

Strategic Convergence in the Arabian Gulf: Evaluating India-UAE Partnership Post 2014

Mohammad Shahnawaz, Rayees Yousuf Mir



Abstract: India's foreign policy towards West Asia has evolved significantly, expanding beyond traditional concerns of energy dependence. Since 2014, under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, there has been a marked emphasis on counterterrorism, defence cooperation, trade diversification, regional security, and the fostering of stronger diplomatic ties. This paper highlights Prime Minister Narendra Modi's diplomatic achievements in the Gulf region, with a particular focus on the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Following independence, the Gulf states have emerged as key trade and energy partners for India. Under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, a transformative "Look West" policy has deepened economic, strategic, and cultural engagements with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, particularly with the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Initiatives such as the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA), digital financial integration, and the Local Currency Settlement (LCS) system underscore the shift toward more comprehensive cooperation. The article further explores India's strategic partnership with the UAE, characterised by robust trade, investment commitments, energy security, and diaspora engagement. Cultural diplomacy, epitomized by the inauguration of the BAPS Hindu Temple in Abu Dhabi, also highlights the strengthening of bilateral ties. This study also examines how Modi's leadership has enhanced bilateral relations, promoting mutual growth and solidifying India's position amid regional challenges and opportunities in the Arabian Gulf.

Keywords: India's Foreign Policy, West Asia, Gulf Region, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA), Digital Financial Integration, Local Currency Settlement (LCS), Diaspora Engagement.

Abbreviation:

GCC: Gulf Cooperation Council

UAE: United Arab Emirates

CEPA: Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement

LCS: Local Currency Settlement

BJP: Bhartiya Janata Party

BJS: Bhartiya Jana Sangh

I. INTRODUCTION

Discussions on India's foreign policy towards West Asia have generally focused on its energy dependence (Oil and

Gas), security concerns and the well-being of nearly 8 million Indians residing in the region. In recent years, especially after the Narendra Modi-led Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power in 2014, issues of counterterrorism, security, defence cooperation and trade in non-energy items have also come up for discussion (Anas, 2021, [1]). Moreover, India focuses on attracting investment to fuel economic growth, combating terrorism, addressing regional security issues in the Arabian Sea and the Persian Gulf region, and expanding its presence and influence in these areas. This change has been caused by pragmatic and ideological differences between the BJP and its predecessor, the Bhartiya Jana Sangh (BJS), as well as the previous Congress-led government in West Asia.

In February 2024, during his second term, Prime Minister Modi's recent diplomatic engagements included visits to the United Arab Emirates and Qatar. His visit to Qatar and UAE followed the opening of a Hindu temple in Abu Dhabi and the discharge of eight ex-Indian navy officers who had been detained in Doha on espionage charges. These developments highlight the strengthening ties and deepening cooperation between India and the Gulf States (Mohan, 2024, [2]).

Both events represent PM Modi's successful diplomatic efforts and highlight India's growing partnership with the Gulf region over the past decade. Surprisingly, a Hindu temple would be constructed in the Arabian Peninsula with state support, and the Indian Prime Minister would participate in its inauguration. There are several reasons for these improved relations, but the most significant is Prime Minister Modi's understanding of the region's importance and multiple visits to it. For a long time, West Asia was not a political priority for Indian Policymakers. For instance, during the ten years of the UPA government, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh visited the West Asian region only four times, two of which were to attend Non-Aligned Movement summits in Cairo and Tehran. On the other hand, since 2014, Prime Minister Modi has made 15 visits to the region. His 2015 visit to the UAE was the first by an Indian Prime Minister since 1981, despite the Gulf countries' significant importance in Indian foreign policy. His recent visit marks his seventh trip to the UAE and second to Qatar as Prime Minister.

According to analysts and scholars, a significant shift is observed in improving relations. Modi has recognized the importance of establishing personal relationships with the region's rulers to strengthen ties. Gulf rulers prioritize personal relationships at the leadership level and shape their national policies through mutual trust and political dialogue. In an era where diplomacy is often viewed as a business or commercial transaction, the deep personal relationship between Indian PM Narendra Modi and the President of the UAE, Sheikh Mohammad bin Zayed

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Al Nahyan, shows a unique perspective.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper analyses the evolving strategic partnership between India and the UAE during Modi's tenure, applying a dual theoretical framework that integrates neo-realist and constructivist approaches to explain both material and ideational factors influencing bilateral relations. Neo-Realism emphasises material and strategic drivers of cooperation, whereas Constructivism highlights the social and cultural factors that foster partnerships.

Neo-Realism, based on Kenneth Waltz's structural realism, asserts that states function within an anarchic international system, prioritising security and power for survival (Waltz, 1979, [3]).

This theory analyses the India-UAE partnership as a strategic response to evolving global and regional dynamics, including China's rise, Iran's regional aspirations, and the ongoing turmoil in West Asia, from the Israel-Palestine conflict to Syria, which have shaped the relationship patterns. The UAE, confronted with increasing uncertainties in the Gulf and declining dependence on Western powers such as the United States, has pursued diversification of its alliances by engaging with emerging powers like India (Ulrichsen, 2019, [4]).

Moreover, Mearsheimer (2001, [5]) argues that in an anarchic system, states aim to enhance their security by accumulating power and forming strategic alliances. Considering changing regional challenges, this theoretical perspective is essential when analysing how India and the UAE have strengthened their defence collaboration and maritime security frameworks. Additionally, cooperative military drills in the Arabian Gulf, intelligence cooperation, and counter-terrorism projects demonstrate the Pragmatic alignment of security interests.

In addition to this materialist perspective, the constructivist framework, primarily influenced by Alexander Wendt's social constructivist theory of international politics, highlights the significance of shared identities, values, and social interactions in shaping state interests and behaviour (Wendt, 1999, [6]). As Hopf (2002, [7]) points out that state interests develop from the interaction between structural factors and social processes rather than from being either entirely material or ideational. In India and the UAE, this demonstrates how economic interdependence, security cooperation, and cultural ties have strengthened one another, leading to a comprehensive strategic partnership. More than 3.5 million Indians live in the UAE, which serves as a bridge that enhances both economic and socio-cultural connections. The two nations' enduring historical and cultural connections have cultivated a mutual sense of identity that encourages collaboration. Shared values of regional stability and multilateralism outline the partnership. Both nations are committed to promoting peace and development in the Gulf region and beyond, engaging with multilateral platforms such as the I2U2 (comprising India, Israel, the UAE, and the USA), BRICS, and G20 summits, which demonstrate their cooperative strategy in addressing global challenges.

The bilateral relationship has been dramatically redefined by the personal diplomacy of Narendra Modi and the UAE's

Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed. Modi's high-profile state visits and symbolic gestures, including his receipt of the UAE's highest civilian honour and the UAE's investment in India's soft power projects, underscore the need for leadership in fostering mutual trust. These acts reveal respect and shared beliefs that go beyond just material gain.

Using this comprehensive theoretical framework, the study aims to demonstrate how, under Modi's leadership, the interplay of structural forces, material capacities, shared identities, and social interactions has shaped the development of India-UAE relations. For example, economic interdependence and defence collaboration are based on practical considerations, yet they are maintained through leadership dynamics, cultural connections, and common aspirations for regional stability. These frameworks collectively offer a comprehensive insight into the bilateral relationship, emphasising the interaction of practical interests and common identities.

A. Historical Context and Evolution of India-UAE Relations

The relationship between India and the Gulf region dates back nearly four thousand years, centred around trade and cultural exchanges. These interactions included trade links between the ancient civilisations of the Indus Valley and Dilmun (present-day Bahrain). During the colonial era, connections between India and the Gulf states continued, as British India managed its imperial interests in the Gulf through the Bombay Presidency. Until the early 1960s, the Indian rupee was the official currency in Qatar, Oman, Kuwait, Bahrain, and the Trucial States (now incorporated into the UAE). The British recognised the strategic importance of this region as a means of overseeing their Middle Eastern interests from India.

Since gaining independence, the Gulf states have become key trade partners for India, with the region's oil and gas reserves playing a crucial role in this relationship. Moreover, economic relations between India and the Gulf states have consistently grown during the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, driven by increased oil imports. During Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's tenure from 2004 to 2014, India's relations with the Gulf states further strengthened. Notably, agreements like the Delhi and Riyadh Declarations were established during this period, fostering joint efforts in counterterrorism and upgrading relations to a "strategic partnership," including increased defence cooperation. Instances of collaboration, such as the extradition of the alleged handler of the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks from Saudi Arabia, exemplify the strengthening of these relations, which continue to improve.

III. MODI'S DIPLOMATIC OUTREACH TO THE GULF

Under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India has achieved notable success in its West Asian policy. During NDA's first term, India balanced relations among the region's key powers—Israel, Iran, and Saudi Arabia—while maintaining a non-aligned approach. Modi's diplomatic outreach to these states strengthened India's limited pre-existing engagements, yielding significant security



and economic gains (Pant & Taneja, 2019, [8]). This included the deportation of terror suspects from Saudi Arabia and the UAE, defence, and technology agreements with Israel, and safeguarding the India-Iran oil trade and the Chabahar Port project despite U.S. opposition (Ramachandran, 2019, [9]).

During Modi's tenure, diplomatic engagements with the Gulf and broader West Asia laid a strong foundation for enhanced cooperation. Historically centred on three Es: Economic, Energy and Expatriate, these relationships expanded significantly, marked by notable milestones. For instance, Modi received the UAE's highest civilian honour, the Zayed Medal, and India conducted its first Indian Air Force stopover in Saudi Arabia (PTI, 2019, [10]). Over the years, Modi visited key regional areas, including Riyadh, Tel Aviv, Abu Dhabi, Tehran, and Ramallah, while hosting prominent leaders such as Netanyahu, Rouhani, Mohammed bin Zayed, Mohammed bin Salman, and Mahmoud Abbas (Bose, 2019, [11]; Roche, 2019, [12]; PTI, 2017, [13]). These interactions strategically navigated regional tensions, fostering progressive bilateral ties.

In the 2014 general election, the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power with a campaign centred on the vision of 'Shreshtha Bharat' (a Great India), emphasising robust economic growth and a strategic roadmap to elevate India's global status both economically and politically. According to S. Jaishankar, Minister of External Affairs, India envisions itself as a leading power on the world stage, aspiring to move beyond the role of balancing power and demonstrating a readiness to undertake greater responsibilities in the global arena.

Factors including economic partnerships, energy security, and strategic alliances influence the evolution of India's foreign policy towards the Gulf region. Under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, there has been a notable shift towards a more comprehensive engagement with the Gulf states, emphasising economic, security, and strategic dimensions.

According to Kumaraswamy (2018, [14]) Since Mr Narendra Modi assumed power, there has been a noticeable shift in Indian foreign policy towards the Gulf region. This area has garnered significant attention in terms of politics, diplomacy, strategy, and economics, primarily due to Prime Minister Modi's proactive engagement with the overseas Indian community in the Gulf. Modi's active involvement with the Indian diaspora in the Gulf further underscored this renewed focus. His personalized and high-level leadership style yielded tangible outcomes, including investment commitments, extradition agreements, counter-terrorism and security cooperation, energy security initiatives, diaspora welfare measures, and business expansion, which have significantly enhanced bilateral relations (Trigunayat, 2020, [15]).

Modi's outreach to the GCC states is of great value, as the region is crucial to India. Since 2014, India has consistently articulated its 'Think West' initiative in various terms such as 'Look West', 'Act West', or 'Link West' over the years. This initiative aims to complement the 'Act East' policy and foster institutional engagement with South East Asian economies (Burton, 2019, [16]; Mohan 2014, [17]).

A. India-UAE: A Convergence of Economic Ties

India-UAE relations indicate that the UAE stands as India's fourth-largest investor, having committed to investing USD 75 billion in India's infrastructure. During 2022-23, bilateral trade reached nearly USD 85 billion, positioning it as India's third-largest trading partner and second-largest export destination [18]. The UAE's status as India's second-largest export destination highlights its significance in facilitating market access for Indian goods and services, thereby making a substantial contribution to India's economic growth. India's primary exports to the UAE include a diverse array of goods, such as petroleum products, gems and jewellery, food items, textiles, and engineering products [19]. On the other hand, India's main imports from the UAE consist primarily of petroleum and petroleum products, gems and jewellery, chemicals, and related commodities.

Additionally, around 3.5 million Indian expatriates reside in the UAE, a population larger than that of many countries, accounting for approximately 30% of the UAE's population [20]. This Indian diaspora plays a significant role in the local economy and remits a substantial amount back to India, strengthening the bilateral relationship between the two nations. The presence of approximately 3.5 million Indians, making up 30% of the UAE's population, demonstrates the deep integration of the Indian community into the UAE's social and economic fabric.

The UAE's position as India's fourth-largest investor and third-largest trading partner highlights its critical role in India's economy. The bilateral trade of USD 85 billion in 2022-23 reflects the growing interdependence between the two economies. Being India's second-largest export destination showcases the UAE's importance in providing market access for Indian goods and services, contributing significantly to India's economic growth.

Additionally, the strong partnership between India and the UAE has led to a comprehensive strategic alliance marked by deep cooperation and several opportunities. Building on this foundation, to boost economic ties in February 2022, India and the UAE signed the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) [21].

The two countries also signed an agreement for the interlinking of digital platforms, such as India's Unified Payments Interface (UPI) and the UAE's AANI [22]. This will enable smooth cross-border transactions between India and the UAE, strengthening financial connectivity and collaboration. This agreement underscores the importance of financial connectivity in fostering economic relations. It facilitates seamless transactions between businesses and individuals in both countries, reducing the costs and time associated with traditional banking systems. The interlinking facilitates easier remittances and financial interactions between Indian expatriates and their families back home, thereby solidifying the socio-economic bond between the two nations. This shows that India and the UAE are moving beyond traditional trade agreements to collaborate on emerging technologies. This also reflects their strategic intent to position themselves as leaders in the digital economy. Both countries also signed a pact on interlinking domestic debit and credit cards: RuPay of

India and JAYWAN of the UAE [23].

In July 2023, they also agreed on the Local Currency Settlement (LCS) system to promote trade in Indian rupees and UAE dirhams [24]. Establishing the LCS would enable exporters and importers to invoice and settle payments in their respective domestic currencies, thereby facilitating the creation of an INR-AED (Indian Rupee-AED) foreign exchange market, as stated by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI). Exporters and importers from India and the UAE will no longer need to rely on an intermediate currency, such as the US Dollar, for invoicing and settling trade payments. This reduces the dependency on global reserve currencies and cuts transaction costs associated with currency conversion. Simplified currency transactions would make trade more attractive and accessible for Indian and UAE businesses. This could enhance bilateral trade and investment flows, aligning with strategic economic partnerships.

Moreover, India and other Gulf countries have expanded their counterterrorism cooperation in the past decade. Additionally, India and the UAE strengthened their relations with the formation of the I2U2 group, which includes India, Israel, the United States, and the UAE, in 2022 (Sheikh, 2024, [25]) and with the BRICS expansion in August 2023 to include key Gulf countries. Furthermore, at the G20 summit in September 2023, India announced a significant project, the India- Middle East- Europe Economic Corridor [26]. Additionally, India invited the UAE to be a special guest at the G20 meeting. This major project, announced during the G20 summit, positions India and the UAE as central players in creating a new trade and transport link between Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. It reflects a shift toward greater connectivity and collaboration in global supply chains. The partnership in counterterrorism also signifies mutual trust and shared security concerns. It underscores a common goal of combating extremism and maintaining regional stability. This alignment reflects the UAE's recognition of India as a reliable partner in addressing global and regional security challenges. With India's endorsement, the inclusion of Gulf nations in BRICS strengthens economic and political ties between the two regions. It also showcases India's diplomatic influence in shaping multilateral forums. Including the UAE in this unique grouping alongside India, Israel, and the U.S. highlights its growing geopolitical importance and India's role in fostering such alliances.

B. India-UAE Cultural Ties: A Blend of Tradition and Contemporary Diplomacy

On February 14, Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated a large BAPS Swaminarayan temple in Abu Dhabi. The BAPS temple, located near Abu Mureikha, will be the largest Hindu temple in the Arabian Peninsula. It will be constructed from stone and spread over 27 acres. Additionally, there are three other Hindu temples in Dubai.

Both countries have recognized the BAPS Hindu Temple as a symbol of India-UAE relations and deep cultural ties. Furthermore, it also reflects the UAE's global commitment to promoting peace, harmony, tolerance, and peaceful coexistence. The temple in Abu Dhabi is a result of the growing cultural, trade, and strategic relations between the two nations. India and the UAE are also interested in supporting peace and stability at both the regional and

international levels. It is worth noting that during his first visit in 2015, Prime Minister Modi requested that the UAE government grant land for a temple to meet the spiritual and religious needs of the sizable Hindu population. In addition to the BAPS Mandir inauguration, Prime Minister Modi also spoke to the Indian diaspora at the 'Ahlan Modi' (Hello Modi in Arabic) event on February 13, 2024 (Livemint, 2024, [27]). The Indian ambassador to the UAE, Sanjay Sudhir, expressed that "there is a strong interest among people to learn about Prime Minister Narendra Modi's vision, especially his idea of 'Viksit Bharat,' during the 'Ahlan Modi' event." He further stated, "Wherever the Indian diaspora is located, they are always eager to hear Prime Minister Modi speak directly." The enthusiasm is evident here, as when we opened registrations for Ahlan Modi, we had to close them once they reached 65,000, as we could no longer accommodate additional participants (MEA, 2024, [28]). The overwhelming enthusiasm for events like Ahlan Modi illustrates the growing influence of India's soft power. Modi's outreach to the diaspora enhances India's global presence, enabling it to use its overseas community as a tool for fostering deeper ties in bilateral relations. Events like 'Ahlan Modi' foster deeper economic collaborations and support for India's development goals, including a 'Viksit Bharat' (Developed India) vision. The large turnout and enthusiasm reflect the importance of diaspora-driven diplomacy. Modi's approach to connecting with the diaspora is not only about strengthening India's image abroad but also about leveraging these communities to enhance relations with the countries in which they reside, fostering goodwill and mutual collaboration.

Furthermore, analysts believe that under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's leadership, India's soft power diplomacy is playing a key role in rekindling the pride of the Indian diaspora in India's heritage, culture, and civilisation. Simultaneously, it promotes the global revival of Indianness as a process centred on universal welfare, mutual respect, and peace.

Prime Minister Modi's recent visit to the UAE marked his third visit within less than a year. He visited the UAE in July 2023 and then again in November to participate in COP28, where he was honoured as the sole guest speaker at the formal opening session. Meanwhile, Sheikh Mohammed was specially invited to India in September to attend the G-20 Summit, and he visited again in January 2024 to participate as a guest of honour in the Vibrant Gujarat Global Summit. During his February 2024 visit, the Prime Minister delivered a keynote address at the 11th World Government Summit in Dubai as a guest of honour. This summit, often referred to as the "Davos of Dubai," is a crucial annual conference that draws the attention of global leaders, heads of international organizations, industry leaders, and thinkers across the globe. The session's theme was "Shaping Future Governments," which gave India a golden opportunity to present its perspectives to an influential international audience.

The Abu Dhabi Investment Authority (ADIA) is set to establish an office in GIFT City, Gujarat. The 'Indian Oil Corporation Limited' has entered into a 14-year agreement to acquire 1.2 million metric tons of liquefied natural gas each year from the 'Abu Dhabi National



Oil Company' for 2026-39, aiming to enhance India's energy security. Furthermore, there has been good progress in discussions on various sensitive areas of defence cooperation between the two countries. The Indian PM Modi set up the foundation stone for 'Bharat Mart,' a facility designed to combine retail, warehousing, and logistics within Dubai's 'Jebel Ali Free Trade Zone.' Bharat Mart is poised to boost exports from India's micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) by offering a platform for them to connect with global consumers in the Gulf, West Asia, Africa, and Eurasia. Setting up this facility in Dubai, an international logistics and trade hub, positions India to leverage the UAE's strategic location to expand its footprint in key regions. It integrates India more efficiently into global supply chains, particularly in high-demand areas.

IV. CONCLUSION

After assuming office in 2014, under the leadership of PM Modi, the new government maintained the same track rather than taking a different path. Still, it reinforced what was becoming known as the "Look West" strategy, focusing on three primary axes: Arab Gulf states, Israel, and Iran. PM Modi energised it by establishing a remarkable personalised approach at the top of leadership, yielding outcomes such as investment commitments, extradition of wanted criminals, counter-terrorism collaboration, security partnerships, energy security, diaspora welfare, and business growth, all of which have a multiplier effect on the bilateral relationship.

In Modi's words, the strategic partnership between India and the UAE serves as a model for the world and is creating new history in the third decade of the 21st century. Moreover, this partnership is strengthening across all sectors and reaching new heights. Both countries desire that this partnership continue to grow stronger with each passing day.

However, the ongoing conflict in the region is a cause for concern for both, as it could increase the duration and costs of freight shipping and potentially raise oil prices, which poses a significant threat to India's economic growth. In this situation, the government must work closely with the United Arab Emirates and other regional influential partners, like Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Qatar, to safeguard India's interests.

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After aggregating input from all authors, I must verify the accuracy of the following information as the article's author.

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