

## ***India's Strategic Partnership with the UAE: A Key Pillar of India's Outreach in West Asia***

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“Home away from Home” is how PM Narendra Modi described the UAE while addressing Indian diaspora at Dubai during his visit to UAE in February 2018<sup>1</sup>. Earlier, former External Affairs Minister Late Mrs Sushma Swaraj called India as the “Janm Bhoomi” and the Gulf region as the “Karm Bhoomi” for almost nine million Indians<sup>2</sup>, while addressing the inaugural session of the First India-League of Arab States Media Symposium at Delhi in August 2014, hailing the Indian diaspora for their hard work and the goodwill that they are generating through work in the region.

Indeed, India and the Gulf region share a special civilizational bond, built over time through trade and people to people contacts, nurtured over centuries. The idea of India has figured in the imagination of people in the Persian Gulf region for centuries. It is therefore not just a geographical fact or sheer coincidence that the Arabian Sea links India to the shores of the Gulf region. It is a bridge across which people on both sides have developed close bonds and which has, over time, led to a rich exchange of ideas, beliefs, culture and languages.

In modern times, however, India's relations with the West Asian region could not realize the true potential immediately after independence, owing mainly due to the countries of the region bound by their obligatory Muslim solidarity with Pakistan. This has, however, changed dramatically over the past two decades, especially after the 9/11 incident and the global war on terror. It may have taken nine years from the time PM Manmohan Singh sought to formulate a ‘Look West’ policy in 2005 to PM Modi announcing the need to ‘Link West’ along with ‘Look East’ policy in September 2014<sup>3</sup> but, the pace of engagement thereafter has been rapid to say the least.

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Within the region, it is UAE, which has slowly emerged as India's key partner and a trusted ally. India-UAE may have started slow but their special partnership has really taken off in the last few years. The bonds of friendship have specially grown stronger after Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan (MBZ), the Crown Prince and Narendra Modi took over reins of their respective countries, almost simultaneously in 2014. The historic visit of PM Modi to the UAE in August 2015, first visit by Indian PM after a gap of over 34 years set the tone and the two leaders agreed to elevate the ties to a comprehensive strategic partnership.

UAE, by its location and its stature in the region, forms a key pillar of India's 'West Asia' policy. UAE is an integral part of all important regional forum; GCC, Arab League etc. It also is a part of the I2U2 or the 'West Asian Quad' comprising of India, Israel, US and UAE. It is also a signatory of recently signed Abraham Accord with Israel. With Iran too, UAE is in a regular dialogue.

With India, the ties with UAE have never been stronger. UAE is India's third largest trade partner, the second largest export destination of India and is the third largest exporter of oil to India after Saudi Arabia and Iraq. UAE's investment in India is estimated to be around US \$ 17-18 billion. Cooperation in the fields of energy, trade, defence, space, cyber security, counter terrorism, digital payments are key components of constantly evolving ties. The landmark agreement CEPA (Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement) signed on 18th February 2022 in a record time of 88 days has laid the foundation for exponential increase in trade and economic partnership, and is yet another example of mutual trust and special relationship between the two nations.

This paper examines in depth, various aspects of this special relationship and identifies possible future contours of it. The paper explores the subject under the following headings:-

- (a) India's West Asia Policy and the UAE;
- (b) UAE and its Growing Leadership Role in the Region; and
- (c) Key Pillars of Strategic Convergence between India and UAE.

### **India's West Asia Policy and the UAE**

India's West Asia policy is rooted in four important pillars; the people, energy security, trade and security. Over nine million Indians working in the Gulf region, sending remittances worth billions of dollars back to India and thus form a very important connect with the region. Trade and energy security is

the next big connect with the region. India imports over 70 percent of its crude oil and over 50 percent of natural gas from the region. Any disruptions in this supply can be severely disruptive to the Indian economy. Fourth pillar has evolved over time, more so in the twenty first century as India has started looking beyond its immediate neighborhood. The West Asian region, situated at the crossroads of Asia, Africa and Europe, forms an important part of India's extended neighborhood, and is vital to India's strategic outlook. India has vital stakes in the stability, security and economic well-being of the region. Security challenges in the region have a ripple effect into India and are of immense concern to India. Instability in the region has a direct bearing on the safety and security of millions of Indians working there, our energy security and our steadily growing trade relations. The shared waters of the Arabian Sea and the Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) are important factors in the trade and security ties. In recent times, issues like the threats of terrorism and sea piracy too have become a shared concern for both India and the West Asian region.

In the past decade, as India is evolving into a major economic and military power in the region and is exerting its influence beyond its shores, the West Asian region too has undergone through a phase of transition and transformation and is, in the process, seeking trustworthy and reliable allies. The 'Arab Spring', the Persian Gulf crisis of 2019, the GCC – Qatar diplomatic standoff from 2017-21, the continuing conflict and humanitarian crisis in Yemen, political instability in Syria and Libya, frequent conflicts between Israel and the Palestine and the continuing suspense over the Iran nuclear issue, all have severe implications on the security dynamics of the region and are therefore of deep concern to India.

India's traditional foreign policy approach has been to remain non-intrusive, non-judgmental and non-prescriptive in other country affairs and it principally avoids taking sides in any intra-regional disputes. The fact that India is recognized a power with no extra territorial ambitions too is widely appreciated in the region. While offering full support and advise (when sought), India has maintained that it is for the nations and its people to choose their options and carve their destiny, without any external interference or diktats from outside.

India's ex-Minister of State for External Affairs, MJ Akbar, during the annual Manama Dialogue in December 2017, stated,

India recognizes and stands by the Gulf region in its efforts to counter emerging security threats. However, while engaging with the Gulf

countries, India's approach has remained and will remain non-intrusive, non-judgmental and non-prescriptive. We do not take sides in intra-regional disputes.<sup>4</sup>

This philosophy and India's unflinching commitment to sustaining and expanding relations with the West Asian region has helped build strong ties in recent times. Under PM Modi's leadership, India's ties with the countries in the region have grown manifold.

Within the region, India recognizes UAE as a special friend. The relationship has developed strong traction and the bonds of friendship have grown stronger especially since PM Modi came to power in May 2014. Coincidentally, the same year, Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan (MBZ) too became the de-facto ruler of the country owing to ill health of Late UAE President and ruler of Abu Dhabi Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan. The fact that both leaders developed a close personal bond soon, contributed a lot towards strengthening bilateral ties. Both the leaders also share a deep and common understanding of critical issues affecting the region, role that the two nations can play towards a secure and prosperous region and very importantly, the huge opportunity for rapid growth of bilateral ties. Eluding to the importance of UAE to India in August 2022, India's Consul General in Dubai, Aman Puri, speaking at the very first *Khaleej Times*' 'Breakfast Connect', a celebration of UAE's year of the 50th and 75th anniversary of India's Independence, stated: "India and the UAE are natural partners. India and UAE's partnership are a force for good, a pillar of resilience, a building block of peace and prosperity for the region and globally"<sup>5</sup>.

Both, India and the UAE, have gone out of their way many a times to demonstrate the special nature of their bilateral relationship. Most recently, soon after taking over the G20 presidency, India invited UAE (among small group of select countries) to be special guests at G20 Summit to be held in New Delhi in September 2023<sup>6</sup>. UAE's importance to India can also be mapped from the fact that it is only other GCC country apart from Saudi Arabia with which it has signed a comprehensive strategic partnership agreement<sup>7</sup>. UAE is the only nation from the region which has offered to store strategic oil reserves in India<sup>8</sup>. It is the most frequented destination in the Gulf region from India and offers wide opportunities to Indian diaspora. When UAE hosted the OIC Summit in 2019, it invited India's External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj despite protests from some nations including Pakistan<sup>9</sup>. Both India and UAE also form part of 'I2U2' or the 'West Asian Quad' comprising India, Israel, US and UAE, clearly indicating the convergence of interests shared between India and UAE in the region. The inauguration of the first

Hindu temple in Dubai on 05th October 2022<sup>10</sup> is indeed a special gift to the Indian community by UAE and demonstrates how UAE too considers India a very special partner. The RuPay card, a key initiative by India in digital payment system, was launched in the UAE on 24th August 2019<sup>11</sup> at the Emirates Palace, Abu Dhabi, making UAE one of the few countries to have such a tie-up with India. PM Modi was earlier invited as the keynote speaker at the World Government Summit in February, 2018 in UAE. Immediately thereafter, in March 2018, India was invited as the 'Guest of Honour' country at the Abu Dhabi Festival (ADF), which is UAE's annual cultural festival<sup>12</sup>.

The list of exceptions which India and UAE have made for each other stems not only from the special bonds of friendship but also owes to how UAE, over time, has grown in stature in the West Asian region across a multi-faceted canvas of diplomacy, regional power play, trade and investment opportunities, sovereign wealth funds and perhaps above all, wide ranging acceptance of its leadership across the region.

### **UAE and its Growing Leadership Role in the Region**

UAE was formally established on 2 December 1971 after an agreement was reached between the rulers of six of the Emirates (Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Fujairah, Umm al-Qaiwain and Ajman) with Sheikh Zayed as its President. The seventh Emirate, Ra's al-Khaimah, formally joined the new federation on 10 February 1972. In its fifty years as a nation, it has evolved from a young, unsure and small nation trying to manage its internal dynamics, to a key player in the region, aspiring for leadership role. In its early years, it focused on consolidating its national structure and identity. The crude oil boom and hydrocarbon resources gave it the leverage to develop social structures and infrastructure for the benefit of its people. Having initially grown under the shadow of big nations in the region like Saudi Arabia, it has slowly acquired an important stature in the region, especially after the onset of 'Arab Spring' in 2011.

In fact, 'Arab Spring' in 2011 was an important turning point in the outlook of UAE towards its foreign policy, especially in the region. It decided to shed its 'soft power' image to project a more muscular policy in the region. As a part of it, it not only welcomed but played a distinct role in the ouster of Muslim Brotherhood government from Egypt and supported Fateh-Al-Sisi in taking over the reins of Egypt. Its role in the fight against the Houthis in Yemen, commencing from the 'Operation Decisive Storm' led by Saudi Arabia in March 2015 too signalled its coming of age in the region. Later on, its

military role in Iraq and Syria against ISIS as a part of international coalition too, was a clear departure from the past.

Diplomatically too, UAE has come of its own in the region. During the diplomatic stand-off of regional countries against Qatar from 2017-21, it was a key player which rallied the region against Qatar. It played a key role again when Qatar was re-admitted into the GCC after the Al-Ula Summit in January 2021<sup>13</sup>. In 2016, it was quick to follow when Saudi Arabia severed diplomatic ties with Iran following attacks on its embassy in Teheran and consulate in Mashad during protests against the execution of Nimr al-Nimr, a leading Shia cleric in the Kingdom.<sup>14</sup> However, UAE took a more cautious approach by condemning Iran but not severing all ties. It recalled its ambassador from Teheran but retained its diplomatic presence to the level of chargé d'affaires. However, in November 2020, the UAE was quick to denounce the assassination of Iran's top nuclear scientist, Mohsen Fakhrizadeh<sup>15</sup>, as a heinous crime despite its downgraded relations. Similarly, in August 2022, UAE decided that its ambassador to Iran, Saif Mohammed Al Zaabi, would return to Tehran, after more than six years of being recalled in 2016<sup>16</sup>. These again are clear indication of an independent policy of the UAE in the region and an affirmation that it wants to maintain a 'rational regional policy' and would not toe blindly any line put forth by 'bigger partners'.

UAE's efforts to patch up ties with Turkey, another major country in the region, too is significant. Both had major differences on the outcome of the 'Arab Spring' protests in the region. While Turkey supported Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, UAE worked actively to have it removed from power. Both engaged in a series of proxy political-military conflicts in the Horn of Africa and the eastern Mediterranean region. In Libya too, both were on the opposing sides. However, when Crown Prince Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan visited Turkey in November 2021, making it the first official visit to Turkey since 2012<sup>17</sup>, it set the tone for a revised and revived relationship. It was soon followed by the Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan visiting the UAE in February 2022<sup>18</sup>. This once again was a clear departure from Saudi-Turkey relations over the killing of Jamal Khashoggi, a US-based journalist on 02<sup>nd</sup> October 2018, within the premises of the Saudi consulate in Istanbul.

The signing of Abraham Accords by the UAE, joining Israel in a formal diplomatic alliance too is a clear indication that UAE wants to take the lead and set the agenda for the region in the future. UAE is also a part of 'I2U2' grouping or the 'West Asian Quad' comprising of India, UAE, Israel and the US which held its first summit level meeting on 14<sup>th</sup> July 2022<sup>19</sup>. In the context of regional dynamics and leadership role, UAE's inclusion in the grouping is a

once again very significant development. UAE is also scheduled to host the COP28 Summit in November-December 2023, the pivotal platform on climate issues where India too has a critical voice.

UAE's emergence in a leadership role in the region thus is significant not only for the region, but also for India, both, in its bilateral engagement with UAE as well as its broader interface with the region. For India, UAE is a country which is ready to embrace modern world values, does not follow a zero sum game in its diplomacy (Iran, Israel) and is ready to set the agenda for the region. UAE also consciously recognises the growth of India and the role that India can play in the region and the world at large. This, when seen in the context of India's 'West Asia' policy, UAE is a perfect match. A further examination of key areas of convergence between India and UAE will present a better perspective on this aspect.

### **Key Pillars of Strategic Convergence between India and UAE**

Although India and UAE established diplomatic relations in 1972, a clear impetus in recent times was triggered by the visit of PM Modi to UAE in August 2015, first by any Indian PM in 34 years. There has been no looking back ever since. Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and Deputy Supreme Commander of UAE Armed Forces, visited India from February 10-12, 2016. He soon followed up this visit by another one on 24-26 January 2017, as the Chief Guest at India's Republic day celebrations. During this visit, the bilateral relations were upgraded to Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. PM Modi visited the UAE for the second time in February 2018 to deliver a keynote address at the 6th World Government Summit in Dubai and then again on 23-24 August 2019 where he was awarded with the prestigious 'Zayed Medal' for playing a "pivotal role" in giving a "big boost" to the bilateral strategic ties. This kind of intense engagement at the highest level is unprecedented for India. The personal chemistry that the two top leaders share only adds to the relationship between the two countries. The Crown Prince had called Modi his "brother" and welcomed the Indian PM to his "second home" during the 2019 visit – thus underscored the strong personal bond between the two charismatic leaders. Over time, both leaders have developed a shared and common perspective on critical issues impacting the region and the key role that the two countries can play towards development and prosperity in the region.

India's bilateral relations with UAE rests on three important pillars: Trade and investments, Energy and Indian community. A fourth dimension of

‘security’ is slowly getting added to the mix as a result of common understanding on threats and the need for a cooperative and collaborative security model in the region.

As regards trade, UAE is India’s third largest trade partner with a bilateral trade expected to cross US \$ 88 billion in FY 2022-23 against that of US \$ 73 billion in FY 2021-22<sup>20</sup>. UAE is also the second largest export destination of India (after US) with an amount of nearly US\$ 28 billion for the FY 2021-2022<sup>21</sup>. For UAE, India is the second largest trading partner for the year 2021 with an amount of around US\$ 45 billion (non-oil trade). UAE’s investments in India is around US \$ 20-21 billion of which US 15.18 billion is in the form of FDI while the remaining is portfolio investment. ADIA, the investment authority of UAE too has made some key investments in India. In July 2017, ADIA invested around US \$ One billion in National Investment and Infrastructure Fund or NIIF which is India’s sovereign investment fund<sup>22</sup>. ADIA has also invested US \$400 million in the housing sector and around US \$500 million in the renewable and green energy. ADIA has also committed to invest US \$ 75 billion in India’s infrastructure sector. Dubai- based DP World too has made commitment for investments with NIIF to invest US\$ 3 billion in ports logistics and river transport<sup>23</sup>. Taking the investment drive forward, Abu Dhabi-based Mubadala Investment Company, sovereign investment entity announced an investment of \$ 1.2 billion for a 1.85% equity stake in Reliance Jio in June 2020<sup>24</sup>. ADIA too indicated its intent to invest US\$ 750 million in Reliance Jio. Most recently, in March 2022, a trade delegation from the UAE visited Jammu & Kashmir looking for trade and investment opportunities in the state.

In February 2022, both sides completed the negotiations over ‘free trade agreement’ in a record time of 88 days and signed the ‘CEPA’ which has set the stage for exponential increase in trade and economic partnership. The CEPA which became operational on 01st May 2022, aims to increase employment opportunities and bilateral trade in goods to US \$100 billion in five years and trade in services upto US \$15 billion<sup>25</sup>. Union Commerce & Industry Minister Piyush Goyal too while co-chairing the 10th Meeting of the India-UAE High Level Joint Task Force on Investments in Mumbai on 12th October 2022 observed,

The India-UAE relations are witnessing unprecedented momentum. We have a large number of opportunities for cooperation and increasing investments especially the key sectors like infrastructure and technology, especially Fintech<sup>26</sup>.



Energy security too forms a key element of strong partnership. After Saudi Arabia and Iraq, UAE is the third largest exporter of crude oil to India, although Russia has emerged in the list of top oil importers to India since 2022 after the Russia-Ukraine war. UAE, as a part of its comprehensive strategic partnership, is committed to ensure, under all circumstances, a steady supply of crude oil to India. As a part of this understanding, an agreement was signed during the visit of PM Modi to UAE in February 2018. It was signed between Indian Strategic Petroleum Reserves Ltd (ISPRL) and ADNOC of UAE and aims to operationalize the filling up of a strategic petroleum reserve caverns by storing crude oil in the ISPRL underground caverns in India<sup>27</sup>. ADNOC became the only foreign oil and gas company, so far, to invest by way of crude oil in India's strategic petroleum reserves programme. This agreement along with the existing strategic reserve facilities put together provide around 21 days of emergency coverage for India's crude oil requirements. On the same day, a Concession Agreement too was signed for 10 percent stake in Abu Dhabi Offshore Lower Zakhum Oil field and Onshore Block-1 to a consortium of Indian Public Sector companies comprising ONGC, VIDESH, IOCL and BPRL. This was the first Indian upstream investment in a producing asset in the Gulf region. Shipment from the oil field has started arriving in India<sup>28</sup>.

People form the next important pillar of engagement. Since the 1970s' oil boom, the Gulf region has been a sought after destination for Indian workers. Majority of Indians live and work in the three largest cities - Abu Dhabi, Dubai and Sharjah. Indian workers, skilled and unskilled, have played a critical role in modernizing of the infrastructure and overall social outlook of the UAE. At the same time, Indian families back home have benefitted largely from their employment in the UAE. As per a research paper published by the Reserve Bank of India, in the financial year 2020-21, remittances from the UAE to India were \$15.40 billion, which is 18 per cent of India's total inward remittances of the US \$87 billion<sup>29</sup>, which is the second largest after the remittances from the US.

As a recognition to the valuable contribution by Indians in UAE, the first Hindu temple was inaugurated in Dubai on 05th October 2022. International Yoga day too has been regularly celebrated in UAE since 2016. As a part of enhancing engagement in soft power especially education, India is due to open an IIT campus in the UAE. There is also discussion of setting up an offshore campus of an Indian Institute of Management (IIM) in UAE in the near future.

Defence and security are slowly emerging as another important pillar of engagement. The region has always been conflict prone, both internally and externally. Constantly evolving security situation in the region and the fact that the past guarantee of security through the US may no longer be assured, especially after the ‘Arab Spring’ has resulted in an increased scope and space for India to play a constructive role in the region’s security. As a result, defence and security cooperation are emerging as key areas of cooperation with the countries of the region.

With the UAE, although MoU on defence cooperation was signed in 2003, not much progress took place until PM Modi gave direction to this important relationship. During PM Modi’s historic visit to the UAE in August 2015, a decision was taken to elevate the bilateral relationship to ‘comprehensive strategic partnership’, in which security cooperation was to an important element. Shortly thereafter, during the state visit of UAE Crown Prince MBZ in February 2016, both sides agreed to conduct regular security dialogue between their National Security Councils, to work closely on security issues, like counter-terrorism, maritime security, and cyber-security. Both sides also agreed to enhance cooperation in training, joint exercises, as well as identify options on the production of defence equipment in India<sup>30</sup>. The focus on security cooperation continued with the visit of Manohar Parrikar, India’s Defence Minister to UAE in May 2016<sup>31</sup>. It was the first visit by any Indian Defence Minister to UAE.

Cooperation in bilateral exercises too forms an important component of defence cooperation. India and the UAE held the first Joint Navy Exercises ‘Gulf Star 1’ in Abu Dhabi during March, 2018<sup>32</sup>. In March 2021, Indian Air Force contingent participated for the first time in Exercise Desert Flag –VI, an annual multilateral large force employment exercise hosted by UAE. The exercise was conducted at Air Force Base Al Dhafra, UAE. IAF participated in this exercise for the first time, fielding Su-30MKI fighter aircraft<sup>33</sup>.

In March 2017, India’s Ordnance Factory Board (OFB) signed a contract with the UAE for supply of 40,000 rounds of 155 mm shells, followed by another 50,000 rounds in 2018<sup>34</sup>. There were some reports in the media on possibility of UAE purchasing Helina, Nag and Brahmos missiles from India. India and UAE also agreed to cooperate in space as a part of their comprehensive strategic partnership. Although nascent in execution, defence and security cooperation too is emerging as a key area of convergence between the two countries.

UAE has been more than forthcoming in acceptance of India's position on terror and at more than one occasion, it has strongly supported India in its fight against terror. Whether it was terror attack on Uri army camp on 18<sup>th</sup> September 2016 or at Pathankote Air Base on 16<sup>th</sup> January 2016 or on the CRPF convoy in Pulwama on 14 February 2019, it condemned the attacks strongly. The UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressed UAE's solidarity and support to India and its firm stand against terrorism in all its forms and manifestations. In fact, UAE along with Bahrain even supported any action by India to confront, eradicate and fight terrorism, knowing well India's options being discussed across a range of military, diplomatic, political and economic options to retaliate against Pakistan.

### **Looking Ahead**

The strong bond developed between the two countries over a very short time is unique in the modern era. The chemistry between PM Modi and President MBZ adds a special flavour to it. Both leaders have gone well beyond normal protocols many a times to make exceptions for each other.

As India grows into a strong economic and military power, it is seeking a greater global outreach. As a part of this strategy, India is seeking deeper engagement and collaboration with its immediate neighborhood and especially the West Asian region of which UAE is an important pillar. UAE is a key voice in the region and is an integral part of all important regional forum like the GCC, Arab League etc. It also forms part of I2U2 and is a signatory of the Abraham Accord with Israel. With Iran too, UAE is seeking positive engagement and is engaged in an effective dialogue. In this year when India sets the global agenda through its G20 presidency, UAE along with some other guest countries, form an important part of its efforts to be the 'voice of Global South'. India therefore finds in UAE a perfect partner and an ideal 'point of contact' for discussing various issues of the world and in the region. Combined with increasing trade relations, security partnership, people to people engagements and charismatic bond between the top leadership, India and UAE are set for a golden era of partnership across sectors, promising peace and prosperity for its people.

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