

India-GCC Defense and Security Cooperation

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

India as a Nation-State has embarked on a far-right path to attain the status of a regional hegemonic power. The government in New Delhi and the hawkish national security establishment under the ideological capture of Hindutva seeks to expand Indian influence in the surrounding regions. The recent trend of deepening Indo-Gulf relations is a reflection of Indian grand strategic objective of attaining strategic autonomy in an increasingly multipolar international system.

The initiatives such as Abraham Accords which eventually led to the creation of minilateral groupings like I2U2 and IMEC signify a notable expansion of Indian influence in West Asia, bolstered by strategic partnerships with the United States and Israel. These developments underscore New Delhi's strategic positioning in the region, aimed at advancing its geopolitical interests. However, it is crucial to recognize that Indo-Gulf cooperation is not unilateral; rather, it reflects a strategic recalibration by Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states in response to perceived shifts in the regional and global balance of power.

GCC states, cognizant of the potential for US downsizing in the region, are actively diversifying their alliances and seeking deeper engagement with emerging powers, particularly India. This strategic pivot toward the East is driven by a desire to safeguard their interests and reduce dependence on traditional partners. The perceived global shift towards multipolarity, coupled with the prospect of U.S. disengagement from West Asia, serves as a catalyst for the deepening collaboration between India and Gulf nations.

For Pakistan this poses as a complex challenge as relations with GCC have held a strategic importance for Pakistan. An increasing Indo-Gulf relationship is directly proportional to Pakistan ceding strategic space in West Asia. Given the political instability and economic difficulties, Pakistan has been unsuccessful in capitalizing relations with Gulf States. If this trend continues Pakistan may lose a potential opportunity to expand the scope of military & economic cooperation in West Asia.

Policy Recommendations

While remaining cognizant of the initiatives like I2U2 and IMEC and growing security challenges it should be paramount for Pakistan to focus on areas of mutual interest while also balancing geopolitical concerns. Given that Pakistan is one of the largest exporter of armaments to Gulf countries, it is imperative to further build on Pak-GCC defense cooperation by: -

- Collaborating on defense procurement projects, including the sale and purchase of military equipment, weapons, and technology.
- Establishing joint defense projects and initiatives for technology transfer, research and development, and co-production of military equipment.
- Pakistan and Gulf countries must enhance maritime security cooperation given their significant strategic locations. Collaborating on maritime patrols, information sharing, and joint naval exercises can help in securing maritime routes and addressing security challenges in the region.
- Utilize diplomatic clout and digital media capabilities to highlight Islamophobia within the BJP-led regime. Highlighting anti-Muslim policies in India can alter perceptions in Gulf States.
- Focusing efforts on fostering cooperation in emerging technologies domain specifically UAVs.
- Utilizing training centers like National Counter Terrorism Center (NCTC) to offer counter-terrorism training to Gulf countries' militaries and law enforcement agencies
- Intelligence sharing on security threats, terrorism, and regional developments to enhance situational awareness and counter threats effectively. Establishing mechanisms for real-time information exchange and coordination in intelligence operations.

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Issue/Problem Statement

The policy brief attempt to highlight the scope of Indian cooperation with the Gulf States specifically in defense and security domains and how it may impact Pakistan's potential for a similar cooperation.

Drivers of India-GCC Defense Cooperation

a. Political & Cultural

- Political goodwill among Indian and Gulf leaderships have facilitated the expansion of defense cooperation. The shift in Indian foreign policy emerged under the BJP-led government, where India utilized its cultural ties with the Gulf States which date back to 2000 years. The narrative of anti-colonialism has also played a significant role in connecting India to Gulf Countries.

b. Geopolitical

- With shifting Geopolitical dynamics in West Asia, the GCC states have sought to engage in reliable partners for cooperation as a U.S disengagement is expected. The threat of China gaining a foothold in West Asia has prompted Indian policy circles to solidify their presence in the region, this is evident through an uptick in Indian Naval presence in the Red Sea region. A recent statement of the Indian Naval Chief clearly indicated that India expects an active role in Red Sea Maritime Security.¹

c. Geo-economics

- There is a major economic backdrop to the upward trajectory of India and GCC relations. Over 8.9 million Indians in the Gulf; 50% of India's annual \$80 billion remittances from the Gulf. UAE contributes to India's strategic oil reserves. Saudi Arabia as India's fourth-largest trading partner and a significant source of crude oil imports. Moreover, over 60% of Indian energy imports come from the Gulf.

¹ "Indian Navy Chief's stern message amid piracy threats in Red Sea, says 'Not going to permit any piracy...,'" *Economic Times*, 18 Jan 24, available at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/indian-navy-chiefs-stern-message-amid-piracy-threats-in-red-sea-says-not-going-to-permit-any-piracy/videoshow/106964291.cms?from=mdr>, and "India deploys unprecedented naval might near Red Sea to rein in piracy," *Reuters*, 31 Jan 24, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/india-deploys-unprecedented-naval-might-near-red-sea-rein-piracy-2024-01-31/>

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- The announcement of IMEC at the G-20 summit² indicate towards India intending to gain greater strategic autonomy in West Asia , supported and backed by both U.S and Israel. U.S interests to prevent a Chinese expansion into West Asia via the BRI perfectly aligns with Indian Strategic objectives to balance China by leveraging its diplomatic clout and economic markets.
- United States views the potential Indo-Abrahamic alliance, building on the 2020 Abraham Accords between Israel and the UAE, as a strategic opportunity to maximize regional impact with minimal resources. The Abraham Accords have provided India with a beneficial framework for regional operations, leveraging its advantages in the Middle East.

d. Indian Foreign and Security Policy

- India's focus on promoting defense exports and achieving self-reliance in defense production aligns with Gulf States' quest for security ambitious initiative where defense production will be indigenized. This places India as a potential source of arms exports for the Gulf States.
- As part of its expansive military diplomacy, India is increasingly focusing on strengthening security and defense cooperation in the broader West Asian region. This aligns with the growing inclination of countries in the region, such as Iran and Israel, to foster political, economic, technological, and security partnerships with Eastern countries. Similarly to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), these nations are actively solidifying bilateral relations with countries across South, East, and Southeast Asia.

² “US, India, Saudi, EU unveil rail, ports deal on G20 sidelines,” *Reuters*, 10 Sep 23, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-india-saudi-eu-unveil-rail-ports-deal-g20-sidelines-white-house-official-2023-09-09/>

Key Elements of Defense Cooperation

- Collaborations between Indian and Gulf defense entities in areas like multiple launch rocket systems (MLRS) demonstrate mutual interest in enhancing military capabilities. During the 2023 International Defense Exhibition and Conference (IDEX) held in Abu Dhabi, India's Hindustan (HAL) and the UAE's defense firm, EDGE, signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU)³ to explore the possibility of joint design and development of missile systems and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs).
- Previously, UAE and Saudi Arabia have also shown interest in acquiring the BrahMos cruise missile from India.⁴ India and Russia have already agreed 'in principle' to export the anti-ship cruise missile, BrahMos, to third countries which include UAE, Vietnam, South Africa and Chile.⁵
- The recent Military exercise between Indian and Saudi Militaries underscore a focus on interoperability and sub-conventional operations.⁶ This indicates towards the following:-
 - a. Growing Indian involvement in collective security of the Gulf region via its military diplomacy.
 - b. Saudi interest in collaborating with Indian military despite latter's pro-Israel Stance

³ "Abu Dhabi defence firm signs MOU with India's HAL at UAE's defence expo," *Live Mint*, 23 Feb 23, available at <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/abu-dhabi-defence-firm-signs-mou-with-india-s-hal-at-uae-s-defence-expo-11677109205445.html>

⁴ "India to export BrhahMos cruise missile to Philippines," *Times of India*, 28 Jan 2022, available at <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/india-to-export-brahmos-supersonic-cruise-missiles-to-the-philippines/articleshow/89176007.cms?from=mdr>

⁵ "India, Russia agree to export BrahMos missiles to third countries — spokesman," *TASS*, 27 May 2016, available at <https://tass.com/defense/878650>

⁶ "India, Saudi Arabia kick off joint drills in Rajasthan," *Hindustan Times*, 29 Jan 24, available at <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-saudi-arabia-kick-off-joint-drills-in-rajasthan-101706516097433.html>

Implications for Pakistan

- Pakistan's recent shift towards geo-economics, outlined in its 2021 National Security Policy, aims to address political and economic challenges. However, the struggle to translate bilateral agreements into tangible outcomes and dependency on Gulf remittances highlight economic vulnerabilities. Bureaucratic hurdles, as seen in the delayed Saudi refinery project, impede potential investments and economic growth.
- India's expanding regional influence and economic development present a challenge to Pakistan's global standing. As India advances in regional connectivity and trade, Pakistan risks marginalization, affecting its ability to advocate for Kashmiri rights and engage in geopolitical discussions. Despite its potential, Pakistan faces difficulty in establishing itself as a reliable international partner, unlike India, complicating its position on the global stage.
- The significant migration of Pakistanis to countries like Saudi Arabia and the UAE underscores the crucial role of remittances in Pakistan's economy. In 2022-23, over 62 percent of the total number of Pakistanis migrating abroad, totaling 514,725 individuals, chose Saudi Arabia as their destination for better financial opportunities. Additionally, 15.5 percent, or 129,000 workers, opted to move to the UAE to secure their livelihood.
- Comparing these statistics with those of India and the nature of MoUs taking place between India and Gulf, it is highly likely that skilled Indian origin labor can potentially take up key areas such as emerging technologies, healthcare and management while Pakistani labors will only be able to occupy low-income blue collar occupations.
- Pakistan losing strategic space in the Gulf region will also impact the principled stance on Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu & Kashmir region. Gulf States' increasing security and economic cooperation with India could lead to weakening of Pakistan's diplomatic influence.
- Pakistan's economic challenges and its negotiations with international organizations require backing from Key West Asian powers like Saudi Arabia and UAE. These come under threat with rise of Indian stakes in the Gulf region

Policy Recommendations

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Appendix A: Figures for India-Gulf Economic Cooperation

Figure - I

Total trade volume (US Dollar)					
UAE	Saudi Arabia	Iraq	Qatar	Oman	Kuwait
US\$ 72.9 billion	42.9 billion	34.3 billion	15 billion		12.3 billion

Indian Community in Gulf					
UAE	Saudi Arabia	Iraq	Qatar	Oman	Kuwait
3.42 million	2.6 million members	over 700,000	7.80 lakhs	6.2 lakh	1.03 million

Figure - II

MOU Type	Country	Description
<i>Education Cooperation</i>	India-UAE	Nov 2023
Renewable Energy	India-KSA	Sept 2023
Advanced Technologies	India-UAE	Oct 5, 2023
AI, Space Technology & Energy	India-UAE	Oct 6, 2023
MoU on Electrical Interconnection & Exchange of electricity	India-KSA	Oct 8, 2023
MoU on Establishment of ICCR Chair of Indian Studies-Hindi Language	India-Oman	Dec 16, 2023
Free Trade Agreement to Boost Apparel Exports	India-Kuwait	Dec 21, 2023
Investment Cooperation	India-UAE	Jan 9, 2024
Agreement on Defense Cooperation	India-Oman	Feb 7, 2024
Food Processing & I2U2 Bilateral ties	India-UAE	Jan 10, 2024
MoU on Grid Connectivity	India-UAE	Jan 12, 2024

Figure: 1 - Source: (<https://www.eurasiareview.com/07042023-india-gulf-relations-oped/>)