

# Gulf Security and India



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While the relationship between the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and India are currently rooted in economic dynamics, it is not completely unrealistic to assume that the region would consider India as a more favored partner if it is willing to address the Gulf's security concerns as well. The need for alternate strategies in the Gulf and the possibility of India playing a role in it arises as a result of changing developments on both sides.

In such a situation, the alternative is further internationalization of the region. The dominant view is that "the United States is a spent force – not militarily or economically, but politically."

This school argues that all the US approaches in the region – relying on Iran and Saudi Arabia as part of the twin-pillar policy in the 1970s; propping up Iraq to counter Iran as part of the balance of power in the 1980s; and invasion of Iraq in 2003 – have failed to guarantee the desired level of security. As a result, the GCC countries are willing to consider intense political, economic and social ties with other countries to counter the prevailing notion that only (US) military power counts.

## GCC Perspective

In the Gulf, the United States has failed miserably in dealing with the Iraqi and Iranian security dilemmas. As a result, two schools of thought prevail in the region: one urging less international involvement in the region's affairs and the other, more.

Those arguing that the way out of the dilemma is through the withdrawal of external powers from the Gulf feel that external powers have precipitated the crises rather than contribute positively. They feel the region may be better off dealing with the crises itself; and that the Gulf has become so complacent that it is unwilling to evolve indigenous mechanisms for conflict prevention and resolution, as well as shying away from confidence-building measures with potential rivals. Therefore, the new mantra, even elucidated by the GCC countries, is that "a lasting Gulf security system can only function if it is based on a regional initiative".

But the situation on the ground is really not conducive to the complete removal of external forces. The GCC countries "neither practice nor engage in any sort of cooperative security exchange," and there is a sense of distrust even among the members of this homogenous bloc.<sup>1</sup> As a result, an indigenous alternative and viable security architecture is highly unlikely.

Saudi Foreign Minister Saud Al-Faisal told the Gulf Dialogue meeting in Bahrain in December 2004 that guarantees for Gulf security cannot be provided unilaterally "even by the only superpower in the world". The region requires guarantees "provided by the collective will of the international community."

The events leading to these and similar reactions in the region have forced the GCC countries to build ties with a host of alternatives, particularly in Europe and Asia. Some of the countries here have one factor in common: they are "regional plus" powers; their political weight goes well beyond their geographical borders, though not as far as to give them a global reach or global ambitions. This gives them a perfect stake in developing a multi-polar world that can resist any single nation's efforts to achieve dominance.<sup>2</sup> While cultivating the new relationship, the region is linking its economic interests and security needs. And, apart from the importance of energy, Europe and Asia are showing signs of relating to the relevance of the Gulf region to transnational security issues such as proliferation of weapons, crime, drugs and terrorism, and their impact on their domestic scenarios. Further, to many, the fact that the Arab Gulf countries are even willing

<sup>1</sup> Recent examples include serious differences between Saudi Arabia and Bahrain over the latter signing the free trade agreement with the United States, which resulted in the Saudi crown prince boycotting the December 2004 GCC Summit in Manama; and the widening rift between Saudi Arabia and Qatar over Al-Jazeera's coverage of political events in the Gulf, which has manifested in several forms, including the US shifting from the Prince Sultan Air Base in Saudi Arabia to Al-Udaid in Qatar starting 2002, and unconfirmed Saudi objection to a Qatar-UAE (Dolphin) gas project in 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Read Jonathan Steele, "India's revival means it can pick and choose its friends," Guardian (UK), 24 February 2006.





to consider alternatives despite US objections is the “real strategic shift occurring in the region”.<sup>3</sup>

### Indian Perspective

While energy security is certainly a factor, India is now willing to showcase its power and influence in the region. This expanded security perspective is driven by necessity, ambition and opportunity. The desire to lead coincides with its rise as a major power with continental aspirations. Former premier Atal Behari Vajpayee and current Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh urged looking beyond the immediate neighbourhood. Singh said “the Gulf region is a part of our natural economic hinterland. We must pursue closer economic relations with all neighbors in our wider Asian neighborhood.”<sup>4</sup>

After Pakistan, China, Russia and the US, the Gulf is the focus to ensure against any maritime or landward threat to it from the region, serve as a base to pursue India’s interests, confront terrorism and extremism, as well as tap the investment potential. By focusing on the Gulf and restoring traditional linkages with the immediate and extended neighbourhood, India is seeking to address its “four deficits” in the historical, security, economic and global decision-making realms.<sup>5</sup>

India is now talking about “soft power” and diplomacy – the security of the Gulf countries, as well as the wider Middle East, is of “paramount concern” and New Delhi is ready to contribute to the stability of the region by sharing its experience in combating terrorism, maritime security and military training. India stresses that events in Iraq have brought home the fact that a politically unstable area can become the spawning ground of terrorists.

*“Linkages with illicit trafficking in narcotics, as well as in small arms have enhanced the destructive potential and lethal reach of the terrorists. The fight against terrorism has to be long-term, sustained and comprehensive. It cannot be ad hoc, selective or compartmentalized in terms of region or religion.”<sup>6</sup>*

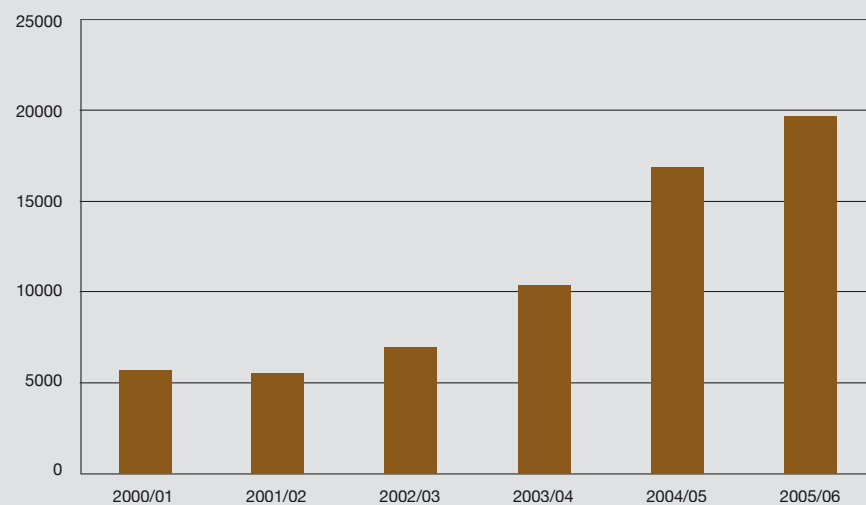
According to India’s National Security Adviser M.K. Narayanan:

*“The key focus in our external relations today is ensuring the stability and security of the region, comprising the arc of nations from the Gulf to East Asia...India’s decision to enter into cooperative strategic relationship with China fully mirrors this approach.”<sup>7</sup>*

India is keen on cooperation with the GCC countries to ensure safety and security of sea-lanes and of communications; safety and freedom of navigation in the shipping lanes and trade routes; counter religious extremism and/or transnational terrorism, narcotics trafficking and proliferation of weapons in the region; and achieve peace in the subcontinent, given Pakistan’s bond with the region.

### GCC-India non-oil trade (2001/02-2005-06)

Source: Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Government of India



Note: India’s oil bill from the Gulf amounted to another \$26 billion during the same period.


3 For more on these issues, read Christian Koch, “Gulf region makes strategic shift in new global system,” Arab News (Saudi Arabia), 22 October 2006; “Gulf needs more, not less, external involvement,” Gulf in the Media (UAE), 27 January 2006; and Tanvir Ahmad Khan, “Taking a broader view of security in the Gulf,” Gulf News, 13 July 2006.)

4 “PM keen on building strong ties with Gulf states”, Sify.com (India), 7 August 2005.

5 Part of a statement by former Indian defense minister Pranab Mukherjee at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, DC, 27 June 2005.

6 Statement by India’s Special Envoy to the Middle East Chinmaya Gharekhan at the second Gulf Security Conference in Bahrain, 2-3 December 2005.

7 These views were part of his presentation titled “China and India: The Asian rising powers debate – An Indian perspective,” at the third Global Strategic Review Conference of the International Institute for Strategic Studies in Geneva on 18 September 2005.



Further, portraying India as “a core state” in the emerging global order and offering to help secure the busy Malacca Straits against high-seas pirates at the Asia Security Summit in Singapore in June 2006, Mukherjee said:

*“(New Delhi’s) role is crucial for ensuring and maintaining long-term peace, stable balance of power, economic growth, and security in Asia...India is one of the important legs of the Asian juggernaut along with China, Japan, and Indonesia.”<sup>8</sup>*

The latest military build-up plan dates back to 2001. On a visit to Washington, then external affairs minister Jaswant Singh said:

*“For a long time, India has not been seen in its true dimensions. How many people know that Indonesia is only 65 miles from the southernmost Indian island? Or that but for Pakistan-occupied (sic) Kashmir, Tajikistan is just 27 miles from India. That we had a border with Iran in 1947? Or that the legal tender of Kuwait till 1961 was the rupee? So when we talk about Indonesia or central Asia or the Gulf, it is because of our interest and our sphere of influence.”*

With this in mind, the government launched “a 20-year program to become a world power whose influence is felt across the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Gulf, and all of Asia”<sup>9</sup> in November 2003.

In order to highlight its potential and achieve its objectives, the Indian military services are undertaking a major build-up of conventional arms, creating ways of delivering nuclear weapons and defending against them, planning construction of warships, enhancing military logistics in Central Asia and even negotiated with the US for an Asian version of NATO. All these come in the wake of India’s existing maritime security involvement involving Asian, African, European and Gulf countries (Oman), as well as Russia and the US. Further, the Indian Coast Guard and Navy have been active in anti-piracy, disaster relief, and environmental management and response operations, which was evident after the 2004 tsunami.

A key role in this program is that of the Indian Navy. In October 2003, then navy chief Admiral Madhvendra Singh said: “Fulfilling India’s dream to have a full-fledged blue-

water navy would need at least three aircraft carriers, 20 more frigates, 20 more destroyers with helicopters, and large numbers of missile corvettes and anti-submarine warfare corvettes.” The Navy’s acquisitions program was then worth \$20 billion. The plan includes acquiring or constructing a submarine that could launch nuclear missiles, aircraft carriers, and long-range missiles with a reach of over 2,500 kilometers.

The Navy’s aim is not just to patrol the seas, but have the capacity to create and “deploy battalion-sized forces at various strategic points... [on] short notice, and disperse them quickly from the landing or dropping zone before any adequate enemy response”. The inference is that the expansion program envisions possible intervention in countries in India’s “sphere of influence”.

These plans were reflected in the government’s Maritime Doctrine in 2004. According to a US War College study:

*“Whereas (India’s) earlier doctrine focused on inward-looking strategies, the new doctrine attempts to deal with conflict with (an) extra-regional power and protecting persons of Indian origin and interest abroad,” (which perhaps brings the Gulf on the radar screens).”<sup>10</sup>*

Maintaining that the ‘challenge’ lies in India becoming a maritime power, former Indian Navy chief Admiral Arun Prakash promised in August 2006 a fully balanced, technologically fighting fit force in the next decade.

*“We are back on track on the submarine front (and) in a few years time would be back to the desired levels on the naval air operations front as well....With fantastic support by the indigenous shipbuilding infrastructure and other acquisitions, within the next 10 years, the Indian Navy would be a fully-balanced, technologically fighting fit, all-purpose maritime force to be reckoned with...The challenge, therefore, lies in India becoming a maritime power. No one can stop India from becoming a maritime power...Though our maritime interests are now all over, anything that happens between the east coast of Africa and the Malacca Straits is of immediate concern to India. We have the business to know what is happening in this part of the Indian Ocean. So, this is the immediate footprint of the Indian Navy...All our maritime strategies, plans and growth takes into account the*

8 “India is a core state for Asian security: Pranab Mukherjee,” The Hindu (India), 4 June 2006.

9 India’s defense expenditure doubled from \$11.6 billion in 1998-99 to \$21.5 billion in 2005-06. More details available in “India’s place in the US strategic order,” Research Unit for Political Economy (Mumbai), December 2005.

10 For more on GCC-India tactical dimensions, see Khadija Arafah Muhammad Amin, “Need for strategic cooperation,” GCC-India Research Bulletin (Gulf Research Center, Dubai, January 2006).





*matrix of economic interests and military threats. All that the force is planning is done keeping in view the bigger role of the country in world affairs in the 21st century and safeguarding all the vital interests of India....There's total consensus on this issue and we are not going back from this approach to Indian maritime strategies or planning. China and Pakistan are only a small part of it, nothing more ..."*<sup>11</sup>

The naval build-up can be gauged from the 8,000-acre Seabird naval base near Goa, which would bring together warships, aircraft carriers and long-range aircraft, among others, capable of impacting waters that stretch from Aden to the Malacca Strait. Further, Israeli-built Heron UAVs in Kochi would give India a surveillance capability that is unrivalled in the region.

### Conclusion

Notwithstanding the historic ties between the GCC and India, which have been sustained by the current oil, trade and expatriate dynamics, the way forward for a robust bilateral relationship rests on developing a paradigm that hinges on strategic political, economic and security dimensions.

The common political and security concerns translate into efforts for peace and stability in the Gulf region and South Asia. The emerging perceptions create further opportunities for GCC-India cooperation in the future. While the GCC countries are going through important changes and transformations, the process of understanding and integration needs to intensify beyond the traditional issues. This involves joint efforts to meet domestic and regional challenges.

With India viewing the Gulf, South Asia and Central Asia as "strategically interactive and interrelated regions", it is time for the GCC to reciprocate in a commensurate way. Given the prevailing anti-West sentiment among Arabs, it is the appropriate time for upgrading GCC-India ties.

A GCC-India relationship based purely on selling and buying of oil is no longer untenable. The GCC countries need to take note of the fact that India's basket of energy suppliers are widening. It is not entirely impossible that

India may follow the United States, which gets more oil from Africa than the Middle East, or China which gets more crude supplies from Angola than Saudi Arabia. With a view to strengthening and diversifying relations, it is imperative for both to acquire fresh dimensions to consolidate their positions in a fast-changing world.

The GCC countries and India share a common desire for peace, stability and security in the region and value the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of the countries concerned. However, in the process of moving forward, the real challenge is how to turn the Indian military strength into a factor of regional security. The dilemmas in the Gulf region could ease if the GCC countries and India evolve new ideas of collective security that go beyond the restrictive paradigms of the past. But by suggesting that it is willing to play a proactive role by sharing its experience in combating terrorism, maritime security and military training, New Delhi may also be indicating just how far it is willing to go, which, in fact, is not far enough for the long-term security concerns of the Gulf countries.

The issues mentioned above raise many questions:

- Will India stick to involvement only in soft security issues?
- If it goes beyond, will it mirror the US approach or will it be distinct and non-controversial?
- Even if it is interested in a wider role, how effective will it be?
- Will the Indian public opinion support military interventions abroad?
- Will India's responses to possible internal and external threats in the region be different in terms of its response, especially since India and Iran enjoy good ties?
- How will India's increasing military cooperation with the United States pan out in the GCC countries?
- Should India work toward a developing a collective security mechanism in cooperation with the US, EU and China?
- More crucially, are the GCC countries looking 'out of the box' for their security or is the US making a mountain out of a molehill while expressing long-term fears about China's intentions in the regional security architecture, and possibly India's in the future?

<sup>11</sup> "Navy chief promises technologically fighting fit force," Indo Asian News Service, 8 August 2006; such assertions have led to question if India's naval modernization effort is aimed at turning the Indian Ocean into India's ocean. For more, see "US, China, India flex muscle over energy-critical sea lanes," Freerepublic.com, 10 June 2006.