



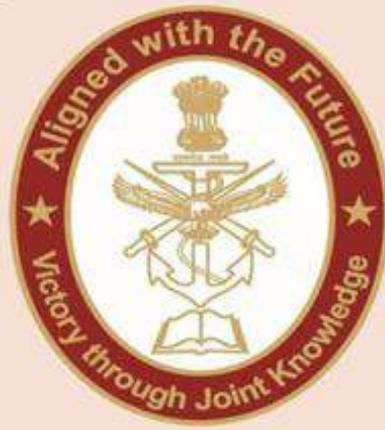
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# NAVAL DIPLOMACY IN THE NORTHWESTERN INDIAN OCEAN: INDIA'S DEFENCE COOPERATION WITH THE UAE AND SAUDI ARABIA

MS NAVODITA KUMARI

# CENTRE FOR JOINT WARFARE STUDIES



## CENJOWS

**Naval Diplomacy in the Northwestern Indian Ocean: India's Defence Cooperation with the UAE and Saudi Arabia**



**Navodita Kumari is a research intern at CENJOWS**

### Introduction

The maritime domain has become a critical arena for foreign policy advancement by the nation-states, and consequently, naval diplomacy has taken centre stage for securing national interests and projecting capabilities on and under water. The Indian Navy describes naval diplomacy as *"the use of naval forces in support of foreign policy objectives to build 'bridges of friendship' and strengthen international cooperation, on one hand, and to signal capability and intent to deter potential adversaries, on the other."*<sup>1</sup> This definition reflects a combination of military and diplomatic practices used by naval forces on the high seas and goes beyond the imperial era 'gunboat diplomacy' to include port calls, patrolling, Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR), and joint exercises, among others, to strengthen interoperability with friendly nations while securing strategic goals.

The Northwestern Indian Ocean (NWIO) primarily consists of the Arabian Sea and includes the Persian Gulf, the Gulf of Oman, the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea, along with key maritime chokepoints, namely, the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab-el-Mandeb. The significance of these strategic waterways to India can be estimated from the fact

that nearly 80% of India's goods trade with Europe passes through the Red Sea, and around *"two-thirds of India's crude oil imports and half of its LNG imports pass through the Strait of Hormuz."*<sup>2</sup> Thus, securing these critical sea lanes of communications (SLOCs) from traditional and non-traditional security threats to advance the geopolitical and geoeconomic interests is the principal maritime strategy followed by India in the NWIO. In this regard, New Delhi has put forward a calibrated approach by strengthening cooperation with the like-minded countries of the NWIO region and fostering coordination with the UAE and Saudi Arabia forms the core of this strategy.

With this context, this paper aims to explain India's defence cooperation with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the two most powerful and emerging middle powers of the region, primarily in the maritime domain, and highlight the strategic significance of this cooperation for India.

### **The UAE: A Key Pillar of India's Engagement in the NWIO**

India's engagement with the UAE has transformed from a buyer and seller of hydrocarbons to a multi-dimensional strategic partnership in the past decade. As both nations are heavily dependent on the maritime routes of the NWIO for energy, trade, and food security, the shared interest to deter common threats such as human trafficking, piracy, smuggling, etc., has created a conducive environment for deeper naval cooperation between the two nations. During the 2016 visit of the UAE Crown Prince, Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, to New Delhi, both nations agreed to work towards integrating the Gulf-Indian Ocean security framework.<sup>3</sup> To move forward in this regard, both countries signed an MoU on the 'Mutual Recognition of Certificates of Competency as per the provisions of the Standards of Training, Certification, and Watchkeeping (STCW, 78)' in 2017.<sup>4</sup> The MoU has helped in harmonising the maritime education systems of the two countries, while enhancing the overseas employability of the Indian maritime professionals. Besides, after the signing of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership agreement, both nations have also expanded the naval cooperation to include regular port calls, high-level engagements, joint bilateral and multilateral exercises, joint patrols, anti-piracy operations, and naval defence exhibitions (NAVDEX), among others.

The visit of the Chief of Naval Staff (CNS) of the Indian Navy, Admiral Dinesh K. Tripathi, in October 2024 highlighted the common endeavour to build navy-to-navy

synergy between the two countries in the maritime calculus and emerge as comprehensive maritime powers in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).<sup>5</sup> As a reciprocal visit, the Commander of the UAE naval forces, Staff Major General Humaid Mohammed Al Rumaithi, visited India in July 2025. The visit focused on strengthening naval engagements to ensure a secure and rules-based maritime order across the IOR, including in the NWIO. Apart from these leadership-level engagements, regular port calls have also become an integral part of naval cooperation and have played a significant role as a visible reassurance mechanism in building trust between the operational commanders of the two navies.<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, the bilateral and multilateral naval exercises form the core of the maritime defence diplomacy between the two nations. From 2018 to 2024, both countries conducted a total of five bilateral and trilateral naval exercises (see Table 1.1), aimed primarily at enhancing interoperability and building operational readiness to ensure free and open maritime navigation in the regional waterways.

**Table 1.1: Naval Exercise between India and the UAE (2018-2024)**

Year	Exercise	Type	Location	Warships Deployed	Aim
2018	Gulf Star-1	Bilateral	Off the coast of Abu Dhabi	<b>India:</b> INS Gomati (Guided Missile Frigate) and INS Kolkata (Guided Missile Destroyer)  <b>UAE:</b> various naval vessels	- To advance shared maritime security objectives - Combat traditional and non-traditional security threats in the Gulf Region
2021	Zayed Talwar	Bilateral	Off the coast of	<b>UAE:</b> UAES AL-Dhafra (a Baynunah class	- To enhance interoperability, synergy and

			Abu Dhabi	guided missile corvette) and one AS-565B Panther helicopter;  <b>India:</b> INS Kochi with two integral Sea King MK 42B helicopters	operational coordination between the two navies
2023	Zayed Talwar	Bilateral	Port Rashid, Dubai	<b>India:</b> INS Trikand (Guided Missile Frigate) and INS Vishakhapatnam (Guided Missile Destroyer)  <b>UAE:</b> UAE Naval Units	- To develop stronger professional bonds by cross-training on procedures and tactics
2023	India-France-UAE Maritime Partnership	Trilateral	Gulf of Oman	<b>India:</b> INS Tarkash  <b>UAE:</b> Dash 8 Maritime Patrol Aircraft	- To ensure freedom of navigation in the high seas and secure key trade routes from traditional and non-traditional security threats

2024	Gulf Waves-1	Bilateral	Off the coast of the UAE	Naval vessels were deployed by both the countries.	- To secure the maritime environment and build operational readiness by exchanging expertise
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**Source:** Compiled by the author from different sources.

India’s naval cooperation with the UAE holds significant strategic importance primarily in light of the increasing shifting maritime environment of the NWIO. To begin with, the Red Sea crisis due to intensified Houthi attacks has posed a direct threat to the energy and trade security of both countries in the past few years. For example, DP World, a prominent Dubai-based port operator, had recorded a sharp 59% decline in its net profit in the first half of 2024 due to supply chain disruptions.<sup>7</sup> On similar lines, the rerouting of vessels via the Cape of Good Hope enhanced the shipping cost of Europe-bound Indian cargo vessels from US\$600 to US\$1500 in 2024.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, the threats causing disruptions have brought into light the requirement of coordinated response by the regional and extra-regional players in the region. Secondly, the increasing Chinese presence in the IOR through port controls and the establishment of naval bases demands proactive diplomatic engagement by New Delhi with the Indian Ocean littoral states. Closer strategic coordination with Abu Dhabi will help New Delhi enhance its containment strategy and counter China’s escalatory objectives in the region. Lastly, a resilient and stable NWIO is indispensable for the successful operationalisation of the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), which has the potential to further enhance the geoeconomic and geostrategic position of India and the UAE at the regional and global levels.

### **The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and India’s Naval Cooperation**

The bilateral ties between India and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) are intrinsically embedded in the age-old energy, trade, and defence partnership. With US\$41.87 billion worth of bilateral trade in FY25, the KSA is the fourth-largest trading

partner and third-largest crude oil exporter to India, while India is the second-largest trading partner of the KSA.<sup>9</sup> In the defence sector, both countries have expanded their cooperation by signing the strategic partnership agreement in 2019,<sup>10</sup> making the relationship comprehensive and robust in nature. Besides, maritime cooperation between the two nations started in 2021 with the first-ever naval exercise, Al Mohed Al Hindi conducted off the King Abdulaziz naval base in Al-Jubail, Saudi Arabia.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, in August 2025, both countries established the Joint Working Group on Maritime Cooperation, which aims to strengthen port connectivity and deepen collaboration in the shipping and logistics sector.<sup>12</sup>

With respect to the naval cooperation, regular port calls, exchange of officers, navy-to-navy staff talks, joint training and capacity building, and bilateral naval exercises are the key tools for improving interoperability and building synergy between the two nations. In July 2025, eight members of the Royal Saudi Naval Forces (RSNF) visited the Information Fusion Centre – Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) in Gurugram as part of a study tour. The visit primarily focused on sharing real-time information and enhancing maritime domain awareness to ensure the safety of vessels on the high seas.<sup>13</sup> Besides, in the most recent port visit in August 2025, Indian ships INS Tamal and INS Surat visited Jeddah and took part in a Passage Exercise with the RSNF.<sup>14</sup> These initiatives reflect the deepening maritime engagement between the two countries with the common strategic aim to ensure stability in the NWIO.

Furthermore, the bilateral naval exercises have also gained momentum, with two editions of the biennial exercise Al-Mohed Al Hindi conducted in 2021 and 2023 (see Table 1.2).

**Table 1.2: Naval Exercises between India and Saudi Arabia (2021-2023)**

Year	Exercise	Type	Location	Warships Deployed	Focus
2021	Al-Mohed Al Hindi (First Edition)	Bilateral	Off the King Abdulaziz Naval base in Al-Jubail,	<b>Saudi Arabia:</b> RSNF Warships	- Electronic warfare drills, tactical

			Saudi Arabia	<b>India:</b> INS Kochi	maneuvers, search and rescue operations
2023	Al-Mohed Al Hindi (Second Edition)	Bilateral	Off the King Abdulaziz Naval base in Al Jubail, Saudi Arabia	<b>Saudi Arabia:</b> HMS Badr, MH-60R helicopter and UAV  <b>India:</b> INS Tarkash, INS Subhadra, and Dornier Maritime Patrol Aircraft (MPA)	- Same as 2021 exercise

Source: compiled by the author using different sources.

Seen through New Delhi's lens, increasing maritime cooperation with Riyadh is strategically important to reduce the catastrophic impacts of evolving asymmetric threats in the NWIO. In the area where maritime geopolitics and geoeconomics are deeply intertwined, creating collaborative mechanisms with friendly neighbours is essential to not only secure the national interests but also strengthen India's role as a net security provider across the IOR. Cooperation with the RSNF, bilaterally as well as through institutional mechanisms such as the IFC-IOR, will enhance New Delhi's ability to create a friendly and conducive environment for joint responses in the region.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, Riyadh's geographic location is very crucial for maintaining a sustained naval presence in both the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea, which will allow

New Delhi to broaden its maritime vision of Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR).

### **Conclusion**

As the above discussion highlights, common challenges and shared maritime visions to ensure freedom of navigation in the NWIO have helped boost cooperation between New Delhi and its two partners in the Persian Gulf region. Through joint patrols and operational experience, the three nations hold the potential and strategic vision to create a resilient maritime environment in the area, primarily in light of the relative retrenchment of the United States from the region. To further deepen this emerging collaboration, the three nations can create a trilateral mechanism and systematically reinforce their presence through initiatives such as the Indian Ocean Diplomatic Initiative, as suggested by Talmiz Ahmad, and reshape the maritime governance system of the region<sup>16</sup> while enhancing their regional profile.

### **DISCLAIMER**

The paper is the author's individual scholastic articulation and does not necessarily reflect the views of CENJOWS, the Defence forces, or the Government of India. The author certifies that the article is original in content, unpublished, and it has not been submitted for publication/ web upload elsewhere and that the facts and figures quoted are duly referenced, as needed and are believed to be correct.

## Endnotes

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