



India's maritime security relations with the gulf cooperation council countries – Prospects amid rising Chinese influence

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ABSTRACT

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries are a vital source for India's energy requirements and home to a large population of Indian workers. Although for quite some time now, India's strategic influence in the Gulf region has been overshadowed by Pakistan, recent developments seem to present India with an opportunity to expand its influence led by maritime security cooperation. However, the growth of Chinese economic and political influence in the region presents some tough challenges. This paper examines India's extant security ties with the GCC countries and their relations with China, with an aim to make a relative assessment of India's strategic influence and discusses the prospects for India's position in the region.

KEYWORDS

India; gulf cooperation council; maritime security; China; Saudi Arabia; the United States

Introduction

India's cordial relations with all six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries located along the Persian Gulf region – Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE – are rooted in historical and cultural ties that endure to this very day. The Persian Gulf region holds immense strategic importance for India for two main reasons: first, the majority of India's burgeoning energy requirements are sourced from this region; and second, because the region is home to more than 6.5 million Indians, who contribute over \$35 billion in remittances annually.¹ In 2018, India's bilateral trade with the GCC countries exceeded \$103 billion, making the GCC India's single largest trading block.² For these reasons, India has a keen interest in the security and stability of the region and has occasionally interceded to evacuate Indian workers, as well as other stranded foreigners, during times of crisis.

Despite this, India's strategic influence and security relationships in the region have been relatively constrained for quite some time now, owing largely to the strong ties that had been forged by Pakistan with the Arab-Gulf countries, and also due to the presence of the United States as the principal underwriter for security and stability in the region. For several years, the United States sought to leverage the local knowledge and close working relationships with the Arab States that Pakistan possessed, and it strengthened Pakistan's position in the region, to India's detriment. However, in recent years,

India's rising status as a formidable military and maritime power, coupled with both, its own aspirations to be the net security provider of the region, and, the tacit support that India has been receiving from the United States, appear to have improved India's standing in the region and have resulted in GCC States showing an encouraging level of keenness to promote security ties with India. This change is evidenced by the increase in high-level political visits between India and the GCC States, the expansion of bilateral maritime security cooperation led principally by the Indian Navy, and, other related developments such as the invitation to India, delivered at Abu Dhabi in March 2019 after a gap of over 50 years, to join the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) conclave – an institution dominated by Saudi Arabia – overriding a boycott by Pakistan over India's participation.³ The significance of this action is provided perspective if one were to recall that in 1969, a similar threat of a boycott by Pakistan over the OIC's invitation to New Delhi had resulted in India's membership being rescinded.⁴ In view of these developments, India seems fairly well placed to improve its strategic ties with the GCC countries. However, it is important to also note that the rising Chinese influence in the region is already presenting India with fresh and significant challenges. This article examines India's current security relations with all the GCC countries with a particular focus on maritime security cooperation, which is, of course, led by the Indian Navy. It also looks at contemporary China's engagement-with and influence-in these States and the resultant challenges these pose for India. It then goes on to provide an overall assessment of the relative strength of India's strategic relations with the countries of this region and evaluates India's future prospects in the face of rising Chinese influence. The article concludes by providing a few strategic options that India could exercise in order to sustain and strengthen its influence in the Persian Gulf.

The following section examines the Indian and Chinese relations currently enjoyed by each of the countries in the GCC.

Bahrain

The Kingdom of Bahrain is a small country with an area of 765 square kilometres and a population of about 1.2 million people. This population-figure includes close to 350,000 Indian workers, 60 per cent of whom fall under the category of unskilled labour, but nevertheless serve as an anchor for India's bilateral relations with Bahrain. Indian nationals enjoy huge goodwill among the local population, as is evident from the fact that in 2015, the authorities established an enclave in Manama, the capital city, called "Little India", in recognition of the contribution of the Indian workers.⁵ While India's relations with the Kingdom of Bahrain have been cordial, exchanges have been relatively sparse and limited to ministerial-level visits alone, with the exception of the visit to New Delhi by the King of Bahrain, in 2014. In February 2015, during the inaugural meeting, in New Delhi, of the India-Bahrain High Joint Commission, both sides decided to expand defence and security cooperation.⁶ In 2018, an agreement to commence security cooperation to combat international terrorism and drug smuggling was concluded. However, bilateral defence cooperation is yet to be formalised. Consequently, India's naval engagements with Bahrain are limited to occasional ship visits, and are bereft of formal mechanisms such as navy-to-navy staff talks, training exchanges, and regular naval exercises.

Bahrain's naval and coast guard forces have traditionally trained with the British Royal Navy and the German *Bundesmarine*, while US personnel have been providing specialist

training.⁷ Bahrain has been a close American ally since the 1970s. In the aftermath of “9/11”, Bahrain’s status was elevated to that of a “major non-NATO ally”, making it the first Gulf country to join this exclusive 15-member group.⁸ Manama, Bahrain, is the headquarters of the US Fifth Fleet, whose area of responsibility encompasses the Persian Gulf, the Arabian Sea, the Red Sea, and parts of the rest of the Indian Ocean. Manama also served as an important base for the U.S. joint operations during the 1991 Gulf War, the 2001 war in Afghanistan, and the 2003 war in Iraq. In 2013, the United States Central Command (USCENTCOM) reportedly spent \$500 million to modernise Bahrain’s naval infrastructure, including its training facilities.⁹ Even at present, as part of the US military’s operations against ISIS in Iraq and Syria, the Fifth Fleet continues to play a crucial role in America’s strategy for the West Asian region. It is evident that the large presence and support of the US Navy in Bahrain has reduced the scope and interest for defence cooperation between Bahrain India. However, some progress on maritime cooperation may be expected with the signing of a defence cooperation agreement. Additionally, the recent decision of the Government of India to position an Indian Navy representative at the USCENCOM headquarters in Bahrain,¹⁰ would certainly help to promote closer linkages.

China’s relations with Bahrain relative to those with other Gulf States have similarly been limited. In 2014, during the visit of the King of Bahrain to China, the two countries publicly announced a commitment to increase trade. Subsequently, in July 2018, Bahrain signed an MoU with China to participate in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), along with several other agreements to progress various economic and business activities. Even though Bahrain has fewer natural resources compared to other Gulf States, its strategic location as the “Gateway” to the Persian Gulf makes it a key point along the routes of the BRI¹¹ and also offers China an untapped consumer market. Overall, the extant level of engagement between the China and Bahrain is assessed to be low, evidently, restricted by the predominant American strategic interests and military presence in the country.

Kuwait

Kuwait is a major oil exporter to India and a favoured destination for Indian workers. The 900,000 strong Indian community forms the largest expatriate group in Kuwait and is an important facet of India-Kuwait ties. India’s relations with Kuwait are also dominated by trade in the energy sector and strategic investments. Pertinently, Kuwait has extended Operational Turnaround (OTR) facilities for Indian naval ships at select ports.¹² During the recent security crisis in West Asia, generated by ISIS, an Indian naval ship visited Kuwait three times in 2015 to evacuate Indian nationals stranded in Iraq.¹³ Earlier, in 2013, an annual security dialogue between the Indian National Security Advisor (NSA) and his counterpart in Kuwait was initiated to promote mutual understanding of threat perceptions and security concerns, as also to strengthen the sharing of information, intelligence, and strategic assessments.¹⁴ The Kuwaiti Navy, as part of the multinational Combined Task Force (CTF) 152, has gained rich experience in terms of working with other navies in the conduct of maritime security operations in Gulf waters. It also participated in combined exercises in the Gulf, with NATO naval forces, so as to develop capabilities in areas such as mine countermeasures.¹⁵ India’s non-

participation in the multinational coalition may well have restricted opportunities for collaboration, yet, maritime security cooperation between India and Kuwait has enormous growth-potential.

China established diplomatic relations with Kuwait in 1971, following the Sino-US rapprochement. During the 1990 Gulf crisis, China had strongly opposed Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. Over the years, Sino-Kuwait relations have steadily grown, with Kuwait being amongst the first few countries to sign an agreement with China on the BRI. In July 2018, when the Kuwaiti Emir visited Beijing, Sino-Kuwait relations were upgraded to a "strategic partnership". Both countries have agreed to enhance cooperation in areas of energy trade, infrastructure, strategic investment, tourism, and security and anti-terrorism cooperation. As an influential member of the GCC, Kuwait serves as a useful partner for China in the region, and strategic cooperation between the two countries is expected to expand in the coming years.

Oman

Oman is one of India's closest defence partners in West Asia. Once the claim for an extended continental shelf in the case of both countries is legally accepted and brought into force, Oman will officially become the eighth country with whom India shares a zonal maritime boundary (even if not a common Territorial Sea border). Bilateral trade between the two countries is in the region of \$4 billion, in addition to joint investments across 13 sectors in excess of \$7.5 billion.¹⁶ Oman is also a major destination for Indian defence exports including, notably, the Indian Small Arms System (INSAS) infantry rifle developed by India's State-run Ordnance Factory Board.¹⁷ In December 2005, India signed a defence cooperation agreement with Oman, through the efforts of a joint committee established under the defence ministers of each State. In 2016, the two countries signed a MoU for cooperation on maritime security. Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, visited Oman in February 2018 with a view to consolidate and expand the scope of the extant bilateral cooperation between the two nations. A joint statement issued during the visit stated:

The two sides expressed satisfaction over the current state of bilateral relations, especially the robust security and defence cooperation, and agreed to further expand their cooperation to new areas of mutual interest, including, *inter-alia*, space, cyber security, energy security, renewable energy and food security, etc., with a view to take the strategic partnership to a higher level.¹⁸

India's defence cooperation with Oman has been jointly led by the Indian Navy and Air Force and regular exchanges of visits by the senior military leadership have helped to sustain and promote this cooperation. Oman has also extended OTR facilities to Indian naval ships and aircraft, and has supported Indian naval ships deployed on anti-piracy patrols. Oman is one of the few West Asian countries with whom India conducts a biennial naval exercise, named *Naseem-Al-Bahar*, which commenced in 1993 and is aimed at promoting interoperability between the two navies.¹⁹ Additionally, the Indian Air Force conducts a joint exercise named *Eastern Bridge* with the Royal Oman Air Force. Both services also hold regular staff talks and conduct training for Omani military personnel.

Oman's relations with China have traditionally rested on energy trade, but, in recent times, following Oman's decision to join the BRI, they have been dominated by rapidly expanded bilateral economic cooperation. Oman's national strategy to diversify from an oil-dependent economy, (as outlined in its "Vision 2020"), complements China's BRI vision. For China, the strategic location of Oman in the Arabian Sea makes it an important point along the Maritime Silk Road, while for Oman, the BRI provides a golden opportunity to emerge as a logistics, tourism and business hub in the region, to even rival Dubai. Chinese investments in Oman surpass those made in other West Asian States. A consortium of Chinese firms have invested over \$10.7 billion in building a brand new industrial city in Duqm, situated 550 km south of the capital, Muscat.²⁰ The plan includes a Special Economic Zone (SEZ), with a port and a wide range of other ventures, such as an oil refinery, a methanol plant, a giant solar-energy equipment-manufacturing operation, an automobile assembly factory, an oil and gas equipment-production site, a tourism zone, and, a multi-million logistics enterprise.²¹ In time, Duqm could become the first mega city in the Arabian Peninsula. Sino-Omani relations also include maritime cooperation, and PLA naval ships on anti-piracy patrols off the Horn of Africa have often utilised Port Salalah in Oman for operational turns-around. Overall, the convergence of strategic interests between China and Oman, seems to indicate that their bilateral relationship will continue to flourish. What remains to be seen is how Oman balances its own ties with India. Meanwhile, in order to nurture the extant security relations, it is imperative that India maintains a high level of naval and air force engagements.

Qatar

Qatar is the largest supplier of LNG to India, and bilateral trade between the two countries reached nearly \$16 billion in 2015–16.²² Since 2017, Qatar has been boycotted by Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, all of whom have accused the Qatari regime of funding regional extremist groups and maintaining close ties with Iran. As a result of this breakdown in diplomatic relations, Qatar has been placed under stringent economic and trade sanctions, which have isolated the country by air, land, and sea from its neighbours. The Indian government, which has maintained close ties with all Gulf States, has maintained a neutral stance, terming the development as a matter internal to the GCC.

As a result of the widening rift with Gulf states, Qatar has sought to diversify its economic and diplomatic relations with other powers, including China, India, and the United States, by "strategically hedging against future tensions from its larger and more powerful neighbours."²³ Thus, relations between India and Qatar have intensified in recent years, boosted by the visit of the prime minister of Qatar to New Delhi in 2015, as also a reciprocal visit by Prime Minister Modi in 2016. In 2018, during the visit of the Indian external affairs minister to Doha, the two countries established a joint commission to explore the scope for enhancing cooperation in cultural, scientific, information technology and educational fields. Earlier, in 2008, India had signed a defence cooperation agreement with Qatar to develop defence relations under a Joint Defence Cooperation Committee. India's defence cooperation with Qatar includes training assistance and visits by ships of the Indian Navy and the Indian Coastguard. In 2016, the Qatar Emiri Naval Forces (QENF) attended the Indian Navy's "International Fleet Review" (IFR) at

Vishakhapatnam, and also deputed a high-level delegation to participate in the Indian Defence Exposition (DEFEXPO) at New Delhi in 2018. For its part, India is a regular participant in the Doha International Maritime Defence Exhibition (DIMDEX) and, in 2018, the Indian Navy showcased its latest destroyer, INS *Kolkata*, at this exhibition. The Indian Navy was reportedly considering the feasibility of stationing a naval training team at Qatar,²⁴ though following the recent Qatar-Gulf tensions; this proposal may have been temporarily shelved.

In addition to close relations with India, Qatar has also maintained strategic defence ties with the United States as witness the fact that the Forward Headquarters of the US CENTCOM is located at Doha. The Qatar Navy also participates in regular exercises with US naval forces in the Persian Gulf.²⁵ Qatar is now keen to expand its defence relations with the United States, and a plan or an offer to establish a “permanent” US Air Force base at Al-Udeid, the biggest military facility used by Washington in the Gulf, is reportedly under discussion. As a key stakeholder in the region, the United States has been working towards resolving the Qatar-Gulf rift as it could hamper Washington’s strategic aim to “unite the Gulf Arab States, Egypt, and Jordan to forge a military alliance to counter Iran.”²⁶

Qatar is the second-largest provider of natural gas to China, supplying more than a fifth of China’s needs.²⁷ However, Qatar’s diplomatic relations with China, which were initially established in 1988, have been slow to progress. It was only after 30 years that the two countries held their first strategic-level dialogue in Beijing to explore areas for cooperation, including an operational plan for cooperation in the BRI.²⁸ As part of Qatar’s “pivot” to China, consequent upon the recent heightening of tensions with other GCC countries, Qatar has invested its sovereign wealth fund in China as well as other countries, including India. In China alone, Qatari investments have surpassed \$ 13 billion, with a further investment of \$ 15–20 billion planned in real estate and infrastructure over the next five years.²⁹ Reportedly, Qatar has also covertly procured SY-400 short-range ballistic missiles from China.³⁰ Based on these developments, it is likely that Sino-Qatar relations would progress further, although China is likely to maintain a neutral position in terms of the Qatar-Gulf rift. It is evident that the tensions between Qatar and other Gulf States would also have an impact on India’s bilateral ties and New Delhi’s defence cooperation with Qatar, but India’s good relations with all the other Gulf countries and the United States should allow for a continuance of its defence/maritime engagements, albeit on a low key.

Saudi Arabia

India has strong economic and socio-cultural ties with Saudi Arabia. As a major power in West Asia, Saudi Arabia wields huge influence in the region and is thus an important country for India. However, Saudi Arabia’s bigger regional strategic partner has been Pakistan. Saudi Arabia also maintains a close security relationship with the United States. In 2014, Saudi Arabia overtook India as the largest importer of defence equipment worldwide, with the United States being its largest supplier.³¹

Until the late 1980s, Pakistan had a large armed forces presence in Saudi Arabia. Subsequently, however, the number was reportedly reduced to only provide training in Saudi Arabia.³² However, it is pertinent to note that in 2015–16, during the Yemen conflict, the

Pakistan Army had quietly deployed around 10,000 troops in Saudi Arabia.³³ However, the greater concern for India is the *de facto* role Pakistan plays as a provider of a “nuclear umbrella” to Saudi Arabia, which is suspected of having funded Pakistan’s nuclear weapons programme from the 1980s,³⁴ which eventually led to Pakistan becoming a declared nuclear weapons State in 1998. Pakistan’s clandestine nuclear programme was exposed by two British journalists in their widely-acclaimed book, “Deception: Pakistan, the United States and the Secret Trade in Nuclear Weapons”, which brought out that, as a *quid pro quo*, Pakistan may provide a nuclear umbrella for Saudi Arabia, or even transfer nuclear weapon-technology or even complete nuclear weapons to Saudi Arabia in the event that Iran acquires nuclear weapons.³⁵

Over the past decade, Pakistan’s “dysfunctional polity” seems to have diminished its influence in Saudi Arabia.³⁶ Consequently, signs of a steadily strengthening relationship between India and Saudi Arabia can be seen, especially since 2006 when King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz al-Saud visited New Delhi to be the chief guest for India’s Republic Day celebrations. He was the first Saudi King to visit India in 50 years, and was travelling from Beijing where he had met the Chinese President, Hu Jintao. Following his visit to India, King Saud also visited Pakistan. In 2010, when Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh visited Saudi Arabia, India-Saudi bilateral ties were elevated to a “strategic partnership”, with the signing of the “Riyadh Declaration.”³⁷ Later, in February 2014, an MoU for defence and security cooperation was signed during the visit of the Saudi Crown Prince, Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister, to New Delhi.³⁸ The MoU sought to promote cooperation in defence, industry, science, technology, and the transfer of technology. Subsequently, in April 2016, during the visit of Prime Minister Modi to Riyadh, five new bilateral agreements covering intelligence-sharing on the financing of terrorism, increasing private investment, and enhancing defence cooperation, were signed.³⁹ Significantly, in a symbolic gesture, Saudi Arabia bestowed the “King Abdulaziz Order of Merit” medal, the kingdom’s highest honour, on the Indian prime minister. In end 2018, during the fourth meeting of the Joint Defence Cooperation Committee, at Riyadh, the two countries discussed the possibility of enhancing defence engagement through joint arms-production and combined naval exercises.⁴⁰ This is a seminal development and was also discussed during the Saudi Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman’s visit to New Delhi in February 2019, where he was accompanied by a high-level official team, and a large business delegation. The Crown Prince was personally received by the Indian Prime Minister, Mr Narendra Modi, who broke traditional protocol norms and personally received Prince Mohammed bin Salman at the airport.

Based on the above developments it is likely that India’s maritime security engagements with Saudi Arabia, currently limited to ships visits and training assistance, could expand in the coming years. In addition to growing defence cooperation, India’s trade with Saudi Arabia has also grown. Currently, Saudi Arabia is India’s fourth largest trade partner (after China, USA, and Japan) and a major source of energy, with about 17% of India’s crude oil requirement being imported from the Kingdom. In 2017–18, India-Saudi bilateral trade had increased to \$ 27.48 billion, an increase of almost 10 per cent over that of the previous year, with Indian exports accounting for \$ 5.41 billion.⁴¹ Furthermore, India is reportedly considering partnering with Saudi Arabia for funding of infrastructure projects in the Maldives and other regional States.⁴² This could potentially open yet another facet for bilateral cooperation between the two countries.

China's relations with Saudi Arabia have rapidly grown in strength since the end of the Cold War in 1990, when Saudi Arabia officially established diplomatic relations with the PRC, breaking away from Taiwan. A key milestone was achieved in Sino-Saudi relations with the signing of the 1999-strategic oil cooperation agreement, creating a partnership between the world's largest consumer and producer of oil. The relationship received a further boost with the visit of the late King Abdullah to Beijing in 2006 – his first ever official visit abroad after his coronation. During this visit, the King signed a series of agreements covering not just energy trade, but also infrastructure and telecommunications. Following the visit of President Xi Jinping to Riyadh in January 2016, Saudi-China ties were elevated to a “comprehensive strategic partnership”, to include cooperation in economic, political, and military fields. Since 2016, Saudi Arabia has sought to diversify its economy, as outlined in the Saudi “Vision 2030”, and has expressed interest in the BRI, which could potentially provide new opportunities for growth and investments.⁴³ In March 2017, during the visit to Beijing of the present Saudi King, His Majesty King Salman, the two countries signed contracts valued at \$65 billion, covering energy, education and technology. This also included an agreement to establish a manufacturing facility in the Middle East for China's CH-4 hunter-killer drones or Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV) whose capabilities are reported to be similar to those of the USA's “MQ-1 Predator”.⁴⁴ The Chinese drone is already in use in several Gulf countries. Unconfirmed reports also indicate that a manufacturing and testing facility for Chinese ballistic missiles is being constructed within Saudi Arabia.⁴⁵ Reportedly, a proposal by Saudi Arabia to fund certain projects under the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) in Pakistan is under discussion, (along lines similar to those being pursued by India with the Kingdom, for projects in Maldives.) As Saudi Arabia seeks to diversify its diplomatic relations (beyond those with the United States), which have been sorely tested following recent developments such as murder of journalist, Jamal Khashoggi, by Saudi agents in Istanbul, and the war in Yemen, it seems clear that China-Saudi relations are poised to expand in coming years. This could pave the way for greater economic and strategic influence by China in the region. For now, India's multi-dimensional relations, including energy trade and contemporary defence cooperation are keeping India on an equal footing with Beijing, but this may not remain the case. Overall, it appears that Saudi is keen to balance its bilateral relationships with India and China, while maintaining close ties with the United States.

The United Arab Emirates (UAE)

India is one of the UAE's largest trading partners, with bilateral trade exceeding \$52 million in 2016–17.⁴⁶ The UAE is also the second largest export destination for India, and the destination-of-choice for Indian professionals seeking employment in the Gulf region. Over 2.8 million Indians live and work here, remitting about \$13.5 billion annually, and form the largest expatriate population, estimated to be nearly 30 per cent of the total population of the United Arab Emirates.⁴⁷ India-UAE ties have received an impetus in recent times, marked by high level visits. In August 2015, Prime Minister Modi visited the UAE. In addition to this being his first visit to the region, it was also the first visit by an Indian prime minister to the UAE in 34 years, thus marking the beginning of a new comprehensive and strategic partnership between the two nations.⁴⁸ In a joint statement the two countries agreed to not only consolidate extant cooperation, but also to

explore newer areas of collaboration. In February 2016, the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed, who is also the Deputy Supreme Commander of UAE Armed Forces, visited India. This was followed by another visit by the Crown Prince in January 2017, as the Chief Guest at India's Republic Day celebrations, where a contingent from the UAE armed forces actively participated in the parade. More recently, in February 2018, Prime Minister Modi visited UAE for the second time, and, in a significant development, India upgraded its ties with UAE to a "comprehensive strategic partnership", covering not just energy, but also security and defence cooperation. In a statement Prime Minister Modi highlighted:

We have agreed to expand our useful cooperation in the field of defence to new areas including in the maritime domain. The MoU (memorandum of understanding) on defence cooperation, signed earlier today, will help steer our defence engagements in the right direction.⁴⁹

The increasing attention paid to India by the UAE, evidenced by frequent high-level political interactions focused on various strategic initiatives including defence and security cooperation, clearly indicates a swing away from Pakistan, the UAE's "close friend." As noted earlier, Pakistan's dysfunctional polity and the role of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence in sponsoring terror groups has led to a decline in Islamabad's influence and standing amongst the Arab States. Reportedly, UAE-Pakistan relations dipped sharply following the killing, in January 2017, of five UAE diplomats in Afghanistan, in an attack that was suspected to have been orchestrated by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence and the Haqqani Network.⁵⁰ Earlier in 2015, the UAE was upset with Islamabad for its refusal to actively deploy troops in the Yemen conflict. It is pertinent to note that the UAE was supportive of the "surgical strike" by India on Pakistan in September 2016, in response to the terror attacks on an Indian Army unit in state of Jammu and Kashmir.⁵¹ Significantly, as a favour to the UAE government, a covert operation by Indian marine commandos was launched in March 2018, to "rescue" Sheikha Latifa, daughter of the Ruler of Dubai, who in an apparent attempt to flee her family, was found on a yacht 30 miles off Goa on the west coast of India. It is moot whether this operation was in violation of the international refugee convention and other norms for dealing with asylum seekers, but it was reportedly cleared by Prime Minister Modi himself.⁵²

A MoU on defence cooperation was initially signed between India and the UAE in 2003, (renewed as a defence cooperation agreement in 2014), and implemented through a Joint Defence Cooperation Committee. The scope for defence cooperation has now been expanded and, during the visit of the Crown Prince in 2017, an MoU for cooperation in field of defence industry and maritime security was also signed. India's security cooperation with UAE presently includes defence exports, intelligence-sharing on terrorism, regular ship visits, combined naval exercises, staff talks and training assistance. In March 2018, the Indian Navy conducted its first bilateral exercise, *Gulf Star I*, with the UAE Navy.⁵³ The Indian Navy is also involved in providing naval training to the UAE Navy,⁵⁴ and Indian naval ships deployed on anti-piracy patrols in the Gulf of Aden routinely enter Abu Dhabi for OTR.⁵⁵ Further, the UAE Navy is an active member of Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), and had assumed chairmanship of the IONS in 2010, upon completion of India's term.

The UAE's relations with China were elevated to a "comprehensive strategic partnership" during the historic State visit to the UAE by Chinese president Xi Jinping in July 2018, the first by a Chinese head of State in 29 years.⁵⁶ Recent years have also seen a spate of visits by trade delegations from China. Currently, the UAE is home to approximately 200,000 Chinese citizens and 4,000 trading companies. The annual trade between the two countries exceeds \$50bn, and is forecast to rise to \$70bn by 2020.⁵⁷ Mina Jebel Ali, in the UAE, is one of the largest and busiest ports in the world and is a gateway to Africa, the Middle East and Europe, making it an important hub along the Maritime Silk Road. Furthermore, according to a recent study, the UAE, with its high credit rating, presents China with a low-risk destination for overseas investment.⁵⁸ It is, therefore, evident that the Sino-UAE economic ties are set to accelerate in the coming years. The lack of defence engagements with China, however, also suggests that growing economic ties may not translate into meaningful political or military influence that could impinge upon India's strategic relations with the Gulf State.

Overall assessment of India's maritime cooperation in West Asia

It is clear that India has nurtured close strategic ties with Oman and possesses sound working relationships with the UAE and Qatar, despite significant Pakistani influence in the region. Further, India's relations with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, both of whom are key players in the West Asia region, are on an upswing, having gained greater salience than ever before. Evidently, the Indian Navy is acknowledged as a robust and professional force and the Arab Gulf navies are keen to engage with it for training and technical assistance. While these factors certainly help India strengthen its position in West Asia, the current regional security situation in Yemen, internal disputes involving Qatar, and the large military presence of the United States in West Asia, seems to limit the scope for India's in the region – particularly since the Indian government has preferred not to interfere in the region's disputes and political affairs.

In comparison with India, which has always been regarded as a regional player with historical ties and cultural affinity with the West Asian states, China is largely viewed as an "outsider."⁵⁹ China's evolving relations with the West Asian States are generally seen in the context of its energy imports and the BRI, which focuses on connectivity and trade cooperation stretching from China across Eurasia. Crucially for China, the Land Silk Road and the Maritime Silk Road crisscross each other in West Asia. China's investments in major infrastructure projects under the BRI in the GCC States appear to be driven primarily by economic interests.⁶⁰ Evidently, Chinese investments in this region are expected to yield good dividends from the oil rich Gulf States. In comparison, similar economic investments by China in South Asian States such as Pakistan, the Maldives, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh, which have a lower credit rating and carry significant investment risks, seem to be influenced more by strategic considerations than economic interests and are aimed at challenging India's influence in the region.

For the GCC States, China, as an emerging global power, could be a viable alternative partner to the United States, whose changing priorities under the Trump regime are perceived as having led to complications in the region. Thus, it is likely that China's deepening economic relations with GCC countries will translate into more broad-based defence cooperation and a commensurate increase of Beijing's political influence. China has

also sought to leverage its bilateral relations with the Gulf States to carve a larger role out for itself. In 2010, for instance, China offered (albeit unsuccessfully) to mediate a long-running island dispute between the United Arab Emirates and Iran over the sovereignty of the *Greater and Lesser Tunbs*, and the *Abu Musa* islands located in the Persian Gulf.⁶¹ It also played an important role as a mediator during the negotiations on the Yemen conflict. With respect to defence cooperation, until the 1980s, China was a key arms supplier to Iraq and Saudi Arabia.⁶² Recent developments, such as the agreement for a UAV manufacturing facility in the region, indicate that it could once again emerge as an important supplier of strategic weapons, possibly even as an alternative to the United States. Prior to the establishment of a logistics facility at Djibouti in 2017, China's naval engagements with the region were limited to port calls that were incidental to the ongoing deployment of the PLA Navy on anti-piracy missions. Oman, followed by Yemen, were preferred destinations for PLA Navy ships.⁶³ However, with the operationalisation of the naval facility at Djibouti and the availability of more naval platforms in the region, it is likely that in the coming years, the PLA Navy would be increasingly used to enable Beijing to play a larger role in the Persian Gulf.

It is also likely that China will continue to build security relationships in the region and establish close security ties with Saudi Arabia and the UAE. It is also probable that China would leverage its strategic ties with Pakistan to obtain advice from Islamabad on how best to strengthen its position in the region – just as the Americans had done earlier. Ultimately, even though China may not dominate the region in terms of strategic influence, given the overarching control by the United States, it could certainly surpass India's degree of influence. Essentially, this implies that India can no longer take its historical influence in the region for granted and must redouble its efforts to sustain and incrementally strengthen extant strategic ties with the GCC States. India must persist with ongoing political engagements and add force to current diplomatic efforts. Since the Indian Navy already conducts combined naval exercises with two of the six GCC navies, namely Oman and the UAE, and given that naval exercises with the Saudi Navy are under discussion, India could propose to expand the scope of its engagements by establishing a formal partnership with the GCC as a collective, and initiate combined naval exercises with the GCC navies. Moreover, India should proactively upgrade its training assistance to Oman and the UAE and establish a permanent or long-term training facility for the GCC navies in the region. Finally, India must focus attention upon the rapid operationalisation of maritime cooperation with Saudi Arabia and explore joint defence production as discussed in the latest meeting of the Joint Defence Cooperation Committee. For instance, it has been reported that Saudi Arabia is exploring the induction of submarines as part of its ongoing defence modernisation.⁶⁴ Given its experience of training the Vietnam Navy's submarine arm, India could offer basic submarine training and technical assistance to the Saudi Navy. There are several other areas for strategic cooperation that could be explored to advantage by the Indian Navy, but the onus lies with India to seize the opportunity to expand its security ties with Saudi Arabia and the other GCC States.

Conclusion

India has been presented with an opportunity to upgrade its security ties with GCC countries. This is unprecedented, considering that despite years of close trade and cultural

ties, India's influence here was constricted by the much larger role that Pakistan played in the region. That this has changed so radically offers strong testimony to the success of India's proactive foreign policy in the region. It is also a direct result of India's enhanced maritime military power and the positive perception that has been created in collective minds of the region's States. However, the growing Chinese economic influence poses a significant challenge for India. Contrary to its protestations of non-interference, China has not hesitated to leverage its growing political influence to mediate in various regional conflicts. In sharp contrast, India has chosen to maintain a neutral position and seems to have accepted the risk of appearing disinterested. China's defence cooperation in the region is expected to expand with the operationalisation of the PLA Navy base at Djibouti and the development of military production facilities in the region. In view of this, the possibility of a rapid expansion of Chinese strategic influence in West Asia eclipsing India's position in the region, is one that New Delhi cannot afford to treat lightly. In order for India to "out-manoeuvre" China, New Delhi must sustain its current political and diplomatic efforts, sharply increase the tempo of its bilateral maritime security cooperation, and, proactively promote multilateral cooperation with the GCC navies.

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