

The Making of West Asia Forum: Security Factors and Areas of Cooperation

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Abstract

India, Israel, the UAE, and the US kickstarted a new minilateral forum as the foreign ministers of respective countries met for the first time on October 20, 2021. The minilateral forum, which is often regarded as the New Quad or the West Asia Quad, is said to focus as per the US State Department on “expanding economic and political cooperation in the Middle East and Asia, including through trade, combating climate change, energy cooperation and increasing maritime security.” At a time, fields like economy, technology, energy, and environment are increasingly securitized, this work asks whether there are any latent security factors for participants to come together vis-e-vis the extended West Asia landscape. The paper will look to what extent security factors have contributed to the formation of the forum from the perspective of four member countries. It will conclude by providing a picture of areas of cooperation that are warranted by the coming together of these countries and how each country could take pre-emptive steps to make the forum sustainable.

Keywords: India, Israel, USA, UAE, Security Factors, Minilateral Cooperation, Geopolitical Concerns, West Asia

Introduction

India, Israel, the UAE, and the US kickstarted a new minilateral forum as the foreign ministers of respective countries met for the first time on October 20, 2021. The minilateral forum, which is often regarded as the New Quad or the West Asia Quad, is said to focus as per the US State Department on “expanding economic and political cooperation in the Middle East and Asia, including through trade, combating climate change, energy cooperation and increasing maritime security.” At a time, fields like economy, technology, energy, and environment are increasingly securitized, this work asks whether there are any latent security factors for participants to come together vis-e-vis the extended West Asia landscape.

The forum can be more comfortably understood as a part of the larger drive for alignment cooperation in the face of power shifts in post-cold war Asia. Alignments are differentiated

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from alliances in the sense that the latter is “formal associations of states for the use (or non-use) of military force, in specified circumstances, against states outside their membership” (Snyder, 2007). Alignments on the other hand are conceptualized as a formal or informal agreement between two or more countries cooperating based on shared security goals, especially non-traditional security (NTS) challenges and include such varieties as Minilateralism and Multilateralism. West Asia Quad or Forum, as this new platform is generally called, could be specifically characterized as a minilateral instituted in place of multilateral bodies failing to effectively deal with the regional questions because of the rivalrous geopolitics of the West Asia region. Minilateral forums are informal, flexible, functional, and voluntary frameworks of three or four participants with varied “situational interests, shared values or relevant capabilities” (Patrick, 2016). The security environments that motivate each country to involve in the forum will be discussed as we go into each country’s security interests.

There is ambiguousness as to what is a comfortable nomenclature for this forum. Critiques against linking the ‘Quad’ nomenclature to this forum mostly hinge on the fact that the initial focus on technology, energy, climate, etc. means that hyping it up as another Quad with its projection of security threats puts the partying countries into an unintended political posture. Nevertheless, as this work will attempt, asking whether the forum members have any security interests is not a futile exercise as we consider notions about security that has taken hold in the 21st-century. The traditional definition of security as “the absence of existential threats to one state emanating from another” has fallen out in the face of newer threats related to migration, maritime security, economic resources, institutional stability, welfare, cyber security, and environmental security (Muller, 2013).

A second reason for this attempt stems from the constructive account of international security. Accordingly, security cooperation develops as a result of the convergence of norms, values, and practices among states and not necessarily because of material security threats. Thus, even if West Asia Forum lacks certain shared material friends and foes, there is a possibility that these countries share certain security values which help them to come together as a strategic forum and cooperate in several fields that have potential security value. Moreover, they can also be seen as a ‘bridge building’ tool that can be employed by countries along with other formal security alliances and used to focus on niche areas (Tow, 2018). There is no doubt that the West Asia Forum would accelerate the divergence from the US hub-and-spoke security

system in this region as a decreasingly effective security system since the Arab Spring. Analysing the extent of security implications of the new forum will give us a picture of the future of security culture, hierarchies and alliances in the region. The following chapters will look to what extent security factors have contributed to the formation of the forum from the perspective of four member countries. This work will conclude by providing a picture of areas of cooperation that are warranted by the coming together of these countries and how each country could take pre-emptive steps to make the forum sustainable.

Understanding US security interests

In his response to the formation of the West Asia Quad, the Israeli ambassador to India credited the US with bringing together the four countries. The US agency in bringing the three of its most strategic partners together can be traced to Biden's Interim Security Strategic Guidance (2021) where he stressed doubling down partnerships to address common challenges, share costs, and widen the circle of cooperation beyond America's core alliances (Biden Jn, 2021). Statements as such reflect how the US deems participation in informal minilateral initiatives to compare favourably to more formal alliances.

1) Keeping the Region with America

The security complex in West Asia with the US as a guarantor has traditionally followed a hub-and-spoke model requiring the US to regularly provide its allies with security commitments, but with increased difficulty to deal with newer threats (Y. Saab, 2016). Moreover, the US presence in the region remains vulnerable to several factors such as the US global strategy to redirect scarce resources to Indo-Pacific and the American domestic environment that is increasingly hostile to the free-rider issue. Yet, America could not risk a complete withdrawal. The expansionist policies of its allies feed into a larger regional conflict involving Russia, China, and Iran into which the US could ultimately be drawn. Beijing's first Arab Policy Paper released in 2016 and Russia's "Collective Security Concept for the Persian Gulf Area" in 2019 along with a host of other bilateral agreements with traditional US allies have certainly sounded an alarm bell for the US. The potential Chinese involvement in the security sector of these countries is not far-fetched as many Chinese companies rely on private Chinese security contractors that employ PLA personnel to protect their investments (Kashgarian, 2021). Deployment in the form of counter-piracy operations has given these countries opportunities to open overseas naval bases and build a long-term strategic presence. US maritime strategy has always sought to problematize such incursions, the earliest being the 2018 Africa strategy

which cited concerns about Beijing's nefarious military behaviour and port acquisitions in West Asia (Vertin, 2020). These are adjacent to energy security and openness of the global economy which relies on the protection of maritime trade-supply routes between Europe, Asia, and the Gulf and looms large in American strategy. Although currently, Indo-Pacific is the top priority for US maritime strategy, US Advisor Matthew Pottinger hinted at reconsidering its articulation of the Indo-Pacific which will further include the Western Indian Ocean (Bagchi, 2020).

2) Non-conventional Security and Defence Technology

The US Interim Security Strategic Guidance (2021) plans to modernize international cooperation by emphasizing threats in the twenty-first-century fields of technology, cyber platforms, environment, etc. The guidance perceptively notes that despite advancements in cyber technology, they remain largely untouched by norms that reflect democratic values and manage the risk of competition (Biden Jn, 2021). The US experienced 156 significant cyber-attacks between 2006 and 2020 as the most victimized in cyberspace, many of which are perpetrated allegedly by Russian and Chinese hackers. The current Democratic government is moreover keen to arrest the meddling of these hackers in domestic procedures. There is also a renewed focus among US leadership on climate issues since the Biden administration replaced Trump. Moreover, defence technology has featured prominently in US diplomacy in the region, including in the Abrahamic Accord where prospects of US high-tech have induced the UAE to normalize relations with Israel. They also look to arrest a major thaw in relationships with distant allies like India i.e., Russia is India's largest weapon partner. US officials pointed out that sanctions on Russia amidst the Ukrainian invasion offer an opportunity for the US to go after new markets, especially Indian markets (EurasianTimes, 2022). These are part of America's larger goal to push its allies to come together and take up their mandate in the region.

India's Security Interests

1) Expatriates, Oil and Regional Stability

The Middle East is home to 7 million Indian diasporas who contributes half of the country's foreign remittance. But limited ability to directly support them had resulted in costly evacuations during times of crisis (Xavier, 2016). India's concerns about the stability of the region are also evident through its consistent stress on the status quo rather than unilateral military experiments. This was seen in its passive opposition to the military adventures against

Bashar-al-Assad, a decision that was also motivated by having been forced to abandon oil investments in Syria as a result. MEA officials speaking on these issues usually point to India's stance as respecting the principle of non-interference in Iraq, Libya and Syria (Pethiyagoda, 2017). On the other hand, India is also an 'energy hungry' country whose dependence on hydrocarbons will last for the next 30-40 years and will remain heavily import-dependent on West Asia for both oil and gas (Ahmad, 2021). Even Indian attempts to become energy independent will require acquisitions of foreign upstream hydrocarbon reserves-another impetus for coordinated protection of these unstable regions in West Asia.

2) Expanding Maritime Footprint and Alternative Infrastructures

Providing a ringfence of national security by transforming into 'blue water' feet has remained a formidable goal in Indian strategic thinking. Starting from 2007 when India espoused the concept of maritime diplomacy, it has engaged West Asian navies to neutralize narco-terrorism, piracy and maritime disputes etc. (Indian Navy, 2009). The instability in the Hormuz strait also adds to the operational responsibility of the Indian Navy as major oil suppliers in the region are trying to circumvent the Iranian presence in the Hormuz using the longer Red Sea route. By joining the minilateral, India could institutionalize its role in stabilizing the region with opportunities for long-term docking and expanding military cooperation. As noted recently by prominent policy analysts, India's forays into a new set of countries in the anglosphere and west signify that the country is frustrated at the fragile security nature of China-led Asian economic integration, a fact signalled by India walking out of RCEP in 2019 (Mohan, 2022). India looks to help build an alternative through the kind of multi-modal India-Arab-Mediterranean transport corridor which will put an end to continued failure to come up with alternatives through NSTC, Chabahar, Farzad B, etc.

3) Counter-terrorism

India has always wanted counter-terrorism relations with West Asian powers, given that several terrorists wanted by the Indian establishment have often transited or resided in the Gulf states and that they often provide ideological inspiration and logistical support. India's CT cooperation with Israel and UAE is also a way out of bilateral relations with the US which were marred by America's disproportionate interests with rivals like Pakistan, the recent being that US negotiation with the Taliban did not include concerns about anti-India groups (TheWire, 2021).

4) Indigenous Defence Industries

Indian interests in the defence corporation have been driven by the fact that forum countries are either in the process of modernizing their weapons, like the UAE, or have high-tech defence industries, as in Israel and the US. Recently, India has been considering the procurement of Israeli high-tech in the wake of border tensions with China that demand more technology and remote-centred response. Forum also facilitates joint-production that complements India's long-sought goal of self-reliance in the defence sector, recently propelled through the Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyaan and DPP-16 policy signal (Chaudhuri, 2021). Lack of indigenization and thus a disproportionate dependence on Russian defence supplies had tainted India's geopolitical standing, recently being in the Ukraine crisis. Similar reservations about strategic autonomy also constrain bilateral defence trade with the US, as most of their technologies are networked with US communication and surveillance systems worldwide.

UAE's Security Interests

The primacy UAE attributes in this minilateral to security is clear in the response of UAE's ambassador to India who was quoted saying that forum will focus more on technology and security (ThePrint, 2022). However, UAE has stepped into the current decade by realizing that security concerns are best addressed through "Good neighbourliness" and through "value-distinct partnerships" that take into account the needs of partners (UAE Principles, 2021; MOFAIC, n.d).

1) Moving Beyond the US

Pronouncements in Abu Dhabi have recently undervalued its traditional alliance with the US in an attempt to establish a more neutral diplomatic stance. In 2016, UAE's foreign affairs minister Anwar Gargash pointed out that America no longer has the lone rein over the region's stability and this has prompted UAE to consolidate relations with other similar powers. It can be further understood as a part of the recent development in the global alignments known as "centrifugal multipolarity"- which allows small states like UAE an opportunity to exit from their region and build commercial and political partnerships with extra-regional powers like India (Malamud & Viola, 2021). This is especially the case with expanding its maritime superiority through dual-use facilities of state-led companies like DP World which has a network of 78 terminals across six continents, with many being professed around the Indian Ocean (Kocak, 2020). Through such expanded relationships, UAE wants to "overcome

smallness” and achieve “strategic parity” with regional powers like Saudi Arabia. It didn’t want to be a besieged neighbour overnight like Qatar during the GCC embargo. UAE is already brokering talks between India-Pakistan, Taliban-US and cultivating local alliances – such as the partnership with the Giant Brigades in Yemen- for use during military campaigns and negotiations.

2) **Prioritizing Stability and Diplomacy**

Despite ranking as Middle East’s most stable country in the Fragile States Index, the fact that it is only a stone’s throw away from Iran and that Houthis have achieved their objective to hit UAE’s economy has put this safety tag under question. Since UAE’s national identity is premised upon the “collective experience of modernization”, stability and continued progress are existential elements for UAE’s monarchy. Prioritising stability thus means that UAE has flouted military options with Iran. It has even condemned the assassination of Iran’s top nuclear scientist as a heinous crime (Barhouma, 2022). Similarly, attacks against merchant ships and arms shipments to Houthis have invited UAE to assert itself in diplomatic forums beyond the US-led coalition in Hormuz. For instance, UAE is keeping a continued presence in the Council of International Maritime Organization (IMO).

3) **Countering Radical Ideologies**

UAE has always been adamant about Muslim Brotherhood’s threat to its monarchical rule. Though UAE had since the 1970s appeased its Islamist Al Islah party, the move backfired as it was found that they formed a “state within a state” in education and judicial ministries. The 9/11 incident and the 2003 Riyadh bombings have further turned UAE against terrorists and political Islamists alike. This makes UAE’s bilateral CT relation with the US insufficient as even though the US regards Islamists as an unsavoury element, it also considers Muslim Brotherhood as a by-product of democracy in the Middle East (Worth, 2020).

4) **Climate Issues and Food Security**

UAE is an oil-producing country that is among the top 30 countries with emission deficits and among the 55 countries that produce 55% of world GHGs. Moreover, the country is located in an arid region with a harsh environment (Ajaj, Shahin, & Salem, 2019). Climate security was listed as a priority area for UAE’s presidential term in UNSC as the country itself hosts the UN Climate Change Conference in 2023. However, UAE’s green-hydrogen productions require international cooperation to grow out of infancy (WAM, 2021b). Similarly, disproportionate

dependence on international markets has forced UAE to secure its food supply chains, sustain value chains and secure long-term self-sufficiency through technological and research collaborations.

Israel's Security Interests

Israel has traditionally followed a realist foreign policy that prioritised short-term security rather than affecting the motivation of its adversaries (Murciano, 2021). The best outcome of this policy has been that Israel manages the Palestinian situation while suffering in the International diplomatic space. Unsurprisingly, many have understood war crimes reports against Israel as the “Yom Kippur” of the country’s diplomacy (Ishay, 2009). The 2006 Meridor Committee Report had thus long recommended that Israel involves international legitimacy while formulating security policy. This has come to be a prime mover in Israel’s accession to the West Asia forum.

1) Countering Isolation

Israel’s earlier attempt to reach others in the region had resulted in “The Mistress Syndrome” whereby it conducted covert operations through Mossad and PM’s office to achieve some positive goals like deterrence. Despite this quiet diplomacy, Arab perception of public relations as a taboo had resulted in Israel being barred from US Army’s joint operations for regional stability through the CENTCOM division. However, the new coalition government with Foreign Minister Yair Lapid as a proven figure in diplomacy expressly called for the rehabilitation of the Foreign Ministry and engagement with international actors hitherto treated with suspicion and condemnation by Netanyahu (MITVIM, 2021a). This has factored in the country seeking a public platform to legitimize its security apparatus. Though legitimacy itself can be a prime concern, chartering other countries in Israel’s fight against what it considers as regional destabilizers like Iran can be a secondary goal. The Meridor Report and its updated recommendations in 2019 state that while Israel does not face existential threats from a conventional army, Iran’s potential nuclear and ballistic missile abilities are still problematic (Meridor & Eldadi, 2019).

2) Reciprocal Partnership with the US

Israel’s security establishment is embarrassed by the demographic trend in America that shows a steep decline in support among the young Jewish, non-religious, and liberal population. The Democratic party’s ambiguity towards Iran, support for the two-state solution and attempts to

weaponize American aid against Israel policy in West Bank have certainly raised concerns about Israel's dependence on the US (Lapid, 2021). Having already eliminated US economic aid, Israel now wants to construct a reciprocal relationship whereby America needs Israel to fulfil US's larger goal in the region. The Blue flag exercise hosted by Israel and attended by all four states is a prior step in instilling such a leading role for Israel as a harbinger of connected command and intelligence in the region. Israel's prioritizing of "new world" players in the far east, as understood from business discourses and negotiated trade agreements, and the consequent demand for an expanded maritime foothold will contribute to this role (Munin, 2020).

3) Sustaining the Defence Industry

Israel's defence industry had taken a hit following the \$35 billion defence MOU with the US. This will mean lower domestic demand development capability for Israel's own IDF while channelling funds to the American industry (Hadad, 2020). Thus, three-quarters of the domestic production has to be exported to offset the cost of research and development. The domestic defence industry is existential for Israel as it tries to move away from perennial American dependence and survive economically and militarily in an isolated region.

4) Leading the Climate Action

Recently, Israel had the National Security Council include climate issues in its annual assessment report to the foreign affairs and security cabinet. It had also established a climate forum to bring together regional neighbours and even Palestinians for a renewable future (MITVIM, 2021b). These initiatives point to Israel's larger goal to justify its integration with formerly disowned partners worldwide and legitimize its existence in the Middle East.

Table 1.0: Areas of Corporation and Security Interests of the Countries

	USA	India	UAE	Israel
Regional Security & Counter-Terrorism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rival powers exploiting US pivot to East Expansionist policies fuelling regional conflict 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The continued security of oil supplies & Expatriates West Asian links of domestic terrorists 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Securing the country's safety tag Achieving strategic parity in the region Threat of Islamism to monarchic al rule 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Check Palestinian instability & regional support for instability Arrest nuclear & asymmetric threats from Iran
Maritime Security, Connectivity & Critical Infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interoperability to keep China and Iran out of supply routes Solving the free-rider issue 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Search for alternatives to Chinese led infrastructure Leading maritime security in the Western Indian Ocean 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expanding footprint beyond the Persian Gulf Move beyond alliance level UAE-US Infrastructures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expanding maritime involvement to secure its trade routes with East Lead regional maritime response against Iran.
Defence Technology & Cyber Security	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Defence transfers to attract & bring together US partners Coordinated legislation to arrest cyber theft & transboundary hackers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Achieving self-reliance & autonomy in Defence Sector 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Move beyond bilateral US transfers that constrain UAE's autonomy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sustain the domestic defence industry
Climate, Energy & Food Securities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Renewing American leadership of 21st-century threats 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Technological & financial help to alleviate the crisis in energy and food procurements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduce dependence on the international food market Concerns as an oil-producing country in an arid region 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A non-threatening and viable issue for regional integration

Source: Compiled by Author

Areas of Security Cooperation

1) Regional Security and Counterterrorism

As noted in the earlier sessions, each country has their security interests to keep the regional stability of West Asia intact. However, questions remain on the nature of their corporation and the ways through which each country could contribute to others' interests.

Diplomacy as a Common Goal

The countries in the forum, especially the US is certain that a threat-centric alliance against countries like China would receive no positive response as China continues to be the region's main trade partner. A case in point is the American Clean Network initiative explicitly directed at China which failed to attract partnership despite multiple calls to several Arab countries like Saudi and UAE (Alhalwany, 2021). Only through a flexible, non-threatening and diplomatic model could the US arrest the expansionist policies of its allies and them using economic engagement to explore potential Chinese security involvement.

Similar return to diplomacy and negotiation feature prominently in the interests of UAE and Israel, both of whom have initiated talks with rivals like Iran, Turkey, etc. For Israel, working with the UAE and India, both of whom have a strategic and huge diasporic presence in the US, is an important way of seeking Washington's support for its security concerns. From the Arab region, UAE, as a Muslim country whose foreign policy is more pragmatic than ideological, can chart the course for other Middle Eastern countries to accept Israel. Unlike Egypt or Jordan, it also doesn't have any history of conflict with Israel. For UAE, recent events have vindicated that rather than locking horns with Iran, it is best to work with its closest allies like US and Israel to avoid their maximum pressure on Iran since that would ignite an existential war over UAE. Considering that UAE still has no credible alternative to the US security umbrella, the best possible recourse is to strike minilateral partnerships with countries that would not irk the US in the way China or Russia does.

Similarly, India's non-interventionist and diplomatic tradition has won dividends among West Asia countries who even sounded to make a 'strategic commitment to help India's rise as a regional power', the kind of statements they had hitherto used only for the US and Japan (Chaudhuri, 2017). Prioritizing diplomacy is directly proportional to the security of India's expatriate population and oil resources. Thus, as far as regional stability is considered, diplomacy, and not intervention with risks of a threat-centric alliance, is the level playing field

for the four countries. The latter not only goes against the central and non-negotiable foreign policy tradition of member countries like India but goes against the very essence of a minilateral relationship.

Counter-Terrorism Relations

Considering that most of these countries face state-sponsored terrorism, the factors leading up to counter-terrorism cooperation almost align with motivations for regional security. A common motivation has been to neutralize the issues that have arisen as a result of bilateral counter-terrorism relations with US. There is much more congruency among India, UAE and Israel who have first-hand experience in dealing with these Islamist and cross-border terrorist establishments.

Joint Counter-Terrorism Operations

Whether Iranian or Pakistan-backed terrorist outfits, Israel and India with their geographical proximity to terrorist strongholds in Lebanon and Pakistan stand better positioned to curtail the terror links that spread to the Gulf countries. A non-negotiable issue India will have to face in the relationship is Pakistan's historical and strategic relations with the Gulf interfering with the CT operations of the UAE. However, UAE recently has taken a tough stand against terror elements from that region, deporting to India not only terrorists but also sympathizers of outfits like Jaish-e-Muhammed. Pakistan's ISI was even forced to relocate its capacity from its traditional stronghold of Dubai to Turkey (Taneja, 2021b).

But India's closeness to Iran and its reluctance to name Houthis as a terrorist outfit when condemning attacks are also often construed as a constraint in CT relations. The forum's focus on diplomacy would mean that such backchannels with Iran are rather beneficial to deal with such state-sponsored radical elements. Israel is also driven by this relationship because of the UAE's closeness to the Hormuz strait and its hosting of various Irani businesses. It is also motivated by UAE's differing approach to Fatah in West Bank and Hamas in Gaza which is positioned to balance Qatar's aid to Brotherhood elements (Zaga, 2021). Some countries like India also lack a formal CT strategy and a clear and coordinated command structure between various CT-oriented agencies. With decades of experience in leading various counter-terrorism operations in West Asia and beyond, the US is best placed to provide them. The benefits accrued from such a transregional joint operation could certainly trump priority attested by each country to their own environment.

2) Maritime Security, Connectivity, and Critical Infrastructure

Neutralizing Chinese Infrastructures

Many in the forum have clear attempts to supplant threatening Chinese infrastructures with alternatives. US has been working closely with India not just because of its ‘demographic and economic capabilities’, but mainly for its geostrategic position being a ‘counterweight’ to China (Syed & Ahmed, 2021, p. 38). As it tries to move away from China-led infrastructures, unilateral bodies as such will fit into India’s inability to enter into arrangements with complicated groupings like the GCC and the consequent failure to lead maritime security in extended West Asia. In fact, such a project could face issues from Israel’s or UAE’s maritime relationship with China. Recently, Chinese involvement in the construction Israeli ports nearby the US Sixth Fleet has become a controversial issue for American administrators (Tibon & Harel, 2019). Many in the region are tempted by the economic cult of China to join OBOR and prioritises economic advantage over the security threat posed by China to lease their ports. However, infrastructures that do not involve Chinese assets cannot be a non-negotiable concern for UAE and Israel as long as the global supply chain is restructured independent of China. Therefore, as long as this is achieved, it would be best to recognize joint infrastructures from the West Asia forum as yet another benevolent project rather than branding them as Chinese centric.

Countering Iranian Infrastructures

The maritime interests of these four countries try to displace potential regional destabilizers like Iran one way or the other. Israel, which has little maritime footprint beyond its borders will benefit immensely from them. A former US Defence official had observed that Socotra, Puntland, and Eritrea are bases where UAE could allow Israeli presence to spy on Iran (Cafiero & Sudetic, 2020). Developing such security infrastructures will benefit from UAE’s expertise in initiating mega infrastructural projects.

In countering Iranian infrastructures, these countries would benefit from India’s space industry that provides cheap homegrown rockets for radar and communication satellites. India had already launched an Israeli surveillance satellite known as Polaris in 2008 which is said to elicit information on strategic installation in Iran (Ghosal, 2016). In fact, most of what is alleged as Iranian threats to maritime shipping is not officially recognized by the Iranian state. Thus, even countries with huge stakes in Iran like India would not have a problem with such maritime operations and security infrastructures. Given a series of attacks on vessels by Houthi rebels

and allegedly supported by Iran, India has launched Operation Sankalp to provide a pass for oil carriers and merchant ships crossing the Hormuz strait to India. For countries like UAE and Israel, India is a country in the closest proximity with geographical preponderance in key choke points to fill the vacuum created by potential US exit. UAE's attempt to generate interoperability required during such beyond-US circumstances is evident in its encouraging participation in India-led initiatives like the International Fleet Review, IONS, and Indian Ocean Defence Ministers Meeting. Considering that UAE officials have in recent years travelled to Iran to manage maritime security issues, India's presence in Iran's Chabahar port and the Indian Navy's port diplomacy with Iran would be more an asset than a constraint. Such a relationship will also help Israel to secure its eastern trade from Iranian threats without violent confrontations.

Freedom of Navigation as a Unique Point of Convergence

Freedom of navigation is a rare arena of international consensus. Dependence on maritime trade had even produced a coalition to fight off piracy in the Horn of Africa among the five permanent members of UNSC who otherwise rarely come together for a single cause. For countries like Israel which have huge potential for trade with eastern countries, the recent Iranian-driven attacks on Israeli-owned shipping offer a rare window of opportunity to tap into regional acceptance by leading the Freedom of Navigation operation against Iran. Protecting SLOCs further serves as a harbinger of US interests at a time the US is eager to move away from the Middle East: the fight against China in the South China Sea or Russia in the Black Sea far exceeding the Middle Eastern context. However, there are subtle differences concerning how each country interprets Freedom of Navigation. Countries like India, for instance, require non-commercial vessels to obtain authorization before entering their EEZ. As evident from Indian authorities' disquiet on US Freedom of Navigation Operation in the country's EEZ without consent, such differences do not altogether constrain joint operations (Singh, 2021). Beyond these differences, this concept could give Israel, India and UAE a powerful converging point to align their maritime interests and collaborate with the US who could finally mellow down its free-rider concerns.

3) Defense Technology and Cyber Security

Joint Production

Joint production would be the aggregate result of each country's interests with regard to acquiring advanced defence technologies. UAE has recently hinted to the US that procedures

and geopolitical considerations of bilateral US transfers don't always go well with the UAE. Similar to other areas listed in this paper, the most obvious conclusion is that rather than approaching rival players, UAE would look for joint defence production with the US and its allies where it has an equal stake in the weaponry. India is similarly clear that "future developments in this sphere should focus on joint developments of defence products.... with a special emphasis on the Made in India initiative" (MEA, 2017). By joining the forum, India could also expect joint production with US firms that have generally despised this idea and thus look for a less cumbersome way of acquiring US technology.

This is also the case with the UAE, whose abundant sovereign wealth funds like Abu Dhabi Investment Authority and Mubadala Investment Company has led India to recently invite investments in critical security fields (MEA, 2020). For Israel, competitive market and production is central to sustaining its domestic defence industry and thus its qualitative military edge in the region. Israeli PM in his visit to India has recognized the low-cost manufacturing-projected at USD 6.5 per day- in India (PIB, 2014). Indian government's recent easing of FDI regulation in defence, the extension of the line of credit facility, industry-friendly policies (DPEEP), and procedures (DAP) to promote defence sectors are equally remarkable. For the US, joint production is at the centre of assuring its close partners like Israel and UAE who are already doubting US defence against Houthi attacks. Kenneth F. McKenzie, the Commander of CENTCOM, in his visit to UAE in the wake of the Houthi attacks, hinted that the US government is working with industries in the US and its regional partners like UAE to develop their defence systems against drone attacks (Gulf News, 2022). Such a move towards joint production is not void of any military incentive to the US. The US has been increasingly disputed as the master of innovation at a time China seems to innovate with much more urgency in defence-tech, particularly with its hypersonic capabilities that threaten the whole US deterrence (Weichert, 2022). There are many things that the US cannot do alone anymore and joint production with reduced R&D time is a solution.

Cyber Security and Digital Risks

Cyber Security is an area that has huge potential for joint production from the four countries. Such cooperation will be motivated by Washington's fears of China involving in "cyber theft" and "undercutting America's advanced technologies". US would be bent on integrating cyber security infrastructures in the region at a time US move to relocate Israel, a cyber warfare giant, to the US Military Central Command (CENTCOM) area of responsibility. This will contribute

to America's larger goal to bring a semblance of predictability to the digital world. Israel's cyber security industry is a global powerhouse that has secured US\$1.03 billion for its start-ups in the year 2018 alone and will perform even better with the vast cyber operations market in India and UAE's financing sources which includes the \$3 billion Abraham fund (Pant & Sahu, 2019). In the case of UAE, National Cyber Security Strategy considers partnerships as a core enabler in achieving cyber security goals (TRAD, 2019). With the Indian government already pushing to actualize its Digital India mission, India will benefit immensely from these three countries in integrating cyber security into its national agenda. Lack of cyber security infrastructure and nodal agencies amidst 700 million internet users had pushed India to the bottom list of countries when it comes to dealing with cyberattacks.

4) **Climate, Energy, and Food Securities**

With their capabilities, the countries in the forum are also obviously the best to qualify the minilateral theory when it comes to climate, energy and food concerns: the least number of actors with the greatest contribution to achieving the greatest impact. As far as the West Asia region is considered, UAE's partnership with Israel in the massive energy and water security projects in the Jordan, making use of Israel's desalination plants, has perceptively shown how minilateral solutions could address regional non-traditional concerns. As a leader in research and technology, Israel could be an asset to address these wider concerns of desertification and develop a sustainable farming ecosystem.

UAE is also at the forefront of revolutionizing food-producing capabilities and India as a food sufficient country can help with that. The Indian government had already decided to launch a "farm-to-port" project not affected by fluctuating food security laws in India to underwrite UAE's food security concerns. (Bagchi, 2017). UAE, on the other hand, could help finance food storage facilities in India to help combat the rotting of food supplies worth approximately \$14 billion each year. India could expect that UAE will build on the investments it has already done to help reach India's 450-gigawatt clean energy goal by 2030. De-regulation of the energy sector in those countries will further prompt Indian companies to invest in the energy sectors of cities like Dubai and specialize in innovative methods. On the other hand, India could help with Israel's and UAE's demands for green hydrogen production and solar energy ventures. Indian PM, launching National Hydrogen Mission, said that green hydrogen is the thing that helps India to achieve quantum leaps in terms of climate concerns (Gnana, 2021). In fact, climate and food security concerns are fields where there are almost no constraints to

collaborate. In this regard, collaboration in the field could act as the glue between the countries even when other areas face considerable differences. It is also the reason why countries like Israel could consider them as powerful forces of regional integration.

Conclusion

The formation of a politically volatile forum as the West Asia forum is characterized by a complex mix of motivations. They are informed by the development of minilateral institutions, the decline in US security assurances, and an increased potential of partnering with emerging powers in the East. This work emerged from the realization that national interests dominate a country's foreign policy motivations and help to partially project the country's future foreign policy manoeuvres. Winston Churchill, speaking from the Cold War environment perceptively noted that the key to unlocking the riddle of Russian actions is Russia's national interest. The work vindicates the formulation that issues such as trade, energy, logistics infrastructure, and digital landscape could be wielded as security issues and that convergence of norms and values could replace shared material foes as the connecting link between the countries in the forum.

From a descriptive account of the national security interests of the US, India, UAE, and Israel, it was found that each of them has often overlapping and contradicting notions of what they expect from this forum. The focus of any grouping, particularly Minilateral ones is to find specific converging points of cooperation where the states have more or less similar goals and are best equipped to work in synergy. Robert Keohane sound similar when he asserted that cooperation can take place in a situation that contains a mixture of conflicting and complementary interests. The extent to which security interests have contributed to the forum and the specific dimension of the security differs from state to state. For the US, security ranks higher than any other motivation and is entwined with its military assurances in the region. However, for others which are either regional or emerging powers, motivations such as geoeconomics cohabit with security interests. The lines between human security, traditional security, trade, and infrastructure continuously overlap and make it simultaneously difficult to draw watertight sectoral conclusions.

However, it could be concluded that these different factors do contribute to certain converging points which would be listed as follows: the continued stability of the West Asia region, regional diplomacy, interoperability in counter-terrorism operations, freedom of navigation, alternative dual-use and digital infrastructures, the joint production of defence equipment, climate, and food security projects. There is a revolutionary possibility for this forum to trigger

more advanced bilateral and minilateral alignments. Regional countries like Egypt and others like France and East Asian countries could make the most out of this strategic leeway and possibly form cross-cutting and issue-specific partnerships with the forum countries. From what we have seen as the driving forces of the West Asia forum, human security challenges are also powerful drivers of integration among regional and extra-regional competitors like China and India at a time regional security is all more destabilized.

However, there are still many security factors that put the sustainability of the forum under question and that demand thoughtful attention from states. Israel tries to establish a new paradigm in which the Palestinian issue could no longer constrain its global ambitions. However, another intifada or Arab-Spring induced regime change could put popular pressure on countries like UAE which might backtrack on their current rapprochement. It is thus necessary that Israel uses the legitimacy from the forum as a bridge toward practical progress on Palestinian statehood. For UAE, the forum has provided a platform to diversify its security dependences and regime stability, but employing the security gains of the forum to disempower the democratic voices of its own people and support militias against internationally recognized entities might create cracks. They could be too much to ask from countries like India and the USA who have their own priorities. As far as India is considered, its understanding of the role in the forum, particularly its relation with Israel must be more transformational than ideological. The presence of the UAE might mellow down global criticism against the alleged anti-Islamic alliance of right-wing governments in India and Israel. But the country should ensure that its bonhomie with Arab governments is not an alternative to religious harmony in the domestic environment.

The US, on the other hand, should make certain that its involvement in the forum demands a kind of reciprocal attention to the concerns of its partners, whether it is the UAE's fears of instability or India's defence supplies from Russia. With US commitments and responsibilities running far and wide, the question would be whether the US could contribute significantly to the forum, if not give more significance than all other minilaterals it has established along similar lines. The West Asia forum will also have to restrict itself from undermining multilateral initiatives and becoming a platform for power rivalry between regional poles. The forum members should strike a creative balance between pursuing their security targets and inviting unnecessary mistrust from legible players like Iran, Russia, China or Turkey.

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