

Delhi's new hierarchy of friendship in West Asia

India walks the talk when it comes to supporting its embattled partners, proven by the signing of a range of bilateral agreements of immense value

Published on: May 19, 2026

By [Sreeram Chaulia](#)

Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi's eighth visit to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) was short but salient. In a barely three-hour-long stay in Abu Dhabi, Modi not only embraced and closed ranks with his "brother" and ruler of the UAE, Mohammed bin Zayed (MBZ), at a critical moment but also laid the foundation for elevating an already robust Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.



In light of the rapid strides in UAE-India friendship, broader regional speculation is inevitable. (DPR PMO/PTI)

The timing of Modi's UAE stopover conveyed crucial signals in the context of the US-Israel war against Iran, and Iran's massive asymmetric retaliation in the form of thousands of missile and drone strikes on the UAE. Exactly when the UAE was reeling from threats to its airspace due to relentless Iranian military attacks on its home soil and facing a debilitating blockade of its oil and gas exports through the Strait of Hormuz, Modi became the first world leader to land in Abu Dhabi, express solidarity with MBZ, and repose confidence in the UAE as a reliable and stable long-term partner.

The grand welcome for Modi, whose plane was escorted by UAE's fighter jets, carried special symbolic meaning, against the backdrop of a UAE whose sense of security was shattered during the Iran war. Modi's categorical condemnation of targeting of the UAE as "unacceptable", his pledge to stand "shoulder-to-shoulder" with the UAE to restore regional peace and stability, and his call for keeping the Strait of Hormuz "free, open, and safe" in adherence to international law, resonated with the UAE and echoed across war-battered West Asia. After all, what are real friends for if they do not stand up for you during a crisis?

The fact that India walks the talk when it comes to supporting its embattled partners was proven by the signing of a range of bilateral agreements that are of immense value to both sides. The UAE-India Strategic Defence Partnership to advance joint military industrial development and innovation, technology-sharing, special operations, interoperability and maritime security is of utmost importance to the UAE, which found itself exposed and vulnerable during the Iran war despite receiving US and Israeli assistance.

The UAE will not abandon its alliance with the US or rewind its closeness with Israel, but the deepening of defence relations with India gives it an added assurance as part of MBZ's foreign policy of diversification. Proactive power projection and enforcement of international law by the Indian Navy at the western end of the Arabian Sea near the two main outlets for the UAE's energy exports — Hormuz and the Gulf of Oman — can be a morale booster for the energy-rich Emirates, which boasts of a world-class air force and combat-tested army but has a relatively weak navy.

The UAE's fast-forwarding of the West-East oil pipeline to double crude oil export capacity through Fujairah, which lies outside Hormuz, and the uplifting of its other port of Khor Fakkan, which is in the Gulf of Oman and also beyond Hormuz, mark a fundamental rerouting of its energy strategy. If India can step up and do more for securing Fujairah and Khor Fakkan, it would build a shock absorber for Indian energy security, bypass choke points which are at the mercy of violent actors, and pave safe passage for its burgeoning non-oil trade with the UAE and Oman.

For India, which is reliant on West Asia for oil, gas, and remittances of its ten-million-strong diaspora in the Gulf, stepping up as a net provider of security along vital Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) will convey that it is a rising power in the world that will not watch passively and helplessly as its lifelines are held hostage at the maritime choke points. Utilising the UAE-India Strategic Defence Partnership to establish a permanent Indian foothold or base in a geopolitically and geoeconomically indispensable area next to the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) should be seriously considered by planners in New Delhi.

The upgrade in UAE-India military ties dovetails with the ambitious new fillip being given to the bilateral energy relationship. The UAE's commitment to store 30 million barrels of oil in India's strategic petroleum reserve, the prospect of keeping part of India's oil reserves in the UAE's port of Fujairah, and long-term supply arrangements for liquified gas from the UAE to India, are all contingent upon freedom of navigation and unimpeded oceanic commerce.

In light of the rapid strides in UAE-India friendship, broader regional speculation is inevitable. Is India aligning with the UAE when intra-Gulf tensions are peaking? The UAE's exit from the Saudi Arabia-led Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) has freed it from the cartel's production cuts regime, allowing it to pump more oil for big customers like India. But this monumental move has also widened fissures between the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

Already, the Saudis have signed their own Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement (SMDA) with Pakistan, which says Qatar and Turkey may also join the so-called

“Islamic NATO”. India has diaspora and energy stakes in Saudi Arabia and Qatar too. It has also sustained delicate ties with Iran, enabling gradual passage of India-bound ships through the blocked Hormuz. So, New Delhi will be cautious that its big bet on Abu Dhabi does not come at the expense of Riyadh, Doha, or Tehran. The India-UAE-Israel trio is not pitted against any Saudi-Pakistan-Turkey-Qatar axis or against Iran. Avoiding simplistic binaries has been the hallmark of Indian diplomacy and its multi-alignment policy in West Asia is rational. But without an iota of doubt, the UAE is number one in India’s hierarchy of friendships in that region and will remain so.

Sreeram Chaulia is dean, Jindal School of International Affairs. The views expressed are personal