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# **France-UAE-India Trilateral Relations**

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# France-UAE-India Trilateral Relations

The impact of nuclear energy and climate change is coming to the forefront at a time when the world is facing complex realities. With the fragmentation of the world order, countries are considering a move towards bilateral and minilateral dialogues. With multilateral organisations like the United Nations and the European Union unable to regulate the dynamic world order, several countries have chosen to work outside the multilateral partnerships by cooperating in small groups with other countries.

India's bilateral agreements with France and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have expanded in several sectors in recent years. UAE and France are India's strategic partners. UAE plays an integral role in India's Gulf Policy, while India's ties with France have been deepening in sectors such as defence and security in the recent past. France and the UAE collaborate with India through a range of maritime and military exercises with the aim of bolstering defense cooperation.

France, India and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) formed a trilateral partnership in February 2023 to collaborate on fields of energy, such as solar and nuclear energy, as well as climate change and biodiversity, with an emphasis on the Indian Ocean Region. This Trilateral Initiative was first discussed by the Foreign Ministers of the three countries - Catherine Colonna of France, S. Jaishankar of India, and Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan of the UAE - in September 2022 on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly in New York<sup>1</sup>. The Trilateral Cooperation Initiative represents the latest minilateral engagement in the Indian Ocean Region. In light of these events the paper seeks to analyse how the France-UAE-India Trilateral Initiative will be leveraged as a platform to further its objectives.

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<sup>1</sup> Bhattacharjee, K. (2023, February 5). *India joins UAE, France for trilateral on clean energy, counter-pandemic steps*. The Hindu. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-joins-uae-france-for-trilateral-on-clean-energy-and-counter-pandemic-measures/article66471623.ece>

## Introduction

The Trilateral Initiative was established to address the ever-evolving geopolitical landscape of our world. With the objective to enhance and strengthen relations between the three countries through the expansion of cooperation across various fields. Additionally, critical is the area of the Indo-Pacific region has garnered significant attention over the past few years, due to China's growing influence in the region and its String of Pearls approach.

In February 2023, France, India and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) established a trilateral partnership to operate in the fields of energy, as well as on climate change and biodiversity, focusing particularly in the Indian Ocean Region. The three sides discussed a comprehensive range of topics including maritime security, energy and food security, climate sector, etc. They also explored potential areas of cooperation like Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR), Blue Economy, and People-to-People Connection.<sup>2</sup> This occurs against the backdrop of India's presidency of the G20 held in September 2023 and the concurrent Emirati presidency of COP 28.

## Significance of UAE and France to India

India maintains vast bilateral relations with both the UAE and France. India has placed significant importance on the Gulf area because of its advantageous geo-strategic location and abundant energy resources. . The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a part of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which also includes countries like Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia. A third of India's oil imports come from GCC member countries of which the UAE holds significant importance for India and this

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<sup>2</sup> Express News Service. (2023, February 5). Trilateral framework: India, France, UAE unveil cooperation plan. *The Indian Express*. <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/trilateral-framework-india-france-uae-unveil-cooperation-plan-8424530/>

makes the UAE India's largest trading hub. India's exports to the GCC countries in 2021-22 increased to about USD 44 billion as against USD 27.8 billion in 2020-21 which is a growth of over 58 per cent.<sup>3</sup> India has started increasing its ties with the Gulf Nations. That is why in October 2021, a new grouping I2U2 was formed, which comprises of US, India, Israel, and the UAE to further promote security cooperation.

In addition, India and the GCC have multiple free trade agreements. In 2022, India and the UAE signed a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) to boost bilateral trade through the reduction and removal of tariffs.<sup>4</sup> Currently, CEPA is having a concomitant positive impact on each country's GDP and development. , India's 'Look West' policy aligns with UAE's 'Look East' policy<sup>5</sup>. Further, India began with joint national exercises with the UAE in 2018<sup>7</sup>. Thus, India and UAE are currently engaged in bilateral (FTA and CEPA), trilateral (the 2023 Initiative) and quadrilateral (I2U2) formats.

Recently France and India have also been strengthening their defence and security ties. To strengthen defence cooperation nations participate in various maritime and military exercises like Exercise Varuna, Exercise Sakti, and Exercise Garuda. India and France are both members of the International Solar Alliance to help combat climate change. France and India are both International Solar Alliance members working to combat climate change. The Rafale deal with France, as well as a contract with a French business to manufacture six Scorpene submarines, demonstrates new strategic cooperation between the two countries<sup>8</sup>. In June 2023, India and France had their first maiden Joint Military Exercise, FRINJEX-

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<sup>3</sup> Rupam Shukla, DH Web Desk, Rupam Shukla, & DH Web Desk. (2022, June 8). *Explained: Importance of the Gulf for India*. Deccan Herald. <https://www.deccanherald.com/india/explained-importance-of-the-gulf-for-india-1116428.html>

<sup>4</sup> Babu Das Augustine, Business Editor with inputs from WAM. (2022, February 21). What is India – UAE CEPA, how it will benefit both economies? *Special-reports – Gulf News*. <https://gulfnews.com/special-reports/what-is-india--uae-cepa-how-it-will-benefit-both-economies-1.1645252081334>

<sup>5</sup> *Distinguished lectures details*. Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. <https://www.mea.gov.in/distinguished-lectures-detail.htm?505>

<sup>7</sup> "Report, S. (2018, November 7). Two Indian ships take part in UAE-India naval exercise. *Uae – Gulf News*. <https://gulfnews.com/uae/two-indian-ships-take-part-in-uae-india-naval-exercise-1.2190342>

<sup>8</sup> Dutta, A. N. (2023, July 13). Connection deepens: Govt clears 26 Rafale jets, 3 Scorpene subs. *The Indian*

23<sup>9</sup>. In addition, French engine manufacturer, Safran, has a deal with Hindustan Aeronautics to manufacture helicopter engines<sup>10</sup>. Thus, the India-France partnership is representing a framework of East-West Cooperation,<sup>11</sup> especially in the Indo-Pacific region.

Therefore, both the UAE and France have emerged as strategic partners for India. Also, in 2023, they launched the France-UAE-India Trilateral Initiative. India had the first trilateral maritime initiative with France and the UAE. The inaugural trilateral maritime partnership exercise was conducted by France, India, and the UAE from June 7th to the 8th, 2023.<sup>12</sup> Various tactical drills and operations were undertaken involving, Advanced Air Defence Exercise using the French Rafale fighters, the Dash 8 MPA from UAE and Helicopter Cross Landing Operations. Further strengthening the maritime ties between the navies of the three countries, thus encouraging maritime trade and freedom of navigation. Both India and UAE purchased Rafale jets from France, thereby signifying the common thread in furthering their respective defence agendas. The initial location of France's military base was in Abu Dhabi.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, this Initiative can be looked at as a pedestal for India to further its interests and to build a strong relationship between the countries to expand soft- and hard-core skills.

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*Express*. <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-big-ticket-procurement-26-rafale-jets-3-scorpene-submarines-navy-8834326/>

<sup>9</sup> *INDO-FRANCE JOINT MILITARY EXERCISE FRINJEX-2023 TO COMMENCE AT THIRUVANANTHAPURAM*. <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1904604>

<sup>10</sup> Dutta, A. N. (2023, July 13). Connection deepens: Govt clears 26 Rafale jets, 3 Scorpene subs. *The Indian Express*. <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-big-ticket-procurement-26-rafale-jets-3-scorpene-submarines-navy-8834326/>

<sup>11</sup> The Diplomat. (2023, January 12). *India-France partnership provides a model for East-West cooperation in the Indo-Pacific*. <https://thediplomat.com/2023/01/india-france-partnership-provides-a-model-for-east-west-cooperation-in-the-indo-pacific/>

<sup>12</sup> *First edition of India-France-UAE Trilateral Maritime Exercise to witness advanced air defence drill*.

<https://www.indiandefensenews.in/2023/06/first-edition-of-india-france-uae.html>

<sup>13</sup> France 24. (2009, May 27). Sarkozy opens French military base in Abu Dhabi. *France 24*. <https://www.france24.com/en/20090526-sarkozy-opens-french-military-base-abu-dhabi->

## Multilateralism or Minilateralism?

Over the past years, Washington has been trying to increase its cooperation with the countries of the Middle East to counter China's aggressive expansionist and developmental policies. India has emerged as a leader in the realm of minilateral engagement over the years, maintaining its independence from major powers. India considers both Russia and the United States as its strategic partners. However, due to various constant tensions and trade wars between them, India has to adopt a neutral stand, by not going against either of them.

Hence, as the European Union and United Nations struggle to adapt to the evolving global dynamics and fail to facilitate a peaceful resolution among conflicting nations, these smaller groupings, known as minilateral organisations, have emerged as a strategic means to navigate crises and prevent the world from descending into a bipolar global power structure. Averse to taking any extreme sides, various minilateral groupings have come to the forefront. For example, the I2U2 format comprising Israel, the United States, India and UAE, a minilateral initiative, heralded as a "partnership for the future".<sup>14</sup>

Amid concerns regarding the expanding influence of China and Russia in the Middle East, the United States has also adopted a West Asia strategy. The US had already displayed its involvement and influence in the I2U2 grouping. However, the France-India-UAE trilateral grouping is an attempt to move away from the steer of Washington and adopt minilateral initiatives without them being Washington centric. Such minilateral initiatives are grounded in economic pragmatism rather than political ideology. Therefore, these minilateral initiatives are forming the ground for fruitful plurilateral cooperation.

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<sup>14</sup> Khaleej Times. (2022, March 23). India-Israel-UAE-US: new quad - News | Khaleej Times. *Khaleej Times*. <https://www.khaleejtimes.com/kt-engage/india-israel-uae-us-new-quad>

# Key Areas of Focus

## Climate Change

Recognizing the potential for broader collaboration, the three countries pledge to leverage existing initiatives like the UAE-led Mangrove Alliance for Climate and the Indo-French Indo-Pacific Parks Partnership as platforms for enhanced cooperation.<sup>15</sup> With the establishment of the Trilateral Initiative, the efforts to combat climate change are gaining momentum. The three countries will organise events against the backdrop of the Indian Presidency of G20 and the UAE's hosting of COP28. Their key areas of focus are pollution caused by single-use plastic, desertification and food security in the context of 2023 being the International Year of Millets.

While facing the devastating impacts of climate change, there is a need to increase cooperation on climate amid its variedness. The International Solar Alliance (ISA) established in 2015 at the Conference of Parties (COP21), also called the Paris Agreement, to boost solar energy. Prime Minister Narendra Modi of India and Former President François Hollande of France launched the ISA. It was set up to develop solar energy through cost-effective and efficient technologies especially for Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and the Small Island Developing States (SIDS). It operates under the framework of One Sun One World One Grid (OSOWOG) launched at the COP26 summit in Glasgow. India and the United Kingdom launched the OSOWOG initiative, of which the UAE is a member<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> Sns, & Sns. (2023, February 4). *India, France, UAE launch trilateral initiative to promote cooperation*. The Statesman. <https://www.thestatesman.com/india/india-france-uae-launch-trilateral-initiative-to-promote-cooperation-1503152352.html>

<sup>16</sup> United Nations. COP26: Together for our planet | United Nations. <https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/cop26#:~:text=At%20the%20heart%20of%20COP26,dirtiest%20of%20the%20fossil%20fuels>.



During the COP27 summit under the presidency of Egypt, UAE and Indonesia announced the Mangrove Alliance for Climate. India, Sri Lanka, Australia, Japan, and Spain approved the Alliance. Spearheaded by UAE and Indonesia, this Alliance advocates for finding ‘nature-based solutions’, to promote mangroves for preventing the devastating effects of climate change. Mangrove Alliance for Climate is an initiative that advocates for the integration and protection of the mangrove forests into Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) programmes for carbon sequestering of which Mangrove trees play a major role.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, Mangrove Alliance and International Solar Alliance are more examples of multilateral engagements. They will help to further the aims of the Paris Agreement of 2015 to combat climate change and will also be helpful for India to achieve its Intended Nationally Determined Contribution (INDC).

## Indo-Pacific Region

The Indo-Pacific region is currently witnessing a notable increase in activity, characterised by the emergence of several diplomatic, maritime, and economic agreements among nations. China is actively pursuing its own interests in the region through the implementation of its policies and naval deployments. The String of Pearls is a geopolitical theory of China in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and now the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) are increasingly aimed at building land and maritime trade routes by undertaking developmental projects with countries around the IOR. China already has its expansion in Hambantota, Gwadar, and Sittwe, which is a part of China’s String of Pearls project<sup>18</sup>. These ports are an important part of IOR. The tactics adopted by China to safeguard its commercial interests and to control the dominion of IOR has led to many countries

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<sup>17</sup> *Mangroves for climate and biodiversity - Join the Global Mangrove Alliance*. (2023, September 13). The Mangrove Alliance. <https://www.mangrovealliance.org/>

<sup>18</sup> Shukla, S. (2023, September 25). *India opens a new front in its corridor war with China*. New Lines Magazine. <https://newlinesmag.com/spotlight/india-opens-a-new-front-in-its-corridor-war-with-china/>

apprehensive of China's intentions due to its actions. Intending to counter China's expansionist policies, various countries like India, Japan, the US, and France, etc. are actively participating in navel drills and building collations and minilateral groupings to avert China from claiming the vast region of IOR. The formation of minilaterals like AUKUS and QUAD are a testament to the urgent need to counter China's actions. Against this backdrop, the France-UAE-India Trilateral Initiative can provide a solid ground framework to avert any future danger.

In addition to strengthening its ties with significant non-oil nations such as South Korea, China, and India, the UAE is attempting to strengthen its partnerships with the Indo-Pacific region. While the IOR has already become a point of contention between Beijing and Washington, it has also become the epicentre of struggles between India and China. UAE is trying to implement a balanced approach to this growing polarisation. Thus, the France-UAE-India Trilateral Initiative is a new force to further cement cooperation with India after the I2U2 grouping and the UAE-India CEPA in 2022. India and UAE are both members of the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA). Therefore, the UAE is seeking to form multiple partnerships with countries to further its diplomatic and economic interests.<sup>19</sup>

China's expansionist policies cause concern for France's strategic interests. In the Pew Research Poll of 2020<sup>20</sup>, unfavourable views on China increased from 42% to 70% in France, thus depicting the aversions of France behind China's hegemonic ambitions in the Indo-Pacific. To counter China's influence, France collaborated with India and in 2018, agreed to a 'Joint Strategic Vision of India-France Cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region'<sup>21</sup>. With the 2015 launch of SAGAR—"security and growth for all in the region"

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<sup>19</sup> Ebtesam Al-Ketbi, *The UAE Power Building Model: Mohamed bin Zayed's Vision*, Emirates Policy Center, 2022, p.20. <https://epc.ae/en/details/publications/the-uae-power-building-model-mohamed-bin-zayed-s-vision>

<sup>20</sup> Pew Research Center. (2020). *Unfavorable Views of China Reach Historic Highs in Many Countries*. [https://www.pewresearch.org/global/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/10/PG\\_2020.10.06\\_Global-Views-China\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.pewresearch.org/global/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2020/10/PG_2020.10.06_Global-Views-China_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. (2023). *India-France Indo-Pacific Roadmap*. <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral->

India is coming close to establishing and fulfilling its objectives. Recently in 2022, before the Russia-Ukraine war, France had given an Open Statement and stated that “*the crisis in Europe will not distract the government from its ambitious goals in the Indo-Pacific. To accomplish these goals, France will attempt to upgrade its military operational capability in the region and increase coordination with important international partners, including India and Japan.*”<sup>22</sup> France also organised a ‘Ministerial Forum for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific’ in Paris.

## Conclusion

Consequently, the potential for the three nations to establish themselves as an action-oriented minilateral in the Indo-Pacific is enhanced by their diverse spectrum of interests. The emergence of minilateral alliances can promote prompt action on urgent matters and can also be pursued to enhance collaboration across diverse nations. The France-UAE-India Trilateral Initiative has also enabled the three countries to engage in a diplomatic forum. The I2U2 is also contemplating the inclusion of South Korea to the 4-member group in order to broaden their interests and mitigate potential conflicts and dissent. Therefore, minilateralism is the way for many countries as this enables them to seek cooperation based on shared challenges. The flexible minilateral grouping allows countries to build stronger relationships rather than being compelled to work within less cohesive multilateral groups.<sup>23</sup> So, the member states should be given strategic autonomy to pursue their national interests and adopt a foreign policy that is beneficial to them, without being forced by any country.<sup>24</sup>

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[documents.htm?dtl/36799/IndiaFrance\\_IndoPacific\\_Roadmap#:~:text=In%202018%2C%20India%20and%20France.and%20peaceful%20Indo%20Pacific%20region.](#)

<sup>22</sup> International Institute for Strategic Studies. (2022). *France’s approach to the Indo-Pacific region*. <https://www.iiss.org/en/publications/strategic-comments/2022/frances-approach-to-the-indo-pacific-region/>

<sup>23</sup> Mladenov, N. (2023). Minilateralism: A concept that is changing the World Order, Washington Institute for Near East Policy. *The Washington Institute*. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/minilateralism-concept-changing-world-order>

<sup>24</sup> “Aravind Devananthan asked: What is ‘strategic autonomy’? How does it help India’s security?”, Manohar Parrikar Insitutte for Defence studies and Analysis, January 20, 2015, (idsa.in) | Accessed July 25, 2023

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