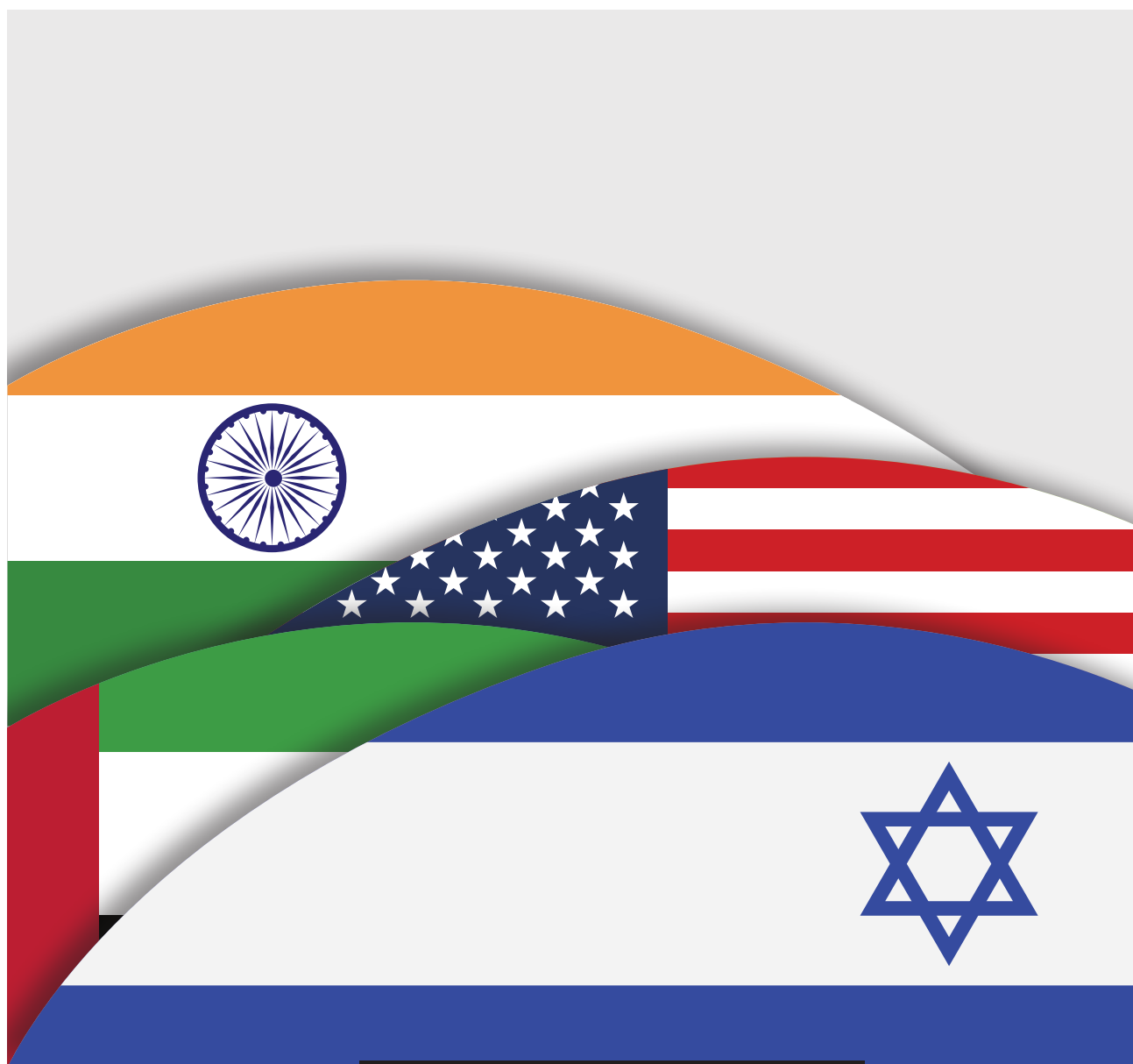


SPECIAL REPORT no. 169

The New US-Israel-UAE-India Minilateral in a Changing West Asia

Kabir Taneja, Ed.



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Introduction

The US-Israel-UAE trilateral was held in October between US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Israel's alternate Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Yair Lapid, and UAE's Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan. A few days later, India joined the new minilateral: External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar and his Israeli counterpart held a virtual meeting with their US and UAE equivalents during Jaishankar's official visit to Israel. India has already hinted of a second meeting of the grouping soon.

The initial US-Israel-UAE trilateral meeting sought to discuss the issue of further operationalising and normalising the Abraham Accords, signed in September 2020 between a collective of Arab states led by the UAE, and Israel. The three also underlined the need to normalise their relations after decades of conflict, and discussed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) or the Iran nuclear deal, which aimed to bring Tehran back into a certain level of the geopolitical mainstream. (The deal had suffered a setback after then US President Donald Trump unceremoniously exited the agreement in May 2018.)

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With India stepping into the grouping, it brings its own set of strategic and geoeconomic interests to those of the Gulf states. Together, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) bloc is India's single largest trading partner. As both Saudi Arabia and the UAE move towards a post-oil era, with other Gulf states in tow, the Indian market offers itself as an attractive proposition, both as an oil consumer over the next decade, and as a general investment destination that has over 1.3 billion customers and investors alike.

India for long has maintained an impressive geostrategic balance in dealing with the three poles of power in the region: Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Iran. The Abraham Accords now offers newer and comparatively risk-free economic opportunities led by the UAE and Israel. Iran is also looking at easing tensions around these new realities, as Tehran already has better relations with the UAE and is opening channels of talks with Saudi Arabia.

This report dissects the US-Israel-UAE-India construct as all four countries appear equally keen. In the first chapter, Akshobh Giridharadas highlights the current state of India-US relations amidst the evolving nature of the historical, and

often unsteady, US presence in West Asia, and the newer outlooks in the Indo-Pacific. I then write on Israel, its place within the Abraham Accords framework, and how this crucial geopolitical shift allows it more room in the geopolitical mainstream, including in its relations with the other three states in this new quadrilateral.

Mohammed Sinan Siyech follows with his section that investigates the India-UAE bonhomie, which is taking a life of its own as Abu Dhabi champions India's interests within the Arab world. The report closes with a section authored by Navdeep Suri that delves into the drastic reorientation of New Delhi's view of West Asia over the past years.

The aim of this report is to outline the most significant debates that are accompanying the emergence of this grouping. While all four sections utilise a linear method of interpreting the unfolding events, all four states are in this minilateral for reasons that go far beyond the Abraham Accords.

-Kabir Taneja

For Washington, the Elephant in the Room is a Dragon

Akshobh Giridharadas

The US-Israel-UAE-India minilateral aims to fructify a partnership in West Asia, and in October, the senior-most foreign policy representatives of the four nations sowed the seeds of the new forum. As Indian analyst C. Raja Mohan writes, “It is perhaps too early to call the new minilateral with the US, UAE and Israel the ‘new Quad’ for the Middle East. It will be a while before this grouping will find its feet and evolve.”¹

Indeed, what is known as the ‘Quad’ has itself taken a long time to find its bearings: it started in 2007, when India, the US, Japan and Australia came together to form a Tsunami Core Group in response to the 2004 tsunami in the Indian Ocean; it dissipated soon after the first exploratory meeting on the sidelines of the ASEAN Regional

Forum summit in Manila in May 2007. There was a sense of nebulosity about the Quad. But 2007 was a different time; there were talks about a peaceful China rise. A decade later, the Quad was revived as the four countries met again in Manila. By then, China had moved from Deng’s peaceful China rise to Xi’s pugnacity in the South China Sea.

This new forum for West Asia makes sense.² India has enhanced its strategic partnership with the US through the Quad alongside Australia and Japan, based on a mutual outlook of the Indo-Pacific. Washington’s partnership with Tel Aviv is as old as the founding of the state, and Washington and Abu Dhabi are described as “close friends and strong allies”.

The signing of the Abraham Accords was the missing piece of the puzzle. This author has earlier argued that while the previous US administration under President Donald Trump “eschewed a sense of multilateralism and global involvement, and adopted a path of economic nationalism and insularity,” there was one exception—i.e., a seminal deal in the Middle East, which continues to figure in the US’s geostrategic calculations.³

The historic Abraham Accords, viewed as having been driven by Trump’s son-in-law and adviser, Jared Kushner, was hatched in the final months of the president’s term. The October 2021 meeting of the four nations owes its existence to these accords; without the deal, Abu Dhabi and Tel Aviv could not have taken to the public stage with one another.

While the UAE and Israel have never fought militarily, Abu Dhabi did participate in the Arab League boycott that had been in place since Israel’s founding in 1948. Since the signing of the accords, more than just a thawing of animosities, there has been an emerging synergy between Abu Dhabi and Tel Aviv. Indeed, new embassies and consulates have opened in both sides, their respective ambassadors have been appointed,

the first of many new direct flights between UAE and Israel is operational, a UAE-Israel business council was created to discuss trade and commercial ties, joint MOUs have been inked between their stock exchanges; and cultural exchanges have started between their diasporic communities.

A week prior to the meeting, on 13 October, Israeli diplomats congregated at the same venue, as the US-India Strategic Partnership Forum (USISPF) hosted India’s Finance Minister, Nirmala Sitharaman in Washington D.C. On the same day, Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid met with UAE Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahya, and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken—a precursor to the West Asia partnership. As noted by ORF analyst Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, the meeting was held to review the “the extent of transformation in West Asia since the announcement of the Abraham Accords.”⁴

All four states—the US, Israel, UAE, and India—have already stepped up on their cooperation in trade and investment. They have also often showed support for each other on critical political matters.

According to Ned Price, US State Department spokesperson, the four discussed “expanding economic and political cooperation in the Middle East and Asia, including through trade, combating climate change, energy cooperation, and increasing maritime security.” Other items on the agenda included people-to-people ties in science and technology, and Covid-19 relief efforts and vaccine outreach.⁵

The Joe Biden administration appears keen on building on his predecessor’s efforts in West Asia. As a region, the Middle East has been long fraught with turbulence and friction. Like its counterpart quadrilateral forum for the Indo-Pacific, the US-India-Israel-UAE partnership claims to have a minimal security agenda and is not looking at negotiating overt military deals. At the same time, however, it does seem to have strategic undertones aimed at encirclement and containment. After all, there is an elephant in the room, and it is a dragon in the form of China.

With the August US withdrawal from Afghanistan, there is a perceived vacuum in West Asia—one that Moscow, Beijing and Tehran are vying to fill. The Quad was not enough, and Washington subsequently entered the AUKUS trilateral, along with the United Kingdom and Australia, to formally consolidate a military trilateral aimed at frustrating Beijing’s expansionist ambitions in the Indo-Pacific.⁶

The emergence of the so-called “new Quad” reflects the Biden administration’s alacrity at a China containment policy. For Washington, there is a categorisation of enemies: the historical one in Iran; the cyclical one in Russia; and the new strategic one in China.⁷ As Beijing increases its engagement with the UAE and Israel, Washington wants to negate Chinese presence in the region, whether through military or political means, or trade. Despite the historic and long alliance with Abu Dhabi and Tel Aviv, there is concern over Beijing’s influence in the region.

As former Indian Ambassador Navdeep Suri wrote about Chinese investments in Israel, highlighting “the new US \$1.7 billion container terminal built in Haifa by state-owned Shanghai International Port Group” will boost Israel’s logistics capacity. Suri also noted that “Ashdod, Israel’s only other major port on the Mediterranean is also being upgraded by the China Harbour Engineering Company.” Chinese presence in the region has exacerbated US security concerns, given Washington’s own naval footprint.⁸

Meanwhile, in Abu Dhabi, Chinese port presence continues. Ambassador Suri points out that the Emiratis “have signed a 35-year concession agreement with China Ocean Shipping Company (COSCO) to develop a new container terminal in Khalifa Port that is situated halfway between Abu Dhabi and Dubai.” This adds to the many nebulous investments that are part of China’s flagship Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) project. On the telecommunications front, Huawei has made inroads for its 5G service for both of UAE’s service providers—i.e., Etisalat and du.

The US withdrawal from Afghanistan leaves a void, one that Pakistan is keen to leverage now that the Taliban are at the helm.⁹ Islamabad wants to assist Beijing in extending the coveted China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), bolstering China’s global footprint and thus consolidating the BRI. The new Taliban regime in Kabul has

already hailed China as its “most important partner” and expressed interest in being part of the CPEC. This is something that Washington, along with Abu Dhabi, Tel Aviv and Delhi are averse to. Yet, Beijing is not the only adversary that concerns Washington. Since Iran and China signed a comprehensive strategic partnership in March earlier this year, Tehran officially became part of the BRI.

Three out of the four partners have a sense of trepidation with a perceived threat from the regime in Tehran, while the US and Israel do not share any formal diplomatic relations with the Shia-majority state. The concern of joint economic and security cooperation between China, Iran, Pakistan and Turkey has perhaps accentuated Washington’s need for such a pact.

Washington is hoping that the Abraham Accords, and subsequent engagement with UAE and Israel, will set a precedent for another of its long-term security allies, Saudi Arabia, to come to the table and normalise and formalise ties with Israel. Although several dossiers have already pointed to previous covert meetings between Riyadh and Tel Aviv.¹⁰

“Washington is hoping that the Abraham Accords, and engagement with UAE and Israel, will make another ally, Saudi Arabia, want to seek to normalise ties with Israel.”

While the US has shown unwavering support for Israel, one thing consistent in all prior Democrat and Republican administrations, was the neutrality of Jerusalem and the consensus towards working for a two-state solution – that was, until Donald Trump. Trump moved the embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem and displayed brazen apathy to the plight of the Palestinians.¹¹ Today Washington is keen to show that the fight for the Palestinian cause is not forgotten and unlike Trump, Biden continues to insist on the two-state solution.

State department officials have said the Abraham Accords does not replace a negotiated settlement. The Palestinians remain despondent with the resurgence of the Israeli right in the Bennett-Lapid government. Meanwhile, the Abraham Accords by Arab States and Washington’s lip-service towards a settlement while overlooking West Bank settlements is fait-accomplis.

There is a sense of nebulosity in how this new forum will metamorphosise; after all, the Indo-Pacific Quad took over a decade to fructify. However, there is one thing the Biden administration has signaled since the exit of Trump – that Washington is once again willing to engage with other countries within the ambit of multilateral platforms.

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Israel's Three-Front Opportunity

Kabir Taneja

After months of political and electoral uncertainty, Naftali Bennett, Israel's former defence minister and leader of the Yamina party in June 2021 took charge of a stitched-up coalition that ousted then Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Three months after Bennett took charge, India's foreign minister visited Israel to take an already dynamic bilateral forward. This time, the Indian visit was not only about the two countries' bilateral relationship; it also discussed defence cooperation and diplomacy with regional and international stakeholders in West Asia.¹

During the visit, a contingent from the Indian Air Force (IAF) took part in the Blue Flag 2021 exercise hosted by Israel, where it showcased its Mirage 2000 fighter aircraft for the first time. In 2017, India had attended the exercise with a contingent of IAF's 'Garud' commandos.² On the sidelines of the military exercise, India joined the US, Israel, and the UAE for a foreign ministers'

minilateral. The chief of the UAE's Air Force, Major General Ibrahim Nasser Mohammed Al Alawi, also visited Israel during this period, adding military heft to existing political and diplomatic cooperation in the region.³ Some Israeli analysts surmised that the military exercise was a show of both international friendship, and of Israel's strength especially aimed at Iran, its primary regional foe.⁴

As far as India is concerned, its ties with Israel has taken strides since 2014, under the governments of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Netanyahu. The 2017 visit by Modi to Israel, the first by any Indian prime minister, broke many shackles of India's West Asia policies. Historically, India has been steadfast in its ideations of non-alignment, advocating for the chimera-like two-state solution to the long-running Israel–Palestine issue. Such position has long been sought not only by India, but majority of the international community as well despite exerting little effort, if at all, to see it through.

The changes made by India in its approach to both Israel and Palestine were well-timed. Prior to his visit to the Jewish state, Modi hosted the president of Palestine, Mahmoud Abbas, and later in 2018 visited Ramallah in the West Bank. This latter visit does not get enough credit for successfully de-hyphenating Israel and Palestine issues in India's diplomatic lexicon and allowing India and Israel relations, specifically in the commercial sector, to thrive.

The 2017 Modi visit was followed by Netanyahu coming to India six months later in January 2018, solidifying a new trajectory for the two states' ties. Israel and India's ties cover different areas of cooperation including for example, the technologies sector that works across streams including Information Technology, agriculture, and clean water management. However, defence remains the frontrunner among these different sectors. Israeli weapons have long played a crucial part in India's military challenges, and this is seen across the country's history of conflicts: the 1965 war with China, the 1971 war with Pakistan, and the 'Surgical Strike' conducted in February 2019 against terror camps inside Pakistan in response to the Pulwama terror strike a few days earlier.⁵

During External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar's visit to Israel in October, the two countries committed to a 10-year defence cooperation plan. According to available data, Israel—now the 8th largest weapons supplier in the world—sells 45 percent of its annual defence-related products to India. Indeed, New Delhi is the single largest customer for the Israeli defence industry, with annual sales consistently going over US\$1 billion beginning in 2014.⁶ During the Galwan crisis between India and China in 2020, the defence ministers of India and Israel held consultations around emergency procurements. Israel consistently assured "all possible help" for India.⁷

For Israel, the minilateral with India, UAE and the US offers it both a regional and global place for its interests. The Abraham Accords deal, which seeks to normalise relations with a significant section of the Arab world, also eased pressures of conducting a political balancing act for states such as India. As briefly alluded to earlier, India has sought to balance its interests between the three poles of power in the region—the Arab world, Israel, and Iran.

For Israel, the normalisation of relations with the UAE and the GCC bloc, which together is India's largest trading partner, will be an excellent engine to access markets and industries that have not been its strong points. Other than defence, which remains transactional in nature, much of the celebrations behind the India–Israel bonhomie is yet to bear fruit. From Israel's perspective, the international dimension of the Abraham Accords is an added benefit to what is essentially a regional deal. The trade and economic component has significant marketable capacity, with Israel being seen as a “startup nation”, as christened by authors Dan Senor and Saul Singer, and the UAE as a “scale up” nation.^{8,9}

Beyond trade and economics, the fast-paced developments in India–Israel ties particularly under Netanyahu and Modi, also have a strong ideological argument around them. This is perhaps where a certain level of discrepancy could emerge between what Israel sees as the strategic function of the Abraham Accords, and how India views its ties with the region. Iran continues to weigh heavily into Israel's security calculus, and the Abraham Accords gives it more leverage to push Tehran towards a more moderate path when it comes to regional geopolitics in West Asia.

The Israel–Iran issue remains a heavy presence in and around the Abraham Accords construct. The 2012 attack on an Israeli diplomat in Delhi, and an IED explosion only a few feet from the Israeli embassy also in Delhi in January 2021—both alleged to be conducted by Iran—has brought India (like many other countries) in the midst of the rivalry between the two states. Israel's new ambassador to India, Naor Gilon, called Iran the “biggest destabiliser in the region,” to which the Iranian mission in India immediately issued a response. These statements showcase the complexities of managing the increasing spillovers of West Asia's geopolitical tussles. Gilon's statement was in the context of the Abraham Accords itself; he said that the deal had huge potential and that in a way, the question over Iran played a significant role in the making of the accords. “One of the reasons why our relations with the Gulf countries came to the open was, among other things, the fear and shared concern from Iran,” he said.¹⁰

Beyond economics and trade, it is yet to be ascertained what the Abraham Accords means strategically to West Asia's fluid geopolitics. Within the India-UAE-US-Israel framework, China remains a consistent concern across member states. There is no doubt that China is a critical economic partner today for Israel, standing only second to the US and potentially soon becoming the largest trade partner. Conversations on international politics, economics and security cannot be held without China, and as US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan puts it, a "stiff competition" developing between the US and China across the economic and political spectrums is something most states will have to learn to navigate.¹¹ This is despite the fact that Israel sees itself as being firmly in the US camp.

While both India and Israel have maintained good pace in their bilateral relationship, it is perhaps premature to recognise this 'minilateral' as a 'new Quad', as popularised in the Indo-Pacific region over the past few years. Despite Israel's interpretations, India will maintain its reviewed version of non-alignment, now known as "strategic autonomy". While the former version may be past its expiration date both in theory and practice, it has delivered dividends for India in its approach to West Asia. Over the decades, India has managed to deal with all concerned interests robustly, while not getting pulled into the fragility of the region's regional politics. And despite the successes of India-Israel ties, the fundamentals of "interests first" from New Delhi's perspective should not be misinterpreted by Israel around this new minilateral in West Asia.

“Some discrepancy could emerge between what Israel sees as the strategic function of the Abraham Accords, and how India views its ties with the region.”

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The View from Abu Dhabi

Mohammed Sinan Siyech

The UAE's primary aim in its foreign policy is to maintain status quo in its domestic political system; it also wants to keep political control in the hands of the current ruling family that includes the crown prince of Abu Dhabi, Sheikh Mohammed Bin Zayed al Nahyan.¹ The UAE has made sure to confront any group or nation that threatens this goal, the most prominent of which is the Muslim Brotherhood, which has broadly expressed its ambitions to have Islamic rule across the Arab world.²

Thus, the UAE took a belligerent stand towards Mohammed Morsi, a Muslim Brotherhood figure who became the president of Egypt in 2012 and supported the successor, Fateh al Sisi, after Morsi was deposed in 2013.³ In the same vein, the UAE was also at the forefront of the embargo against

Qatar in 2017 following the latter's decision to allow its news channel Al Jazeera to "encourage" revolutions across the Middle East.⁴ Despite reconciling with Qatar in 2021, the news channel is still not allowed to broadcast in the UAE.⁵

It is this strategic calculation of its domestic and foreign policy goals that has kept the UAE close to the US, long a buyer of its oil and a guarantor of security in West Asia. The same calibrations also impelled Abu Dhabi to sign the Abraham Accords with Israel allowing the UAE to diversify its allies across the world.⁶ The deal also ensured that the UAE cemented its friendship with the US, which is Israel's closest ally. The US served as main interlocutor for the peace treaty during Donald Trump's presidency.⁷

More recently, however, Abu Dhabi has been trying to de-escalate its conflicts and tensions by engaging with Iran, Turkey and other nations with which it has had fractious relations in the past.⁸ Using this prism, analysing UAE's presence within the four-member forum reveals certain benefits that the UAE may be hoping to derive.

An important point to reiterate regarding the meeting of the four nations is that the UAE, the US, and Israel had already met as a trilateral following the signing of the Abraham Accords. India's inclusion in the grouping should therefore be viewed within the framework of that trilateral.⁹ As the Israeli ambassador to India has noted, this minilateral would not have been possible if it were not for the accords.¹⁰

As such, the US has underscored cooperation with the other three on issues such as climate change, trade, and technological innovation as impetus for the new forum.¹¹ This falls in line with Abu Dhabi's other goals—i.e., the continuation of economic inflow to a nation that is slowly trying to reduce dependency on oil. This was highlighted in a document released in 2021 that outlines the UAE's foreign policy ambitions.¹² This is crucial. After all, the country has been able to continue providing generous welfare benefits to its citizens owing to its earnings from oil; a dip in these earnings could affect these benefits and thereby lead to public discontent. Thus, enhanced trade with the other three nations is expected

to provide the UAE benefits in the form of economic opportunities and jobs as it attempts to recover from the massive fallout of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Another benefit for the UAE is the opportunity to procure advanced weapons such as the F-35 fighter jets from the US, with blessings from Israel who was the first operator in the region of the type. Over the past decade, Abu Dhabi has advanced its military technology and expertise, giving the mission the name, 'Little Sparta'.¹³ By interlinking itself with these three nations that also trade heavily on defence supplies, it is possible that the UAE is ensuring a constant flow of weapons to its military.

A third benefit for UAE would likely be a consensus on the definitions of "terrorism" and "extremism", at least for the four nations. Already, the UAE, Israel, and India have similar outlooks on defining who extremists are, often painting political non-violent Islamists and Jihadists with the same brush. Indeed, the UAE along with Saudi Arabia has also long been lobbying to shut down groups like the Council of American Islamic Relation (CAIR) and the Muslim American Society (MAS), both located in the US—which have been outspoken against states like the UAE and Saudi Arabia for their actions in Yemen and other parts of the Muslim world.¹⁴

While the US has rejected these allegations leveled by Abu Dhabi,¹⁵ the UAE is hoping that a joint consensus by the other three could compel the US to take a less belligerent view of these Muslim groups.

More importantly, it is likely that the Arab nation is hedging its bets by ensuring that the US also supports it as much as China does. This is all the more important given how the US has taken a backseat in the affairs of the Middle East.¹⁶ At the same time, the UAE is also hoping that India, among other nations in the region, plays a more proactive role in providing security to the UAE.

Some analysts have noted that the new minilateral forum in West Asia acts as counterweight to China. However, this is not necessarily true, given both the UAE's and Israel's increasing closeness with China over the last decade.¹⁷ The UAE and China indeed now share a "comprehensive strategic partnership".¹⁸

Therefore, while the new grouping is not necessarily anti-China, it is wholly possible that the UAE could use the US's and India's wariness of China to procure more benefits for itself. Similarly, Iran, while a threat to Israel is not a major enemy of the group, too. Indeed, the UAE has recently

encouraged reconciliatory steps towards Iran; India has historically had harmonious relations with the nation as well.

Every country within this quadrilateral grouping would be driven by their own strategic calculations. For the UAE, the biggest impetus to partake in such foreign policy manoeuvres is to ensure continuity of the Zayed clan at the throne. It entered the partnership, keeping in mind the economic benefits of increased trade, access to weapons required to ensure its national security in a turbulent region, and possibly, furthering its goal of combating Muslim groups it deems as threatening to its national security.

The overarching logic, though, likely lies in the UAE hedging its economic and security bets by using the US–China and India–China rivalry to its advantage. It remains to be seen whether its goals match up with those of the others, and whether the minilateral could become a powerful force in the region, or mere diplomatic show with little consequence.

“The UAE’s motivation for partaking in the new minilateral is to ensure continuity of the Al Nahyan clan at the throne.”

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4

India's Stakes

Navdeep Suri

The emergence of a new, informal quadrilateral grouping that brings India together with UAE, Israel and the United States (US) holds considerable promise from an Indian standpoint. At the minimum, it pushes India a notch higher in its growing stature in regional and global platforms. Beyond that, taking a more expansive view, it could also create entirely new political, economic, defence, and security dynamics in West Asia.

That the first US-UAE-Israel-India meeting happened while India's Minister of External Affairs S Jaishankar was in Tel Aviv, carried its own significance. EAM Jaishankar later described India's ties with the three nations as "among the closest, if not the closest,"¹ a fact also borne out by a Survey of India's Strategic Community carried out by Brookings Institution in 2019. It ranked Israel and UAE as India's two most trusted partners in West Asia.²

This is not a coincidence. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has personally invested effort and energy in developing these two relationships. When he visited Abu Dhabi in August 2015, he became the first Indian prime minister to do so since Indira Gandhi in 1981 – a long gap of 34 years. Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al Nahyan, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and the de facto ruler of UAE, responded with a state visit to India in February 2016 and was soon back in January 2017 as the Chief Guest for India's Republic Day celebrations. Prime Minister Modi returned to UAE in February 2018 and again in August 2019, when he was conferred the Order of Zayed, UAE's highest civilian award. In that period of four years, the two countries had signed a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Agreement and established pathways for collaboration in areas ranging from energy and investment, to defence and maritime security.³

A similar dynamism and sense of urgency was also imparted to India's ties with Israel. In 2015, President Pranab Mukherjee became the first Indian head of state to visit Israel; a year later, India hosted Israeli President Reuven Rivlin. In July 2017, PM Modi became the first Indian prime minister to visit Israel and there the relationship was elevated to a strategic partnership. The momentum continued when in 2018, then Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu came to India—by then, a relationship that had grown quietly since the establishment of full diplomatic ties in 1992 had grown wings. India had finally shed its paranoia that ties with the Jewish state would impact its relations with key Arab states. In a relatively short span of time, Israel has become one of India's top three suppliers of defence equipment, a major source of critical technologies, and a key partner in the agriculture sector through an extensive network of Centres for Excellence.

The Abraham Accords that formalised diplomatic ties between Israel and UAE in August 2020 was a timely catalyst for a nascent trilateral cooperation between the three countries. Meanwhile, the International Federation of Indo-Israel Chambers of Commerce (IFIICC) was launched in December 2020, with its international headquarters in Dubai. The event was attended

by the Indian and Israeli heads of mission in Abu Dhabi and the UAE ambassador to India. Israel's and India's ambassadors to each other's territory participated virtually, along with several leading lights of the Indian business community in UAE. The American Jewish Committee helped put together an important webinar on 14 February 2021 titled 'India, Israel and the Gulf: New Opportunities'. The Consuls General of India and Israel in Dubai added another dimension by hosting an India-Israel-UAE business meeting at the India Pavilion at Dubai Expo on 25 October 2021. Rony Yedidia-Clein, Israel's Deputy Chief of Mission in Delhi had indicated in October that a meeting between the three foreign ministers may take place on the side-lines of Dubai Expo. The meeting has not happened yet, at the time of writing this report.⁴

These seemingly disparate initiatives are underpinned by a powerful economic rationale. Over 500 Indian business groups have a presence in Dubai and virtually every significant Indian company has its MENA headquarters in the city. Some 23 leading Indian banks have offices at Dubai International Financial Centre and direct flight links between Dubai and Tel Aviv will allow these corporates and bankers to cover Israel more easily.

Israel has been quick to open its consulate in Dubai and has started reaching out to the influential Indian business community that can serve as a bridge between the three countries. Several Dubai-based Indian businesses have already announced tie-ups with their Israeli counterparts in sectors like healthcare, pharmaceuticals, and financial services. The Dubai Multi-Commodity Centre, having carved out a niche for itself in sectors like gold, diamonds and jewellery that are of interest to both Israel and India, is also set to play a role.

The three countries also place a strong emphasis on technology and innovation. Israel's claim as 'Start-up Nation' is well-established. India has surprised many by emerging as one of the primary destinations for venture capital, spawning as many as 33 unicorns during the first ten months of 2021. UAE may not be in the same league yet but there can be no doubt about its outsized ambition—from its mission to Mars and the vision behind Dubai Future Foundation and Abu Dhabi's Hub 71, to the world's first Ministers for the Future and for Artificial Intelligence. In addition, UAE also has abundant capital resources, including those housed in sovereign wealth funds like ADIA, Mubadala and ADQ. These offer the tantalising possibility of marrying cutting-edge technology and capital, with the market size and


scale offered by a country like India. A couple of tripartite ventures are already in the pipeline and these could be the harbingers of many more to follow.

For the US, the coming together of three key partners, each with a significant defence capability, will inevitably bring a strong security dimension to the new grouping. This may not be on the cards immediately and the relevant spokespersons will make the usual statements affirming that this is essentially a non-military gathering of like-minded nations. However, as in the case of the other Quad that brought India, Japan and Australia together with the US, the desire to push back against growing Chinese influence may provide the subtext. Israel, UAE and the US also have strong concerns about Iran's manifest influence in an arc ranging from Yemen to Lebanon, including Bahrain, Iraq and Syria in its path. This may cause some problems for India in terms of its extensive ties with Iran but Indian diplomacy has shown that it can rise to the challenge of maintaining close ties with countries that may be at loggerheads with each other. Moreover, the advantage of an informal grouping like this minilateral is that all members do not necessarily have to agree on everything.

In a tweet following the meeting, EAM Jaishankar said that the four ministers “discussed working together more closely on economic growth and global issues” and emphasised the “agreement on expeditious follow-up.” The US side stressed on the synergy between the four countries, while the Israeli statement was more expansive, highlighting the “possibilities for joint infrastructure projects in the fields of transportation, technology, maritime security, and economics and trade.”⁵

The suggestion about joint infrastructure projects holds out the exciting possibility of the kind of multi-modal India-ArabMed transport corridor that had been proposed by Prof. Michael Tanchum.⁶ This could potentially link Indian ports like Mumbai with Piraeus in Greece via Jebel Ali in UAE, and by rail from there via Saudi Arabia and Jordan to Israel’s Mediterranean port of Haifa. Much of the infrastructure is already in place or is coming up rapidly and a relatively short 300-

km link from Al Haditha on the Saudi-Jordan border to Beit She’an near the Jordan-Israel border could provide seamless connectivity. This could have a strategic benefit for India by bringing it closer to European markets. That India is fast-tracking its FTAs with UAE, Israel and the European Union should impart additional momentum to this project. It could also provide some of the logistics support needed to restructure supply chains and reduce the dependence of global trade on China.

For India, the emergence of this ‘new Quad’ is a welcome development, bringing tangible political and economic gains in the short term and offering the possibility of substantive strategic advantages in the future if some of the relevant pieces fall into place. 

“Indian diplomacy has shown that it can rise to the challenge of maintaining close ties with countries that may be at loggerheads with one another.”

Endnotes

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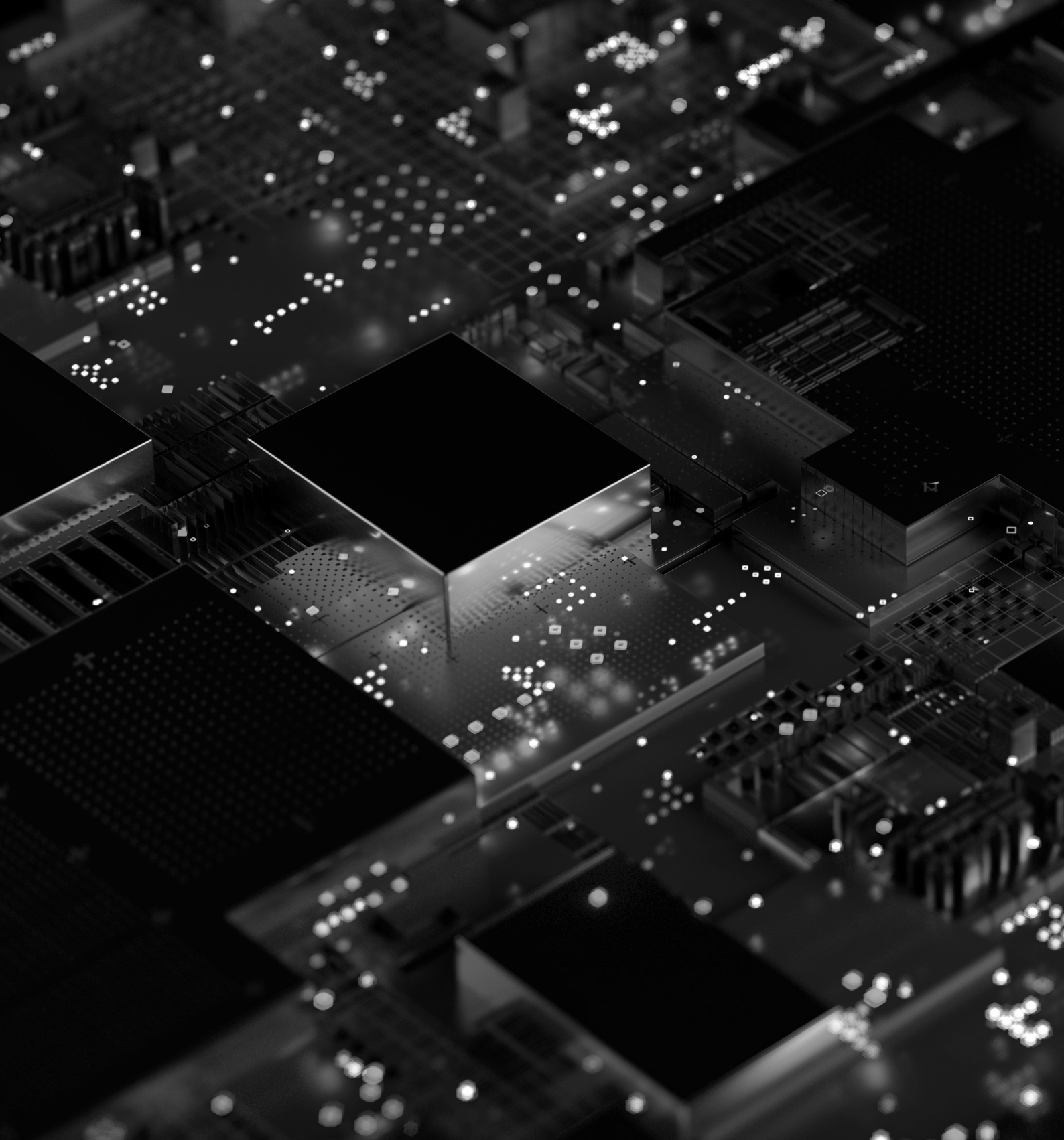
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