

## A GULF TOO WIDE

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C Raja Mohan wrote in The Indian Express ([A diplomatic blind spot](#), October 16): “As their confrontation with Tehran escalates, the Gulf Arabs are dismayed by Delhi’s inability to engage with their profound security concerns about Iran. Worse still, they see a Delhi that is politically passive on the Arab front and strategically active on the Iranian side.”

Pakistan is often stricken with a contrary conscience when leaning in favour of the Gulf Arabs and neglecting Iran. The parliament in Islamabad actually protested the retired army chief General Raheel Sharif being made the head of a Saudi-led “Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism” as it saw an anti-Iran angle in it. Culturally, Pakistan shares a lot with Iran — sharing religion with the Arabs is not as deep a bond — but is compelled by the strategic disposition of the Gulf region to side with the Arabs. Also, it has a workforce in the Arab Gulf that sends the bulk of the dollar remittances that keep Pakistan afloat.

Iran under the Shah was a part of pax Americana in the region with Pakistan riding along, using Iran as “strategic depth” in the 1965 war against India. After the Shah was driven out in 1979, the situation changed and old threats resurfaced. Wars were fought and global security threatened enough to bring the Americans in. Pakistan was on the wrong side of Revolutionary Iran after 9/11 when Afghanistan was invaded and Mullah Umar was made to flee. India had been “isolated” along with Iran as the Arab “warriors” came to Afghanistan to fight the Soviet army.

The Gulf is now militarily dominated by the US, allowing President Donald Trump to shoot off his mouth without fear of a punitive backlash. India is drawing close to the US as both oppose the entry of China into the region. It is possible that a firm India-US strategic partnership will be complete only after India pulls out of its strategic embrace with Iran, although Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#)’s recent diplomacy in the Gulf has been praised for its Chanakyan malleability. Pakistan’s own Gulf diplomacy is too one-sided in favour of the Arabs, and this lack of suppleness fills it with guilt. But Raja Mohan is obviously better armed with “strategic” information.

In Qatar, the US army base at Camp As-Sayliyah has served as a forward headquarters and command centre (CENTCOM). There is also a base for pre-positioned army equipment at Doha airport. Kuwait sponsors four US military bases — Camp Doha, Camp Arifjan, Ali al-Salem Air Base and Ahmad al-Jaber Air Base — and is the headquarters for CENTCOM’s army component.

The Bahrain base, acquired in 1995, has 21 American ships and one aircraft carrier. The port of Manama in Bahrain is headquarters for the US Navy’s 5th Fleet and hosts the headquarters of CENTCOM navy and marine corps leaders. Bahrain also provides the Sheik Isa Air Base. Oman allows the use of three bases by the US military; the Masirah Air Base, the Thumrait Naval Air Base for anti-submarine patrol planes, and the US Air Force use of Seeb International Airport, which is Oman’s largest airport.

Raja Mohan wants focus on some of the strategic details that Pakistan wants to forget in its search for balance. He highlights the importance of what he calls the third factor in the Gulf: “That brings to the third factor — Delhi’s tendency to privilege long-term geopolitical expectations

from Iran over the far weightier current relationship with the Gulf Arabs. On all the current economic indicators — supply of hydrocarbons, size of the migrant workers, hard currency remittances, trade and mutual investments — Iran offers no serious comparison with the Arab Gulf. Parts of the Arab Gulf are also emerging as modern financial and innovation hubs that offer great possibilities to India. Iran is nowhere in that game.”

The “third factor” applies to Pakistan as well but it fills it with guilt vis-a-vis Iran, increasingly as Washington becomes blunt in its criticism of Pakistan’s “harbouring”terrorists. But whereas India has a “choice”, Pakistan doesn’t; it can be pressured by the Arabs the same way as by the Americans. India can drag its feet over its strategy in the Gulf; Pakistan remains unhappily stuck with a policy it thinks is one-sided.

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