

RAJA MANDALA: RETHINKING THE GULF

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India's relations with the key Gulf countries have never been as good as they are today. The deepening energy interdependence is marked by growing volumes of energy imports into India and the prospect of substantive investments from the Gulf into the Indian hydrocarbon sector. The number of Indian migrant workers in the region stands at more than 7 million. The Gulf is among India's top trading partners.

Meanwhile, a high-level engagement between India and the Gulf has blossomed in recent years. Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#) and External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj have travelled frequently to the Gulf and there has been a steady stream of senior Gulf leaders visiting India. The expansion of the political engagement has been matched by the growing security cooperation, especially on counter-terrorism. India and its Gulf partners are also taking tentative steps towards defence cooperation.

There is no question that Delhi's political neglect of the Gulf has ended during the last few years. Yet, India's relations with the Gulf have been constrained by too strong a focus on the bilateral. Delhi is paying too little attention to the growing weight of the Gulf in regional affairs and the strategic possibilities that it opens up for India.

To be sure, Saudi Arabia has long been a pivotal state. As the nation with one of the world's largest petroleum reserves and capable of modulating its oil production, Riyadh has played a critical role in shaping the world energy markets since the 1970s. As the home to Mecca and Medina, Saudi Arabia has a unique place in the Islamic world. Since the late 1960s, Riyadh has exercised significant political influence in the evolution of the Middle East.

The rise of the UAE, in contrast, has been less noticed. What differentiates the UAE from other petrostates is a rare purposefulness that has turned it into a strategic actor of consequence in the Middle East and beyond. The cathartic events of 9/11 and the Arab Spring have convinced Abu Dhabi that it must act boldly and generate the capabilities to survive amidst the regional turbulence.

Consider for a moment the defence budget of the UAE. Some reports put it around \$22 billion, which is nearly 40 per cent of India's defence spending of about \$52 billion. The UAE was the

fourth-largest importer of weapons during 2013-17.

The UAE is also a major player in the global logistics market, thanks to the successful development of Dubai as a major port and aviation hub. It is now striving to emerge as a centre of art, higher education and technological innovation. As the home to multiple nationalities from around the world, the UAE has become a small but important cosmopolitan centre.

If Delhi looks beyond the bilateral, it will find two very important axes of potential partnerships in the Middle East. One is the idea of a “moderate Arab centre”. The UAE leadership has made the construction of a moderate bloc in the region its highest regional priority. It sees the construction of such a core around Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Abu Dhabi believes that only a coalition of moderate Arab states can move the region out of its current deeply troubled state.

Abu Dhabi also believes that the values of cultural openness, religious tolerance, women’s empowerment, and economic opportunities for younger people — which helped the Emirates succeed — can be extended to other parts of the Middle East. By any measure, this is an ambitious project. And there are many obstacles to its realisation — especially the deepening divisions within the Gulf.

But the idea of a moderate Arab centre should resonate deeply with India’s natural ethos and its traditional empathy for modernising forces in the Arab world. Helping the construction of a moderate Arab centre envisaged by Abu Dhabi, then, is very much in India’s interest.

Second is the growing impact of the Gulf countries in the Indian Ocean region. Nowhere is this more evident than the Horn of Africa. The recent success of the UAE and Saudi Arabia in brokering peace between Ethiopia and Eritrea who had been locked in a prolonged conflict underlines the positive role of the Gulf in Africa. Others point to the destabilising impact of the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and the UAE on the one hand and Qatar and Turkey elsewhere in the region, most notably in Somalia and its rebel provinces.

Alliances, military bases, interventions and peace-making have long been considered as the preserve of great powers. But the Gulf countries today are bringing a combination of financial resources and political will to shape the geopolitics of their neighbouring regions. Some of the Gulf countries like the UAE are eager to collaborate with India on development assistance and the construction of strategic infrastructure in the Indian Ocean littoral. If India continues to be disinterested, they are bound to look for other partners.

The Gulf states have relied in the past on the Anglo-Americans for their security. As America and Britain gaze at their own navel, the Gulf states are taking greater responsibility for managing the regional order. The conditions under which India could afford to take a purely bilateral approach to the Gulf nations are beginning to disappear. India needs an integrated regional strategy to secure its ever-rising stakes in the Middle East and the Western Indian Ocean.

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