

Passage to the Gulf

The most remarkable thing about the new agreements with Oman on military access to the Duqm port and logistical cooperation, announced during Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#)'s visit to Muscat, is that they took so long. The Gulf kingdoms have always been interested in strong security partnerships with India. It was Delhi, however, that thumbed its nose. Through the 19th and the first half of the 20th centuries, the undivided Subcontinent under the Raj was the principal security provider for Oman and other sheikhdoms in the south eastern coast of the Arabian peninsula. After Independence, non-aligned India began to dissociate itself from such a role. When the British decided to withdraw most of their military forces from the east of Suez and granted independence to the Gulf kingdoms in 1971, many of the sheikhs turned to India for security partnerships.

At the urging of Muscat, for example, India signed a defence cooperation agreement with Oman in 1972. India also deputed its naval personnel to man the fledgling maritime forces of Oman. As India's own defence infrastructure began to rust and its foreign policy turned increasingly ideological, Delhi's ability and interest in sustaining the security partnership with Oman and other Gulf states began to diminish. As India began to turn outward again in 1991, Oman took the initiative to renew the defence cooperation agreement with India in 2005. Since then there has been a tentative expansion of India's military engagement. While the Indian Navy and the Foreign Office are eager to expand India's security footprint in the Indian Ocean, the civilian bureaucracy of the Ministry of Defence has not bought into the idea of military diplomacy.

Meanwhile, the PLA has begun to develop basing arrangements across the Indian Ocean as part of its naval power projection. It will be a huge mistake for Delhi, however, to view its naval engagement with friends like Oman through the Chinese prism. Delhi does not need access to Oman's Duqm and other ports to counter Chinese naval presence in Pakistan's Gwadar port that is so close to India. There is a strong case for rebuilding special military relationships with Oman and others on their own merits. In securing its growing economic interests far from national shores, India needs access to military facilities across the Indian Ocean. As small states seek to diversify their defence relations in an uncertain era, they are indeed eager for India's security cooperation.

Unfortunately, Delhi has been hesitant to walk through that open door. Although Modi has been more enthusiastic, he is yet to modernise the ossified higher defence organisation that severely limits India's military diplomacy. Without that reform, India's security cooperation in the Gulf and beyond will remain ad hoc and underwhelming.

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