



# The Emerging Military-Security Cooperation Between India and its GCC Partners

Opportunities and Challenges

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## India-Middle East Relations

### Opportunities and Challenges

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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: Commander of the Royal Saudi Armed Forces of Saudi Arabia, Fahd Bin Abdullah Mohammed Al-Mutair (R), inspects a guard of honour upon his arrival in New Delhi, 15 February 2022. Prakash SINGH/AFP.



# The Emerging Military-Security Cooperation Between India and its GCC Partners

## Opportunities and Challenges

Alvite Ningthoujam\*

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Military-security cooperation between India and some of the Gulf Cooperation Council states has gained steady momentum in recent years, evidenced by frequent visits of high-level officials and conduct of bilateral military exercises. What has brought the military-security establishments of India and these states are their shared threat perceptions, particularly their concerns regarding cross-border terrorism.

Another important contributory factor is the ongoing military modernisation both in India and the GCC countries. India has aspirations of becoming a major arms supplier and is looking to tap Middle Eastern markets, but China's growing footprint in the region, marked by a visible arms trade, could challenge India's ambitions.

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**I**ndia's engagement with some of its Middle Eastern partners, particularly the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states, is no longer confined to the traditional energy-dominated trade and

remittance-related financial activities; military-security cooperation between these players has gained significant momentum. This new pattern of engagement has become discernible particularly since the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)–led government headed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi came to power in May 2014. The government has given priority to what is called the “Look West Policy”.<sup>1</sup> Modi, for his part, has shown personal interest in warming up to the leaders of the Middle Eastern region.<sup>2</sup>

**“Chief among the factors contributing to the growth in military-security cooperation between India and the GCC states is their shared threats perceptions.”**

Chief among the factors contributing to the growth in military-security cooperation between India and the GCC states is their shared threats perceptions, notably their concerns relating to cross-border terrorism stemming from non-state actors including Al Qaida, remnants of outfits like the Islamic state of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and its tentacles in South Asia, radicalisation of various movements and their potential for violent extremism, as well as associated risks such as terror financing and money laundering. The Gulf states have also felt the need to forge cooperation and partnerships in the military-security domain with new players owing to the perceived disengagement from the region of the United States, which has long been their strongest source of political as well military support. This quest to forge military partnerships for security and political reasons coincides with India’s objective of

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<sup>1</sup> Guy Burton, “India’s ‘Look West’ Policy in the Middle East under Modi”, Middle East Institute, 6 August 2029, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/indias-look-west-policy-middle-east-under-modi>

<sup>2</sup> Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, “Modi’s Personal Touch to Diplomacy Furthers Indian Interests Worldwide”, *The Economic Times*, 26 April 2018, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/modis-personal-touch-to-diplomacy-furthers-indian-interests-worldwide/articleshow/63930507.cms?from=mdr>

safeguarding its maritime security interests in the Middle East region by increasing its military diplomacy, particularly through arms exports.

The burgeoning of military-security ties between India and the GCC states is also driven by both sides' desire to establish defence industrial cooperation for economic and technological gains. Both state-owned and private defence companies from India and the GCC countries are looking for collaborations in the defence technological sector, including the possibility of co-production of weapons systems. During the past few years, several important MoUs or defence-related agreements have been signed between the Indian government and some GCC states as well as between private defence firms from both sides, particularly for co-production of certain types of weapons systems.

According to a report by the Indian defence ministry, India has thus far exported the following equipment and components to some of the GCC countries.

### India's arms exports to the GCC

Item	Recipient Country
Bulletproof jackets and helmets	Bahrain Oman Qatar Saudi Arabia UAE
Armour shielding binoculars	Saudi Arabia
Ammunition (5.56 mm–155 mm)	UAE
Firearms components	UAE
Batteries	UAE Kuwait

Source: *Indian Defence Goes Global*, Department of Defence Production, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, 18 February 2020.

Regardless of the lacklustre arms trade, as indicated above, there is potential for progress. Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar are the major arms-importing countries in the GCC and are also diversifying their import sources, which makes them ideal customers for the Indian defence industry.

The growth in political ties between India and the GCC states has significantly facilitated the strengthening of their military-security ties, predominantly focusing on counter-terrorism, money laundering, cybersecurity, organised crime, human trafficking and anti-piracy,<sup>3</sup> and gradually expanding to initiatives for collaboration in defence technology. The UAE and Saudi Arabia, India's third and fourth largest trading partners, seem to be making significant headway in partnering with the Indian defence industry.

## The UAE

India's military-security ties have shown the most impressive growth with the UAE, a leading player in the military domain among the Gulf states. Modi's coming to power coincided with the appointment of the crown prince of Abu Dhabi, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan (commonly known as MbZ), as the de facto ruler of the UAE in January 2014. The rise of the two men seems to have played an instrumental role in ushering in a new era in Indo-Emirati ties. Giving impetus to the bilateral relationship was the signing of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership agreement in February 2015 during Modi's visit to the UAE.<sup>4</sup> Apart from security dialogues, the evolving military-security ties between the two countries also involve cooperation in fields like counter-terrorism, maritime security, military exercises, intelligence sharing, manufacture of defence items, cybersecurity, initiatives to prevent money

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<sup>3</sup> Rahul Roy-Chaudhury, "India and the Gulf Region: Building Strategic Partnerships," IISS, 29 August 2018, <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/analysis/2018/08/india-gulf-strategic-partnerships>

<sup>4</sup> "Joint Statement between the United Arab Emirates and the Republic of India", Ministry of External Affairs, India, 17 August 2015, <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/25733/Joint-Statement-between-the-United-Arab-Emirates-and-the-Republic-of-India>

laundering, drug trafficking and various transnational crimes, as well as extradition arrangements and police training.

**“In what could be considered a breakthrough, in February 2023, India’s Hindustan Aeronautics Limited and the UAE defence firm EDGE signed a MoU regarding joint design and development of missile systems and unmanned aerial vehicles.”**

The MoU on defence, which was signed during the visit of Al Nahyan to India in January 2017, laid the grounds for cooperation in the field of defence technology.<sup>5</sup> The increasing quest for technological advancements has led both the public and private sectors of the two countries to collaborate in the research and development domain. In what could be considered a breakthrough, in February 2023, India’s Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) and the UAE defence firm EDGE signed a MoU regarding joint design and development of missile systems and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs).<sup>6</sup> Also in February 2023, the Indian firm ICOMM, a company under the Megha Engineering & Infrastructures Ltd (MEIL) group, signed an agreement with the UAE-based small arms company CARACAL to manufacture in India CARACAL’s complete line of small arms for the Indian market.<sup>7</sup> This

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<sup>5</sup> “List of Agreements/MOUs Exchanged during the State Visit of Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi to India”, Ministry of External Affairs, India, 25 January 2017, <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/27967/List+of+AgreementsMOUs+exchanged+during+the+State+visit+of+Crown+Prince+of+Abu+Dhabi+to+India>

<sup>6</sup> “Abu Dhabi Defence Firm Signs MOU with India’s HAL at UAE’s Defence Expo”, *LiveMint*, 23 February 2023, <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/abu-dhabi-defence-firm-signs-mou-with-india-s-hal-at-uae-s-defence-expo-11677109205445.html>

<sup>7</sup> “ICOMM to partner with UAE’s CARACAL to Manufacture Small Arms in India.” *The Indian Express*, 22 February 2023, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/icomm-partner-uae-caracal-manufacture-arms-india-8460789/>



initiative is in line with New Delhi's "Make in India" and "Atma Nirbhar Bharat" initiatives.<sup>8</sup>

**“An important hallmark of Indo-Emirati military-security ties is the regular conduct of joint military exercises in all three services.”**

In the field of arms trade, India's state-run Ordnance Factory Board signed a deal worth US\$45.75 million with the UAE in August 2019 to supply around 50,000 artillery shells used with Bofors guns.<sup>9</sup> This deal holds significance, considering India's ambition to emerge as one of the major exporters of indigenously designed and manufactured defence items. The UAE, on the other hand, is diversifying its weapons import sources to reduce its reliance on some of its traditional Western suppliers, especially the United States. The UAE is also said to have expressed interest in acquiring Indian-manufactured BrahMos missiles and Akash missile systems.<sup>10</sup>

An important hallmark of Indo-Emirati military-security ties is the regular conduct of joint military exercises in all three services. For instance, naval exercises are regularly conducted with a view to increasing interoperability and synergy between the two navies. Similarly, the air forces of the two countries organise combat exercises. In late February and early March 2023, an Indian air force contingent participated in

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<sup>8</sup> "Make in India", <http://www.makeinindia.com/about>

<sup>9</sup> Manu Pubby, "In Its Largest Ever Export Order, OFB to Supply 50,000 Bofors shells to UAE", *The Economic Times*, 3 August 2019, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/in-its-largest-ever-export-order-ofb-to-supply-50000-bofors-shells-to-uae/articleshow/70501461.cms>

<sup>10</sup>For further analysis, see Saroj Bishoyi, "India's Defence Exports: Recent Trends and the Way Forward", VIF Paper, Vivekananda International Foundation, September 2023, p.18.

Exercise Desert Flag VIII at the Al Dhafra airbase in the UAE.<sup>11</sup> In recent years, the maritime agencies of India and the UAE have carried out joint exercises as part of goodwill visits. These activities are crucial from the standpoint of advancing the shared maritime security objectives of both the countries in the Indian Ocean, particularly the Gulf region.

**“Indicating robust engagement in these areas, the UAE has been deporting to India not only terrorists but also sympathisers of outfits like Jaish-e-Mohammad and ISIS in recent years.”**

With threats from terrorist organisations and other non-state actors remaining unabated, cooperation in the areas of counter-terrorism and cyber security as well as information and intelligence sharing have also become some of the trademarks of military-security ties between the two countries. Indicating robust engagement in these areas, the UAE has been deporting to India not only terrorists but also sympathisers of outfits like Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM)<sup>12</sup> and ISIS in recent years.<sup>13</sup> Related to such cooperation is the strong interest expressed by both governments to disrupt “the use of web and social media for promotion of extremist and violent ideologies; preventing the use of religious centres to radicalise youth and recruit terrorist cadres.”<sup>14</sup> Given that radicalisation of

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<sup>11</sup> “Indian Air Force to Participate in Exercise Desert Flag VIII,” Press Information Bureau, India, 25 February 2023,

<https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1902383>

<sup>12</sup> Anirban Bhaumik, “UAE Depports Jem Terrorist to India”, *Deccan Herald*, 3 April 2019, <https://www.deccanherald.com/national/uae-deports-jem-terrorist-to-india-726678.html>

<sup>13</sup> Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, “UAE Quietly Deporting IS sympathisers of Indian Origin”, *The Economic Times*, 6 December 2018,

<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/uae-quietly-deporting-is-sympathisers-of-indian-origin/articleshow/66963305.cms>

<sup>14</sup> “India-UAE Joint Statement during State Visit of the Prime Minister of India to UAE”, Ministry of External Affairs, India, 11 February 2018,

<https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral->

impressionable youths is a common phenomenon that could adversely impact the national security of both countries, engagements are in place between the UAE-based Sawab and Hedayah centres and Indian establishments involved in countering violent extremism (CVE). With the increasing use of cyber media to propagate violent extremist ideology, and also with Al Qaida and ISIS having virtually become transnational terrorist franchises, close coordination on tackling these real-time security threats is firmly binding India and some of its Middle Eastern partners, including the UAE.

### Saudi Arabia

The military-security dimension of Indo-Saudi relations is gaining momentum, evidenced by the nature of the agreements signed and the high-level political and military-related visits that have taken place. Among bilateral institutional mechanisms, the India-Saudi Arabia Joint Committee on Defence Cooperation (JCDC) enables both sides to identify areas of mutual interest and cooperation. Alongside this, an MoU on defence cooperation signed during the February 2014 visit to India of the then crown prince and defence minister (now king) Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud paved the way for furthering the relationship to a new level and emphasised the sharing of expertise, training and defence industry cooperation.<sup>15</sup>

To add thrust to the growing defence cooperation, the then Indian army chief, General MM Naravane, visited Saudi Arabia in December 2020, making the first such visit by an Indian army chief to Saudi Arabia. Lieutenant General Fahd Bin Abdullah Mohammed Al-Mutair, commander of the Royal Saudi Land Forces, made a reciprocal

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[documents.htm?dtl/29476/IndiaUAE+Joint+Statement+during+State+Visit+of+the+Prime+Minister+of+India+to+UAE+February+1011+2018](https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/29476/IndiaUAE+Joint+Statement+during+State+Visit+of+the+Prime+Minister+of+India+to+UAE+February+1011+2018)

<sup>15</sup> “Joint Statement on the occasion of the Official Visit of Crown Prince, Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to India”, Ministry of External Affairs, India, 28 February 2014, <https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/23014/Joint+Statement+on+the+occasion+of+the+Official+Visit+of+Crown+Prince+Deputy+Prime+Minister+and+Defence+Minister+of+the+Kingdom+of+Saudi+Arabia+to+Ind>

visit to India in February 2022. These two visits signalled interest on both sides to intensify their ties. From just bilateral exercises and training of Saudi military personnel by the Indian navy and institutions like the Indian National Defence Academy (NDA), these two countries now look to forging joint defence industrial collaboration. The latter aspect ties in with the military modernisation programmes under way in both countries.<sup>16</sup>

**“The Saudi Arabian Military Industries (SAMI) and the Indian armed forces were said to have discussed possible cooperation in the area of multiple launch rocket systems.”**

During Modi’s visit to the kingdom in October 2019, the Saudi General Authority of Military Industries (GAMI) and the Department of Defence Production in India’s Ministry of Defence agreed to collaborate in military acquisition, industries, research, development and technology.<sup>17</sup> Although details are lacking, the Saudi Arabian Military Industries (SAMI) and the Indian armed forces were said to have discussed possible cooperation in the area of multiple launch rocket systems (MLRS).<sup>18</sup> In addition, like the UAE, Saudi Arabia is said to have expressed interest in acquiring Indian-manufactured BrahMos missiles and Akash missile systems.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Anthony H. Cordesman, “Military Spending: The Other Side of Saudi Security, Centre for Strategic and International Studies”, CSIS, 13 March 2018, [https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/180315\\_Saudi\\_Military\\_Spending.pdf](https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/180315_Saudi_Military_Spending.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> “List of MOUs/Agreements Signed during the Visit of Prime Minister to Saudi Arabia,” Ministry of External Affairs, India, 29 October 2019, <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/31981/List+of+MoUs+Agreements+signed+during+the+visit+of+Prime+Minister+to+Saudi+Arabia+October+29+2019>

<sup>18</sup> “Saudi Arabia, India, and MLRS ToT,” *Tactical Report*, 8 July 2022,

<https://www.tacticalreport.com/daily/59899-saudi-arabia-india-and-mlrs-tot>

<sup>19</sup> See Saroj Bishoyi, “India’s Defence Exports: Recent Trends and the Way Forward”.

Another area of cooperation is the maritime domain, where both sides have shown increasing keenness to strengthen their ties. Here, their interest is especially strong in the western Indian Ocean region, home to some of the world's busiest shipping lanes, including those in the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, the Arabian Sea, the Gulf of Oman, and the Persian Gulf.<sup>20</sup> Notably, the Indian and Saudi naval forces conducted two joint naval exercises in August 2021 and May 2023, covering tactical manoeuvres, search and rescue operations, and an electronic warfare drill to enhance interoperability.<sup>21</sup>

“Countering threats from ... militias ... that have mastered guerrilla warfare tactics over several years ... is an area where India's expertise in fighting such threats could be imparted to the Saudis.”

With a view to taking the relationship to newer heights, India and Saudi Arabia agreed in February 2019 to establish a Comprehensive Security Dialogue at the national security adviser level and set up a Joint Working Group on Counter-terrorism.<sup>22</sup> In October 2019, during Modi's visit to the kingdom, the two countries set up the India-Saudi Strategic Partnership Council (SPC). The council held its first meeting in

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<sup>20</sup> Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, “India-Saudi Security Ties Getting Stronger”, *The Diplomat*, 19 February 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/02/india-saudi-security-ties-getting-stronger/>

<sup>21</sup> “Indian Navy, Royal Saudi Arabia Navy Prepare for Bilateral Naval Exercise”, NDTV, 16 March 2023, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/indian-navy-royal-saudi-arabia-navy-prepare-for-bilateral-naval-exercise-3867203#:~:text=Indian%20Navy%20Forces%2C%20Royal%20Saudi,first%20was%20in%20August%202021.>

<sup>22</sup> “India-Saudi Arabia Joint Statement during the State Visit of His Royal Highness the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia to India”, Ministry of External Affairs, India, 20 February 2019, <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/31072/IndiaSaudi+Arabia+Joint+Statement+during+the+State+Visit+of+His+Royal+Highness+the+Crown+Prince+of+Saudi+Arabia+to+India>

September 2023 in New Delhi.<sup>23</sup> These steps could be considered timely strategic decisions as the two countries face multidimensional security threats, not only on land, air and sea, but also in cyberspace. Such security dialogues could serve as a platform for both sides to discuss prevailing regional geosecurity dynamics and explore new areas of cooperation in the security realm. Despite being one of the military powers in the region and spending billions of dollars annually on arms purchases, Saudi Arabia appears to have limited experience in countering threats from groups like the Yemen-based Houthi militias, who have mastered guerrilla warfare tactics over several years. This is an area where India's expertise in fighting such threats could be imparted to the Saudis, by for example, enhancing joint military training programmes and exercises.<sup>24</sup> While India continues to face cross-border terrorism (including seaborne threats), Saudi Arabia remains vulnerable to frequent missile and drone attacks on major oilfields and civilian dwellings. Within the framework of counter-terrorism cooperation, the two countries are giving greater priority to preventing the flow of funds to terror groups and boosting information and intelligence sharing. Meanwhile, under the framework of the extradition treaty signed in 2010, the kingdom has extradited to India terrorists from Al Qaida and Lashkar-e-Toiba. These security-related developments are visible signs that relations are moving beyond the traditional energy trade.

## Oman

The Sultanate of Oman is considered India's closest defence partner among the Gulf states, and it is the first country with which New Delhi

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<sup>23</sup> "Joint Statement during the State Visit of HRH the Crown Prince and Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to India," Ministry of External Affairs, India, 11 September 2023, <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/371110/Joint+Statement+during+the+State+Visit+of+HRH+the+Crown+Prince+and+Prime+Minister+of+the+Kingdom+of+Saudi+Arabia+to+India#:~:text=Both%20sides%20praised%20the%20burgeoning,largest%20trade%20partner%20of%20India>.

<sup>24</sup> Alvite Ningthoujam, "India and Saudi Arabia: Scaling New Heights", *The Diplomat*, 28 October 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/10/india-saudi-arabia-ties-scaling-new-heights/>

signed an MoU, in 2005.<sup>25</sup> It is primarily the strategic location of this country that makes it imperative for India to strengthen its strategic partnership with Oman. Although the visit of the then Indian defence minister, Manohar Parrikar, to Oman in May 2016 laid the foundation for the deepening of defence ties, Modi's visit to Muscat in February 2018 has revitalised the overall bilateral relationship. The India-Oman Joint Military Cooperation Committee (JMCC), the latest meeting of which was held in March 2022, evaluates and guides overall bilateral defence cooperation. The strategic partnership is underscored by the fact that Oman provides operational turnaround (OTR) for Indian navy ships for anti-piracy patrols as well as technical support for landing and overflight of Indian air force planes.<sup>26</sup>

**“Considering India’s maritime strategy of countering the Chinese navy’s growing surreptitious activities in the Indian Ocean region, access to [the port of] Duqm is a breakthrough for India as well as for Indo-Omani strategic cooperation.”**

For the past several years, the Indian and Omani navies have been cooperating in combating piracy in the Indian Ocean. Oman's location at the mouth of the Persian Gulf and Arabian Sea makes it critical for the security of the sea lines of communication (SLOCs) in the region.<sup>27</sup> It is telling that an annexure to the MoU on military

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<sup>25</sup> Shubhajit Roy, “Explained: India, Oman Ties and Why Its Top Defence Official’s Delhi Visit Important”, *The Indian Express*, 31 January 2022, <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-india-oman-ties-defence-officials-mohammed-nasser-al-zaabi-delhi-visit-7748422/>

<sup>26</sup> “Manohar Parrikar Visit: India and Oman Sign Four Key Defence Agreements”, *Financial Express*, 22 May 2016, <https://www.financialexpress.com/economy/india-and-oman-sign-four-key-defence-agreements/262806/>

<sup>27</sup> Muddassar Quamar, “Growing Indo-Gulf Defence Cooperation and Future Prospects”, Middle East Institute, 28 October 2018. <http://www.mei.org.in/growing-indo-gulf-defence-cooperation-and-future-prospects>

cooperation signed between the two countries in February 2018 has granted India access to Oman's port of Duqm for military use and logistical support, including maintenance.<sup>28</sup> Duqm's location on the southeastern seaboard of Oman, overlooking the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean as well as its proximity to the Shahid Beheshti port at Chabahar in Iran makes access to it important for the Indian navy. Considering India's maritime strategy of countering the Chinese navy's growing surreptitious activities in the Indian Ocean region, access to Duqm is a breakthrough for India as well as for Indo-Omani strategic cooperation.

**“Defence ties between India and Oman have also been highlighted through regular interoperability exercises between the two armed forces.”**

Defence ties between the two countries have also been highlighted through regular interoperability exercises between the two armed forces. For example, as part of their efforts to strengthen counter-terrorism cooperation, the Indo-Oman Joint Military Exercise Al Najaf IV between the armies of the two countries and their latest naval exercise, “Naseem Al Bahr” (Sea Breeze), were conducted in late August 2022 and November 2022, respectively.<sup>29</sup> Alongside these initiatives, counter-extremism/radicalisation cooperation has figured prominently in almost all their bilateral discussions, and both sides promote robust

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<sup>28</sup> Subhajt Roy, “India gets access to strategic Oman port Duqm for military use, Chabahar-Gwadar in sight,” *The Indian Express*, 13 February 2018, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-gets-access-to-strategic-oman-port-for-military-use-chabahar-gwadar-in-sight-5061573/>

<sup>29</sup> “Indo-Oman Joint Military Exercise Al Najaf IV Concludes,” Press Information Bureau, India, 13 August 2022, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1851645>



cybersecurity cooperation. Oman is known for having the best cybersecurity preparedness in the Arab world.<sup>30</sup>

The strengthening of ties between the two countries has come about at a juncture when India's defence manufacturing and exports are on a gradual rise. For instance, in 2010, there were reports about the Royal Oman Army inducting the Indian-made INSAS (Indian small arms system), manufactured by the Ordnance Factory Board.<sup>31</sup> The political goodwill between the leaderships of the two countries is expected to give further boost to their military-security ties.

### **Bahrain, Kuwait and Qatar: Gaining Momentum**

India's military-security cooperation with Qatar and Bahrain has improved following the visits of Modi in 2016 and 2018, respectively. The focal areas of cooperation include enhancing counter-terrorism cooperation, intelligence exchanges, safety of sea lanes, anti-piracy and cybersecurity. The existence of a deputy national security advisers-level security dialogue with Bahrain provides both sides an avenue to discuss regional and international issues and military-security cooperation. In a move to augment maritime security ties, India's deputy chief of the Naval Staff visited Bahrain in July 2022.<sup>32</sup>

Qatar, an energy-rich country, has expressed interest in joint production of defence equipment in India under the "Make in India" initiative.<sup>33</sup> An agreement for defence and security cooperation was

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<sup>30</sup> "Oman on Top in Cyber Security Readiness in Arab world", *Gulf News*, 25 November 2017, <https://gulfnews.com/world/gulf/oman/oman-on-top-in-cyber-security-readiness-in-arab-world-1.2130299>

<sup>31</sup> "Oman All Set to Use India's INSAS Rifles", *Hindustan Times*, 22 April 2010, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india/oman-army-all-set-to-use-india-s-insas-rifles/story-MRxpigdWBkn5NEpS3TZCfl.html>

<sup>32</sup> "Deputy Chief of Naval Staff, India Visits Kingdom of Bahrain", Embassy of India, Bahrain, 22 July 2022.

<sup>33</sup> "India-Qatar Joint Statement during the visit of Prime Minister to Qatar", Ministry of External Affairs, 5 June 2016, [https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/26870/IndiaQatar\\_Joint\\_Statement\\_during\\_the\\_visit\\_of\\_Prime\\_Minister\\_to\\_Qatar](https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/26870/IndiaQatar_Joint_Statement_during_the_visit_of_Prime_Minister_to_Qatar)

signed in November 2008,<sup>34</sup> but the relationship has been mostly restricted to military training, joint exercises and naval ship visits, including the conduct of maritime exercises between the two navies in November 2019.<sup>35</sup> However, as India strives to become a weapons-exporting country, Qatar has the potential to become one of its clients, both in the realms of arms trade and technological collaboration.

The opening of a Kuwaiti defence attaché office in New Delhi in early 2020 could be seen as a preliminary step towards enhancing defence and security ties.<sup>36</sup> Currently, India-Kuwait ties are restricted to navy-to-navy and maritime cooperation in the Indian Ocean region.

## Prospects

There are clear indications that both India and the GCC states are transforming their bilateral relations beyond the energy trade dimension, which has long been the mainstay of their ties. Continuing threats from non-state actors (including terrorist organisations) in both India and the GCC countries have pushed the two sides towards forging robust and comprehensive military-security cooperation. Instability in the Middle East could give rise to undesirable socio-economic as well as security consequences for India. A stable Middle East, therefore, is crucial for India, considering its increasing trade with and investments in the region and the presence of a large Indian diaspora in some of the Gulf states.

While it will probably take time for Indian defence manufacturers to break into new markets, the emerging pattern of ties suggests a strong potential for forging co-production initiatives between India and the GCC countries. Greater cooperation in the defence

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<sup>34</sup>“India-Qatar Relations”, Ministry of External Affairs, May 2016, p. 3, [https://mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Qatar\\_May\\_2016.pdf](https://mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Qatar_May_2016.pdf)

<sup>35</sup> “Joint Exercise between the Qatari Emiri Navy and the Indian Navy Forces (the Roar of the Sea)”, Press Information Bureau, 18 November 2019, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1591973>

<sup>36</sup> Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, “Kuwait Opens Defence Attaché Office in India to Ramp Up Security Cooperation”, *The Economic Times*, 20 February 2020, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/kuwait-opens-defence-attach-office-in-india-to-ramp-up-security-cooperation/articleshow/74230367.cms?from=mdr>

industry sector is a possibility, given that the Gulf states are embarking on rapid military industrialisation programmes and are also in search of alternative arms vendors. India will certainly welcome investments from the affluent Gulf countries in the co-development and manufacturing of defence items that would help boost the Indian defence industry. For the key Gulf states, the quest for technological advancement in the defence industry sector gives them strong incentives to boost ties with India. Indian defence firms are likely to bag arms contracts, possibly in the category of missile systems and small arms and ammunition.

India, however, is likely to closely monitor the existing and emerging nature of military-security cooperation between Pakistan and the Gulf states, mainly the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Both these Gulf states and Pakistan have forged strong military partnerships since the Cold War period, and there have been important visits of top-level Pakistani military officials to the Gulf countries in recent years to discuss enhanced defence cooperation. As India looks to promote defence technological collaboration with its GCC partners, it is likely to exercise caution to ensure that there is no transfer of critical technologies to third parties.

**“In the long run, China’s growing footprint in the region could pose a competition to India’s state-run and private stakeholders in the region.”**

Given recent geopolitical developments, arms exporters like Israel and China are also hoping to clinch mega defence deals with the GCC states, whose traditional arms suppliers are the internationally reputed ones like the United States, United Kingdom, France and Italy. These include exporters like Israel and China. As China played an important role in brokering the rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran in March 2023, there is a fair chance that Beijing will use this diplomatic breakthrough to make further political and economic, but also important military and technological, inroads into the region. In the long run, China’s growing footprint in the region could pose a competition to India’s state-run and private stakeholders in the region. Having said that,

the ongoing political realignments in the Middle East could also open avenues for multilateral partnerships, even raising the prospects for collaborations between India, the GCC states and countries like France, the United States, Japan and Israel, including in the defence sector.

Realpolitik and convergence of strategic interests have been instrumental in bringing India and the Gulf countries closer in the military-security domain notwithstanding some of their ideological differences. The existence of political goodwill between the governments of India and the Gulf states provides further ground for more robust and comprehensive military-security partnerships in time to come. ◆

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