



I2U2: Change and Continuity in India's West Asia Policy

Deepika Saraswat

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India-Middle East Relations

Opportunities and Challenges

With the United States shifting its security focus from the Middle East to the Asia-Pacific, other major powers are seen as potential players that might fill the void in Middle East security. The fact that India is one such player is further manifested in the recently announced India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor.

This series of *Insights* seeks to unravel the evolutionary paths that the growing multifaceted connections between India and the Middle East might take and the challenges arising. India's relationship with Israel, especially under the purview of the I2U2 partnership, which also includes the United Arab Emirates and the United States, has in particular generated much curiosity among observers. India's longstanding economic ties with the GCC countries, along with its ties with Iraq and Iran, have added to the strategic significance of the Middle East for India and given it strong reasons for a greater role in the Middle East.

Cover image: US President Joe Biden (L) and Israel's then caretaker Prime Minister Yair Lapid in Jerusalem during a virtual meeting with leaders of the I2U2 group, 14 July 2022. (On screen Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India and UAE President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan.) Mandel NGAN/AFP.

I2U2: Change and Continuity in India's West Asia Policy

Deepika Saraswat*

India's participation in the quadrilateral partnership known as I2U2 is a transformational development in its West Asia policy. It is the culmination of India's deepening strategic partnerships with the UAE and Israel and underscores a growing US-India convergence in West Asia. As the United States seeks to synergise its Indo-Pacific and Middle East strategies, India is keen to link with and foster an interconnected, cooperative Gulf-Mediterranean region as a pushback strategy against the growing Chinese economic presence and diplomatic activism in the region. Nonetheless, its new-found willingness to work with the United States and its regional allies, India will seek to maintain its independent strategic vision of West Asia.

While on a visit to Israel in October 2021, India's External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar participated in a quadrilateral meeting with his counterparts from what has come to be known as the I2U2 countries, Israel, the United Arab Emirates and the United States. At the meeting, the I2U2 partners launched the International Forum for Economic Cooperation. Since then there have been several high-level meetings of the I2U2, including the first leaders' summit during President Joe Biden's visit to Israel in July 2022. More recently, the four countries created a joint business coalition to deepen

technological and private sector collaboration with a view to advancing practical cooperation in dealing with climate change crises and food, energy and maritime security.¹

The I2U2, as a new model of flexible partnerships, builds on the Abraham Accords, which normalised relations between Israel and several Arab countries, and on India's strong bilateral strategic partnerships with the UAE and Israel. The I2U2 is intended to facilitate the integration of Israel with the wider region and provides an opportunity for India to forge mutually beneficial geo-economic connections across the Gulf and the Mediterranean subregions. India's alignment with the United States and its allies in strengthening regional capabilities and addressing shared non-traditional security challenges marks a transformational development in India's West Asia policy

India-UAE Strategic Partnership

The clear beginnings of the India-UAE strategic partnership – which was formalised by means of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership agreement during the visit of Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed to India in January 2017 – can be traced back to Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the UAE in 2015. It was the first prime ministerial visit after a gap of 34 years. Thomas Wilkins notes that strategic partnerships are “formed when the partners perceive environmental uncertainty and a strategic fit with their partner and share a commitment to a system principle”.² The joint statement signed during Modi's visit was blunt in acknowledging that the relationship between the two governments had not kept pace with the exponential growth in relations between their people or the promise of this “natural strategic partnership”. It

¹ Jack Dutton, “US, India, UAE, Israel Announce Creation of I2U2 Joint Business Coalition”, *Al-Monitor*, 19 April, 2023, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/04/us-india-uae-israel-announce-creation-i2u2-joint-business-coalition>

² Thomas S. Wilkins, “Russo-Chinese Strategic Partnership: A New Form of Security Cooperation?” *Contemporary Security Policy* 29, no. 2 (2008): 358–383, quoted in H. D. P. Envall and Ian Hall, “Asian Strategic Partnerships: New Practices and Regional Security Governance”, *Asian Politics and Policy* 8, no. 1, (2016): 87–105.

emphasised the urgency for a “close strategic partnership” with rewarding prospects in these “uncertain times”.³

“India saw opportunities in engaging the Gulf states, which were engaged in ambitious programmes of transforming their economies by embracing the new technological order and reinforcing their strategic location in the global trade and connectivity architecture.”

In the face of the global power shift, where the future of the US role as the security guarantor in the Gulf looked uncertain, the UAE and other Gulf states were beginning to see merit in diversifying their ties with the rising powers in Asia, especially China and India, but also Japan and South Korea, who were prime destinations for their energy exports and presented trade and investment opportunities. India saw opportunities in engaging the Gulf states, which were engaged in ambitious programmes of transforming their economies by embracing the new technological order and reinforcing their strategic location in the global trade and connectivity architecture. India also hoped to attract investments from the sovereign wealth funds of the Gulf states to its own industrialisation initiatives such as “Make in India” and “Digital India”.

On the security front, the UAE saw the need to cultivate new partnerships to combat religious extremism and terrorism at a time when transnational radical Islamist actors such as the Muslim Brotherhood and jihadists posed a threat to state structures and regional stability. For India, deepening counterterrorism cooperation was not limited to practical measures such as enhanced cooperation in the exchange of

³ Press Information Bureau, Government of India, “Joint Statement between the United Arab Emirates and India”, 17 August 2015, <https://pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=126127>

financial intelligence related to money laundering and terrorist financing;⁴ it also entailed wider appreciation of India's traditional stance that Pakistan-sponsored cross-border terrorism against India on the pretext of jihad for Kashmir posed a security challenge to the wider Southwest Asian region.⁵

“India-UAE cooperation in food and energy security and space research underscores the “strategic fit” that underpins successful strategic partnerships.”

India-UAE cooperation in food and energy security and space research underscores the “strategic fit” that underpins successful strategic partnerships. The idea of an India-UAE food corridor was inspired by India's partnership with Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC) in establishing strategic petroleum reserves in the southern state of Karnataka. These reserves helped shore up India's energy security amid India's high import dependence and risks of supply-related disruptions in the Gulf.⁶ The UAE, which imports 90% of its food requirements, saw an opportunity to use its logistics capabilities as a major trading and transit hub to address food security concerns. In 2019, the UAE committed investments of up to US\$7 billion over the next three years in mega food parks and related warehousing infrastructure in various Indian cities, with the involvement of the Dubai-based Emaar group, DP World

⁴ *The Economic Times*, “Dubai and India's Financial Regulators Seek Closer Cooperation”, 8 February 2022, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/uae/dubai-and-indias-financial-regulators-seek-closer-cooperation/articleshow/89427082.cms?from=mdr>

⁵ Ranjit Gupta, “India's Relations with West Asia: A New Era Dawns”, Middle East Institute, 7 March 2017, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/indias-relations-west-asia-new-era-dawns>

⁶ Press Information Bureau, Government of India, “ISPRL Signs Memorandum of Understanding with ADNOC to explore storage of Crude Oil at Padur Underground Facility in Karnataka”, 12 November 2018, <https://pib.gov.in/Pressreleaseshare.aspx?PRID=1552500>

and other private sector players.⁷ The Covid-19 pandemic further drove home the importance of resilient supply chains, leading the two countries to fast track their joint work on integrating supply chains by strengthening infrastructure and dedicated logistics services for connecting farms to port.⁸

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After the UAE established its space agency in 2014, it saw a valuable partner in India, which has a proven record of a sophisticated and cost-effective space programme, demonstrated by the success of its Mars Orbiter Mission and the Chandrayaan missions to the moon. The space agencies of the two countries signed a memorandum of understanding in 2016, after which they set up joint working groups for cooperation in the exploration of outer space for peaceful purposes.⁹ The partnership continues to grow given that the UAE is pursuing an ambitious inter-planetary expedition and a lunar mission and has a dedicated national space fund with the goal of encouraging global partnerships in space sciences and technology.¹⁰

⁷ Consulate General of India, Dubai, “India Poised for Major Investments from the UAE in the Food Sector”, 10 December 2020,

https://www.cgidubai.gov.in/news_letter_detail/?id=78

⁸ John Benny, “Investors Start To Line Up for India-UAE \$7b 'Food Corridor' Project”, *Gulf News*, 8 December, 2020, <https://gulfnews.com/business/investors-start-to-line-up-for-india-uae-7b-food-corridor-project-1.1607420397506>

⁹ Press Information Bureau, Government of India, “MoU between Indian Space Research Organisation and the United Arab Emirates Space Agency”, 25 May 2016, <https://pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=145640>

¹⁰ Huma Siddiqui, “Exclusive Interview: UAE Space Agency Set to Work with India in Science & Tech Says UAE Minister of Future Tech”, *The Financial Express*, 8 December

As India decided to re-engage with the notion of free trade agreements (FTAs) to address pandemic-induced challenges of supply chain disruption and seek greater correspondence between geopolitical and economic partnerships, the UAE was a priority because of the high level of complementarity between the two economies and their comprehensive economic ties covering the movement of goods, services, capital and labour.¹¹ The India-UAE comprehensive economic partnership agreement (CEPA), which came into force on 1 May 2022, was concluded within a record 88 days of commencing negotiations. It is a wide-ranging agreement, covering trade, investments, intellectual property rights, healthcare, digital trade and government procurement.

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By providing duty waivers and reciprocal preferential market access to products and services in which each country holds competitive advantage, CEPA seeks to increase bilateral non-oil trade to US\$100 billion from the current US\$40 billion within five years of the signing of the agreement.¹² After CEPA eliminated duties on 97.4% of tariff lines, corresponding to 99% of Indian exports to the UAE, many Indian companies eyeing international expansion are tapping into the UAE's re-export potential, reinforcing the latter's strategy of developing

2022, <https://www.financialexpress.com/lifestyle/science/exclusive-interview-uae-space-agency-set-to-work-with-india-in-science-tech-says-uae-minister-of-future-tech/2906773/>

¹¹ Amitendu Palit, "India-United Arab Emirates CEPA: New Beginning in India's Trade Engagement", ISAS Brief, National University of Singapore, 23 February 2023, <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/india-united-arab-emirates-cep-a-new-beginning-in-indias-trade-engagement/>

¹² Ministry of Commerce and Industry, India, "India-UAE Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) Enters into Force", 1 May 2022, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1821785>

connectivity and trade corridors to gain business from trade flows between Asia and Africa as well as Europe.¹³

India-Israel Strategic Partnership

India made the strategic decision to enhance ties with Israel at a time when the Arab-Israeli conflict had lost its relevance as a major structuring factor in Middle East politics owing to the shifting balance of power in West Asia and the rise of new threats related to jihadist groups such as ISIS.¹⁴ Also, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's doctrine of "peace through strength" translated into a strategy of promoting Israel's economic integration with the wider region, including countries that have differences with Israel, on the basis of the country's strength in high technology across defence, intelligence, water, energy and its new-found gas resources in the Eastern Mediterranean.¹⁵ These trends allowed India to simultaneously deepen ties with both the Gulf states and Israel.

In engaging Israel at the highest political level, India's Bharatiya Janata Party-led government also overcame the country's longstanding hesitation on account of its domestic political calculus.¹⁶ New Delhi's de-

¹³ Manoj Nair, "Watch: Under CEPA, UAE's 'Window to the World' Concept Delivering Results for Indian Businesses", *GulfNews*, 5 May 2023,

<https://gulfnews.com/business/markets/watch-under-cepa-uaes-window-to-the-world-concept-delivering-results-for-indian-businesses-1.95548271>; Mohammed Baharoon,

"The Keys to Reading the UAE's Strategic Map", Middle East Institute,

<https://www.mei.edu/publications/keys-reading-uaes-strategic-map>

¹⁴ Raffaella A. Del Sarto, Helle Malmvig and Eduard Soler i Lecha, "Interregnum: The Regional Order in the Middle East and North Africa after 2011", *MENARA* (Istituto Affari Internazionali), 1 February, 2019,

https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/menara_fr_1.pdf

¹⁵ "Netanyahu: UAE Deal Based on Strength, Will Yield 'True Peace' with Palestinians", *Times of Israel*, 16 August 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-uae-deal-based-on-strength-will-yield-true-peace-with-palestinians/>

¹⁶ Paulomi Ghosh, "On India-Israel, Jaishankar says: 'We Could Have Furthered Ties but...'", *Hindustan Times*, 5 September 2022, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/on-india-israel-jaishankar-says-we-could-have-furthered-ties-but-101662341707564.html>

hyphenation of its bilateral ties with Israel and with Palestine saw further expansion of defence and development cooperation between India and Israel, with the latter keen to make the de-hyphenation permanent by deepening and broadening ties across the board.¹⁷

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During Modi’s maiden visit to Israel in 2017, the two countries signed agreements for cooperation in six key areas, namely, space, water management, energy and agriculture. The two sides also agreed to set up a US\$40 million India-Israel Industrial Research and Development and Technical Innovation Fund, which was launched during Netanyahu’s return visit to India the following year.¹⁸ In defence cooperation, which has been the strongest pillar of the relationship, the focus is now on defence technology cooperation through joint ventures with both state-owned and private players in sectors ranging from surveillance capabilities and missile defence to niche equipment.¹⁹ The Indo-Israel Agricultural Cooperation Project, which was started in 2008, has been a success story, with 30 “centres of excellence” jointly established across

¹⁷ Herb Keinon, “What is India’s De-Hyphenation Policy toward Israel and Why Does It Matter?”, *The Jerusalem Post*, 18 January 2018, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/india-israel/what-is-indias-de-hyphenation-policy-toward-israel-and-why-does-it-matter-538170>

¹⁸ Narendra Modi website, “India-Israel Joint Statement during the visit of Prime Minister to Israel”, 5 July 2017, <https://www.narendramodi.in/india-israel-joint-statement-during-the-visit-of-prime-minister-to-israel-july-5-2017--536253>

¹⁹ S Samuel C Rajiv, *The India-Israel Strategic Partnership: Contours, Opportunities And Challenges*, Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, Pentagon Press, New Delhi, 2023

India, disseminating best agricultural practices and capacity building through professional training programmes.²⁰

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Israeli Minister of Economy Nir Barkat's visit to India in April 2023 focused on institutionalising business-to-business ties, leveraging the complementarities of Israel's technological prowess and India's market size. Barkat told Indian media, “we're the leading entrepreneurial country in the world. We understand how to leverage technology to solve many challenges and the opportunity with the economy of India, which is soon going to be the third largest economy, is scale scope [sic]”.²¹ As the two countries focus on business and technological collaboration in critical areas with robust involvement of the private sector, they are also negotiating an FTA.

Israel is undergoing a transport revolution, with ambitious plans for doubling its railway network over the next two decades and linking it with neighbouring countries. It is also upgrading and privatising its underperforming ports.²² Despite US concerns, Chinese state-owned

²⁰ ANI, “Envoy Gilon Inaugurates 30th Indo-Israel Centre for Excellence, Calls It “Significant Milestone” for Diplomatic Ties”, 22 January 2023,

<https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/envoy-gilon-inaugurates-30th-indo-israel-centre-of-excellence-calls-it-significant-milestone-for-diplomatic-ties20230122183111/>

²¹ ANI, “I'm inspired by Opportunity of Collaborating between Israeli and Indian Economy”: Nir Barkat”, 19 April 2023, <https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/im-inspired-by-opportunity-of-collaborating-between-israeli-and-indian-economy-nir-barkat20230419001651/>

²² “Israel to Double Rail Network by 2040”, *International Railway Journal*, 12 June 2017, <https://www.railjournal.com/regions/middle-east/israel-to-double-rail-network-by-2040/>

operator Shanghai International Port Group (SIPG) has built and operationalised a new terminal in the biggest Mediterranean port in Haifa. With Israel's growing rehabilitation in its Arab neighbourhood and the need for alternatives to the Suez Canal, Haifa can potentially become a regional hub and also a link between Asia and Europe. The recent acquisition of Haifa port by a consortium led by Adani ports, India's largest private sector port developer and operator, is being touted as a "strategic investment", which will boost trade lanes with the company's Indian ports and expand its footprint into the European port sector.²³

The 'Minilateral' Turn

The developments over the last two decades have seriously undermined the coherence of the Middle East as a geopolitical region organised around US interests and power.²⁴ This trend has to do with the diminished US position following its unsuccessful nation-building project in Iraq, its ambivalent approach towards Arab uprisings, and its Iran policy, which together exposed the limits of American power while creating an expectation gap among its traditional allies. As a result, regional actors, including US allies, have been determined to pursue their own particular security and economic interests, rapidly expanding their ties with China and Russia.

The UAE, Saudi Arabia and Israel have refused to join Western sanctions on Russia over its invasion of Ukraine. Earlier, in 2018, when the United States and China were already engaged in a trade war, Abu Dhabi Ports and China Ocean Shipping Company (Cosco) went ahead with a 35-year concession agreement allowing the latter to develop and operate a new container terminal in Khalifa port as part of China's Belt and Road Initiative.²⁵ In 2022, the central banks of the UAE and China

²³ "Haifa Port Acquisition by Adani a "Strategic Purchase" where "Price Didn't Matter": Israeli Media", *The Economic Times*, 18 July 2022, <https://shorturl.at/cjkmz>

²⁴ Marc Lynch, "The End of the Middle East", *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/africa/middle-east-map-new-reality>

²⁵ Karen Gilchrist, "China's Cosco and Abu Dhabi Ports Develop Khalifa to Support Belt and Road Initiative", CNBC, 8 December 2018,

completed a 40-day trial using digital currencies to settle trade, thus bypassing the dollar.²⁶ These developments indicate that far from picking sides in the United States' intensifying competition with China and Russia, the Gulf states are strengthening their economic sovereignty while forging diverse partnerships that can contribute to their global economic competitiveness. In light of changes in the strategic environment of the Middle East and the United States' priorities in the Indo-Pacific, the Biden administration's National Security Strategy has recalibrated the traditional US role of external security guarantor through bilateral alliances to a multilateral or integration-based approach to the region. The strategy notes:

The United States will promote regional integration in the Middle East by building political, economic and security connections between and among US partners, including through integrated air and maritime defense structures while respecting each country's sovereignty and independent choices.

To find a strategic balance between retrenchment and presence, the US Central Command (CENTCOM) has redefined its posture in the region as security integrator.²⁷ Explaining this new posture, CENTCOM Commander General Mike Kurilla noted that "we are in a race to integrate our partners before China and Russia can deeply penetrate the region". As part of the US strategy of building an architecture of integrated deterrence across domains, Israel was realigned from the

<https://www.cnn.com/2018/12/10/belt-and-road-abu-dhabi-ports-sees-huge-trade-boost-from-cosco-deal.html>

²⁶ Coco Feng, "China Tests Central Bank Digital Currency Use to Settle Trades via 'Bridge' with Partners including Hong Kong, Thailand and UAE", *South China Morning Post*, 29 September 2022, <https://www.scmp.com/tech/article/3194160/china-tests-central-bank-digital-currency-use-settle-trades-bridge-partners>

²⁷ Eleonora Ardemagni, "Defense Integration Refashions the US-GCC Alliance", Italian Institute for International Political Studies, 24 February 2023, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/defense-integration-refashions-the-us-gcc-alliance-118338>

European Command to CENTCOM after Washington brokered the Abraham Accords.²⁸

“The I2U2 indicates the emergence of a deeper geo-economic alignment among member countries by taking an approach based on trade, investment and technology to address overlapping security cum development challenges in energy, food and water security, and climate change agendas.”

To meet the systemic challenge of China, the United States is increasingly relying on integration of its allies and partners within the framework of the rules-based international order. The emergence of mega-regions such as the Indo-Pacific, centred on new kinds of flexible multilateral partnerships such as the Quad, involving the United States, Japan, Australia and India, indicate the salience of coalitions amid the intensifying US-China security, economic and technological rivalry. Through these coalitions, countries can draw on their complementary strengths in addressing non-traditional security challenges such as climate change, pandemics and maritime security where cooperation is relatively non-contentious. But, more importantly, for the United States, these are instruments of regional and global economic restructuring through cooperative efforts in de-risking and diversification of supply chains, investment in transport infrastructure and greater technological cooperation.²⁹

²⁸ US Department of Defense, “Remarks by Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Dr Colin Kahl at the IISS Manama Dialogue”, 18 November 2022, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech/Article/3223837/remarks-by-under-secretary-of-defense-for-policy-dr-colin-kahl-at-the-iiss-mana/>

²⁹ Dhruva Jaishankar and Tanvi Madan, “How the Quad Can Match the Hype”, *Foreign Affairs*, 15 April 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-04-15/how-quad-can-match-hype>

Similarly, the I2U2 indicates the emergence of a deeper geo-economic alignment among member countries by taking an approach based on trade, investment and technology to address overlapping security cum development challenges in energy, food and water security, and climate change agendas. After the maiden I2U2 summit in July 2022

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agreed on increasing joint investment in six important areas of water, energy, transport, space, health and food security, a Joint Business Coalition was created in April 2023.³⁰ The alignment of the four players is based on their varied comparative advantages – such as the UAE’s nodal location in global connectivity and capital resources, Israel’s high technology and innovation, and India’s market size and production capacity – which lend themselves to cooperative efforts aimed at reducing risks and creating mutually beneficial economic possibilities amid global uncertainties. There is little doubt that the launch of the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEEC) on 10 September 2023 during the G20 summit will have systemic impact when plans for the rail-cum-ports link come to fruition. The corridor will significantly enhance the status of Israel (and Saudi Arabia) in regional

³⁰ The White House, “Remarks by President Biden, Prime Minister Lapid, President bin Zayed Al Nahyan, and Prime Minister Modi at I2U2 Virtual Event”, 14 July 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/07/14/remarks-by-president-biden-prime-minister-lapid-president-bin-zayed-al-nahyan-and-prime-minister-modi-at-i2u2-virtual-event/>

and even continental trade and connectivity, and also India's role in the Eurasian economic order.³¹

Also, for India, the Arabian Sea and wider Western India Ocean are integral to its Indo-Pacific strategy. During the India-US 2+2 ministerial dialogue in 2022, India became an “associate partner” of the CENTCOM-led Combined Maritime Forces (CMF), which coordinates counter-piracy and counterterrorism missions among 34 member countries for the security of civilian maritime traffic in the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf, the Gulf of Aden, Arabian Sea and the wider Indian Ocean.³² The Indian navy participated for the first time in the CMF-coordinated International Maritime Exercise/Cutlass Express 2023, while Israel has been participating in the exercise since it came under CENTCOM in 2021.³³

Whither India's Traditional Balancing Act?

The transformation of India's West Asia policy in terms of going beyond bilateralism to building regional partnerships must be seen in the context of the Biden administration's recalibration of its Middle East strategy. As the Biden administration supported de-escalation in the region, including the revival of dialogue with Iran on the nuclear issue, a key focus of the Biden Middle East strategy has been to build on the Abraham Accords to promote regional integration initiatives, including building political, economic and security connections between and among US partners in the Middle East and the Indo-Pacific.

³¹ Michaël Tanchum, “India's Arab-Mediterranean Corridor: A Paradigm Shift in Strategic Connectivity to Europe”, ISAS, National University of Singapore, August 2021, <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/South-Asia-Scan-Aug-2021-V4.pdf>

³² Dinakar Peri, “India Begins Cooperation with Bahrain-based Combined Maritime Forces”, *The Hindu*, 8 August 2022, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-begins-cooperation-with-based-combined-maritime-forces/article65741512.ece>

³³ Ministry of Defence, India, “Participation of INS Trikand in International Maritime Exercise/Cutlass Express 23 (IMX/CE-23)”, 10 March, 2023, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1905563>

The growing convergence between New Delhi and Washington in West Asia is based on their shared interests in an interconnected, cooperative Gulf-Mediterranean region, and a progressive integration of Israel within this region. The best bet for India and the United States for pushback against the growing Chinese economic presence and diplomatic activism in the Middle East is to offer better alternatives by fostering mutually beneficial relationships of interdependence, and support regional states' balancing acts.

“India is unlikely to welcome the I2U2 foraying into hard security issues beyond some cooperation in maritime security and in ensuring the freedom of navigation in the region's waterways.”

Notably, all four states envision the I2U2 as a cooperative framework driven by positive agendas rather than a zero-sum logic or prism of strategic competition. It is therefore not surprising that as India deepens commercial cooperation in the I2U2 format, it remains committed to jointly developing Iran's Chabahar port as its gateway to Eurasia. Also, India is keen on linking Chabahar port to the eastern branch of the multi-modal International North-South Transport Corridor towards Central Asia.³⁴

Nevertheless, India's growing convergence with the United States in West Asia is likely to pose challenges for India's independent strategic vision of the region. India is unlikely to welcome the I2U2 foraying into hard security issues beyond some cooperation in maritime security and in ensuring the freedom of navigation in the region's waterways. If the current thaw between the Gulf states and Iran proves to be short-lived, India will find it difficult to perform its traditional balancing act between these rival players in the region. Amid regional

³⁴ Press Information Bureau, Government of India, “Workshop Conducted on ‘Linking Chabahar Port with INSTC’”, 19 January 2023, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1892221>

environmental uncertainty, New Delhi would do well to have a proactive and adaptive approach to the region. ◆

- * **Dr Deepika Saraswat** is Associate Fellow at the West Asia Centre, Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi. Her research focuses on Iran's foreign policy and geopolitical developments in West Asia and Eurasia, and Indian foreign policy. Saraswat has a PhD in political geography from the School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. Earlier, she was Research Fellow at the Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA). She is the author of *Between Survival and Status: The Counter-Hegemonic Geopolitics of Iran* (ICWA & Macmillan, 2022).



29 Heng Mui Keng Terrace
Block B #06-06
Singapore 119620
Tel: +65 6516 2380; Fax: +65 6774 0458
Email: contact.mei@nus.edu.sg
www.mei.nus.edu.sg

