

## India and United Arab Emirates (UAE): Challenging Trends

Dr. Md. Tarique Anwer  
Associate Professor in Political Science, Department of Arts,  
Mangalayatan University, Aligarh, U.P.

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Article: Received: 10/03/2026, Returned: 20/03/2026, Accepted: 29/03/2026, Published:31/03/2026.

D.O.I. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19396854>



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**Abstract:** The research paper entitled “India and United Arab Emirates: Challenging Trends” explores all aspects of relations between the two nations. India–United Arab Emirates relations are the bilateral relations that exist between the Republic of India and the United Arab Emirates. Since 3000 BCE, India and the UAE, including its predecessor emirates, have maintained close ties through ancient trade networks. The bilateral relations between India and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have developed into a multifaceted strategic partnership, reflecting deep historical, economic, cultural, and defense ties. These relations flourished with the formation of the UAE after the 1970s and resulted in a significant economic and political alliance. This study provides information on high-level diplomatic engagements, such as several visits by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, which have accelerated cooperation in various sectors. The study also explained the economic relations between the two countries. For example, economic ties are strong, with the UAE emerging as India's third-largest trading partner and a major foreign investor. Agreements such as the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) and local currency settlement (LCS) highlight mutual interests in promoting trade and energy security. Additionally, the study examines defense relations between India and the UAE. Defense cooperation reflected in joint military exercises and security dialogues reveals shared geo-political interests. Cultural relations are strengthened in the United Arab Emirates by the large Indian expatriate population, serving as a bridge for economic and social cooperation. Despite challenges such as trade imbalances, both nations are ready to expand their partnership in technology, renewable energy, and defense. This paper examines the progress of India-UAE relations, explores key drivers, mutual benefits, and future paths for strategic engagement.

**Keywords:** India, UAE, Bilateral Relations, Diplomatic, Economics, Defence, Cultural.

**Introduction:** India and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) established diplomatic relations in 1972. While the UAE opened its embassy in India in 1972, India's embassy in the UAE was opened in 1973.<sup>1</sup> Bilateral relations between India and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are progressive in nature. The UAE and India have enjoyed friendly, strong, and enduring relations for centuries. Over time, the relations between the two countries have grown even stronger. The relations between India and the UAE can be traced back to the Indus Valley Civilization (2500-2000 BCE) and have a close connection with its ancient trade network. These relations flourished after the formation of the UAE in 1971.<sup>2</sup>

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1. [https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/India\\_UAE2024n.pdf](https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/India_UAE2024n.pdf)

2. Ibid.

Relations between the two countries are based on trade and centuries-old shared commercial links. This accelerated in the 1970s when H.H. Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan came to power in the United Arab Emirates. In the Arab world, the UAE is the largest investor in India, accounting for about 81% of investments from the Arab world. Bilateral relations between the two countries have recently increased with the exchange of high-level visits by both sides. Over the past few decades, relations between the two countries have been characterized by their shared economic and business interests as well as political commitment.<sup>3</sup>

Relations between the two countries have been deepening since the establishment of the embassy. India opened its embassy in Abu Dhabi in 1973 and in New Delhi in the UAE in 1972. The UAE also established an Emirati consulate in Mumbai in 1973. Over the decades, their relations have become extremely strong. Political interaction and economic interests bring them together to establish close ties.<sup>4</sup> Both India and the UAE have great potential for further development and growth. The strategic location of the UAE and its global economic position is a significant opportunity for India to strengthen its position and presence in the West Asian region. The UAE also shows interest in enhancing its relations with India because of its investor-friendly environment and the largest population in the world. In September 2025, Minister of Communications of India, Shri Jyotiraditya M. Scindia led a delegation to the United Arab Emirates to participate in 28th UPU Congress.<sup>5</sup>

#### **Bilateral Diplomatic and Political Relations:**

##### **Visits from India to UAE:**

India-UAE bilateral relations have been flourishing from time to time through high-level visits by both sides. On India's side, President Dr. Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed visited the UAE in 1976. After the formation of the UAE, in 1981, Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi went to the UAE. Recently, Indian Presidents A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, Shri Pranab Mukherjee, and Smt. Pratibha Singh Patil visited in 2003, 2008, and 2010 respectively. Thirty-four years after former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's visit, Prime Minister Modi went to the UAE in 2015. After this visit, both countries gained new momentum in bilateral relations.

In the past nine years, Indian Prime Minister Modi has visited the UAE seven times, with the most recent visit being in February 2024. This was PM Modi's seventh visit to the UAE since 2015 and the third visit within three months. During this visit, PM Modi held a bilateral meeting with UAE President Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan and discussed ways to further deepen, broaden, and strengthen the strategic partnership between the countries, while both leaders also exchanged views on regional and international issues of mutual interest.

During the visit, he also inaugurated the first Hindu temple in Abu Dhabi, the BAPS temple, and addressed the Indian community at the Zayed Sports City Stadium in Abu Dhabi. During the 2022 visit, PM Modi signed a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) with the UAE, and during the July 2023 visit, he signed another agreement on the Local Currency Settlement (LCS) system. He

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3. Vaibhav Verma<sup>1</sup> and Anjali Awasthi, Trade, Energy, and Diplomacy: Pillars of India UAE Bilateral Relations, *International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research (IJFMR)*, Volume 7, Issue 1, January-February 2025.
  4. 1UAE, India: A lasting friendship and advanced relationship. (2016, February 11). Latest News, Breaking News, LIVE News, Top News Headlines, Viral Video, Cricket LIVE, Sports, Entertainment, Business, Health, Lifestyle and Utility News | India.Com. <https://www.india.com/news/india/uae-india-a-lasting-friendship-and-advanced-relationship-937871/>
  5. <https://www.indembassyuae.gov.in/page.php?id=political-relations1>

also went to Dubai in November-December 2023 to participate in the COP28-World Climate Action Summit.<sup>6</sup>

### Visits from UAE to India:

The President of the United Arab Emirates, Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Ali Nahyan, visited India several times in 1975 and 1992. More recently, in 2007 and 2010, the Vice President and Prime Minister of the United Arab Emirates, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, came to India, and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan also visited India in 2007 and 2011.

In 2009 and 2012, UAE's Foreign Trade Minister Sheikha Lubna bin Khalid Al Qasimi visited India to participate in the CII Partnership Summit.<sup>7</sup> More recently, in 2016 and 2017, UAE President HH Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed visited India when he was Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi. To participate in the G20 Summit, he visited India in September 2023 and was invited by India as the chief guest for the 10th Vibrant Gujarat Summit in January 2024.<sup>8</sup>

The President of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) visited New Delhi on January 26, 2026. Both countries expressed agreement on several bilateral agreements and outcomes ranging from defense to space and LNG. This visit holds particular significance in the context of increasing military tensions in the Gulf region.<sup>9</sup>

### Trade and Economic relations:

Since the establishment of diplomatic relations between India and the UAE in 1972, economic cooperation has continuously deepened. However, a major shift in economic relations between the two countries occurred after 1990. Currently, in the West Asia and North Africa (WANA) region, the UAE is India's largest trading partner and, in FY 2023, also became India's third-largest trading partner after China and the USA, with the total non-oil bilateral trade valued at 84.84 billion US dollars, and it is expected to exceed 100 billion US dollars in the next five years. During the 1990s, this was 180 million US dollars per year. In the financial year 2023-24, the UAE is the fifth-largest foreign direct investment (FDI) investor in India after Mauritius, Singapore, the USA, and the UK.<sup>10</sup>

However, it was in fourth place in 2022-23. The UAE has resolved to increase its FDI investment in India. If we look at the history of trade between India and the UAE, we will find that it was focused on traditional commodities such as dates, pearls, and fisheries, and recently discovered commodities like oil and gas trade dominate. Developing economic relations are playing an important role in enhancing stability between India and the UAE and deepening strategic partnership. Both countries are strengthening these relations to ensure mutual benefits.

India is highly dependent on the UAE for energy resources in West Asia after Iraq and Saudi Arabia, including crude oil, LNG, and LPG. Recently in 2024, India and the UAE signed four agreements in the energy sector, which include LNG trade, petroleum supply, nuclear plant operation and maintenance, and production concession agreement. The first agreement was for the long-term LNG supply (one

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6. Op. Cit., No. 3.

7. Government of India. (2012). India-UAE relations. <https://www.mea.gov.in/Images/pdf/india-uae-relations-16-05-2012-press-release.pdf>

8. MEA (2024). India-UAE bilateral relations. [https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/India\\_UAE2024n.pdf](https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/India_UAE2024n.pdf)

9. [https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/40597/Visit\\_of\\_His\\_Highness\\_Sheikh\\_Mohamed\\_bin\\_Zayed\\_Al\\_Nahyan\\_President\\_of\\_the\\_United\\_Arab\\_Emirates\\_to\\_India](https://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/40597/Visit_of_His_Highness_Sheikh_Mohamed_bin_Zayed_Al_Nahyan_President_of_the_United_Arab_Emirates_to_India)

10. PTI. (2024, June 2). India receives highest FDI from Singapore in 2023-24; Mauritius second biggest investor: Government data. The Hindu. <https://www.thehindu.com/business/Economy/india-receives-highest-fdi-from-singapore-in-2023-24-mauritius-second-biggest-investor-government-data/article68242434.ece>

million metric tons annually) to be provided by Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC) to Indian Oil Corporation Limited, the second was between ADNOC and ISPRL. The third agreement was made between NPCIL and ENEC to enhance cooperation in the operation and maintenance of nuclear power plants.

The fourth and final agreement was made between Energy India and ADNOC.<sup>11</sup> India exports several items to the UAE, including petroleum products, precious metals, stones, gems and jewelry, minerals, foodstuffs, engineering and machinery products, and chemicals. India also imports certain items from the UAE, such as petroleum and petroleum products, wood and wood products, stones, minerals, precious metals, and chemicals. To promote the use of INR and AED for cross-border transactions, a memorandum of understanding (MoU) was signed between the RBI and the Central Bank of the UAE for the establishment of a local currency settlement (LCS) system.<sup>12</sup>

In 2025-26, trade and economic relations between India and the United Arab Emirates are characterized by a strong and expanded partnership. The Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) signed in 2022 has been a significant catalyst for this growth, raising bilateral trade to \$100.06 billion in FY25. This increase reflects a structural shift in economic relations, with non-oil trade increasing to \$37.6 billion in the first half of 2025. The relationship is also marked by investment cooperation, with the UAE being the seventh largest investor in India. CEPA has reduced tariffs, simplified customs, and opened the UAE market to over 10,000 Indian products, benefiting Indian producers, especially MSMEs.<sup>13</sup>

#### **Cultural relations:**

They are also making a significant contribution to the Indian economy and are building a friendship relationship between the two countries. India and the UAE signed the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) on February 18, 2022, and the leaders of both countries agreed to establish a UAE-India Cultural Council to promote bilateral cultural cooperation. Both countries also signed an Executive Program for Cultural Cooperation (EPCC) in February 2016 to strengthen cultural cooperation and promote cultural activities and collaboration.<sup>14</sup>

On the occasion of Mahatma Gandhi's 150th birth anniversary and Sheikh Zayed's 100th birth anniversary, the inauguration of the Zayed-Gandhi Digital Museum was done on December 4, 2019, by the Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of the United Arab Emirates and the Foreign Minister of India. The leaders of both countries issued a postage stamp on the 150th birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi.<sup>15</sup>

New York University Abu Dhabi (NYUAD) and the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) signed an agreement on August 26, 2021, at New York University Abu Dhabi to establish a visiting professorship in social sciences, aimed at promoting cross-border collaboration in education. The UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation and ICCR signed a Memorandum of

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11. [Four agreements signed between Indian, UAE entities in energy sector | External Affairs Defence Security News - Business Standard](#)

12. Op. Cit., No. 3

13. [https://www.google.com/search?q=India-UAE+Defence+Relations+2025-26&oq=India-UAE+Defence+Relations+2025-26&gs\\_lcrp=EgZjaHJvbWUyBggAEEUYOTIKCAEQABiABBiiBDIHCAIQABjvBTIHCAEQABjvBTIKCAQQABiiBBiJBTIKCAUQABiABBiiBNIBCTiONzk4ajBqN6gCCLACAFefqip8A3LdE4s&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8](https://www.google.com/search?q=India-UAE+Defence+Relations+2025-26&oq=India-UAE+Defence+Relations+2025-26&gs_lcrp=EgZjaHJvbWUyBggAEEUYOTIKCAEQABiABBiiBDIHCAIQABjvBTIHCAEQABjvBTIKCAQQABiiBBiJBTIKCAUQABiABBiiBNIBCTiONzk4ajBqN6gCCLACAFefqip8A3LdE4s&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8)

14. UAE Embassy in New Delhi-Cultural cooperation. (n.d.). <https://www.mofa.gov.ae/en/Missions/New-Delhi/UAE-Relationships/Cultural-Cooperation>

15. [indembassyuae.gov.in/cultural-relation.php](http://indembassyuae.gov.in/cultural-relation.php)

Understanding (MoU) in September 2022 during the India-UAE Joint Commission meeting to establish a cultural council to promote cultural cooperation.

A program 'Ahlam Modi' was held at the Zayed Sports City Stadium in Abu Dhabi, UAE, where Indian Prime Minister Mr. Narendra Modi addressed the Indian community. He appreciated the significant contributions made by the Indian diaspora in strengthening and promoting bilateral relations. He also expressed his gratitude to the UAE government for their care and support for the Indian diaspora, as well as for providing job opportunities and facilitating the transfer of money to India through remittances.<sup>16</sup>

In 2025-26, cultural relations between India and the UAE are expected to flourish, involving several initiatives and meetings to deepen cultural ties. The India-UAE Cultural Council Forum, co-chaired by Noora bint Mohammed Al Kaabi and K. Nandini Singla, Director General of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR), is an important example of this effort. The council aims to enhance connections and cooperation among people, including collaboration in various fields such as arts, education, heritage preservation, creative industries, and youth engagement.<sup>17</sup>

### **Defence and Security Relations:**

Bilateral defense relations between India and the UAE developed in the 21st century when the Chief of Staff of the UAE Armed Forces visited India in 2003. From time to time, several high-level exchanges have taken place, including at the level of service chiefs, at the functional level, and in military education exchanges between the two countries. Regularly, the Indian Navy and Army have conducted bilateral exercises with the UAE Navy and Army, aimed at strengthening defense relations and mutual cooperation. The annual defense dialogue plays a significant role in developing defense cooperation and provides a platform to discuss issues related to security and defense cooperation. All defense cooperation between them is managed at the ministry level by the Joint Defense Cooperation Committee (JDCC).

The main objective of JMCC is to identify new areas and opportunities for cooperation between them. Recently, on 09 July 2024, the 12th edition of JDCC was held in Abu Dhabi. The main focus of the meeting was to discuss several areas such as training, joint military exercises, defense cooperation, subject matter experts, and research & development (R&D) initiatives.<sup>18</sup> Both countries established a permanent resident Defense Advisor (DA) office in 2013, which monitors defense training and regular exchange programs in order to strengthen bilateral defense cooperation. Over the past few years, there has been a tremendous positive change in the areas of defense, security, and energy cooperation between the two countries.

Recently, in 2016, the Indian Air Force participated in a bilateral exercise with UAE's allies. In March 2018, UAE participated as an observer in a trilateral air exercise on HADR. In March 2018, the Indian Navy and the UAE Navy conducted a joint naval exercise 'Gulf Star 1' to establish a base for maritime security cooperation. In February 2019, a delegation from the UAE Ministry of Defense participated in the Aero India program in Bengaluru.<sup>19</sup>

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16. 8Prime Minister's interaction at the Indian Community Event - AHLAM MODI in UAE. (2024). Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. [https://www.mea.gov.in/press\\_releases.htm?dtl/37622/Prime\\_Minister39s\\_interaction\\_at\\_the\\_Indian\\_Community\\_Event\\_\\_3939AHLAM\\_MODI3939\\_in\\_UAE](https://www.mea.gov.in/press_releases.htm?dtl/37622/Prime_Minister39s_interaction_at_the_Indian_Community_Event__3939AHLAM_MODI3939_in_UAE)

17. <https://www.indembassyuae.gov.in/page/cultural-relation/>

18. Ministry of Defence (2024). 12th Joint Defence Cooperation Committee meeting between India & UAE held in Abu Dhabi to strengthen bilateral defence & security ties. <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2031839>

19. [indembassyuae.gov.in/defence-relation.php](http://indembassyuae.gov.in/defence-relation.php)

In the field of maritime security, both countries have developed their security cooperation, reflecting a shared interest in ensuring safe and open sea routes in the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf. The UAE participated in Desert Eagle, which is a joint initiative of the Indian Air Force (IAF) and UAE Air Force (UAE AF). It is a bilateral air combat exercise aimed at enhancing cooperation and interoperability during peacekeeping operations, as well as fighting in desert or semi-desert areas. The UAE Land Forces participated in the first edition of the India-UAE joint military exercise 'Desert Cyclone,' held in Mahajan, Rajasthan, from January 2 to 15, 2024.<sup>20</sup>

India and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) reiterated their commitment to strengthening bilateral defense cooperation during the 13th India-UAE Joint Defence Cooperation Committee (JDCC) meeting, held at the secretary level for the first time in New Delhi on July 30, 2025. The meeting was co-chaired by Defence Secretary Mr. Rajesh Kumar Singh and UAE Undersecretary of Defence, Lieutenant General Ibrahim Nasser M. Al Alawi, who led a high-level UAE defence delegation on a two-day official visit to India. Both sides agreed to elevate defence ties in line with the growing momentum in trade, investment, and public engagement. Both sides expressed agreement on enhancing military training cooperation and discussing their respective training requirements. India offered to provide customized training courses according to the UAE's needs. They also agreed to cooperate on maritime security through the sharing of information.<sup>21</sup>

### **Challenges:**

India-UAE relations have flourished in the past few decades. Nevertheless, both countries face several obstacles in their relationship. After signing the CSP in January 2017, both countries have achieved significant accomplishments in their relations, but its stability and future development entirely depend on how India deals with the challenges of its strategic relations. After the signing of the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA), India-UAE trade relations have indeed increased considerably.

However, this increase is also accompanied by a growing trade deficit for India. In the financial year 2021-22, India recorded a trade deficit of 16.78 billion USD with the UAE, which has risen significantly from a deficit of 1.40 billion USD in the financial year 2019-20. In view of this growing imbalance, it is imperative for India to take strategic steps to reduce the trade deficit and work towards a more balanced trade relationship.<sup>22</sup> It is also necessary for both countries to expand and diversify their trade into new areas such as technology and renewable energy, to ensure sustainable economic growth and balanced trade relations. Non-tariff barriers, such as the UAE's mandatory halal certification, create obstacles for Indian exporters in the food export process. Such non-tariff barriers hinder improving market access and increasing trade opportunities between countries.<sup>23</sup>

**Conclusion:** From the above deliberations, we have to conclude that the United Arab Emirates and India have enjoyed friendly, strong, and enduring relations for centuries. The traditionally strong bilateral relationship between India and the United Arab Emirates received new impetus when Prime Minister

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20. Tnn. (2024, January 17). India, UAE's drill 'Desert Cyclone' ends in Bikaner. The Times of India. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/jaipur/india-and-uaes-joint-military-exercise-desert-cyclone-in-rajasthan/articleshow/106913015.cms>

21. View of Indo-UAE strategic relationship since 2014: challenges and prospects. (n.d.). <https://www.thinkindiaquarterly.org/index.php/think-india/article/view/19685/14551>

22. India-UAE Bilateral trade: Trends and outlook - India Guide | Doing Business in India. (n.d.). <https://www.india-briefing.com/doing-business-guide/india/trade-relationships/india-uae-bilateral-trade-trends-and-outlook>

23. View of Indo-UAE strategic relationship since 2014: challenges and prospects. (n.d.). <https://www.thinkindiaquarterly.org/index.php/think-india/article/view/19685/14551>

Narendra Modi visited the UAE in 2015, marking the first visit by an Indian Prime Minister in 34 years. Today, India-UAE relations are truly in a new era of milestones. The ties between the two countries have been deepening since the establishment of embassies. India opened its embassy in Abu Dhabi in 1973, and the UAE opened its embassy in New Delhi in 1972. The UAE also established an Emirati commercial mission in Mumbai in 1973.

Since the establishment of diplomatic relations between India and the UAE in 1972, economic cooperation has been steadily deepening. However, after the 1990s, there was a significant change in the economic relations between the two countries. India is highly dependent on the UAE for energy sources in West Asia, including crude oil, LNG, and LPG, after Iraq and Saudi Arabia. Recently, in 2024, India and the UAE signed four agreements in the energy sector, including LNG trade, petroleum supply, operation and maintenance of nuclear plants, and a production permission agreement.

India and the UAE both share strong cultural ties, and cultural exchanges occur at both governmental and public levels. In 1975, a cultural agreement was signed between the two nations to promote bilateral cultural activities. Indian expatriates are the largest ethnic group in the UAE, numbering approximately 3.5 million. These expatriates are an integral part of the growth and development of the UAE's economy. They are contributing significantly to the Indian economy as well and establishing friendly relations between the two nations. At an event, AHLAN Modi, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, appreciated the significant contributions made by the Indian expatriate community in strengthening and enhancing bilateral relations. He expressed gratitude to the government of the United Arab Emirates for their attention and support towards the Indian expatriate community, for facilitating remittances to India, and for providing employment opportunities.

Bilateral defense relations between India and the UAE have developed in the 21st century, when in 2003 the Chief of Staff of the UAE Armed Forces visited India. From time to time, there have been several high-level exchanges, functional-level exchanges, and exchange of military education at the level of the service chiefs of both countries. Regularly, bilateral exercises are conducted by the Indian Navy and Army with the UAE Navy and Army, aiming to strengthen defense relations and mutual cooperation.

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