

# MP-IDSA *Commentary*

## Defence to be Mainstay of India-UAE Comprehensive Strategic Partnership

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### **S***ummary*

India-UAE defence cooperation is becoming an integral part of a flourishing comprehensive strategic partnership.

The first official visit of Crown Prince of Dubai, Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister of the UAE, His Highness Sheikh Hamdan bin Mohammad Al Maktoum to India from 8 April to 9 April 2025 was a success. The visit was in response to Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s invitation. The Crown Prince headed a delegation of UAE ministers, senior officials and business leaders.

Prime Minister Modi noted that Sheikh Hamdan’s visit

signified generational continuity in the strong and historic ties between India and the UAE, emphasising the enduring partnership built on mutual trust and a shared vision for the future.<sup>1</sup>

According to a statement issued by the Prime Minister’s Office, the two sides,

discussed ways to further strengthen the India-UAE Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, especially in the areas of trade, investments, defence, energy, technology, education, sports and people-to-people ties.<sup>2</sup>

In his response, H.H. Sheikh Hamdan stated that

India and the UAE share more than strong economic ties; we share a bold vision for the future. Our partnership is built on trust, innovation, and a common commitment to shaping resilient, forward-looking economies that advance prosperity and enhance the welfare of the people of the two countries.<sup>3</sup>

H.H. Sheikh Hamdan held talks with External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and then in Mumbai with Minister of Commerce and Industry Piyush Goyal. Underscoring the importance of the visit, Prime Minister Modi posted on X.

This special visit reaffirms our deep-rooted friendship and paves the way for even stronger collaboration in the future.<sup>4</sup>

## **Defence Integral to Strategic Cooperation**

Of particular significance was the resolve on both sides for “close collaboration between the defence industries” of the two countries and the resolve to make it an

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<sup>1</sup> [\*\*“Prime Minister Receives the Crown Prince of Dubai, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defence of the UAE”\*\*](#), Press Information Bureau, Prime Minister’s Office (PMO), India, 8 April 2025.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> [\*\*“Hamdan bin Mohammed Meets with India’s Minister of Commerce and Industry”\*\*](#), *Emirates News Agency (WAM)*, 9 April 2025.

<sup>4</sup> Narendra Modi, [\*\*“Glad to Meet H.H. Sheikh Hamdan bin Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum...”\*\*](#), X (formerly Twitter), 8 April 2025.

“integral part” of the bilateral cooperation.<sup>5</sup> In fact, the two sides acknowledged that bilateral defence cooperation has to be scaled up to match the present progress being made in trade and business relations.

Reports noted that the Indian government offered UAE its indigenously developed Akash air defence missile system, which is capable of intercepting hostile aircraft, helicopters, drones and subsonic cruise missiles at a range of 25 kms. It is also reported that the two sides expressed satisfaction with the present state of defence cooperation through institutional mechanisms, military exercises, exchange of training programmes, etc.<sup>6</sup>

Defence Minister Singh stated that the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with the UAE was of “immense priority” for India and that India was eager to work closely in areas such as co-production and co-development projects, innovation and technology.

Expressing satisfaction at the active Coast Guard-to-Coast Guard cooperation, the two leaders committed to further deepening it by formalising the same through a memorandum of understanding (MoU). The two sides also focused on complementarities in the Make-in-Emirates and the Make-in-India initiatives.<sup>7</sup>

Welcoming India–UAE Defence Partnership Forum which would facilitate strategic Joint Ventures and co-production projects benefiting both countries, the two sides acknowledged active participation in each other's exhibitions and defence expos. The press note also revealed that training exchanges was one of the key areas of defence cooperation between the countries, which might be enhanced to enable better understanding of each other's defence ecosystem.<sup>8</sup>

It is worth noting that after the landmark visit of Prime Minister Modi to the UAE in August 2015, relations between the two countries have steadily improved and have been elevated to the level of Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. When it comes to strategic issues, there exist a lot of convergences that include counter-terrorism cooperation, maritime security partnership, cooperation in multi-lateral forums, promotion of regional stability, along with the aforementioned defence collaboration.

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<sup>5</sup> [“Raksha Mantri Shri Rajnath Singh Holds Meeting with Crown Prince of Dubai and UAE Deputy PM & Defence Minister Sheikh Hamdan bin Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum in New Delhi”](#), Press Information Bureau, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 8 April 2025.

<sup>6</sup> Rajat Pandit, [“India Offers Akash Defence Missile System to UAE”](#), *The Times of India*, 9 April 2025.

<sup>7</sup> [“Special Visit: Sheikh Hamdan and Indian PM Narendra Modi Hail Strong Ties at New Delhi Talks”](#), *The National*, 8 April 2025.

<sup>8</sup> [“Raksha Mantri Shri Rajnath Singh Holds Meeting with Crown Prince of Dubai and UAE Deputy PM & Defence Minister Sheikh Hamdan bin Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum in New Delhi”](#), no. 5.

## Six Major Joint Projects

In addition to the aforementioned developments in the defence sector, the two sides decided to complete six other programmes—setting up of a campus of Indian Institute of Management-Ahmedabad in Dubai with commencement of its first MBA programme in September 2025; setting up of the first overseas campus of Indian Institute of Foreign Trade at the India Pavilion in Expo City Dubai; construction of Bharat Mart and the launch of a 3-D rendering of the Bharat Mart complex; grant of land for UAE–India Friendship Hospital in Dubai; development of ship-repair clusters at Kochi in Kerala in Gujarat and Vadinar and opening of an India Office of Dubai Chamber of Commerce.<sup>9</sup>

In meeting with Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal in Mumbai on 9 April, H.H. Sheikh Hamdan discussed ways to galvanise the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) and the Bilateral Investment Treaty (BIT).<sup>10</sup> It is noteworthy that the India–UAE CEPA, signed in 2022, seeks to take non-oil trade between the countries to US\$ 100 billion by 2030.<sup>11</sup>

According to the Embassy of India in Abu Dhabi, the UAE currently ranks as India’s third-largest trading partner and second largest export destination, with exports over US\$ 35.62 billion in FY 2023–24.<sup>12</sup> India is also the UAE’s second largest trading partner, with exports of over US\$ 48 billion in FY 2023.<sup>13</sup> A highly diversified trade basket between the two nations consists of petroleum products, gems and jewellery, food items, textiles, chemicals and engineering goods.

A major development in trade facilitation happened in 2023, when the two countries signed an MoU on Establishing a Local Currency Settlement System between the Reserve Bank of India and Central Bank of the UAE. Additionally, efforts are underway to integrate instant payment platforms of the Indian (UPI) and the UAE (AANI) along with the interlinking of domestic debit cards of UAE (JAYWAN) and India (RuPay).<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> [“Official Visit of His Highness Sheikh Hamdan Bin Mohammed Al Maktoum, Crown Prince of Dubai, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defence of UAE \(April 08-09, 2025\)”](#), Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 7 April 2025.

<sup>10</sup> [“Bilateral Investment Treaty between India and the United Arab Emirates, Giving Continuity of Investment Protection to Investors of both the Countries, Comes into Effect”](#), Ministry of Finance, Government of India, 7 October 2024.

<sup>11</sup> [“UAE-India Mark Three Years of Comprehensive Economic Partnership”](#), *Emirates News Agency (WAM)*, 8 April 2025.

<sup>12</sup> [“India-UAE Bilateral Relations”](#), Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, January 2024.

<sup>13</sup> Rajeev Agarwal, [“Three Years On: What the World Can Learn from India-UAE Trade Agreement”](#), *India Today*, 28 February 2025.

<sup>14</sup> [“Enabling Infrastructure Build and Interoperability of Payment Systems between India-UAE”](#), Press Information Bureau, Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Government of India, 7 October 2024.

The two nations have also signed the Bilateral Investment Treaty last year.<sup>15</sup> The UAE’s investments are well-diversified with focus on sectors like real estate, infrastructure, energy, private equity and financial services. The UAE’s Sovereign Wealth Funds (SWF) have a strong presence in India. Abu Dhabi Investment Authority (ADIA), the UAE’s largest SWF has recently established a subsidiary office in the GIFT City, Gujarat.<sup>16</sup>

### **‘Significant Milestone’**

At a time when relations between countries of the Middle East and South Asia have been in flux, the UAE–India relations have grown stronger. The values of mutual respect and tolerance for diverse cultures and demographic identities shared by the UAE and India have developed stronger strategic relations, in all sectors of cooperation. The steadfastness in relations and resolve to take them forward has helped both nations in overcoming the ongoing geopolitical headwinds. By upscaling levels of defence cooperation, the comprehensive strategic partnership in trade, investment, education, defence and healthcare sectors have advanced tremendously. As a spokesman of Ministry of External Affairs noted, H.H. Sheikh Hamdan’s visit has already become a “significant milestone” in India–UAE relations.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> [“UAE-India Mark Three Years of Comprehensive Economic Partnership”](#), *Emirates News Agency (WAM)*, 8 April 2025.

<sup>16</sup> [“ADIA Establishes Subsidiary in India’s GIFT City”](#), *ADIA*, 7 October 2024.

<sup>17</sup> [“Dubai Crown Prince Hamdan bin Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Welcomed in India with Ceremonial Guard of Honour”](#), *Doordarshan News*, 8 April 2025.

## About the Author



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