



The visiting Minister Responsible for Defence, H.E. Mr. Sayyid Badr bin Saud bin Harib al Busaidi meeting with India's Minister of Defence, Ms. Nirmala Sitharaman at New Delhi in September 2018.

India's relations with Oman is being strengthened and defence has emerged as a prominent sector of cooperation in recent years. Mr. Sayyid Badr bin Saud bin Harib Al Busaidi<sup>1</sup>, Minister responsible for Defence Affairs of Oman visited India and met the Indian Defence Minister Ms. Nirmala Sitharaman in the last week of September signifying

growing India-Oman defence ties. During the talks held at South Block, the ministers undertook a comprehensive review of bilateral defence cooperation and discussed measures to further enhance bilateral exchanges. They agreed upon a range of measures to enhance the defence relationship between the two countries and prioritized cooperation in

## Oman and India on a Journey of Robust Defence Cooperation

By Dr. Lakshmi Priya, IDSA\*

During PM Modi's visit to Oman in February 2018, more than one fourth of the joint statements issued by the two countries dealt with defence, security, terrorism and space cooperation.

maritime security and defence industry for future engagement. Both the ministers also shared their perspectives on recent developments related to regional security.

This visit was preceded by his Indian counterpart, Former Defence Minister, Mr. Manohar Parrikar's<sup>2</sup> official tour to the Sultanate of Oman in May 2016 during which four MoUs pertaining to defence cooperation between Oman and India were signed, The MoUs were on defence issues, Marine Crime Prevention at Sea, Maritime Issues and Flight Safety information Exchange. Mr. Parrikar reiterated the importance that India attaches to its strategic partnership with Oman. He conveyed his appreciation at the continued support rendered by Oman for the Operational Turnaround (OTR) of Indian Navy ships for anti-piracy patrols as well as technical support for landing and over flight of Indian Air Force aircraft.



**Delegation level talks between the Defence Ministers of Oman and India at New Delhi in September 2018, headed by H.E. Mr. Sayyid Badr bin Saudi bin Harib al Busaidi and Ms. Nirmala Sitharaman.**

India-Oman defence relations figured prominently during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit<sup>3</sup> to Oman in February 2018. More than one fourth of the joint statement issued during this visit dealt with defence, security, terrorism and space cooperation. Eight MoUs were signed during the visit and two of them dealt with defence cooperation. MoUs were signed on cooperation on peaceful use of outer space; and academic cooperation between National Defence College, Sultanate of Oman and the Institute for Defence Studies and the Analyses, India. An annexure to the existing Defence MOU (2005) on Military Cooperation between the Defence Ministries was also signed. This MoU was signed in 2005 and was renewed in 2016.

Oman and India have been conducting joint military exercises to foster defence cooperation. The defence exchanges are annually revised by the Joint military cooperation committee of the Defence Ministries of both the countries. Biennial Naval exercise 'Naseem Al Bahr' (Sea Breeze) which began in 1993 was conducted successfully in the Gulf of Oman in December 2017 and Indian naval ships 'Trikanth' and 'Teg'<sup>4</sup> participated in it. Air force exercise 'al-Jisr

al-Sharqi' (Eastern Bridge) culminated in January 2017 at Jamnagar, Gujarat. These military exercises were institutionalized in 2008 when Former Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh visited Oman. Similarly, a 14-day joint military exercise 'al Nagah-II' (Success-II) was held at Himachal Pradesh in March 2017 with an aim to exchange military tactics and expertise. Oman is the only country in the region with which India has bilateral institutionalized exercises in all the three defence services on a biennial basis.<sup>5</sup>

A large number of Omani military personnel are trained in India through Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation. India sends mobile training teams to Oman to facilitate the training for the Royal Navy of Oman.

Oman has given berthing rights to the Indian navy ships to fight against piracy in the Gulf of Aden and is the first gulf country to buy the Indian Small arms System (INSAS) developed by the state-run ordnance factory board. Commemorating 60 years of India-Oman diplomatic ties, Royal Navy of Oman's sailing vessel 'Shabab Oman' along with Indian Naval Ship 'Tarangini' participated in the joint sailing voyage from Muscat to Kochi in Nov 2015 tracing the ancient trading routes between

Oman and India. In a friendly gesture, Oman permits the Indian Air Force and Indian Navy aircraft to regularly utilize Omani Airports for refueling and operational turnaround.<sup>6</sup>

Situated across the Arabian Sea at a distance of less than 2500 kms, Oman is India's natural partner. Along with civilizational and historical ties, Oman and India share strategic relations. Oman is India's oldest defence partner in West Asia and a reliable ally in the anti-piracy campaign. Oman and India are trying to find ventures for joint production of defence equipment in India under 'Make in India'. This cooperation is on the cards since 2002 when former Indian Defence Minister, Mr. George Fernandes visited Oman in the same year.<sup>7</sup> Oman is situated mid-way between India and Africa and thus has great strategic value. If India secures a strong foothold in Oman, it can be its gateway to West Asia and Africa.

#### **Strategic Interests of Oman and India**

Oman is a maritime power and India needs its support in the region to counter growing Chinese foothold in the region. India is concerned with China's acquisition of strategic assets in the region including setting its base at Port

of Doraleh in Djibouti. Since PM Modi visited Oman in February 2018, Oman has given India an access to the key Port of Duqm for military use and logistical support. The Port of Duqm and dry dock will be available for providing maintenance to the Indian Naval vessels which will also allow India to expand its footprints in the Indian Ocean Region. India offered its assistance to Oman in development of its capabilities in training, human resource development, for use of space technologies and applications for developmental and other purposes. An MoU for Space cooperation was also signed in

security. Oman is interested in India to diversify the presence of external stakeholders in the region. By giving a major stake to India, Oman ensures presence of a South Asian actor with huge physical presence (in the form of migrant population) in the region.

It is apparent that in times to come, India-Oman defence relations will grow and strengthen the Indo-Oman ties on the whole.

1) Oman and India Agree to Enhance Bilateral Cooperation in the Field of Maritime Security and Defence Industry , 26 September 2018, Press Information Bureau, Government of India [http://](http://pib.nic.in/newsite/pmreleases.aspx?mincode=33)

Prime\_Minister\_to\_Oman

4) Indian Navy Conducts Exercise Naseem-Al-Bahr with Oman Navy , Press Information Bureau, Government of India <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=174638>

5) Indian Defence Minister To Visit Oman From May 20-22, 16 May 2016, Muscat Daily <https://www.muscatdaily.com/Archive/Oman/Indian-defence-minister-to-visit-Oman-from-May-20-22-4pjn>

6) India-Oman Relations, 2017, Ministry of External Affairs, [https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/26\\_Oman\\_November\\_2017.pdf](https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/26_Oman_November_2017.pdf)



H.E. Mr. Sayyid Badr bin Saud bin Harib Al Busaidi during the Guard of Honour in New Delhi.

February 2018. Oman and India have long coastlines and each will benefit from other's expertise in coastal defence and maritime security under the MoU.

Oman's immediate security threat emerges from the instability in Yemen and to keep it away from spilling over in its own territory, Oman will have to continue the balancing act.<sup>8</sup> Looking towards an eastern player along with engaging with Western actors provides it with the much-needed

[pib.nic.in/newsite/pmreleases.aspx?mincode=33](http://pib.nic.in/newsite/pmreleases.aspx?mincode=33)

2) Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar Visits Oman, May 2016, India Strategic, [https://www.indiastrategic.in/Defence\\_Minister\\_Manohar\\_Parrikar\\_Visits\\_Oman.htm](https://www.indiastrategic.in/Defence_Minister_Manohar_Parrikar_Visits_Oman.htm)

3) India Oman Joint Statement during visit of Prime Minister to Oman, 12 February 2018, Ministry of External Affairs, [https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/29479/India\\_Oman\\_Joint\\_Statement\\_during\\_visit\\_of\\_](https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/29479/India_Oman_Joint_Statement_during_visit_of_)

7) India Oman To Step Up Defence Cooperation, 9 October 2002, Defence Aerospace, [http://www.defense-aerospace.com/article-view/release/12165/india,-oman-plan-joint-military-training-\(oct.-10\).html](http://www.defense-aerospace.com/article-view/release/12165/india,-oman-plan-joint-military-training-(oct.-10).html)

8) Oman Diversifies Allies with Closer India Ties, Middle East Institute, [http://www.mei.edu/publications/oman-diversifies-allies-closer-india-ties#\\_edn15](http://www.mei.edu/publications/oman-diversifies-allies-closer-india-ties#_edn15).

*\*The author is Research Analyst, Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, IDSA.*