
India's *Atmanirbhar Bharat* and Defence Outreach: Leveraging the Gulf Strategic Partnerships

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In May 2020 when Prime Minister Narendra Modi gave the clarion call for *Atmanirbhar Bharat*¹ or 'Self Reliant India'; the initiative, at least until then referred to economic stimulus packages intended for the distressed population during the Pandemic. However, soon after, it became the buzzword for modern India, the one touted as a responsible, reliable regional and global power which visualises itself as a self-reliant and self-sufficient economy while maintaining its strategic autonomy. This realisation further got affirmation when the country became the first responder and a responsible supplier of basic medicines such as paracetamol and hydroxychloroquine to around 120 countries during the initial stages of COVID-19, thus providing impetus to India's medical diplomacy.²

Surprisingly, even though the initiative is extended to all the sectors available in the country; however, the later addition of defence component is most notable as it not only involves the promotion of indigenous defence production and manufacturing but also propels massive outreach to friendly countries and reliable partners.³ According to Stockholm

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International Peace Institute (SIPRI) Fact Sheet 2021, even though India's arms imports have decreased by 33 per cent from 2011-15 to 2016-20, still it is the second-largest arms importer in the world after Saudi Arabia by importing 9.5 per cent of its arms, mainly from Russia (49 per cent), France (18 per cent) and Israel (13 per cent).⁴ To make matters worse, India is also the third-largest country in terms of defence expenditure after the US and China, with US\$ 71.1 billion spending in the defence sector.⁵

Given the changing geopolitical dynamics, not only does New Delhi direly needs to diversify its import partners but also needs to invest in the indigenisation of defence products to reduce its dependence on other countries. Most importantly, the inability to indigenous defence procurement, manufacturing and production was termed as the major lacuna in the long talked about but never acted upon defence reforms proposed under the 1990s Arun Singh Committee report on Defence Expenditure.

Subsequently, both the Kargil Review Committee (KRC) in 1999 and the Group of Ministers' report (2000) set up post-Kargil conflict, vouched for indigenisation. However, given the civil-military non-relations, lack of foresight, but most importantly, bureaucratic hurdles, led to India shying away from taking up a crucial step towards defence modernisation through indigenisation.⁶

Thus, identified as one of the 'core areas', the defence sector—like other sectors initiated under *Atmanirbhar Bharat*—stands on five pillars, namely: economy, infrastructure, systems, vibrant geography and demand. Taking all the pillars into account, strategic partnerships with the Persian Gulf economies have the ability to further India's goal of indigenisation in defence manufacturing, production and export. To strengthen the argument, in December 2020, Minister of State for External Affairs, V. Murleedharan remarked that “[t]he Gulf countries with their surplus capital, open economies and connections with different

regions of the world such as Africa, Central Asia and Europe are well placed to partner with India in its quest. This is a win-win proposition for both India and Gulf".⁷ Even though, this proposition was primarily focused on extending the *Atmanirbhar Bharat Initiative* in economic and energy-related investments, however, it stands valid even for the defence sector. For, the Gulf not only provides a vibrant market for Indian defence equipment, arms and ammunitions at a cheaper and reasonable rate, but also provides an opportunity for joint ventures and investments in the defence field. Additionally, in return, India is also an important export destination for the regions mobile anti-drone systems, multi-role transport tankers, emerging technologies and others.⁸

In August 2020, a 'negative list of 101 defence items' was issued by the Ministry of Defence (MoD), which includes not only minor products but also warfare systems, integrated platforms, and combat vehicles which India pledged to stop importing in a step-wise manner in three to four quarters starting from December last year. All these 101 items will either be procured domestically or produced through joint ventures with reliable partners. Interestingly, most of the items listed can be achieved through joint ventures with Gulf economies too. Probably, the political dispensation and the policymakers have already ventured into this idea as the Gulf is touted as India's second most preferred outreach destination after South Asia and followed by Africa. Thus, evolving strategic partnerships with the Persian Gulf nations can be used as a leverage point to enhance India's defence industry. Interestingly, the Gulf already plays a strategically crucial role in India's economic development, social progress and political ascendance. With *Atmanirbhar Bharat*, it has the potential to contribute enormously to developing India's defence sector.

As established, Indo-Gulf relations have transcended over a period of time from India being a benign power with traditional buyer-seller kind of transactional interaction with the region based on ideologically driven

Non-aligned movement (NAM) to India being a pragmatic strategic partner, a more reliable, responsible and trustworthy partner.⁹ Thus, it is safe to argue that with regard to the Persian Gulf, Indian foreign policy has been evolving progressively and much of it is to do with New Delhi's response to the evolving needs and conditions in the region, as also domestically. While its pre-historic relations hovered around trade, specifically in spices, gold and silk, with the discovery of oil in the then Persia in 1908 and subsequently in Gulf Arab countries, the traditional relations with the region were focused primarily on securing energy. Subsequently, with the oil boom in the 1970s, as the economic prospects in the Gulf increased, it gave impetus to massive Gulf migrations from India, especially from Southern India.¹⁰

However, despite Gulf's enormous contribution to India's GDP, the relations continued to be transactional in nature. It was only since the 2000s that India started to elevate its relations with the major Gulf economies to strategic partnership levels. Nevertheless, there was a lull in the engagements for a very long time until Prime Minister Narendra Modi's ascendance since 2014, wherein with the introduction of 'Link West' and 'Act West' policies, relations with Gulf economies began to further. Today, India has signed a Memorandum of Understanding on defence cooperation with as many as five Gulf nations, namely, Iran (2001), UAE (2003), Qatar (2008), Saudi Arabia (2014) and Oman (2016).¹¹ However, the countries have been majorly collaborating on intelligence sharing, counter-terrorism, counter-piracy and counter-extremism measures as of now with minimum or no cooperation on investments in defence procurements, production, exports and imports. This becomes even more important as the still energy component in the strategic partnerships with Gulf finds precedence above all. Moreover, with Persian Gulf economies' drive towards economic diversification to achieve *Vision 2030*, investment in defence production can play a major role.

To do so, first and foremost, India may like to establish an exclusive Defence Strategic Partnership with major Gulf countries.¹² This is important as not only it provides impetus to its defence services in these countries and vice versa, enhance defence exports and imports, caters to joint ventures in defence projects, helps in setting up defence industries with private players' partnerships in the region and in India;¹³ but can also help the countries to work closely on securing the Sea Lines of Communications (SLOC) from any potential Chinese blockades in the future.

While once the start-ups in the sector in India are picked up by big private industries, they can invest in joint ventures with Gulf economies; with regard to the 101 lists, India can successfully invest in shipbuilding factories specifically with Oman with which the country has maritime cooperation and is successfully working jointly in anti-piracy, marine and coastal security issues. Moreover, India can supply indigenous short-range drones such as Idea Forge drones with high to middle altitude range which can be utilised in situational awareness at ground levels; supply loitering munitions such as MIDAS used for tactical levels which the ground troops may use; aviation industry may be boosted by production of indigenous helicopters such as Dhruv Advanced Light Helicopter (ALH) and its weaponised version ALH-WSI (weapon system integration); and Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) produced single-engine, fourth-generation, multirole light fighter aircrafts such as TEJAS. Battle and manoeuvre tanks such as Arjun MK1, Arjun MK2 and their variants may find a good market in the Gulf.¹⁴

Remarkably, in October 2020, MoD conducted a webinar with UAE, wherein private industries from both countries participated and presented their cases on individual production capabilities. From the Indian side, "L&T Defence, GRSE, OFB, MKU, Bharat Forge and Ashok Leyland made company and product presentations on major platforms/equipment like Artillery Systems, Radars, Protected Vehicles, Coastal Surveillance

System, Akash Missile system and Ammunition etc. From the UAE side STREIT Group, Rockford Xellerie, EDGE, TAWAZUN and Marakeb Technologies presented their case".¹⁵ Such initiatives are required with other major Gulf countries such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Oman, and Iran as well.

To further bolster its defence relations and to cater responsibly to the region, India must seriously work upon its expeditionary capabilities, form a robust evacuation policy, and strengthen its defence diplomacy, economic interests and alliances with all the countries in the region while maintaining its strategic autonomy. It is noteworthy that despite enormous regional clout, until now India is still not an active player in the region unlike the US, UK, Russia and China; at the most, it is seen as a responsible 'partner' but not an actor in the region. Post-Cold War and after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, if not entirely but too much extent the Indian tilt towards the US policy in the region is well noticed and acknowledged by all the major regional and external players. On top of it, concerns over China's visible strategic footprint in the region, Pakistan factor and India's own aspirations to be recognised as a regional and global power, must push New Delhi into considering building military bases in the region. This is not to participate in countries' internal matters but to oversee and maximise its joint defence production, manufacturing and cooperation and also to build a permanent base for evacuation of its expatriates in times of need. In this regard, Al Duqm port offered by Oman to Indian Navy in 2018 for establishing a military base can be used efficiently by India.¹⁶

On balance, while defence outreach through *Atmanirbhar Bharat* may sound promising, it requires a concerted and diligent effort to succeed. Given the visible competitions especially in the Gulf Arab market owing to the normalisation of Israel-Arab relations, Pakistan's defence outreach, US plans of withdrawal and China's active strategic footprint; India must work on its deliverables. Also, as India has many times missed

the bus on defence indigenisation and modernisation, it cannot afford to have a lax attitude this time. However, the Indian Army Chiefs' unprecedented visit to Saudi Arabia and UAE in December 2020, and the frequent visits and interactions with the major countries in the Gulf even amidst the pandemic does indicate that India is serious in its defence outreach to the Gulf. Besides, MoDs conduction of webinar with Indian and UAE's private industries further clarified that the region sees India as a potential defence partner. Thus, if nurtured properly, it cannot be neglected that Gulf has the potential and capability to play a major role in boosting India's defence industry.

Notes

1. While the idea of self-reliance was introduced in 1940s when the Indian leaders took inspiration from Soviet model and later on from South Korean, Taiwanese and Brazilian models, the initiative was popularised by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in May 2020 and was eventually expanded to all sectors in the country. The initiative was introduced with a disclaimer that it does not advocate for a self-centered protectionist approach. It is noteworthy that despite numerous discussions on defence reforms and defence manufacturing especially post the Kargil Review Committee (KRC) report, nothing substantial has been achieved in that sector. Therefore, to provide an impetus to that, by August 2020, Defence Minister Rajnath Singh called for an extension of *Atmanirbharta* in Defence sector as well.
2. "India supplied paracetamol, hydroxychloroquine to over 120 countries in last two months: Piyush Goyal", *The Economic Times*, 14 May 2020. Available online at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/india-supplied-paracetamol-hydroxychloroquine-to-over-120-countries-in-last-2-mths-piyush-goyal/articleshow/75740457.cms?from=mdr>, accessed on March 26, 2021.
3. Ministry of Defence (2020), "Raksha Mantri Shri Rajnath Singh Highlights Atmanirbhar Bharat Initiative of MoD at Defence Industry Outreach Webinar", Press Release, 27 August 2020. Available online at <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1649023#:~:text=To%20promote%20Atmanirbhar%20Bharat%20in,for%20procurement%20from%20domestic%20vendors.&text=Raksha%20Mantri%20said%20that%20the,reliance%2C%20in%20the%20defence%20sector>, accessed on March 27, 2021.
4. Pieter D. Wezeman, Alexandra Kuimova and Siemon T. Wezeman (2021), "Trends In International Arms Transfers, 2020", *SIPRI Fact Sheet 2021*, March 2021. Available online at https://sipri.org/sites/default/files/2021-03/fs_2103_at_2020.pdf, accessed on March 27, 2021.

5. Shaurya Karanbir Gurung (2020), "India Third Largest Military Spender in World, After US and China", *The Economic Times*, 27 April 2020. Available online at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/global-military-spending-saw-largest-increase-in-decade-in-2019-china-india-in-top-3-study/articleshow/75404166.cms?from=mdr>, accessed on March 27, 2021.
6. Anit Mukherjee (2013), "Failing to Deliver: Post-Crises Defence Reforms in India, 1998-2010", in Kanti P. Bajpai and Harsh V. Pant (eds.), *India's National Security: A Reader*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp. 425-468.
7. Ministry of External Affairs (2020), "Remarks by Minister of State for External Affairs during Panel Discussion on India and the Gulf: Leveraging Energy Partnerships, Investment Opportunities and Emerging Technologies for 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' at the PBD Conference", 11 December 2020. Available online at <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/33285>, accessed on March 27, 2021.
8. Ahead of the 2020 Republic Day parade held amidst protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), therefore, given the security requirements in India, UAE promptly supplied its mobile anti-drone systems to India. Around the same time, for mid-air refuelling of the Rafale jets, the country agreed to deploy its Airbus 330 multi-role transport tankers for India. For more information, See: Shishir Gupta (2021), "Deepening India-UAE Defence Cooperation Enlarges India's Footprint in West Asia", *The Hindustan Times*, 15 March 2021. Available online at <https://www.hindustantimes.com/analysis/deepening-india-uae-defence-cooperation-enlarges-india-s-footprint-in-west-asia-101615786054363.html>, accessed on March 27, 2021.
9. M.S. Agwani (1976), "India and the Arab World" in B. R. Nanda (ed.) *Indian Foreign Policy: The Nehru Years*, New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, pp. 60-77.
10. Manjari Singh (2020), "India-Persian Gulf Relations: From Transactional to Strategic Partnerships", *CLAWS Journal*, Vol. 13, No. 1, pp. 157-173.
11. Ministry of Defence (2020), "Interaction Mechanism on Defence Cooperation", Hardcopy available with the Army Headquarter.
12. In a Personal Interview conducted with a Defence Official who was actively involved in the creation of 101 negative list and Defence Procurement Procedure Report 2020 and Defence Acquisition 2020 report but who wished to remain anonymous.
13. For instance, ONGC Videsh Limited which already acquires 10 per cent stakes in UAE offshore oilfields can also be persuaded to venture into defence sector for optimum results. Similarly, Reliance Group of Industries can also venture into this field. As these private players are already trusted partners in the region in oil extractions, their mandate can be extended to defence sector as well.
14. In a Personal Interview conducted with a Defence Official who was actively involved in the creation of 101 negative list and Defence Procurement Procedure Report 2020 and Defence Acquisition 2020 report but who wished to remain anonymous; *See also*: Manjari Singh (2021), "Navigating Indian Defense Outreach with the Gulf", Fikra Forum, Washington Institute, 7 April 2021. Available online at <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/navigating-indian-defense-outreach-gulf>, accessed on April 10, 2021.

15. “Boosting Defence Exports: India-UAE Agree to Further Defence Cooperation Through Joint Production and Mutual Trade”, Press Interest Bureau (PIB), 28 October 2020. Available online at <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1668099>, accessed on March 29, 2021.
16. Dipanjan Roy Chaudhary (2018), “PM Modi’s Oman Visit: Indian Navy Can Now Access Duqm Port”, *The Economic Times*, 13 February 2018. Available online at <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/pm-modis-oman-visit-navy-can-now-access-duqm-port/articleshow/62894357.cms>, accessed on March 29, 2021.

