat of terrorism, which cast a shadow of security and stability in Egypt and on the entire regional security.”<sup>5</sup> He noted that “in this context, India looks forward to exchanging expertise and consolidating the military and security aspect within the framework of joint cooperation relations between the two countries.”<sup>6</sup> The two sides also exchanged views on regional security and acknowledged the contribution of India and Egypt to achieving peace and stability in the world. Finally, the Arab Republic of Egypt was officially invited to participate in the India-Africa Defence Dialogue and the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) Defence Ministers' Conclave, which was held as part of the 12th DefExpo in Gandhinagar, Gujarat from 18 to 22 October 2022.

### **Cultural Cooperation**

The year 2022 also witnessed cultural exchanges between the two sides, which are a continuance of a centuries-old history of contacts and cultural exchanges between Egypt and India. The Supreme Council of Culture of Egypt organised a symposium on “Cultural Relations between Egypt and India” to discuss the vital role of culture in bringing the two countries closer. The International Day of Yoga was also celebrated on 21 June, as prominent figures from Egypt

practised yoga on the banks of the Nile, a gesture that echoes the two great civilizations that embraced each other's culture. In December 2021, the Cairo Film Festival was honoured with the presence of A.R. Rahman who is considered the pioneer of music in Indian cinema. The next edition of the "India by the Nile" festival was held in October 2022. The festival featured performances of different forms of Indian classical dance as well as a variety of events related to Indian food, yoga and Indian films.

### **Energy Cooperation**

Building strong and sustainable partnerships and exchanging experiences is pivotal for India's relations with Egypt. A solar-based electrification project was set up in the village of "Agaween" in the Matrouh Governorate. The project highlighted India's technical capabilities in the field of renewable energy. This project could be replicated in other locations. The Textile Vocational Training Center in Cairo provides training opportunities for 300 students annually. In addition, the Pan-African e-Network project between India and all African countries, which is located at Alexandria University, provides tele-medicine and tele-education. The establishment of a centre of excellence in the field of information technology at Al Azhar University will open new horizons for cooperation between the two sides. The Indian professorship at Ain Shams University – currently specialising in bioinformatics – has contributed to strengthening and deepening the roots of academic exchange.

There is no doubt that Egypt – which is in the stage of economic reform and implementation of a comprehensive development process that is commended by various states and relevant international institutions – can benefit from various Indian initiatives such as "Make in India", "Clean India Mission" and India's One-Nation-One-Tax Goods and Services Tax, Startup India campaign, and the Self-Reliant India campaign; and in a broader framework, from the global financial inclusion programme called "Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana." More than 400 million bank accounts have been opened for the underprivileged in the past few years. The Ujjwala scheme has contributed to the shift to using liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) in cooking by more than 80 million disadvantaged rural households, who were using traditional fuels for cooking. In doing so, India has made a significant positive contribution to supporting women's health in rural areas.

## **Climate Cooperation**

Egypt recently hosted the Climate Summit COP27 in Sharm El Sheikh. Egypt counted significantly on India's participation in this summit, for which Egypt exerted intensive efforts – nationally and internationally – in order to provide the means for its success. India has an outstanding experience in terms of installed capacity of renewable energy, as it is now ranked fourth globally in this regard, with a capacity of more than 150 gigawatts. Egypt and India can share experiences on raising their respective energy capacities from sources other than fossil fuels. The two countries are members of the International Solar Alliance, which now includes 81 countries.

The transfer and localisation of environment-friendly technology is a catalyst for the implementation of national commitments with regard to addressing climate change. Egypt made efforts in this regard, including the signing of a MoU in the presence of Prime Minister Mostafa Madbouly on 27 July 2022, to start preliminary studies on the establishment of a new factory to produce green hydrogen in the Suez Canal Economic Zone, with investments worth US\$ eight billion, between a number of Egyptian governmental bodies and ReNew Power Private Limited, one of the leading companies in the field of renewable energy in India. According to the MoU, the Indian company will build a factory to produce green hydrogen with a capacity of 20,000 tons per year, by relying on renewable energy sources.

There is no doubt that the Egyptian partnership with India, in the economic, cultural and social fields, has provided an opportunity for the two countries to expand this partnership towards wider areas and to build on the historical ties between the two peoples. The relationship binding the two countries and the two peoples is of special importance, as it unites them on multiple fronts, most notably energy security and climate change.

## **Conclusion**

In sum, Egypt and India have maintained, for many years, a strategic partnership, and they have shown great interest and political will to expand cooperation in various fields. In a world marked by intense strategic competition between the United States and other major powers, it is important to strengthen Egypt-India political cooperation and promote economic

cooperation in new areas such as public health, pharmaceutical industries, manufacturing, advanced technology, energy, textile industries, and technical cooperation. The rich partnership existing between the two countries provides a broad framework for new ties and further cooperation in various fields. Over the years, the two countries have demonstrated strong political will to expand cooperative frameworks in various fields on the basis of common interests and mutual benefits.

Undoubtedly, there are genuine opportunities for India to invest in Egypt and the visit of the Indian Defence Minister paves the way for broad prospects for increasing cooperation between the Egyptian and Indian fleets, thus providing a strategic opportunity to enhance maritime security, especially in the Indian Ocean, the Gulf of Oman and the Mediterranean. There are also promising prospects for strengthening mechanisms to address food and energy security challenges. There is no doubt that Egypt's strategic location, being a crossroads between the African, European and Asian continents, and its importance in global affairs, is a focal point of bilateral cooperation. This represents an important opportunity for India as a rising global power, which can enhance its reach in different regions of the world.

#### NOTES

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APPENDIX  
**Important Bilateral Treaties and Agreements between  
 Egypt and India**

<i>Sl. No. Treaties and Agreements</i>	<i>Year</i>
1. Treaty of Friendship	1955
2. Trade Agreement	1978
3. Agreement on the establishment of Joint Commission	1983
4. Agreement on combating international terrorism and transnational and organized Crimes	1955
5. Agreement of Tourism Cooperation	1997
6. The Partnership Agreement	2006
7. Extradition Treaty	2008
8. MoU on Trade and Technical Cooperation	2008
9. MoU on Cooperation in the Exploration and Use of Outer Space for peaceful purposes	2008
10. MoU on Cooperation in the field of Health and Medicine	2008
11. MoU on Renewable Energy Cooperation	2011
12. MoU on Cooperation in the field of Environmental Protection	2012
13. MoU on Cooperation in the field of Electoral Management and Administration	2012
14. MoU on Cooperation in Information and Communication Technology	2013
15. MoU on Cooperation in Cyber Security	2013
16. MoU on establishment of a Centre for Excellence in IT	2013
17. MoU on Cooperation in the field of Micro and Small Enterprises	2013
18. MoU on Cooperation in the field of Protection, Preservation and Management of Cultural Heritage	2013
19. MoU on Up-gradation of a vocational Training Centre in Cairo	2013
20. Letter of Intent on Cooperation in the field of Solar Energy	2013
21. Letter of Intent concerning launch services for Egyptian Nano Satellite on board Indian PSLV	2013
22. MoU between GOL and Government of Arab Republic of Egypt for Air Transport Arrangements	2014
23. Executive Programme on Science & Technology cooperation for period of 2015 -2018	2014
24. MoU on scientific cooperation between National Research Centre, Egypt (NRC) and Council for Scientific & Industrial Research (CSIR)	2015
25. MoU on Tourism cooperation	2015
26. MoU on cooperation between Secretaries of National Security Councils of India & Egypt	2015
27. MoU between Bureau of Indian Standard (BIS) and Egyptian Organization for Standardization and Quality (EOS)	2016
28. Agreement on Maritime Transport	2016
29. MoU between General Authority for Investment and Free Zones (Egypt) and Invest India (India)	2018

# 9

## Iran-India Relations: From Strategic Partnership to Paled Friendship

*Mandana Tishehyar*

### **Introduction**

Relations between Iran and India, two ancient civilisations, go far back in history. New Delhi and Tehran have pursued a robust relationship with each other as two major Asian powers. However, the contemporary politico-economic relations between these two major Asian powers are affected by various domestic, regional and international elements. In fact, the existing realities of the regional and international arenas and also the dominant domestic ideologies have dictated different foreign policy approaches of policymakers of both sides, especially during recent years. Accordingly, analysing different dimensions of the “New Delhi-Tehran axis” and its implications for the balance of power at both regional and international levels has become significant. This chapter attempts to show how the main historical trends of cooperation between Iran and India in the last two decades have been declining. It then examines the consequences of declining cooperation between Iran and India for both countries and, finally, suggests some strategies for improving relations between the two countries.

### **Indo-Iran Relations during the Cold War**

Following the independence of India in 1947, Iran and India established diplomatic links on 15 March 1950. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru’s policy

towards Iran was based on mutual regional cooperation, *Panchshila* and a policy of non-alignment.<sup>1</sup> However, due to the US intervention in Iran in 1953 to overthrow the democratically-elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq over the issue of the nationalisation of the oil industry, Iran's sympathy towards the Western bloc, and its relations with India's arch-rival Pakistan, faced some obstacles that hindered the improvement of bilateral ties.

Iran was concerned about the following issues in its relationship with its eastern neighbour, India: the India-Pakistan dispute over Kashmir, Afghan-Soviet-Indian amity, the Soviet interest in securing direct access to the Indian Ocean, India's growing economic and military strength as an Indian Ocean power, as well as its expanding ties with the Arab world.

On the issue of Indo-Pakistani relations, Iran was the first country to recognise the newly-independent State of Pakistan in 1947. Under the Shah, Iran moved closer to Pakistan in many fields and the two nations worked closely with each other. Pakistan, Iran and Turkiye joined the US-sponsored CENTO (Central Treaty Organisation) defence treaty which extended along the Soviet Union's southern perimeter. The relationship between Iran and Pakistan was further strengthened in the 1970s by a joint endeavour to suppress a rebel movement based in the provinces of Iranian Baluchistan, Pakistani Baluchistan and Afghani Baluchistan. Iran is also believed to have assisted Pakistan financially in its development of a nuclear programme after India's test in 1974.

At the same time, Iran tried to mediate in the conflict between India and Pakistan on several occasions. Nevertheless, during the India-Pakistan War that broke out on 17 September 1965, Iran supported Pakistan's claim over Kashmir but confined its support to political statements and limited logistical aid, although it provided extensive relief support.<sup>2</sup> At that time, the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) sought to acquire additional aircraft from Indonesia, Iraq, Iran, Turkiye and China within 10 days of the commencement of the War. It succeeded in obtaining some assistance from Asian countries with large Islamic populations, including Turkiye, Iran and Indonesia.<sup>3</sup> After the War, the Pahlavi regime offered to mediate between India and Pakistan, and during separate visits to both countries, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi urged both sides to settle their differences peacefully. But in the late 1960s, Iran transferred a large

number of fighters to Pakistan that were used against India in the war of 1971.

During the war in 1971, also when the U.S. administration supported Pakistan both politically and materially, Washington proposed a UN Resolution warning India against going to war. The US sent military supplies to Pakistan, routing them through Jordan and Iran.<sup>4</sup> President Nixon also persuaded Iran and Jordan to send their F-86, F-104 and F-5 fighter jets to aid Pakistan.<sup>5</sup> During the 1970s, Iran tried to follow the policy of non-military involvement, to support Pakistan. Mohammad Reza Pahlavi viewed the Simla Agreement between India and Pakistan as a welcome step in creating peace and normalizing the situation in a zone that was of great significance to regional security and stability as well as in promoting regional cooperation.<sup>6</sup>

During 1965-70 the volume of Iran's trade with India and the bilateral economic relationship increased significantly with the establishment of a joint Indo-Iranian endeavour to develop the Madras Refinery, an iron ore mine at Kudremukh and an irrigation canal to help grow more foodgrains in the Rajasthan Desert.<sup>7</sup> Iranian export of natural gas to Pakistan and India was also discussed before the 1979 Islamic Revolution. However, given the length of the required pipeline, the political uncertainty in Pakistan and the precarious nature of that country's relations with India, as well as the stage of economic development in the two countries at the time, the project did not seem economically or politically feasible.<sup>8</sup>

At a political level, the fundamental objective of such cooperation on behalf of the Pahlavi regime was to reduce Indian dependence on Soviet aid and motivate it to depend more on the West. The Pahlavi regime also wanted to secure India's support for its Persian Gulf policy and ease concerns about the safety of the Indian Ocean in the face of expected Soviet penetration. The Pahlavi regime wanted the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean to be declared a "nuclear-free peace zone." A slight reluctance was noted by Indira Gandhi during her visit to Iran in 1974; who avoided approval of this matter except on the matter of a "peace zone." Indira Gandhi's reluctance was on the one hand based on the growing fear of the Pahlavi regime's military build-up and its aspirations to dominate the Indian Ocean. On the other hand, Indira Gandhi was careful about maintaining friendly ties with the Soviet Union. In the end, Iran and India agreed that a constructive relationship based on political

understanding and sound economic cooperation would promote stability and lasting tranquillity in the region.<sup>9</sup>

In the late 1970s, India successfully improved bilateral relations by developing mutually beneficial economic exchanges with a number of Islamic countries, particularly Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and other Persian Gulf States.<sup>10</sup> In fact, closer ties with the West Asian countries were necessitated by India's dependency on petroleum imports. Oil represented eight per cent of India's total imports in 1971 and 42 per cent in 1981.

Two events in 1979, the establishment of the Islamic Republic in Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in support of the pro-Soviet Marxist regime in Kabul, complicated India's relations with Iran. From the Indian perspective, these two events and the Iran-Iraq War changed the balance of power in West Asia.<sup>11</sup> The Islamic Revolution in Iran restructured the way in which the world established relations with Iran. Revolutionary Iran withdrew from CENTO and dissociated itself from strategic cooperation with the United States and other Western countries. Based on its "Neither East nor West" policy, Iran condemned both the United States and the Soviet Union as equally malevolent forces in international politics. The revolutionaries embraced the notion that the materialist ideologies were ploys to help maintain imperialist domination of the Third World. Consequently, a major foreign policy goal originating out of the Revolution has been to preclude all forms of political, economic, and cultural dependence on either Western capitalism or Eastern socialism.

Following this novel approach, Iran sought relations with the members of the Non-Aligned Movement. However, the new Iranian government received a cold response from India. During the 1980s, India was trying to change its conventional "negative equilibrium" policy to a functional approach in order to gradually improve its relations with both blocs. In fact, the signing of the Treaty of Peace, Friendship, and Cooperation between India and the Soviet Union in 1971 impacted New Delhi's image as a non-aligned nation.

Furthermore, during the second half of the 1980s, Rajiv Gandhi as Prime Minister, began to pursue foreign policy in a direction significantly different from his mother, Indira Gandhi's take on socialism. He improved bilateral relations with the US – long strained owing to Indira's socialist leanings and close friendship with the USSR – and expanded economic and scientific

cooperation. Generally, it seems that Iran and India passed through different processes and adopted different approaches towards what the structure of international relations during the last decade of the Cold War should look like.

On the other hand, the success of the Islamic Revolution in Iran inspired the entire Muslim world, including Muslim minorities in the Indian subcontinent. Although most Muslim communities in India are Sunni, their leaders welcomed the Islamic Revolution in Iran, which was based on Shiite teachings. Kashmiri Muslims invited the Leader of Iran's Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini to stay in Kashmir when the Iraqi regime announced that he must leave Iraq in 1978. On 5 December 1978, Ayatollah Khomeini sent a letter to the religious leaders and also the people of India to describe the situation Iranians faced under the Pahlavi regime and their struggle against the government's discrimination. He also invited "the great nation of India" to support the movement of "the oppressed people of Iran."<sup>12</sup>

At the regional level, New Delhi, which traditionally enjoyed close relations with Kabul, condemned the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan only in the most perfunctory manner and provided diplomatic, economic and logistical support to the Marxist regime in Kabul. Conversely, Iran's post-revolutionary relationship with the Soviet Union and its allies was significantly less positive. Iran severely criticised the USSR for dispatching its troops to Afghanistan and took the lead, several months later, in denouncing Moscow at a conference of foreign ministers of Islamic countries.<sup>13</sup>

India was also worried about Iran-Pakistan relations under the new circumstances. However, after 1979, the new Islamic government in Iran distanced itself from the Pakistani government as the latter was a formal strategic ally of the US and received military support from Western countries to play the role of the main ally of the Western bloc in South Asia. This changed Iran's position on its Islamic neighbour and the new government in Tehran ceased to be a potential supporter of Pakistan, which would have created a situation unfavourable to India. Iran also frequently objected to Pakistan's attempts to draft anti-India Resolutions at international fora such as the Organisation for Islamic Cooperation (formerly known as the Organisation of the Islamic Conference) and the Human Rights Commission, to improve its relations with India.<sup>14</sup>

Nonetheless, both Pakistan and Iran opposed the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and coordinated covert support for the Afghan mujahedeen. At the time, India continued to purchase oil from Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait. In return, it provided engineering services, manufactured goods, and labour. However, the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War forced India to shift its oil purchases from Iran and Iraq to Saudi Arabia and the other Persian Gulf States. New Delhi took a neutral position in the Iran-Iraq War; it maintained warm ties with Baghdad while building workable political and economic relations with Tehran.<sup>15</sup>

With the end of the Cold War, relations between Iran and India altered. During the 1990s, Iran tried to follow a *détente* policy and assumed a new "Look to the East" policy to improve relations with the Asian States. At the same time, India was also looking for an advantageous position as an emerging power in the international arena. The two countries began to make efforts to improve their politico-economic and strategic relations.

### **Indo-Iran Relation during Post-Cold War Era**

In September 1993, fourteen years after Iran's Islamic Revolution, Indian Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao visited Tehran. The highlights of the visit included discussions on the construction of a pipeline to supply Iranian natural gas to India and allowing India to develop transit facilities in Iran for Indian products destined for the landlocked Central Asian Republics. It is noticeable that from the early 1990s, India became a major energy importer and thus needed to improve relations with energy exporting countries; a development which could be seen as one of the important motives underlying the improvement of bilateral relations with Iran.

When Iranian President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani visited India on April 1995 to sign a major trade accord and five bilateral agreements, Indo-Iran relations were on the upswing. The trend was consolidated and enhanced at the turn of the millennium by ensuing visits by Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee in 2001 and a return visit by President Mohammad Khatami in 2003, who was received as the Chief Guest at the Republic Day function.

India was interested in forging a long-term strategic relationship built around energy security and transit arrangements. Iran was also ready to work

with India to provide viable and rapid access to Afghanistan, Central Asia and Russia.<sup>16</sup> According to Kanwal Sibal, former Foreign Secretary of India, “India and Iran have shared geo-political interests in the pursuit of which this part of Asia can be knit into networks of economic cooperation with increased stability consequence.”<sup>17</sup> In January 2003, the two countries launched the “New Delhi Declaration”, a strategic partnership for a more stable, secure and prosperous region and for enhanced regional and global cooperation.<sup>18</sup> Since then, Indian firms have signed many contracts with the Iranian government, especially in the field of energy. In its 2005-2006 annual report, the Indian Ministry of Foreign Affairs said that Indo-Iranian cooperation had “acquired a strategic dimension flourishing in the fields of energy, trade and commerce, information technology and transit.”<sup>19</sup>

In the Post-Cold War era, it was in war-torn Afghanistan in the 1990s that India and Iran discovered that they share common security concerns from the threat posed by the Pakistan-backed Taliban regime. Both India and Iran extensively supported the Afghan Northern Alliance against the Taliban regime. They continued to collaborate in supporting the broad-based anti-Taliban governments led by Afghan Presidents, Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani, which were also supported by the US. The New Delhi Declaration in 2003 called for the two States to “broaden their strategic collaboration in third countries”, a clear reference to Afghanistan.<sup>20</sup> In fact, both countries faced a serious challenge from the threat of Wahhabi extremism, especially from Afghanistan. Thus, both welcomed the Taliban’s downfall in October 2001 and made Afghanistan’s reconstruction and stability a common, critical goal. India and Iran have since established working groups on terrorism and counter-narcotics; both of these initiatives focus on Al Qaeda. Additionally, the two countries have also continued to work to counter Sunni militant threats in the region and have expressed a mutual preference for a comprehensive convention against international terrorism at the United Nations.<sup>21</sup>

Another area of regional cooperation between the two countries is the expanding North-South corridor in Central Asia and the Caucasus. Although India is closer to the Central Asian supply chain, and potentially could be the biggest consumer of Central Asian oil and gas, it had no foothold in the region. When it comes to Indian energy security and energy transportation from the Caspian Sea region, the importance of Iran’s role is undeniable. Iran

not only controls the Strait of Hormuz but also has direct access to both the eastern and western areas of the energy-rich Caspian Sea region. The Iranian route, therefore, is the easiest, safest and cheapest gateway for Central Asian and Caucasian oil and gas. It would travel some 1,300 kilometres (over 800 miles) through Iran to its warm water ports of Jask and Chabahar in the Sea of Oman.<sup>22</sup> India already has a foothold in the Iranian port of Chabahar to develop it into a commercial port with access to both Afghanistan and Central Asia.

The turning point for Indo-Iranian regional cooperation was an agreement, signed in 2000, committing both countries to establish a North-South trade corridor. The corridor stretches from ports in India across the Arabian Sea to the southern Iranian port of Bandar Abbas, where goods then transit Iran and the Caspian Sea to ports in Russia's sector of the Caspian Sea. From there, the route stretches along the Volga River via Moscow to northern Europe.<sup>23</sup>

India also welcomed Iran's inclusion as an Observer State in the regional organisation SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) and both countries joined the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) as Observers in 2005. India in 2017 and Iran in 2022 became the SCO's official members. Cooperation on regional security issues has largely centred on the conflict in Afghanistan.

Economically, India and Iran improved their bilateral commercial relations during the 1990s and 2000s. Their economic and commercial ties have traditionally been buoyed by Indian imports of Iranian crude oil to help feed energy needs, generated by the country's rapid development. India was one of the largest purchasers of Iran's crude oil. It imported about 22 million tons of crude oil valued at about US\$ 10 billion in 2009, which made it the third-largest market for Iranian crude. India-Iran trade in 2009-10 was valued at US\$ 13.4 billion (Indian exports US\$ 1.9 billion and imports US\$ 11.5 billion).<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, about 40 per cent of the refined oil consumed by Iran was imported from India.<sup>25</sup> In exchange for Iranian gas, the two countries were in talks to set up a number of projects such as the development of the Farsi oil and gas blocks, the South Pars gas field and the LNG project.<sup>26</sup> India's biggest quest to secure energy resources overseas had been most successful in Iran, where the Indian Oil Corporation, a State-run company, reached an agreement with the Iranian firm Petropars in January 2005 to develop a gas

block in the gigantic South Pars gas field, home to the world's largest gas reserves.

The Chabahar container terminal project and the Chabahar-Faraj-Bam railway project were some other aspects of the bilateral cooperation between the two countries. Situated on the Makran Coast of the Sistan and Baluchistan province of Iran, Chabahar is officially designated as a Free Trade and Industrial Zone by the Iranian government. India wanted to provide assistance in developing the port, which will provide access to the oil and gas resources in Iran and the Central Asian States. Chabahar was seen as a project by the Indian government as a response to the challenge posed by the Chinese, who are building the Gwadar Port in Pakistani Baluchistan.<sup>27</sup> Both countries had also set up joint ventures such as the Irano-Hind Shipping Company, the Madras Fertilizer Company and the Chennai Refinery. India had also obtained stakes in the development of Iran's largest onshore oilfield, Yadavaran, as well as the Jufair oilfield.<sup>28</sup>

A major part of the India-Iran energy cooperation was the proposed construction of a gas pipeline from Iran to India via Pakistan (IPI), which could provide India with a steady source of Iranian natural gas. Since the discovery of natural gas reserves in Iran's South Pars field in 1988, the Iranian government began increasing efforts to promote gas exports. The prospects for profit are especially high in South Asian countries like India and Pakistan, where natural gas reserves are low and energy demand exceeds supply.

India signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Iran on the construction of the pipeline as far back as 1993. In 1995, Pakistan and Iran also signed a preliminary agreement for the construction of a natural gas pipeline linking the Iranian South Pars natural gas field in the Persian Gulf with Karachi, Pakistan's main industrial port located in the Arabian Sea. The plan called for a roughly 1,700-mile, 5.4-Bcf/d pipeline. Iran later proposed an extension of the pipeline from Pakistan to India. The pipeline was supposed to run 2,775 kilometres from Iran's South Pars gas field through Khuzdar in Pakistan, with one branch reaching Multan and another Karachi. From Multan, the pipeline could extend into India. This pipeline could potentially transfer 150 million metric standard cubic metres per day (mmscmd); 60 mmscmd to Pakistan and the rest to India.<sup>29</sup>

The pipeline had been referred to as the “peace pipeline” because creating economic linkages between India and Pakistan was likely to encourage stable relations between the two historical foes, who have fought three wars since their independence in 1947 and experienced several military crises in the past decade. Initially, the Indian government was reluctant to enter into any agreement with Pakistan due to the historically tense relationship between the two neighbours. As an alternative, India suggested the development of a deep-sea pipeline where no threat to natural gas transit would exist.<sup>30</sup> However, the overland route was eventually chosen because it would be four times cheaper than the deep-sea route, even after including transit fee payments to Pakistan.<sup>31</sup> Finally, in February 1999, a preliminary agreement between Iran and India was signed.

The pipeline talks stalled between 1999 and 2003 because of India-Pakistan tensions, but they regained some momentum in 2004-2005 after New Delhi and Islamabad started a bilateral dialogue process.<sup>32</sup> In 2005, Pakistan and India agreed to pursue this project as a straightforward purchase of Iranian gas at the Indian border with a supplementary agreement between Iran and Pakistan covering the supply of gas to Pakistan and its transit to India.<sup>33</sup> In June 2005, India and Iran also reached a US\$ 22 billion deal to export 5 million tons of Iranian LNG to India per year beginning in 2009.

On the other hand, one of the most significant provisions of the New Delhi Declaration sought to upgrade defence cooperation significantly between the two countries. Iran joined the Indian Navy's annual initiative, the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium, which provides a forum for the navies of Indian Ocean littoral States to engage with each other, and plans are afoot for greater maritime cooperation. In November 2009, India held discussions on the expansion of military cooperation with Iran. Improved military relations could include Indian training of Iranian troops, satellite services, and joint naval exercises in the Persian Gulf. Previous military interaction included the training of personnel from the Iranian military by India's Institute of Military Law in Kamptee.<sup>34</sup> This defence relationship, however, remains not only sporadic and tentative but is also circumscribed by India's growing defence links with Israel. Expectations that India would assist Iran in upgrading its Russian-made defence systems have also not been realized.

## **Impediments to Indo-Iran Relations**

The 9/11 attacks in the US gradually changed the context in which Indo-Iran relations had previously operated. South Asia was suddenly brought to the fore within the broader context of the global “War on Terror”, causing considerable concern in both India and Iran. India watched Washington resuscitate its relationship with Islamabad; while Iran witnessed the US dramatically expanding its military footprint in the region by invading Afghanistan and Iraq.

The US also increased its pressure to bring Iran’s nuclear energy programme to a halt and encouraged other major powers to consider it a threat to international security. In order to isolate Iran because of its nuclear energy programme, the US strongly opposed the proposed India-Pakistan-Iran pipeline, which would give Iran an economic advantage and increase its leverage and influence in South Asia.

Surely, the Indo-US nuclear deal was conditional on India supporting the US on the Iran issue. The two sides signed a deal which bestows legitimacy on India’s nuclear capability, unsurpassed by any other State outside the Non-Proliferation Treaty. The US-India Peaceful Atomic Energy Cooperation Act (also known as the Hyde Act), signed in December 2006, contained a “Statement of Policy” which included clauses designed to ensure India’s support for US policies regarding the Iranian nuclear issue. In particular, India was “to dissuade, isolate, and if necessary, sanction and contain Iran for its efforts to acquire weapons of mass destruction, including a nuclear weapons capability and the capability to enrich uranium or reprocess nuclear fuel and the means to deliver weapons of mass destruction.”<sup>35</sup>

Although this section of the Hyde Act generated considerable domestic opposition in India, US President George W. Bush, while signing the Act, emphasised that his administration would interpret this provision as merely “advisory.”<sup>36</sup> US officials also continued to remind India and Pakistan that US legislation sanctions any company investing more than US\$ 20 million annually in Iran’s oil and gas industry. Consequently, the IPI project and all other Iranian projects to supply India with energy have been beset by multiple problems which have frequently been compounded due to the effects of the US-led pressure on Iran’s trade and foreign investment in Iran.

Initially, both India and Pakistan declared their intentions to go ahead with the project. The Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh stated that "This is between us, India is not a client state." During his visit to the US in 2005, Singh made several statements to illustrate this fact: "Only preliminary discussions have taken place (on the pipeline). We are terribly short of energy supplies and we desperately need new sources of energy."<sup>37</sup> However, New Delhi lately seemed to have given in to American pressure. A change in the Indian stance regarding the IPI pipeline has been visible.

While Manmohan Singh supported South-South energy cooperation at the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Afro-Asian Conference in Jakarta in April 2005, saying "While our continents include both major producers and consumers of energy, the framework within which we produce and consume energy is determined elsewhere" and called the role of Western governments and companies, "an anomaly" in an interview with *The Washington Post*, he also raised doubts about the viability and bankability of the Iran-Pakistan-India pipeline project: "There are many risks, considering all the uncertainties of the situation there in Iran. I don't know if any international consortium of bankers could underwrite this."<sup>38</sup>

In reality, as of 2006, and despite American opposition, the World Bank and Japan's Sumitomo Mitsui Banking Corporation showed an interest in bankrolling the pact. Beyond that, Australia's BHP, Petronas, Total and the Iranian National Gas Company expressed interest in building this pipeline.<sup>39</sup> Meanwhile, Gazprom was also ready to help finance or even manage it as well, since Russian President Vladimir Putin approved this deal and the Pakistani government also approved the possibility of Gazprom financing and/or constructing the pipeline.<sup>40</sup> Some analysts even advocated extending the IPI pipeline to China, to tie Russia, China, India, Pakistan, and Iran together in a major project having significant strategic implications as well as a huge number of consumers.<sup>41</sup>

On the other hand, the IPI project encountered numerous problems, not all of them due to American obstacles in its path. Of particular concern is the 475 miles of pipeline through Baluchistan, one of the poorest and most unstable of Pakistan's provinces. This remote region is home to tribes that employ private militias that fight over territory and resources, conditions that are hardly conducive to secure energy transportation.<sup>42</sup> India had also been cautious about

pursuing the pipeline, given its concern that Pakistan could use it as economic leverage against India. In fact, some Indian strategists had never been in favour of the pipeline proposal, as in their opinion, it gives Pakistan too much leverage over India's energy security.<sup>43</sup> Islamabad could threaten to cut off the supply if it is dissatisfied with India's policy regarding Kashmir or some other bilateral issues, similar to what Russia has repeatedly done in its bilateral relations with Ukraine and a number of other Eastern European States.

Consequently, as of May 2009, India officially announced its decision to remain noncommittal in the IPI project due to a combination of factors, including price disputes with Pakistan, anti-Iranian pressure from the US, security concerns, and the possibility of less expensive domestic alternatives. The Indian government's 11<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan also did not project any gas supply from this route.<sup>44</sup> On the other hand, many members of the US Congress continued to demand that Washington should make the nuclear deal with New Delhi conditional on India ending all military cooperation with Iran. They cited the docking of Iranian naval vessels in June 2006 to the Indian port of Kochi for five days of joint exercises, which included training of Iranian cadets, as an example of activities that needed to cease.<sup>45</sup>

The issues related to Iran's nuclear energy program are complex for Indo-Iranian relations. New Delhi and Tehran have long held significantly different perceptions of the global nuclear order. Iran was not supportive of the Indian nuclear tests in 1998 and supported the UN Security Council Resolution asking India and Pakistan to cap their nuclear capabilities by signing the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT). Iran has repeatedly called for the universal ratification of the NPT. Although Iran had claimed that this was directed at Israel, the implications of such a stance are far-reaching for India. With the conclusion of the US-India nuclear deal, Iran warned that the pact endangered the NPT and could trigger new 'crises' for the international community.<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, despite close relations and convergence of interests with Iran, India voted against Iran in the International Atomic Energy Agency, which took Iran by surprise. Although India stated that it supports Iran's development of nuclear technology for peaceful purposes, it believes that Iran should comply with the restrictions of the NPT as it is a signatory to it.

Domestically, India's shift in policy toward Iran created a furore in the Communist Party and other leftist parties on whose votes Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's Congress Party-led coalition relied on a parliamentary majority. These parties objected to the government's decision and argued that India's IAEA votes abandoned its autonomy on foreign policy and made it subservient to Washington. The Bharatiya Janata Party also accused the government of betraying Iran and "capitulating" to the US. Top Indian policymakers tried to quell the criticism by arguing that India voted in its own national interest. They also pointed out that India was not alone: both Russia and China, Iran's strongest allies, also voted for the Resolution to refer Iran to the UN Security Council over its nuclear file.

In November 2006, after India's vote against Iran at the IAEA took Tehran by surprise, a "hurt" Ali Larijani – then secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council and Iran's Majlis speaker was reported as saying: "India was our friend."<sup>47</sup> Tehran signalled its anger over India's votes against the Iranian nuclear energy programme at IAEA meetings repeatedly on many occasions. At the same time, a former Iranian deputy oil minister, Hadi Nejad-Hosseinian, questioned the natural gas deal between Iran and India on the ground that it gave a huge discount to India and was some 30 per cent below the value of gas sold to Turkiye.<sup>48</sup> The then Iranian Foreign Minister, Manouchehr Mottaki, also expressed his country's disappointment to his Indian counterpart Somanahalli Malliah Krishna over India's vote in favour of the Resolutions by the IAEA regarding Tehran's nuclear energy programme. In a letter, Mottaki drew parallels between Iran's nuclear energy programme and India's nuclear tests. Krishna, however, responded by saying that the two cases lack similarity and that India's non-proliferation record is free from blemishes.<sup>49</sup> Under these circumstances, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh took the step of explaining India's vote in a formal statement to parliament. He argued that Iran had undertaken international obligations voluntarily – both the obligations it has as a member of the NPT and its decision to suspend its sensitive nuclear activities – and should abide by its commitments. He also noted concerns about the origins of gas centrifuges, a thinly veiled reference to Pakistan.<sup>50</sup>

The vote remained a contentious issue between Iran and India for some time, but regular dialogue helped to overcome it. Although India voted to take the issue of Iran's enrichment activities to the UN Security Council, it

has repeatedly insisted on a peaceful resolution to the conflict and stated it will not support any threats of violence made against Iran for its nuclear programme. However, the biggest area of difference between Iran and India is likely to be Tehran's nuclear energy programme. India has categorically stated that a nuclear-armed Iran is not acceptable. It is in India's interest that nuclear proliferation in its neighbourhood is contained.

On the other hand, although much has been written about the growing defence ties between India and Iran, India has a more substantive defence relationship with the Arab world. India and the Arab States of the Persian Gulf enjoy strong cultural, economic and military ties. The presence of more than nine million Indians in Arab countries – 3.4 million of whom are to be living in the UAE alone, a strong Arab-India trade including 60 per cent of Indian oil imports, are the main reasons that give Indian foreign policy a pragmatic approach.

Nowadays, Saudi Arabia is one of the chief suppliers of oil to India's booming economy, and India is now the second-largest recipient of Saudi oil after China. India has also invested in different refineries and petrochemical projects in Saudi Arabia. New Delhi is seeking a partnership with Riyadh for strategic reasons. To Indian strategists, any ally that can act as a counterweight to Pakistan in the Islamic world is important. Initially, New Delhi sought to develop security ties with Tehran, but such efforts have stumbled in recent years. Indeed, the Iranian nuclear energy programme has helped to draw New Delhi and Riyadh closer together.

Furthermore, India's trade and energy security is inextricably linked to the security of the Strait of Hormuz. With this in mind, the Indian Navy regularly visits Persian Gulf ports and conducts joint exercises with other States in the region, thereby lending its hand to Indian diplomacy in expanding New Delhi's reach in the region. The Indian Navy has made port calls and conducted different exercises with the navies of Kuwait, Oman, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE. It has also used this opportunity to engage with the navies of other major powers involved in the region, such as the US, the UK and France. These exercises have been repeated several times during the recent decade.

India has also cultivated close security ties with major GCC countries.

The defence cooperation agreements that India has with these States are similar to the ones it has with the US, the UK, France, Germany, Australia and Japan. Since 2002, India and the UAE decided to streamline their defence relationship, which has been largely dominated by naval ship visits and training exchange programmes. Later, the focus shifted to joint development and manufacture of sophisticated military hardware.

India's defence cooperation with Qatar and Oman is also extensive and involves training of military personnel, joint exercises and service-to-service information-sharing. India also has maritime security arrangements in place with these two countries. In 2008, a landmark defence pact was signed, under which India committed its military assets to protect "Qatar from external threats." Qatar remains India's top supplier of natural gas.

On the other hand, the US remains the predominant player in the Persian Gulf and the Pacific region. India's ties with the US have dramatically expanded in the last few decades, and this has already emerged as a significant factor shaping India's foreign policy towards the Persian Gulf. The most visible manifestation of this has been India's attempt to recalibrate its ties with Iran. The shadow of the US will loom large over Indian foreign policy in the years to come, especially if the conflict between the US and Iran intensifies.

India's efforts to improve its relations with the Middle East are not limited to Iran and the other Persian Gulf States. In the early 1990s, India stepped back from its staunch anti-Israeli stance and support for the Palestinian cause. Besides practical economic and security considerations in the Post-Cold War world, domestic politics, especially those influenced by Hindu nationalists, played a role in this reversal. However, in December 1991, India voted along with the UN majority to repeal the UN Resolution equating Zionism with racism and in 1992, following the Soviet Union and China, India established diplomatic relations with Israel.

Israel and India have developed close defence and security ties since establishing diplomatic relations in 1992. Israel provided India with much-needed intelligence on Pakistani positions during the Kargil War in 1999, which was instrumental in turning the war in India's favour.<sup>51</sup> Israel is India's second-largest arms supplier, after Russia. India's trade with Israel has increased and India has become Israel's third-largest trading partner in Asia, when it

comes to non-military goods and services. While India and Israel were officially “rivals” during the Cold War, the fall of the Soviet Union and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism had generated a solid strategic alliance.<sup>52</sup> However, India still cannot ignore the sentiments of its Muslim minority of about 170 million which has deep religious roots and attachment with Islamic holy places. India’s growing relationships with Israel and the US and the domestic criticism it has engendered have prompted India to reinforce its ties with the Muslim world.

Finally, Iran’s position on several other issues crucial to it has run counter to Indian interests. Tehran has been critical of the way the Indian government has handled the situation in Kashmir. For instance, In November 2010, Iran’s Supreme Leader issued a message to Hajj pilgrims in which he called upon Muslims worldwide to support the Kashmiri people in India’s Jammu and Kashmir. This message came at a time when Kashmiri youth were protesting against human rights violations by Indian security forces. In his message, the Iranian leader noted that the need for solidarity with the Kashmiri people is “a great obligation” for the Muslim Ummah. This position is repeated on different occasions during recent years. The successive Indian governments have often raised their objections to the Iranian interference in Indian internal affairs.

## **Conclusion**

During recent decades, India and Iran’s relationship has been described as a “civilisational” and “historical” one, dating back thousands of years. New Delhi and Tehran have tried to strengthen their ties and found common ground for cultural, economic and strategic cooperation. However, over time, the basis for the relationship has shifted from civilisational to economic.

Now, the Indian government is aware that Iran is looking to improve bilateral relations with India, and the economic relations between the two would go a long way in helping India grow as an economic and political power. Energy and transport are likely to remain the key elements at present and in the future in India’s relationship with Iran. Planned oil and natural gas pipelines and joint transport infrastructure projects outline a paradigm of South-South economic cooperation and political solidarity. Clearly, India is interested in increasing its presence in the Iranian energy and transport sector because of its rapidly rising economic development.

However, during the last two decades – from January 2003, when President Khatami was invited as a chief guest for the Indian Republic Day celebrations, and the Delhi Declaration was signed with an emphasis on the need to expand the strategic partnership, until today – bilateral relations between the two countries in the political, economic, security, social, and cultural fields have reached their lowest point.

Iran and India have defined several joint projects during recent decades, which have mostly remained unfinished. What follows, here is a brief overview of these projects:

- The initiative to transfer natural gas from the South Pars Gas-Condensate Field in Iran to India via Pakistan, known as the Peace Pipeline project and pursued by the three countries since the 1990s, was left unfinished since India's withdrawal from the project in 2009.
- The initiative to launch an International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), which was pursued by Iran, India, and Russia and officially launched in September 2000, remains on paper and has not been implemented yet.
- The initiative for extensive economic cooperation between Iran and India in the Chabahar Port, accompanied by numerous agreements in various fields, is still half-finished. Although Chabahar was the only place in Iran from where the US sanctions against Iran were lifted, and notwithstanding the signature of new agreements by the leaders of Iran, India, and Afghanistan in 2016 to accelerate the equipment of the Chabahar port, according to the Indian contractor of the project, from the total of US\$ 500 million allocated by India to the project, only US\$ 25,000 has been invested so far, according to the Indian contractor of the project. Moreover, the Chabahar-Zahedan-Zaranj railway, which was agreed to be quickly completed by Indian companies to facilitate transport between the three countries, did not succeed, and India was excluded from the project in the summer of 2021.
- Iran and India have also signed an agreement on investment and cooperation in developing the Farzad-B Gas Field. However, after several years, the agreement has been cancelled in 2021 due to the differences between the parties, and Iran would probably have to carry

forward the project with other Asian countries.

- In terms of trade partnerships, given the sharp decline in the trade between Iran and India, Iran has been almost wholly removed from India's energy basket. The blocking of Iranian oil and gas revenues in Indian banks and Iran's requirement to purchase goods instead, and use the Rupee in the trade between the two countries, blocked the expansion of economic relations between the two sides. Moreover, the entry of Indian goods, especially Indian agricultural products, into Iranian markets created widespread dissatisfaction among numerous Iranian farmers who produced the same products within the country.
- In recent years, India's votes against the Iranian nuclear programme at the International Atomic Energy Agency have also impacted the diplomatic relations between the two countries.
- The significant reduction in the academic and cultural relations between the two countries, which shows itself in the decreased number of Iranian and Indian students and tourists, has also added to the challenge in the relations between the two countries. Although it has been primarily due to the COVID-19 pandemic since 2020 and the economic sanctions against Iran, it can be expected that the declining relations between the Iranian and Indian peoples, and especially the academia, would affect the two countries' public diplomacy.
- At the regional level also, India's extensive cooperation with Israel and the Arab countries of the Persian Gulf, which can be observed in its naval manoeuvre with Saudi Arabia and the signing of a strategic economic agreement with the UAE in 2022, has driven Iran closer to China. In March 2021, a US\$ 400 billion Agreement on Strategic Cooperation was signed between Iran and China. The strategic cooperation agreement between Iran and Russia was also extended. Indeed, the formation of this dichotomy, with India-GCC-Israel on the one hand and Iran-China-Russia-and some other Arab countries on the other, can only fuel a new Cold War in the Persian Gulf region. It has to be remembered that, in India's strategic environment within the Indo-Pacific region, Iran is a maritime neighbour to India. The Strait of Hormuz is also located on the western borders of this strategic

environment, and the increased security tensions and competition can spread to other areas.

- Although some diplomats and analysts have repeatedly cited the economic sanctions as a major obstacle to continued cooperation between the two countries in recent years, Iran's relations with other countries, including China, Russia and other Asian countries and even some EU member states, have not experienced such an extensive reduction.
- Therefore, what RAND Corporation experts referred to as the "Tehran-New Delhi Axis" at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and promised extensive cooperation between the two great Asian civilisations, is now disappearing from the relations between the two countries. Hence, India's new approach in the form of the "Think West" programme and Iran's policy in the form of the "Look East" programme could not provide an appropriate ground to develop bilateral collaboration.

It can be stated that the different mentalities in the political structures of these two societies play a significant role in forming a contradiction in their interests. Thus, it seems that the most important gap between the two sides can be found in their different discourse and perceptions about the new structure of the international system and its necessities. In other words, three decades after the collapse of the USSR, there are still deep-seated differences between the foreign policy approaches of Iranian and Indian policymakers. In fact, they look at the new structure of the international system from different perspectives. Certainly, the main outcome of this gap is that achieving a functional policy to improve relations has become difficult.

The change in Indian decision-makers' view of the international system has been influential in formulating the current state of relations between the two countries. The weakening of the Nehruvian approach and the strengthening of the neo-liberal one in India's foreign-policy decisions have led to a shift from a soft balance policy in India's relations with Iran and the US to a policy of unilateralism and strengthening of India's alliance and alignment with the US. It has resulted in Iran's increasing frustration with cooperation with India, driving it towards increased cooperation with China. As a result, the strategic advantage of India's traditional presence in West Asia as a natural ally for the

region's countries seems to diminish and give way to increasing competitive approaches.

In this context, and given the developments in the international system after the Ukraine War, to ensure the national interests of both countries, it seems necessary for both sides to start a new level of dialogue and define new cooperative approaches. Continuous communication between Iranian and Indian researchers, analysts and diplomats and the design of a new cooperation model in the economic, social, political and cultural fields at the bilateral, regional and international levels has become an extreme necessity today. However, no research centre or institute has been set up either in Iran or in India to study and analyse the relations between the two countries and design new areas of cooperation. Consequently, despite the numerous valuable articles and books published annually on the historical relations between the two countries, there are very few scientific and practical materials on Iran-India relations in modern times, and the number of researchers familiar with this subject in both countries is considerably small.

Accordingly, academic institutes in both countries can draw on support from foreign political entities, to set up two joint research centres in Tehran and New Delhi, embark on pathological investigations into the relations between the two countries in recent years, and provide them with strategic guidelines, so that the two long-standing neighbours can get out of the existing situation and improve the level of their cooperation.

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# 10

## Indians in the Gulf during the Pandemic: Analysing Responses from India and the GCC Countries

*Prasanta Kumar Pradhan*

### **Introduction**

There are over nine million Indians living and working in the Gulf region. The Indian expatriate community forms a natural link between India and the region. The Gulf region has been a favourite destination for Indian workers looking for employment outside the country. Geographical proximity, employment opportunities in the region as well as the historical and cultural linkages between India and the Gulf are some of the reasons for the higher concentration of Indian nationals in the region. Indian workers are appreciated for being hardworking, disciplined and law-abiding. Often they are preferred over people from other nationalities in the region. The leaders of the region have acknowledged the contribution of Indian workers towards the development and progress of their countries. The Indian expatriate workers not only contribute to the development of the countries they work in but also to the foreign exchange reserves of India. Therefore, their welfare, safety and security have always been a key concern for the Government of India.

The spread of the COVID-19 pandemic brought a number of challenges for the Indian community in the Gulf region. Due to their occupational hazards, poor and unhygienic living conditions and low wages, the migrant workers in the Gulf were at a high risk of contracting COVID-19 infection

and related health issues. As elsewhere in the world, the pandemic disrupted the industrial and economic activities in the Gulf. This resulted in the loss of employment of a number of Indian workers. A large number of Indian workers in the Gulf region are engaged in low-skilled and semi-skilled jobs. Thus, their wages and savings were not enough to sustain themselves during the prolonged pandemic. Many of them felt desperate to return home because of the loss of jobs during the pandemic. Feeling helpless in a foreign land, the Indian expatriate workers looked up to the Government of India and the local administration for help and support. The Government made several efforts to reach out to the people in distress in the Gulf and also appealed to the local governments to support the expatriate workers during the pandemic.

Further, a number of Indian expatriate workers died in the Gulf region during the pandemic. In February 2022, the Government of India informed the Rajya Sabha that 4355 Indian nationals had died during the pandemic all over the world. A total of 3670 Indian nationals died in the six GCC countries. The highest number of 1237 deaths was reported in Saudi Arabia, followed by 894 in the UAE, 668 in Kuwait, 555 in Oman, 203 in Bahrain and 113 in Qatar.<sup>1</sup> Due to the high concentration of Indian expatriate workers in the Gulf region, the number of deaths was also high in these countries as compared to other parts of the world. Against this backdrop, this chapter analyses the nature of problems faced by the Indian expatriate workers, and the approach of India and the GCC countries towards the Indian migrant workers in the Gulf during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Challenges Faced by Indians in the Gulf during the Pandemic**

Like other countries around the world, the GCC countries also adopted several precautionary measures to deal with the pandemic. To contain the further spread of the virus, all these countries suspended commercial flights, shut the government and private sector offices, educational institutions and declared curfews and lockdowns. This created varieties of problems for the expatriate community in the Gulf. One of the most common problems that arose was the loss of employment among a number of people who were working in smaller private organisations. A number of Indian expatriate workers, particularly blue-collar workers, were affected more severely than others who were financially stable and had the means and resources to face the challenges

imposed by the pandemic. Although it is difficult to get exact data on the number of Indians who became jobless as a result of the pandemic, some studies do provide information about the difficulties faced by Indians in the Gulf during the pandemic.

The flight ban was one of the major problems faced by the migrant workers in the Gulf as this not only affected their work and business but also kept them away from their families. Labour exploitation and abuse of migrant workers including wage cuts and non-payment of wages by some unscrupulous employers were also reported during the pandemic.<sup>2</sup> There were also reports of some employers refusing to pay overtime dues to their employees.

The economic impact of the pandemic on the GCC economies was unprecedented as it hit their fiscal revenues. This impacted the migrant workers as well. The economies of the GCC countries were seriously affected as the global demand for oil decreased during the pandemic. The oil price volatility during the pandemic severely affected the GCC economies which are mostly dependent on rent accrued from the supply of energy. There was also a fall in global demand for oil as many countries in the region prolonged lockdowns and industrial and economic activities were closed for months. According to an estimate by the International Energy Agency (IEA) in April 2020, global oil demand fell by 30 per cent compared to the previous year.<sup>3</sup> Some countries were already under financial pressure because of the low oil prices before the pandemic, and the pandemic further aggravated their situation.<sup>4</sup>

The Gulf countries thus had to bear the dual shock of the spreading virus and the falling oil prices.<sup>5</sup> The fall in oil prices further aggravated the situation inflicted by the spread of the virus and global lockdown.<sup>6</sup> The governments also spent huge amounts of money to check the further spread of the pandemic in their countries. A number of private enterprises found it difficult to sustain themselves amid the pandemic and could not maintain the number of employees they had employed. As a result, many Indian expatriate workers lost their jobs.

Similarly, a large number of them were also stranded in the labour camps which were not adequately maintained, were unhygienic and overcrowded. In the thick of the pandemic, it became difficult for them to maintain social distancing, living in such poor conditions with shared accommodation. This

further increased their vulnerability to the COVID-19 infection. Further, some faced the challenges of food and healthcare shortages as well. The feeling of being neglected and discriminated against in a foreign country during a raging pandemic was prevalent in the minds of most of the blue-collar workers in the Gulf. Therefore, feeling helpless in a foreign country during the pandemic, many of them were desperate to come back home.<sup>7</sup>

## **India's Initiatives**

### *Reaching Out to the Gulf Rulers*

The Indian government reached out to the rulers of all the GCC countries reiterating the need to take necessary steps for the safety and well-being of the Indian expatriate community. Prime Minister Modi held telephonic conversations with all the GCC rulers as the virus continued to spread.<sup>8</sup> The Gulf rulers, on their part, gave assurances that the Indian community in the Gulf will be taken care of during the pandemic. India's External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar visited the Gulf several times and held discussions with his counterparts over the challenges faced by the Indian community during the pandemic. During the discussions, Jaishankar appealed to the Gulf leaders to provide the necessary healthcare facilities and other basic necessities to the Indian expatriate workers who were in distress and stranded because of the lockdowns and quarantine rules. Further, the Government of India made efforts to ensure that there are no job losses of its nationals working in the Gulf.

### *Reaching Out to the People in Distress*

Indian embassies in the Gulf also undertook several initiatives to reach out to the people in distress and provide them with basic necessities. The embassies provided food and medicines to the people and held discussions with the local governments regarding wage cuts and non-payment of dues. Indian embassies also worked in close coordination with the Indian community welfare organisations in the Gulf countries that also came forward to help the people during the pandemic. They provided them with food, shelter, medicines, masks and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) kits.<sup>9</sup> India spent around Rs. 33.5 crores from the Indian Community Welfare Fund (ICWF) to support the people in distress during the pandemic.<sup>10</sup> The ICWF, which was established

in 2009, played a critical role in assisting Indian expatriate workers overseas in their fight against the pandemic.

In Qatar, for instance, the Indian embassy worked closely with the Indian Doctors Club and Associations of Indian Paramedics, to provide medical assistance to people and take up issues with the local authorities when required.<sup>11</sup>

### *Discussions with the Stakeholders*

As a large number of people started flying back home, the central, as well as state governments, were concerned about the social and economic implications of the continuing pandemic on them. Therefore, the Government began discussing the issues with all the possible stakeholders regarding the return of migrant workers. The Government of India held discussions with the respective state governments, industries and a number of non-governmental organisations working in this field for the smooth return of workers from the Gulf and accommodating them in the local job market.

### *Vande Bharat Mission*

As many of the expatriates wanted to return home, in April 2020, India began the registration process for its nationals desiring to return. In response, a large number of them in different Gulf countries registered themselves to fly back. In May 2020, India launched the *Vande Bharat Mission* in order to repatriate its stranded nationals in different parts of the world. India held discussions with the GCC countries about repatriation and created air bubbles to enable repatriation in a phased manner. All countries in the Gulf responded favourably to these efforts by India, as a result of which, the expatriates were successfully repatriated. The mission continued to run successfully and it emerged as one of the largest peacetime repatriation missions ever undertaken in the world. In December 2021, the Government of India stated that over seven lakh Indians had returned from the Gulf during the pandemic under the *Vande Bharat Mission*. The maximum number of 330,058 Indian workers returned from the UAE followed by 137,900 more from Saudi Arabia. An estimated 97,802 workers returned from Kuwait, 72,259 from Oman, 51,190 from Qatar, and 27,453 from Bahrain.<sup>12</sup> The demand for repatriation of the people in the Gulf was many times more than the capacity India had during the pandemic. That was mainly why the *Vande Bharat Mission* continued.

**Table 1: Country-wise Returnees from the Gulf Countries under the Vande Bharat Mission**

<i>Sl No</i>	<i>Country</i>	<i>Number of returnees</i>
1.	UAE	330,058
2.	Saudi Arabia	137,900
3.	Kuwait	97,802
4.	Oman	72,259
5.	Qatar	51,190
6.	Bahrain	27,453
	Total	7,16,662

*Source:* Statement made by External Affairs Minister in Lok Sabha on December 10, 2021.

### *Return Migration*

As people began returning home from the Gulf, the central and the state governments were concerned about the larger economic and social implications of the return migration. A key concern for the Government was how to deal with the quantum of people, both skilled and semi-skilled, returning home. Providing them employment emerged as a primary concern for the Government. In order to create a database of people returning from overseas, the Government of India established a Skilled Workers Arrival Database for Employment Support (SWADES) portal in 2020. The SWADES portal is a skill mapping database that gathered the qualifications, professional experience and skill sets of the returnees so that it will be helpful for the Government to explore suitable employment for them. The data was also shared with companies in India so that suitable placement opportunities could be found for the returnees.<sup>13</sup> By January 2021, the SWADES portal received 30,500 registrations out of which around 80 per cent of the returnees were from the Gulf States.<sup>14</sup> The SWADES portal was a joint initiative undertaken by the Ministries of Skill Development & Entrepreneurship, Civil Aviation and External Affairs.

### **Response from the Gulf Countries**

There were mixed reports about the response from the Gulf countries towards the expatriates during the pandemic. While some reports suggested that the Government agencies and departments in the Gulf reached out to the migrant communities assuring them of financial support, medical facilities and ensuring hygienic living conditions, some other reports suggested that the migrant

workers had expressed their helplessness in the absence of any substantial support from their employers or local government agencies.

Initially, when the pandemic hit, the Gulf countries like many other countries around the world, were concerned about containing the spread of the virus – which was a top priority for them. And after curfews were imposed, the vulnerable sections of the migrant community who actually needed help, became desperate. As the reports of migrant workers in distress in these countries emerged, there were calls from several quarters including governments and humanitarian organisations who appealed to the authorities in the Gulf<sup>15</sup> to provide support to the very people who have helped to build their country and their economy. Kuwait offered a general amnesty to the people who had overstayed their visas and also offered to pay for their tickets to go home.<sup>16</sup> It also offered to cooperate with the Government of India in its effort to repatriate people from Kuwait who wanted to come back home.

In Qatar, preparations for the Football World Cup 2022 were in full swing when the pandemic hit the country. There were a large number of workers involved in a number of construction projects. As the number of infections increased, the Qatari government issued orders to ensure hygienic living conditions for the workers, their wages, and medical facilities. While trying to ensure that there are no violations of labour laws committed in the country, the Qatari government also undertook inspections to further improve the situation. Qatar set up direct free telephone lines for emergency situations and inquiries in several Indian languages to help the Indian community.<sup>17</sup> The Qatari approach was to take care of everyone who lives in the country including the migrant communities. Qatari government also promised to provide medical facilities to everyone infected with the virus.

The Bahrain government provided free COVID-19 vaccines to Indian expatriates as well. During the pandemic, the government ensured the implementation of all precautionary measures at workplaces and residences of the expatriate workers. It also renewed the expired residency permits of expatriate workers and exempted them from fines during the pandemic. Saudi Arabia also provided free COVID-19 treatment to all expatriate workers in the Kingdom.<sup>18</sup> It also extended the validity of the residency permits and visas of those expatriate workers who were stranded due to a travel ban.<sup>19</sup> In March 2020, the Saudi government announced a series of economic measures which

included an exemption from the expat levy for three months. The Saudi government had begun implementing the expat levy on the dependents of expatriate workers since 2018 in order to augment the government's revenues in the face of falling oil prices.

Apart from the government, some private and non-governmental organisations also came forward to support the Indian workers in distress. The Indian Cultural Foundation (ICF) in collaboration with the Aasa Group arranged free accommodation and food for more than 300 Indian workers who were stranded in Dubai in 2020 because of the travel restrictions and mandatory quarantine rules.<sup>20</sup> In Qatar, the Qatar Charity and Qatar Red Crescent Society provided food to Indian expatriate workers.<sup>21</sup>

### **India's COVID-19 Diplomacy and Expatriates in the Gulf**

During the pandemic, India reached out to a large number of countries for cooperation to fight the pandemic. As there are over nine million Indians living in the Gulf region, it emerged as a key concern for the Government of India. Prime Minister Modi reached out to all the GCC rulers and discussed mutual cooperation with them to defeat the pandemic. India offered all possible help and support to defeat the virus. In 2020, when there was a lot of uncertainty and a lack of information about the treatment of the virus, India supplied Hydroxychloroquine tablets to the Gulf countries. Responding to the request of the rulers, India sent doctors and healthcare professionals to the UAE and Kuwait. India, thus, emerged as a reliable friend at a time of crisis. Prime Minister Modi also appealed to the Gulf rulers to take care of the well-being of the Indian nationals and provide them with the required basic amenities as well as medical support. India's diplomatic outreach to the world, called as 'COVID diplomacy' had been effective and beneficial for India in dealing with the difficulties faced by the Indian expatriate workers in the Gulf.

India's diplomatic outreach to the Gulf countries helped it to provide food and ensure hygienic living conditions to the Indian workers, provide them with other basic amenities during the pandemic and establish air bubbles. India had also supplied COVID-19 vaccines to all the GCC States. When the second wave hit India hard in 2021, all the GCC countries came forward to help India by supplying oxygen and other medical equipment.

Cooperation in the health sector had emerged as a key area of cooperation between India and the GCC countries during the pandemic. And, this emerged as a key aspect of India's overall strategic engagement with the region. All these countries realised that mutual cooperation and support was necessary to fight the pandemic. India's continuous support to the Gulf States in terms of supplying medicines, medical equipment and medical professionals during the pandemic had a strong impact on the leadership of these countries, which was a key reason for the support India has received from them over the expatriates' issue.

### **Returning to the Gulf**

As the pandemic receded, those who had returned to India, started moving back to the Gulf. The majority of them have already gone back to the Gulf. In March 2021, the External Affairs Minister stated that "the largest numbers, not surprisingly, have gone to the Gulf."<sup>22</sup> He also stated that the Government is pursuing the return of workers to their old jobs in the Gulf and there has been significant success with regard to creating air bubbles and easing travel restrictions.<sup>23</sup> In fact, there is a significant increase in the number of Indians who have travelled to the Gulf for work in 2022 after the pandemic subsided.

The industrial and economic activities in the Gulf have quickly recovered in the aftermath of the pandemic. The travel restrictions imposed during the pandemic have also been gradually removed. These are two important factors responsible for the return of the Indian expatriate workers back to the Gulf. India's Minister of State for External Affairs, V. Muraleedharan, has informed that there has been a substantial increase in the emigration clearances issued to the people travelling to the Gulf region in 2022 than previous years. He stated that from January to July 2022, 189,206 emigration clearances were issued for the Gulf compared to 132,763 during all of 2021.<sup>24</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The COVID-19 pandemic showed that a section of migrant workers in the Gulf region was highly vulnerable to the sudden and unexpected changes that were enforced by the pandemic. Subsequently, they also had to undergo financial strain in some cases. Access to healthcare facilities was also a concern among them as the pandemic continued to spread throughout the region.

In such a desperate situation, support from the governments – both the Indian government as well as the host nations – was extremely important for the expatriate community to mitigate their helplessness and desperation in a foreign land. At the political and diplomatic level, India reached out to all the GCC countries appealing to them to take care of the Indian nationals facing difficulties because of the pandemic. Indian missions in the region also reached out to the people in need of urgent consular support, and in some cases, provided basic amenities to the needy.

The response from the local governments was also crucial as they supported the Indian expatriate community by ensuring shelter, hygiene and medical facilities. India has acknowledged the contribution of the local governments for looking after the requirements of the Indian expatriate community during the worst phase of the pandemic. But there is always a feeling among some members of the expatriate community and their family members back home that even more could have been done by the Government of India and local governments to mitigate the suffering they faced during the pandemic in the Gulf. A more systematic approach and intervention by the Government of India and the host nations would have helped them even more in the hour of crisis.

Cooperation during the pandemic indicated a strong and robust relationship between India and the Gulf. In 2020, India supplied medicines, medical equipment and healthcare professionals to the Gulf to help them fight the pandemic when required. In 2021, many of the Gulf countries sent liquid oxygen when the COVID-19 infection was at its peak in India. As a result, the health sector emerged as a key area of cooperation between India and the Gulf. The Gulf rulers responded positively to the appeals made by India to look after the well-being of the Indian workers stranded in their countries as a result of the containment measures in those countries. The proactive foreign policy of the Government, engaging with the Gulf countries in other sectors built trust, which actually worked during the pandemic. India's COVID diplomacy has worked well with the Gulf region and in return, they have reciprocated well to India's appeal for providing basic amenities to Indian workers during the pandemic.

As the pandemic has now receded, those who returned from the Gulf have now begun returning. Reports suggest that many of them retained their

old jobs and businesses. The pandemic was a test case of the strength of the India-Gulf relationship. More than two years of the pandemic has proven that India and the Gulf countries have confidence in each other, have positively reciprocated each other's initiatives and supported each other when required.

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