

RAJA MANDALA: WHAT INDIA HAS TO OFFER IN THE GULF

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Middle East

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Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#)'s visit to the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain this week underlines Delhi's continuing commitment to the transformation of India's relations with the Gulf region. Although, the Gulf's value for India had steadily risen for more than four decades, Modi is the first one to pay sustained high-level political attention to the region.

If no prime minister of India had travelled to the UAE for more than three decades, before 2015, Modi is about to head to the Emirates for the third time since then. That Modi is being honoured with the Zayed Medal, the highest civilian honour in the Emirates, underlines the new good will, trust and personal intimacy between PM Modi and the UAE leadership. The Zayed Medal is named after the founder of the kingdom, Sheik Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan.

If India tended to see the Gulf region through the prism of Pakistan in the past, it has now learnt that the conservative Gulf Kingdoms are quite eager to develop an independent relationship with Delhi. Three areas highlight the region's new approach to India.

First, some Gulf countries have expanded counter-terror cooperation with Delhi, extending support to India in the unfolding conflict over Jammu and Kashmir, and have sought to open the OIC platform for India despite Pakistan's objections. Delhi has long chafed at Pakistan's routine mobilisation of the Organisation Islamic Cooperation against India.

Second, recognising Modi's special interest in the welfare of the Indian diaspora and expatriate labour, the Gulf kingdoms have begun to address many of the long-standing Indian concerns. Third, the oil rich Gulf has begun to see India, one of the world's leading energy importers, as a major economic partner. The recent Saudi decision to pick up 20 per cent stake in the oil business of Reliance Industries Limited and UAE's support for the construction of India's Strategic Petroleum Reserve are two examples of deepening energy interdependence.

Modi's non-defensive and non-ideological approach to the Gulf has been a major contribution to India's foreign policy. But there is one weakness that remains to be overcome. If the focus of Modi's first term was on what India can get from the region, the emphasis in the second must be

on what Delhi can do for the Gulf. Three opportunities present themselves for India.

The first is about paying greater attention to the domestic dynamics in the different kingdoms of the Gulf amidst the region's deepening political turbulence. One important new trend has been the effort to promote moderate Islam in the region. The UAE has been at the forefront of this effort aimed at modernising and stabilising the Arab Gulf societies. In Saudi Arabia, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman has taken some small but significant steps to liberalise the economy and society.

While the West has reacted with scepticism or is demanding faster pace in these reforms, Delhi should offer strong public support for the reform agenda in the region. No country has a higher stake in the efforts to reclaim the legacy of peaceful co-existence of religions in the Gulf. Supporting positive reform will lend greater weight to India's concerns about the continuing negative trends in the region, such as the support for extremist ideologies.

Second, Delhi must reciprocate more productively to the enthusiasm in the Gulf region for strategic economic cooperation with India — ranging from energy and digital innovation to arms production and space technology. While the region is ready to deploy its considerable amounts of capital in India's growth story, Delhi has been tardy in facilitating investments from the Gulf.

China, in contrast, has moved quickly to elevate its economic and commercial profile in the region. As India begins to take the dangers of an economic slowdown seriously, it should try and unclog multiple bureaucratic and policy obstacles to investments from the Gulf.

Third, security cooperation, where the unrealised potential remains huge. The highly vulnerable Gulf regimes have long depended upon Britain and the US to protect themselves from threats — internal, regional and international. Amidst the current domestic turmoil in the Anglo-American world, President Donald Trump's talk on downsizing America's role in the Gulf is encouraging the region to diversify its security partnerships.

It is time Delhi showed some initiative to develop a more pro-active strategy for defence cooperation in the region. Inaction now will necessarily lead to reaction as other Asian powers like China carve out a larger security role in the Gulf. Russia and France have already stepped up their involvement in the Gulf region's security affairs.

As the internal conflicts within the Gulf region — the intra-Arab, as well as between the Arabs and the Iranians — sharpened in recent years, Delhi's instinct was to avoid getting drawn into these. But ducking can't be a permanent Indian security strategy in the Gulf. Thanks to the potential American retrenchment, the Gulf powers are recognising the importance of engaging each other. The recent talks on maritime security between UAE and Iran, who have had a troubled relationship for long, could be a sign of things to come. The question for India is no longer about taking sides; it is about contributing to the regional security in whatever manner it can.

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