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INDIA, FRANCE, AND THE UAE

An Analysis of the New Strategic Trilateral Partnership

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Introduction

The foreign ministers of France, India, and the United Arab Emirates met in a trilateral setting for the first time on September 19, 2022, on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly in New York. The foreign ministers of France, India, and the UAE decided to create a formal trilateral initiative to increase cooperation in a number of areas of shared interest. This was done in recognition of their shared desire to advance international stability and prosperity as well as to further strengthen the positive and cooperative relationships already existing between the three nations. To create a roadmap for the implementation of this effort, the three Ministers followed up over a phone call in February this year. The trilateral focuses on various fields of cooperation, such as energy—most importantly solar and nuclear energy, as well as climate change—with a focus on biodiversity, clean energy, and the environment. The trilateral effort also acts as a platform to increase collaboration between the development agencies of the three nations on sustainable initiatives. It was also decided that the three nations would work to integrate their respective social, technological, and economic policies in line with the goals of the Paris Agreement. The India- France-UAE trilateral becomes increasingly relevant as the world moves on from multilateral organizations like the UN as a source of cooperation to minilateral platforms of cooperation like the QUAD and AUKUS. By connecting Asia, the Middle East, and Europe, the trilateral acts as a crucial step in terms of international politics, security, trade, and diplomacy. It signifies an alignment of the interests of the three nations, focusing on mutual benefits amidst an uncertain and fast-changing world order.

The countries have also been promoting their aligned goals through various other international platforms. The three partners hope to host several events where many of their shared objectives can be advanced, such as during the course of India's G-20 presidency and the UAE's scheduled hosting of COP-28 in 2023. The Mangrove Alliance for Climate, led by the UAE, and the Indo-Pacific Parks Partnership, led by France and India, are two other programs that the three nations intend to use to further their cooperative agenda. Amicable bilateral relations between India-UAE, India-France, and France-UAE play an important role in forming the foundation of this trilateral agreement, although facets of this partnership have implications on both regional and international levels.

Challenges to Energy Security

With the way recent geopolitical events have unfolded, and the implications of the same, the three countries have realized the need to modify their roles in the global energy market. The war between Russia and Ukraine has made France and largely Europe realize the need to diversify their energy supply since sanctions on Russia inevitably affected them severely. Considering this, France signed an agreement on energy cooperation with UAE, in July 2022, to safeguard oil and natural gas supplies from the Gulf nation. President Emmanuel Macron also hosted UAE Crowned Prince Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan in Paris at the time of the deal's announcement. In a statement, French Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire said, "The agreement we are signing with the United Arab Emirates is of double strategic importance: it allows us to address the pressing challenges of energy security in the short term while preparing for a decarbonized future."¹

France's expertise in nuclear energy knowledge and the UAE's position as a significant oil and gas producer have huge potential in helping to stabilize the global energy market as the ongoing conflict raises concerns about the drawbacks of narrowed energy suppliers. It is important to note that the UAE's resource abundance and France's advanced technological knowledge can assist in reducing reliance on conventional suppliers and guarantee a steady supply of energy. In the face of geopolitical unpredictability, strengthening their relationship can promote regional stability and offer alternate energy sources.

India and the UAE have a close and complex connection that extends to their joint efforts in the energy sector. The strategic partnership between these two countries has made tremendous strides, and energy cooperation has been essential in strengthening bilateral ties. India, the third-largest energy consumer in the world, has an enormous need for oil and gas to sustain its brisk economic expansion. On the other hand, the mainstay of India-UAE's energy cooperation is oil. The UAE has historically been one of India's leading crude oil suppliers, contributing significantly to India's oil imports. UAE also has sizeable reserves and is one of the Middle East's top producers of oil and gas. This complementarity between supply and demand has created the groundwork for a strong energy market. To fulfill India's expanding energy needs, both nations have inked long-

¹ Surk, Barbara, and Masha Macpherson. "France, United Arab Emirates Sign Deal on Energy Cooperation amid Potential Russian Shutdown." PBS, July 18, 2022. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/france-united-arab-emirates-sign-deal-on-energy-cooperation>.

term supply agreements that guarantee a consistent and stable flow of oil. Additionally, the sovereign wealth funds of the UAE have expressed a strong desire to engage in India's energy sector. Minister of Industry and Advanced Technology Sultan Ahmed Al Jaber said that the UAE is investing across its energy supply chain to remain a reliable energy provider to India and the world.² He further said, “Our partnership in energy has a great foundation that I want to build on. There are so many opportunities, from the full range of our refined and petrochemical products to new energies, like zero-carbon hydrogen. And, as India expands its renewable energy portfolio, the UAE is keen to build on the investments we have already made to help you reach your 450 GW goal by 2030.”³ India and the UAE have worked together on regional and international energy challenges in addition to bilateral relations. Both nations are actively involved in global forums and projects including the International Solar Alliance (ISA) and the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA). This partnership improves their bilateral relations while also increasing their aggregate goals in influencing international energy policies and advancing sustainable energy.

The UAE-India energy collaboration can also act as a driver for regional stability considering the ongoing war. Considering the war between Russia and Ukraine, the UAE-India energy collaboration has special relevance. India is a rising energy user, and the UAE is a significant producer of energy, making both key players in the world energy market. Intensifying their collaboration can offer a trustworthy alternative energy source, lessen reliance on established suppliers, and support the stability of the global energy markets. These two nations can support regional peace and security by fostering cooperation and collaboration in the energy industry since partnerships in the energy sector frequently promote economic integration and international communication.

While the UAE-India energy collaboration has a lot of promise, it should be noted that traditional suppliers will still need to be used in some cases. A wide mix of energy sources and suppliers is necessary for assuring stability and security because the dynamics of the global energy market are

² “UAE Assures Energy Supplies to India.” The Economic Times. Accessed May 29, 2023. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/uae/uae-assures-energy-supplies-to-india/articleshow/87165753.cms?from=mdr>.

³ Ibid.

complicated. It re-emphasizes the fact that it is essential to keep the energy mix diverse and promote regional stability through collaboration and communication.

Defense Cooperation

India, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and France have seen a substantial expansion and diversification of their Defence cooperation in recent years. This extensive alliance covers a range of areas of cooperation, including the acquisition of equipment, joint military drills, technological transfers, and strategic discussions. India has long-standing links with both the UAE and France, and these bilateral ties are based on mutual trust and common objectives.

India and the UAE have been working together on various projects, of which a crucial component has been the acquisition of equipment, in line with India's desire to diversify defense procurement. Furthermore, the UAE has expressed interest in purchasing military equipment made in India, such as surface-to-air missiles, helicopters, and navy ships. Along with boosting India's exports, this partnership encourages technology cooperation and sharing between the two nations. Additionally, joint military drills and training sessions are now a staple of India and the UAE's military relations. Through these drills, the armed forces of the two countries can improve their operational skills, share best practices, and fortify their bilateral military connections. The exercises help the two forces work together more effectively by fostering improved coordination and interoperability between them.

With its cutting-edge military capabilities, France is a strategic partner for both India and the United Arab Emirates. Defense technology, marine security, and counterterrorism are just a few of the many areas of defense collaboration between France and India. India has been a significant importer of French military hardware, such as fighter jets, submarines, and missile systems. The Rafale fighter jet deal is one example of the extent of cooperation in the two nations' strategic partnership, which also involves joint manufacture and technology transfer. France is also a crucial defense partner for the UAE. The UAE has acquired cutting-edge French military equipment, such as fighter jets, ships, and missile systems. The UAE's efforts to strengthen its security capabilities have benefited from France's expertise in fields including cybersecurity, intelligence, and counterterrorism. Additionally, the two nations participate in joint military drills and training initiatives, which further solidifies their defense relations. Regionally, France has also been

helping the UAE as a trusted partner in securing its airspace from increasing attacks. France also has a permanent military base in Abu Dhabi and has strong political and economic relations with the UAE. The depth of their defense cooperation can be supported by the fact that the largest international sale of French aircraft was made in December when an agreement to sell 80 Rafale fighter jets to the UAE was finalized.⁴

The development of India, the UAE, and France's cooperation depends critically on strategic discussions. Regular high-level interactions, such as visits by ministers and senior military leaders, offer a forum for talking about common security challenges, exchanging opinions on regional problems, and examining potential areas of further cooperation. These discussions encourage diplomacy, mutual understanding, and strategic convergence between the three nations. Additionally, the trilateral cooperation between France, the UAE, and India has wider regional and international implications. There are now opportunities for coordinated defense operations due to shared interests in maritime security, counterterrorism, and stability, in the Indo-Pacific. In line with their common goal of a rule-based world, the three nations have emphasized the commitment to freedom of navigation, adherence to international law, and peaceful conflict resolution.

India, the UAE, and France's cooperation has developed into a multidimensional collaboration that includes the purchase of equipment, joint military exercises, technological transfers, and strategic discussions. In addition to improving each nation's unique security capacities, this trilateral cooperation also promotes regional stability and international security. The partnership between India, the UAE, and France is likely to intensify as the strategic environment changes, further cementing their common commitment to peace, security, and cooperation.

⁴ Al Jazeera. "France to Help UAE Secure Airspace from Increasing Attacks." Military News | Al Jazeera, February 4, 2022. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/2/4/france-to-help-uae-secure-airspace-from-yemen-attacks>.

The Security Scene and the China Factor

As the Indo-Pacific emerges as one of the most happening places in the geopolitical and security landscape, it is also important to analyze the reasons and implications of this trilateral in the region. All three countries have stakes in the Indo-Pacific, which has eventually made them realize the importance of its security. Apart from this, with a growing youth population, India is the perfect market for whatever France and the UAE have to offer. Through considerable presence and influence in the Indian Ocean, both nations also have access to potential markets in South Asia and Southeast Asia.

The Indo-Pacific region is a geopolitical reality and priority for France because of its substantial territorial and military presence there. Over 1.6 million French people reside in the territories of France, which stretch from the eastern coast of Africa to the western coast of the Americas. These territories include Mayonette, Scattered Island, La Réunion, New Caledonia, Wallis & Futuna, French Polynesia, Clipperton Islands, French Antarctic, and sub-Antarctic territories.⁵ More significantly, these areas provide France access to an exclusive economic zone (EEZ) that is 11 million square kilometers in size, the second largest in the world (after the United States). With 14 percent of exports and 17 percent of imports (excluding armaments) going through the area, this makes up 93% of France's total EEZ. France has more than 7,000 enterprises and €108 billion worth of foreign direct investment (FDI) in the Indo-Pacific region.⁶ Such ingrained physical and economic ties demonstrate the region's importance to France's global financial and security outlook. France's turn to the Indo-Pacific is a natural progression as the region becomes a hub of global economic activity, also due to which it views India as an integral strategic and security partner. Apart from this, its interests in the region can also be understood considering the evolving nature of its relations with China and the latter's increasing engagement in the Indo-Pacific. France is placing a strong emphasis on China's expanding influence in the Indo-Pacific as it works to influence and shape regional standards and contribute to the creation of an inclusive, rule-based regional order.⁷

⁵ Duggal, Mahima. "The China Factor in France's Indo-Pacific Strategy." Air University (AU). Accessed May 29, 2023. <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/JIPA/Display/Article/3091134/the-china-factor-in-frances-indo-pacific-strategy/>.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

The Indo-Pacific region is increasingly becoming the focal point of conflicts between continental and regional powers, such as India and China or India and Pakistan as well as the main stage of a competition between Beijing and Washington. The UAE is managing this growing polarization - and the ensuing confrontational rhetoric - by implementing a balanced foreign policy towards the major regional players. The UAE's policy has instead been focused on pursuing several relationships using a mutually beneficial approach, rejecting the narrative of the competition among great powers taking place across the two seas and its implications. Due to this, the UAE has shown the ability and willingness to diversify its strategic relationships with China's competitors on the Asian Continent, while also supporting China's BRI projects in the Middle East.⁸

It is a well-known fact that India and China have been having problems both at their borders as well as in the Indo-Pacific, at a time when India has been forging relations with various countries as it climbs the global order in terms of power and influence. The security scene in the Indo-Pacific is much a point of convergence between the three countries as well, even though not explicitly mentioned. India's efforts to oppose China's aggression are indirectly supported by the trilateral alliance between India, France, and the UAE in the Indo-Pacific. The trilateral collaboration indirectly helps to counterbalance China's expanding influence in the Indo-Pacific, even if it does not overtly target China. India, France, and the UAE share similar interests, which helps balance out China's regional ambitions and ensures that no one nation dominates the region. It enables India to cooperate with like-minded allies and influence the regional order in a way that protects its own security and interests. By improving India's maritime security, defense capabilities, regional connectivity, and strategic influence in the region, it creates a framework for upholding the balance of power and safeguarding its interests. However, it is crucial to remember that confronting China requires a multifaceted strategy that goes beyond trilateral collaboration.

⁸ Tasinato, Emily. "The UAE's Push toward the Indo-Pacific." Med. Accessed May 29, 2023. <https://www.med-or.org/en/news/gli-emirati-arabi-si-affacciano-sullindo-pacifico>.

Conclusion

These trilaterals highlight the importance and effectiveness of minilateral platforms against the growing irrelevance and ineffectiveness of international bodies like the UN. National and strategic interests have come to the forefront of cooperation as such partnerships transform relations and the very basis of cooperation between nations. Bilateral and mini-lateral actions have improved India's relations with these two nations. The trilateral cooperation has the potential to develop into an action-focused minilateral in the larger Indo-Pacific region given the strong commitment of France, India, and the UAE as well as their combined material resources. While pursuing an agenda that will have significant implications for most of the Global South, the three countries are likely to place equal emphasis on some of the difficult security concerns. The alliance between India and France can also be viewed as a strong framework for East-West cooperation.⁹

Overall, the trilateral relationship between India, France, and the United Arab Emirates provides lessons on the value of diverse partnerships, strategic alignment, resource synergy, complementary expertise, consensus building, and multidimensional collaboration, which can be applied to promote successful and mutually beneficial partnerships in a variety of contexts.

⁹ Rajagopalan, Rajeswari Pillai. "France-India-UAE Trilateral: India's Minilateral Engagements Ticks Up." – TheDiplomat, February 15, 2023. <https://thediplomat.com/2023/02/france-india-uae-trilateral-indias-minilateral-engagements-ticks-up/>

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