



**Chintan
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Foundation**



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INDIA AND THE UAE

Crafting a Model Strategic Partnership
Amid a Tumultuous Global Order

UAE



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India and the UAE

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FOREWORD



India and the UAE share a special partnership, built not only on centuries of cultural and civilisational linkages, but on strategic convergence and mutual trust built over the years. Over the past decade, UAE has emerged as one of the most reliable and trustworthy partners of India. In an era where trade tensions and simmering conflicts are impacting global economic growth, India-UAE ties are steadily breaking new grounds and are setting an example and a model for others to follow. Both countries have often gone out of the way to seek convergence and have made noticeable exceptions for each other. The foundation has now been laid but there are still new frontiers to be breached and new benchmarks to be set in this unique partnership in India's extended neighborhood. Recognising these, Col Rajeev Agarwal, CRF's Senior Research Consultant has conducted in-depth research on the bilateral relations between the two countries.

The research paper acknowledges and explores the various dimensions of this partnership. It highlights how the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) signed between the two countries in February 2022, negotiated in a record time of 88 days, is setting global benchmarks. The new initiatives in Fintech cooperation as well as joint efforts in Space exploration, polar research in the Antarctica and cooperation in Artificial Intelligence present new frontiers in cooperation. The inclusion of UAE in the ambitious trans continental connectivity project, India Middle-East Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) and the collaboration in harmonising regulatory frameworks through a digital platform like MAITRI is presenting models for other countries to follow. These and many other unique facets of this relationship clearly indicate to the enormous possibilities in the future between these two strategic partners.

At CRF, we believe that research must move beyond diagnosis to shape actionable strategies. This research paper exemplifies that spirit by offering a roadmap for policymakers, businesses, and stakeholders in both India and the UAE. I am confident that the insights presented here will contribute meaningfully to policy debates and provide a foundation for a stronger, more resilient partnership between India and the UAE.

Shishir Priyadarshi
President, Chintan Research Foundation

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It was in August 2015 that Prime Minister Modi became the first Indian prime minister to visit the UAE in 34 years. Rest, as they, is history. In ten years from then, the two countries have come together and forged strategic convergence on issues that may have been beyond the scope of imagination at the turn of the century. The list of agreements, partnerships, exceptions and exclusive arrangements that each has done for the other is unprecedented. In an era where tariff threats, trade wars and simmering conflicts all over the world have kept everyone occupied and is threatening the established world order, India-UAE ties are steadily breaking new grounds regularly and are setting an example and a model for others to follow.

A Brief Historical Background

The relationship between India and the countries in the Gulf region are deeply rooted in centuries of cultural and commercial exchanges. Gulf scholars like Al-Beruni have, in their writings, documented Indo-Gulf cultural links. Countless artifacts from the Bronze Age onwards, retrieved from archaeological sites bear testimony to the influence and interaction between the two populations for more than 5,000 years¹. Archaeologists have also found evidence of trade links between the Harappan civilization and that of Dilmun in the Gulf. Long before the discovery of oil in the Twentieth Century, Indian merchants traded in pearls, spices, and textiles with the Gulf coast. Traders in Ras Al Khaimah and Sharjah in modern day UAE, were among those who set up flourishing businesses that exported pearls, horses and Basra dates to India.

The British rule too saw value in finding common connect between India and the region, owing to common trade linkages and the people to people connect. The discovery of oil and the need to protect critical sea-lanes prompted the British to set up governates in the region, including the UAE, and rule them from British India. They established a protectorate in Abu Dhabi in 1820, incorporating it as a province of British India. Later, they established protectorates over Oman, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain,

and the States that today comprise the UAE.² In fact, the Indian Rupee was a legal tender in the region, including the UAE till 1960s.³

Formal diplomatic relations between India and the UAE were established in 1972, a year after the UAE's formation. During the early decades, ties were modest and restricted largely to oil trade and thousands of Indian blue-collar workers reaching the shores of UAE in search of jobs and sending back precious remittances back home.

This was also the period when there was a constant overhang of Pakistan in India's ties with the UAE which acted as a barrier in the relationship to flourish completely. UAE, along with Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, were the three countries which had given recognition to the first Taliban Government in Afghanistan (1996-2001), a big red flag for India. However, the 9/11 terror attack in New York and the global war on terror made it clear to the world that the threat of terror was real. Later, the 26/11 Mumbai terror attack in November 2008, was instrumental in the world accepting the fact that India too was truly a victim of terror. It also brought about a slow and steady change in the mindset of the rulers in the Gulf that Pakistan cannot be given any more blank cheques while it harbors terrorists on its soil. Plus, there was a clear understanding that ties with India need to be de-hyphenated from those with Pakistan as India was not only an emerging economic and military power but a great friend to have, owing to its democratic values.

The early years of this century were also the time when the UAE embarked on a journey of economic liberalization and modernization. With Dubai becoming a hub of economy and trade, UAE sought to replicate the model across the seven emirates. The Arab Spring protests in the Gulf region in 2010-11 only highlighted the fact that the regimes need to deliver on promises to the people and it acted as a catalyst for modernization, with the UAE being among the first to modernize.

With India too on a similar trajectory, both countries found natural and willing partners to develop and

prosper together. Political fortunes played a great role in the strengthening relationship as Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan (MBZ), the Crown Prince and Prime Minister Narendra Modi took over reins of their respective countries, almost simultaneously in 2014. The historic visit of PM Modi to the UAE in August 2015 set the tone as the two leaders soon agreed to elevate the ties to a comprehensive strategic partnership.

Why is UAE Important to India

UAE, by its location and its stature in the region, forms a key pillar of India's 'West Asia' policy. UAE is an integral part of all important regional forum; GCC, Arab League etc. It also is a part of the I2U2 or the 'West Asian Quad' comprising of India, Israel, US and UAE. It is also a signatory of Abraham Accords signed with Israel in September 2020. With Iran too, UAE is in a regular dialogue.

UAE is a country which is ready to embrace modern world values, does not follow a zero-sum game in its diplomacy and is ready to set the agenda for the region. UAE also consciously recognises the growth of India and the role that India can play in the region and the world at large. UAE's foreign policy, which emphasizes pragmatic engagement with all major powers, aligns well with India's non-aligned yet multi-aligned approach. On regional and global issues, India and the UAE increasingly converge. Both oppose extremism and support moderation in religious discourse. Both stress the importance of maritime security and freedom of navigation in the Gulf which is critical for trade and energy flows. On the multilateral front, the UAE has backed India's positions at the United Nations and extended support for India's bid for a permanent seat in the UN Security Council. All this, when seen in the context of India's 'West Asia' policy, UAE is a perfect match.

Key Pillars of Partnership

India and UAE have developed a multidimensional partnership which rests on five important pillars; political and diplomatic partnership, Trade and investments, Energy, Security and Defence, and the

vibrant Indian community. The dimension of 'security and defence' has only become strong in recent years and as a result of common understanding of threats to national security and the need for a cooperative and collaborative security model in the region.

Political Convergence

Of these, the most important is the political convergence that has been the cornerstone and center point of this special relationship. PM Modi has already travelled to UAE seven times since his first visit in August 2015. His most recent visit was in February 2024 when he inaugurated a Hindu temple in Abu Dhabi, built by the BAPS society⁴. During his visit to UAE in August 2019, PM Modi was awarded with the prestigious 'Zayed Medal' for playing a "pivotal role" in giving a "big boost" to the bilateral strategic ties⁵.

Similarly, UAE's President, Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan (MbZ), has visited India twice as the President of the UAE on 09-10 September 2023, 09-10 January 2024 and twice as Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi on 10-12 February 2016 and 24-26 January 2017. The UAE president was also the Chief Guest at the 10th Vibrant Gujarat Summit in Gandhinagar in January 2024⁶. In addition, the Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Defence and Crown Prince of Dubai Sheikh Hamdan Bin Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum visited India on 08-09 April 2025⁷ while the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi Sheikh Khaled bin Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan visited India on 09-10 September 2024⁸.

It was during the visit of MbZ on 26 January 2017, as the Chief Guest at India's Republic day celebrations, that the bilateral relations were upgraded to Comprehensive Strategic Partnership⁹. This not only set the tone for the future strengthening of bilateral ties but also set a model that India has followed up many more countries in the region later, including Saudi Arabia, Egypt etc.

One of the most remarkable things about this special relationship is the personal chemistry between Modi and MbZ. Over time, both leaders have developed

a strong bond as 'brothers' and share a common perspective of critical issues impacting the region and the key role that the two countries can play towards development and prosperity in the region. UAE has also consistently supported India's candidature for permanent membership of a reformed UN Security Council¹⁰.

As a result, both countries have often gone out of the way and have made noticeable exceptions for each other. As the host of the OIC Summit in 2019, UAE resisted opposition from several OIC members, especially from Pakistan and invited India's External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj as a guest of honour¹¹. The inauguration of the first Hindu temple in Dubai on 05th October 2022¹² is indeed an exceptional gesture to the Indian community by UAE and demonstrates how UAE considers India a very special partner. PM Modi was earlier invited as the keynote speaker at the World Government Summit in February, 2018 in UAE and once again in February 2024¹³. In March 2018, India was the invited as the 'Guest of Honour' country at the Abu Dhabi Festival (ADF), which is UAE's annual cultural festival¹⁴. UAE is the only nation from the region which has offered to store strategic oil reserves in India¹⁵.

India too has reciprocated well. The RuPay card, a key initiative by India in digital payment system, was launched in the UAE on 24th August 2019¹⁶ at the Emirates Palace, Abu Dhabi, making UAE one of the few countries to have such a tie-up with India. At the G20 Summit hosted by India in September 2023, India invited UAE (among small group of select countries) as special guests¹⁷. UAE was also among the eight signatories and a key player in the ambitious economic connectivity corridor, the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) announced at the same G20 summit¹⁸. In fact, two of its ports Jabel Ali and Fujirah were nominated as the ports of entry in the Gulf region for the IMEC, a clear display of importance of UAE.

Trade and Investments

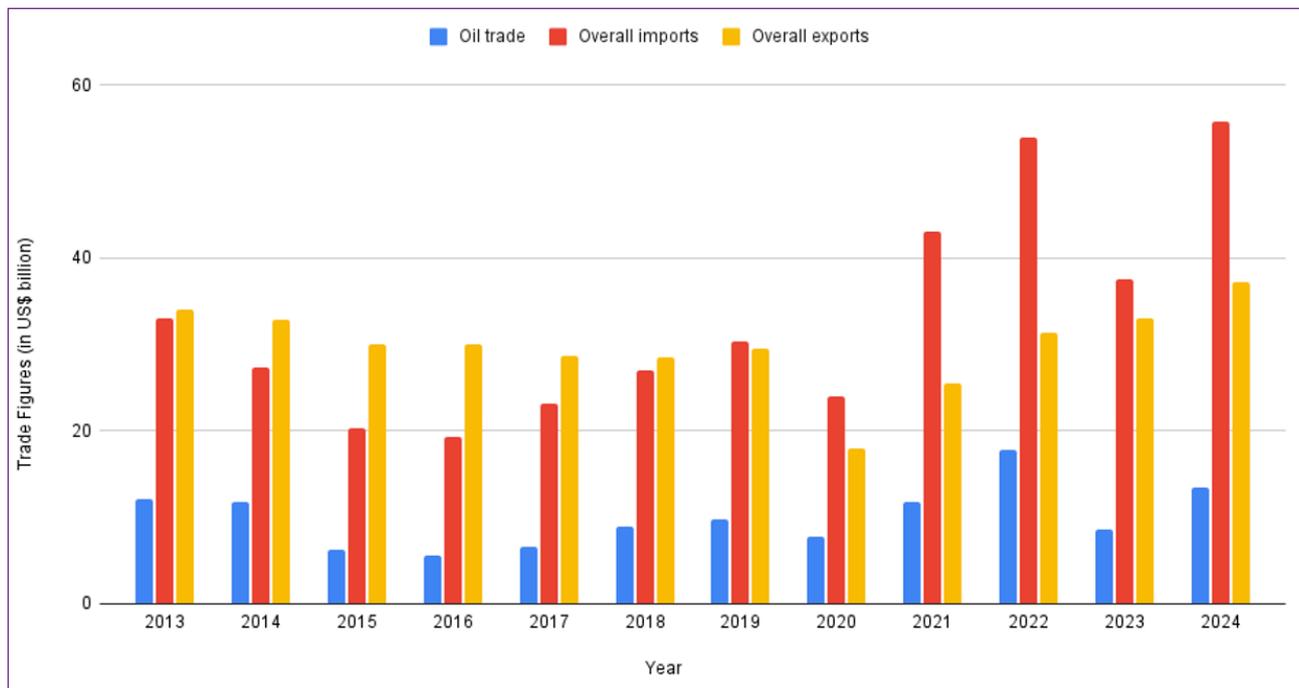
Trade and investment are another big pillar of bilateral engagement. The last decade has witnessed transformational change in the economic

and commerce relationship. The high point was obviously the signing of the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA). This landmark agreement, signed on 18th February 2022, in a record time of 88 days, has laid the foundation for exponential increase in trade and economic partnership, and is yet another example of mutual trust and special relationship between the two nations. The CEPA which became operational on 01st May 2022, aims to increase employment opportunities and bilateral trade in goods to US \$100 billion in five years and trade in services upto US \$15 billion¹⁹. Shortly after the CEPA became operational, Shri Piyush Goyal while co-chairing the 10th Meeting of the India-UAE High Level Joint Task Force on Investments in Mumbai on 12th October 2022 observed, "*The India-UAE relations are witnessing unprecedented momentum. We have a large number of opportunities for cooperation and increasing investments especially the key sectors like infrastructure and technology, especially Fintech*"²⁰.

As a result of the push given towards bilateral trade, including the CEPA, the bilateral trade has expanded exponentially from US\$ 180 million annually in the 1970s, to US\$ 100.06 billion in FY 2024-25-24²¹. The UAE now ranks as India's third-largest trading partner and second largest export destination, with exports over US\$ 36.63 billion in FY 2024-25. Meanwhile, India ranks as UAE's second largest trading partner, with export of over US\$ 63.4 billion in FY 2024-25²². It is also the fourth largest exporter of oil to India after Saudi Arabia, Russia and Iraq. The trade basket between the two nations is well diversified, encompassing major products like petroleum products, gems and jewelry, food items, textiles, chemicals and engineering goods.

Recognizing the importance of innovations and Start-ups in modern trade and business, the UAE-India CEPA Council (UICC) launched the UAE-India CEPA Start-up Series in New Delhi in June 2025. The initiative delivers on a key commitment under the UAE-India CEPA to promote innovation-led collaboration and support the internationalisation of Indian start-ups. The initiative will culminate in a pitch event, offering selected start-ups a UAE soft-

India-UAE Trade (From 2013-2024)



Source: Trading Economics

landing package with incubation, mentorship, and investor access²³.

Investment has also become a significant component of this relationship. The two nations signed the Bilateral Investment Treaty in February 2024²⁴ which entered into effect from 31 August 2024. From April 2000 to March 2025, the cumulative FDI from the UAE into India amounted to US\$ 22.84 billion²⁵, making UAE the seventh-largest overseas investor in India. UAE's investments are well-diversified with focus on sectors like real estate, infrastructure, energy, private equity and financial services. UAE's Sovereign Wealth Funds (SWF) have a strong presence in India. Abu Dhabi Investment Authority (ADIA), UAE's largest SWF has established a subsidiary office in GIFT City, Gujarat.

Indian investments in the UAE, too, are significant. Many Indian companies have set up manufacturing units, either as joint ventures or in Special Economic Zones, producing cement, building materials, textiles, engineering products, consumer electronics, tourism, healthcare, hospitality etc, with notable names like the Taj Group, BITS Pilani, Zee Entertainment, Ashok Leyland, Mahindra, and

Dabur. Major Indian companies such as L&T, ESSAR, Punj Lloyd, Engineers India Ltd are working on a number of contracts in UAE. A number of public and private sector banks of India also have established overseas branches in the UAE, further strengthening financial and economic ties.

Fintech is emerging as yet another area of strong convergence. The RuPay card, a key component of India's Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI), is being accepted in the UAE since August 2019²⁶. Also, from July 2023 onwards, Indian Rupee is being accepted as legal at Dubai airports²⁷. In July 2023, The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) and the Central Bank of UAE (CBUAE) signed two Memoranda of Understandings (MoUs) in Abu Dhabi to settle bilateral trade in respective local currencies, and interlinking payments and messaging system²⁸. The first MoU aims to put in place a Local Currency Settlement System (LCSS) to promote the use of INR and AED bilaterally. The second MoU on payments and messaging systems has three components. The first one is to link each country's Fast Payment Systems (FPSs) – India's Unified Payments Interface (UPI) and UAE's Instant Payment Platform (IPP). This will enable the users in both countries to make fast, convenient, safe,

and cost-effective cross-border funds transfers. The second component of the MoU facilitates card switches between RuPay and UAESwitch cards, helping mutual acceptance of domestic cards and processing of card transactions. Thus, credit cards like India's Rupay and cards issued by the UAE banks, can be settled through a direct messaging system without the need to use the international card network. Third component established a direct messaging system between India and UAE, by linking India's Structured Financial Messaging System (SFMS), with the UAE's messaging system, aimed to facilitate bilateral financial messaging between the two countries, bypassing the SWIFT messaging system. As a result of these initiatives, the IOC made the first rupee payment to ADNOC for crude oil imports in August 2023²⁹.

In October 2023, NPCI International Payments Limited (NIPL) the international arm of National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI), entered into a strategic partnership agreement with Al Etihad Payments (AEP) for Domestic Card Scheme (DCS) Implementation in UAE³⁰. As per the agreement, NIPL and AEP will work together to build, implement, and operationalize UAE's national domestic card scheme which will facilitate the growth of e-commerce and digital transactions in the UAE, bolster financial inclusion, support the UAE's digitization agenda, increase alternate payment options, reduce the cost of payments, and enhance the UAE's competitiveness and position as a global payments leader.

These developments in fintech cooperation and trade in local currencies is significant from the point of view of reducing the over dependence on the US dollar and the international SWIFT system of payments clearance. It becomes even more important given the current scenario of US-India trade and tariff standoff wherein the US has imposed huge tariff penalties of 50 percent on India wef 25th August 2025³¹, targeting it for buying crude oil from Russia, alleging that Indian payments are fuelling the Russian war economy. It is also very important from the standpoint of India being able to exercise its strategic autonomy in financial sector.

Most recently, on 18 August 2025, Kotak Mahindra (International) announced received a license by the Securities and Commodities Authority (SCA), the capital markets regulator of the UAE, to conduct Investment Fund Management and Portfolio Management activities³², becoming the first Indian firm to receive this license from the SCA. This development paves the way for the launch of UAE-domiciled funds for retail investors, further reinforcing the strong India-UAE investment ties.

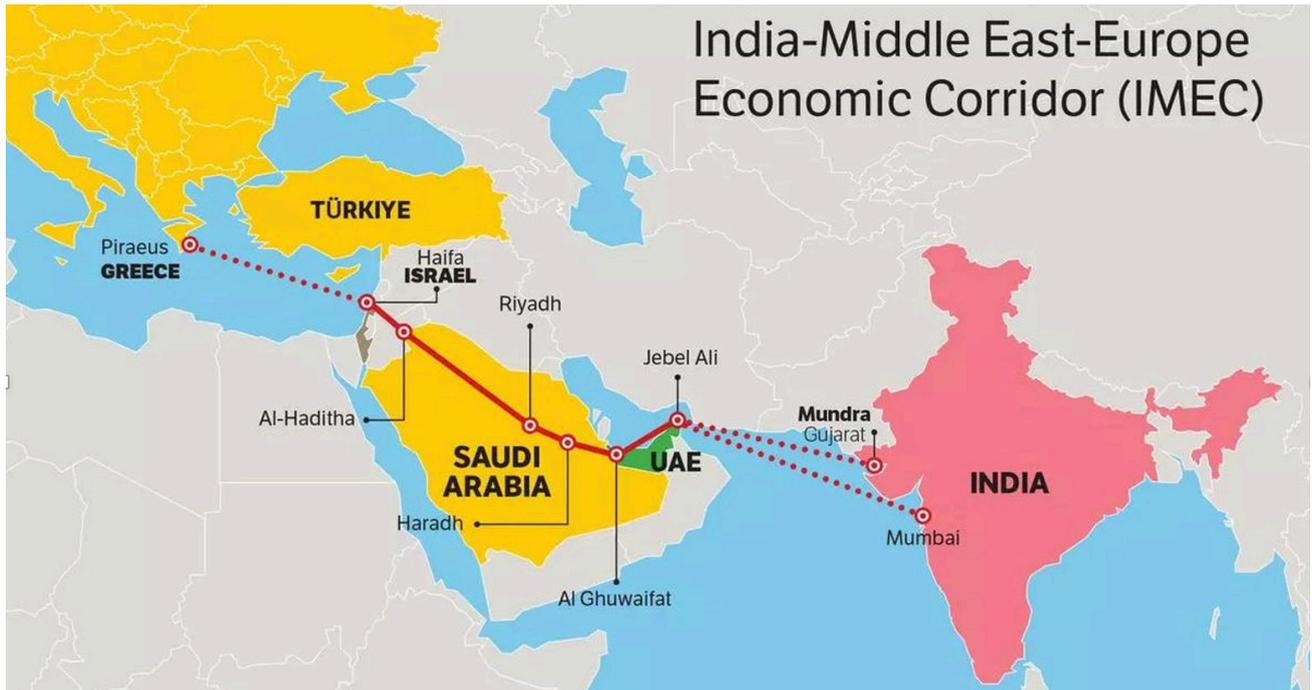
Abu Dhabi Investment Authority (ADIA), has made some key investments in India. In July 2017, ADIA announced commitment of around US \$ One billion in National Investment and Infrastructure Fund (NIIF), India's sovereign investment fund³³. ADIA has also invested US \$400 million in the housing sector and around US \$500 million in the renewable and green energy. In addition, ADIA has committed to invest US \$ 75 billion in India's infrastructure sector. Dubai-based DP World too has made commitment for investments with NIIF to invest US\$ 3 billion in ports logistics and river transport³⁴. ADIA too indicated its intent to invest US\$ 750 Million in Reliance Jio.

Abu Dhabi based Mubadala Investment Company, sovereign investment entity, too, announced an investment of \$ 1.2 Billion for a 1.85% equity stake in Reliance Jio in June 2020³⁵. As an act of solidarity with India on the Kashmir issue, a trade delegation from the UAE visited Jammu & Kashmir looking for trade and investment opportunities in the state in March 2022.

IMEC

Trade and connectivity are closely linked, especially in context of very closely intertwined supply chains and markets. In this context, the IMEC corridor which has India and UAE among the eight signatories is not only a boost for inter-regional connectivity but also important to boost India-UAE trade ties. While the work on IMEC got stalled even before it could take off, India and UAE have already commenced significant work on it bilaterally.

The launch of the India-UAE Virtual Trade Corridor and Master Application for International Trade and



Regulatory Interface (MAITRI) during the visit of Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Khaled Bin Mohamed Bin Zayed al Nahyan in September 2024 is one such significant development³⁶. It aims to integrate Indian trade portals with the UAE counterparts to enable seamless, paperless, and efficient trade by streamlining regulatory processes and reducing transshipment and logistics costs. The platform will incorporate India's National Logistics Portal-Marine, Indian Customs Electronic Gateway, and Unified Logistics Interface Platform with corresponding UAE systems. This would enhance the ease of doing business between India and the UAE by leveraging technology not only for IMEC but also bilaterally.

In the same context, the decision taken to open a BHARAT MART at Jebel Ali Free Trade Zone in Dubai is another significant decision in integrating India UAE trade ties. The foundation stone of the Bharat Mart was laid during PM Modi's visit to Dubai in February 2024. Dubai DP World is constructing it with an aim to complete first phase by end 2026. The facility will span 2.7 million square feet, with the initial phase covering 1.3 million square feet. Strategically located in Jebel Ali Free Zone (JAFZA), the marketplace will feature 1,500 showrooms and over 700,000 square feet of warehousing, light industrial units, office spaces, and meeting facilities.

India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC)

A dedicated section will support women-led businesses from India. Sultan Ahmed bin Sulayem, CEO of DP World, emphasized the project's alignment with broader trade goals: "India and the UAE aim to reach \$100 billion in non-oil trade by 2030, and Bharat Mart will be a key driver in achieving this milestone"³⁷. It is expected that the Bharat Mart will not only enhance bilateral trade ties but also provide Indian goods faster access to global markets. This is critically significant in view of the tariff war with the US and the difficulties that the Indian exporters could have faced otherwise.

Energy Security

Energy security forms another key element of strong partnership. After Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Russia (after the onset of war in Ukraine in February 2022), UAE is the fourth largest exporter of crude oil to India. UAE, as a part of its comprehensive strategic partnership, is committed to ensure, under all circumstances, a steady supply of crude oil to India. As a part of this understanding, an agreement was signed during visit of PM Modi to UAE in February 2018. It was signed between Indian Strategic Petroleum Reserves Ltd (ISPRL) and Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC) of UAE with an aim to operationalize the filling up of a strategic petroleum reserve caverns by

storing crude oil in the ISPRL underground caverns in India³⁸. ADNOC became the only foreign oil and Gas Company, so far, to invest by way of crude oil in India's strategic petroleum reserves program. This agreement along with the existing strategic reserve facilities put together provide around 21 days of emergency coverage for India's crude oil requirements.

On the same day, a Concession Agreement too was signed for 10 percent stake in Abu Dhabi Offshore Lower Zakhum Oil field and Onshore Block-1 to a consortium of Indian Public Sector companies comprising ONGC, VIDESH, IOCL and BPRL. This was the first Indian upstream investment in a producing asset in the Gulf region. Shipment from the oil field has started arriving in India³⁹.

Energy cooperation took a huge leap when four agreements, mostly on green energy and critical minerals were signed on 10th September 2024 during the visit of Sheikh Khalid bin Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi⁴⁰. These four key agreements aim to enhance cooperation in crude oil storage, long-term LNG supply, and civil nuclear energy.

As per the agreements⁴¹, Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC) will supply one million metric tonnes of liquefied natural gas (LNG) annually to the Indian Oil Corporation Ltd. This agreement is the third such contract signed between India and UAE. Both IOCL and GAIL had previously signed long-term agreements for 1.2 MMTPA and 0.5 MMTPA, respectively, with ADNOC.

At the same time, another pact was signed between ADNOC and India Strategic Petroleum Reserve Ltd (ISPRL) to explore further crude storage opportunities and renew their storage agreement. This MoU builds on ADNOC's existing involvement in crude storage at the Mangalore Cavern of ISPRL since 2018.

On civil nuclear cooperation, Emirates Nuclear Energy Company (ENEC) and Nuclear Power Corporation of India Ltd (NPCIL) signed a significant deal to collaborate on nuclear power plant operations and maintenance, sourcing nuclear goods and services,

and exploring mutual investment opportunities. Speaking on the occasion, Mohamed Al Hammadi, Managing Director and Chief Executive Officer of ENEC highlighted that the MoU is a major step in UAE's goal to triple global nuclear energy capacity by 2050 and reinforces the commitment to advancing the development of reliable, carbon-free electricity that nuclear energy provides 24/7⁴². Nuclear cooperation is emerging as a transformative area, with the UAE currently generating 25 percent of its energy from nuclear sources (5.6 GW capacity) at its Barakah Nuclear Energy Plant, aiming to double this by 2030⁴³.

Critical minerals formed another critical part of the agreements. As per the MoU signed between UAE's International Resources Holding (IRH) and an Indian consortium comprising Oil India Limited (OIL), Khanij Bidesh India (KABIL), and Oil and Natural Gas Corporation Limited (ONGC) Videsh, the deal aims for global collaboration in securing a comprehensive supply chain for critical minerals, focusing on project identification, due diligence, development strategies, risk management, and offtake strategies⁴⁴. This, when seen in context of the launch of National Critical Mineral Mission (NCMM) with an overall expenditure of Rs 34,300 Crore including an expected investment of Rs.18,000 crore by PSUs⁴⁵, is an important commitment by India as a part of the Atmanirbhar (Self Reliance) Bharat initiative, and recognizing the indispensable role of critical minerals in high-tech industries, clean energy, and defence. The collaboration with UAE only adds more muscle to it.

The fourth agreement was on a production concession agreement for Abu Dhabi's onshore block-one between Urja Bharat (a joint venture of Indian Oil Corporation Ltd and Bharat PetroResources Ltd) and ADNOC. This agreement marks the first operation by an Indian company in the UAE and entitles Urja Bharat to bring crude oil to India, thus contributing to the country's energy security.

Defence and Security

Defence and security are slowly emerging as another strong pillar of engagement with the region which has been conflict prone, both internally and externally.

Constantly evolving security situation in the region and the fact that the past guarantee of security through the US may no longer be assured, especially after the 'Arab Spring', in 2010-11 has resulted in an increased scope and space for India to play a constructive role in the region's security.

With the UAE, although a MoU on defence cooperation was signed in 2003, not much progress was made for almost a decade. During the Prime Minister Modi's visit to the UAE in August 2015, as a part of 'comprehensive strategic partnership', it was decided to include security cooperation as an important element. Later, during the state visit of the UAE's Crown Prince Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan in February 2016, it was agreed that a regular security dialogue be held between the National Security Councils, on issues like counter-terrorism, maritime security, and cyber-security. Both sides also agreed to enhance cooperation in training, joint exercises, as well as identify options on the production of defence equipment in India.⁴⁶ The focus on security cooperation continued with the visit of Shri Manohar Parrikar, India's Defence Minister to the UAE in May 2016.⁴⁷ It was the first visit by any Indian Defence Minister to UAE.

Bilateral exercises form an important component. India and the UAE held the first Joint Navy Exercises 'Gulf Star 1' in Abu Dhabi in March 2018.⁴⁸ In March 2021, an Indian Air Force (IAF) contingent participated for the first time in Exercise Desert Flag-VI, an annual multilateral large force employment exercise, hosted by the UAE at the Al Dhafra Air Force Base, UAE. The IAF fielded the Su-30MKI fighter aircraft.⁴⁹ The IAF again participated in Exercise Desert Flag-VII in UAE in March 2023, this time with five LCA Tejas and two C-17 Globemaster III aircraft. Indian contingent has also been a regular feature at the Dubai Air Show. In November 2023, the Indian contingent included the Advanced Lightweight Helicopter Sarang and the Lightweight Combat Aircraft (LCA) Tejas. Acknowledging the importance of the event, Indian Ambassador to the UAE, Sunjay Sudhir, highlighted the integral role of defense engagement in the robust strategic partnership between India and the UAE.⁵⁰

At the 13th meeting of the India-UAE Joint Defence

Cooperation Committee (JDCC) held in Delhi in July 2025, India offered to provide customised training courses tailored to the UAE's needs. A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was also signed between the Indian Coast Guard and the UAE National Guard to enhance cooperation in maritime safety, covering areas such as search and rescue, anti-piracy operations, and marine pollution response⁵¹.

As part of cooperation in defence production with the UAE, the Ordnance Factory Board (OFB) signed a contract with the UAE on 23 March 2017 for supply of 40,000 rounds of 155 mm shells, followed by another 50,000 rounds in 2018.⁵² There have been some reports in the media on the UAE expressing interest in the purchase of Helina, Nag and Brahmos missiles from India.

UAE has been more than forthcoming in acceptance of India's position on terror and at more than one occasion, it has strongly supported India in its fight against terror. Whether it was terror attack on Uri army camp on 18th September 2016 or at Pathankote Air Base on 16th January 2016 or on the CRPF convoy in Pulwama on 14 February 2019, it condemned the attacks strongly. The UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressed UAE's solidarity and support to India and its firm stand against terrorism in all its forms and manifestations and. In fact, UAE along with Bahrain even supported any action by India to confront, eradicate and fight terrorism, knowing well India's options being discussed across a range of military, diplomatic, political and economic options to retaliate against Pakistan.

People and Soft Power

People form the next important pillar of engagement. Since the 1970s' oil boom, the Gulf region has been a sought after destination for Indian workers. Majority of Indians have migrated to work in the UAE. Indian workers, skilled and unskilled, have played a critical role in modernizing of the infrastructure and overall social outlook of the UAE. At the same time, Indian families back home have benefitted largely from their employment in the UAE. With an estimated population of around 4.5 million in the UAE which constitutes roughly about 35 percent of the country's population,

Indian are not only the largest community of expats but have been sending back significant remittances back home. As per the RBI, Indians working abroad sent back a record US\$135.46 billion in the financial year 2024-25, placing it way ahead of second-placed Mexico with US\$ 68 billion⁵³. Of this UAE accounted for 19.2 percent, second only to the remittances from the US at 27.7 percent.⁵⁴

As a recognition to the valuable contribution by Indians in UAE, the first Hindu temple was inaugurated in Dubai on 05th October 2022⁵⁵. International Yoga day too has been regularly celebrated in UAE since 2016.

As a part of enhancing engagement in soft power especially education, IIT Delhi opened its offshore campus in Dubai on 3rd September 2024⁵⁶. The Indian Institute of Management (IIM)-Ahmedabad too is setting its campus in Dubai with the signing of a MoU between IIM-Ahmedabad and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) government in Mumbai. The first batch to will start in September 2025, offering a full-time, one-year MBA programme designed to cater to global working professionals and entrepreneurs' advanced management learning and upskilling needs⁵⁷. Apart from IIM-Ahmedabad, the first overseas campus of the Indian Institute of Foreign Trade will also be set up at the India Pavilion in Expo City Dubai. The offshore campus Symbiosis International (Deemed University) too was inaugurated in Dubai, by Dr S Jaishankar, the

External Affairs Minister on 15 November 2024⁵⁸.

New Frontiers of Engagement

India and UAE are setting new benchmarks in cooperation with every passing year. Among new areas, space is emerging is the latest and most promising area of cooperation. Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) and UAE Space Agency (UAESA) signed an MoU regarding cooperation in the exploration and use of outer space for peaceful purposes in 2016⁵⁹ and UAE's first nanosatellite, Nayif-1, meant for collecting environmental space data was launched by PSLV from Sriharikota in 2017⁶⁰. India has already launched successful missions to the Moon and Mars and is preparing to launch the first manned mission Gangayaan shortly. It has also installed its own satellite navigation constellation NAVIC successfully. With UAE too looking to advance its space program and launch its own satellites, India presents the ideal partnership option.

Joint polar research and exploration is emerging as a new area of close cooperation. A MoU between the Emirates Polar Program and the National Centre for Polar and Ocean Research (NCPOR) of India was signed during the 15th session of the UAE-India Joint Committee Meeting in December 2024. This collaboration aims to facilitate joint efforts in polar research, academic exchanges, and capacity building,



Source: Amyat UK

enhancing both nations' presence and contributions in the polar regions.⁶¹

Cyber security too is emerging as a strong area of bilateral cooperation. A MoU on Technical Cooperation in Cyber Space and Combating Cyber-Crime signed in February 2016.⁶² The agreement provides help in handling of the issues related to the cyber-crime between the two countries. Both the countries shall cooperate in cyber space and combating cyber-crime in all forms, particularly through coordination and exchange of information in relation with cyber crime, cooperation and training in cyber-crime investigation, etc. between India and UAE. In July 2025, The Data Security Council of India (DSCI) hosted the second edition of the Indo-UAE Cybersecurity Exchange in Dubai, reinforcing bilateral cooperation in the digital security domain. Speaking at the event, Atul Kumar, Director of DSCI, highlighted the strategic importance of Indo-UAE cooperation in the digital space, adding that "with both nations digitizing rapidly and depending heavily on secure digital infrastructure, there is significant scope to jointly nurture resilient cybersecurity ecosystems."⁶³ With a number of private companies and Start-ups participating in this campaign, cyber security domain is set to grow stronger between India and UAE.

Looking Ahead- Sky is the Limit

As India grows into a strong economic and military power, it is seeking a greater outreach in the region and globally. As a part of this strategy, India is seeking deeper engagement and collaboration with its immediate and extended neighborhood of which UAE is an important pillar. Over the past decade, UAE has

emerged as one of the most reliable and trustworthy partners of India. The personal rapport between the two leaders as well as political stability and continuity has helped built this important relationship. From a 'just another country', UAE has become one of the most important strategic partners of India. In an era where Covid-19 pandemic disrupted the supply chains, wars in the region threatened stability and the tariff wars unleashed by the US under Donald Trump have put most relationships under strain, India and UAE ties have not only survived but is growing exponentially with every passing year. The cooperation in Fintech has not only helped both nations in facilitating use of local currencies in trade but is helping in reducing the dependence on US Dollar, very significant in the current circumstances, given the tariff war and imposition of 50 percent tariffs on Indian exports to the US and the.

For India, UAE is important both as a bilateral partner and as a key voice in the region. It is an integral part of all important regional forum like the GCC, Arab League, I2U2 etc. It is a signatory of the Abraham Accord with Israel. With its entry into the BRICS in 2023⁶⁴ and SCO (as a dialogue partner)⁶⁵ in 2023, UAE is also an important partner for India in multilateral groupings. The inclusion of UAE in IMEC as a key hub only amplifies the importance of UAE to India and the region. India therefore finds in UAE a perfect partner and an ideal 'point of contact' for discussing various issues of the world and in the region. Combined with increasing trade relations, security partnership, people to people engagements and charismatic bond between the top leadership, sky is the limit for India and UAE partnership. ●

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