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Pakistan's Traditional Influence in the
Middle East**

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Introduction

Formed during the fall of 2021, the I2U2 is an emerging alliance in the Middle East which includes Israel, India, UAE, and the US. Officially, these states aim to deepen cooperation in the field of economics, while also overcoming the challenges in different areas such as water, energy, transportation, space, health and food security, and in the maritime sector. The I2U2 members have a desire to increase private-sector capital and technologies to solve their mutual challenges. The challenges of free trade, transportation, clean energy, waste treatment and emerging technologies were mentioned as their utmost priorities.¹ These members also emphasise on resolving the problems related to carbon emissions and promoting hybrid renewable energy projects. The I2U2 is the platform for the US to contain China in terms of economic development and to marginalise the latter's

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influence in the Middle East. The Biden administration is expected to utilise this network to foster its policy of containing China around the globe in which the Middle East is a crucial region, given its vast energy resources and pivotal position for China's BRI. Such competition between the US and China in the Middle East provides opportunity for India to grasp maximum economic advantage from the I2U2. India is a strategic partner of the US and over the years, their mutual partnership has strengthened. Due to its prospective economic might, it has presented itself as a counter force to China's rise in the eyes of the US. India has already received \$2 billion investment and technological assistance for agricultural initiatives from I2U2 platform.² In addition, India has strong relations with other member states of I2U2, i.e., Israel and the UAE. Indo-Israel relations began in 1990s with the free trade agreement and their bilateral trade initiated with the amount of \$200 million during 1992.³ India also established its embassy in Tel Aviv and currently their bilateral trade is worth of \$4.82 billion excluding defence, in 2021. Over the years, owing to India's defence needs and Israel's ambitions of developing its military industrial complex, the defence ties between the two states have also prospered. Under the US pressure, Israel cancelled its joint venture of developing the Haifa Port with China and instead, signed an agreement with India to operationalise the Israeli port until 2054.⁴ On the other hand, the UAE relations with India also gained momentum in 2015. The two states signed a free trade agreement, aiming to boost their bilateral trade to the expected amount of \$100 billion in the next five years.⁵ India and UAE are eyeing to use I2U2 platform for their economic cooperation. However, the major issues pertaining the I2U2 member states is

the lack of clarification over the geopolitical objectives and their conflicting positions on how to deal with the emerging global and regional powers such as China, Russia and Iran. Although the member states do not explicitly declare I2U2 as an alliance against any particular state but given that this initiative was taken by the US and provided India's participation in it, hint towards its anti-China's posture. Therefore, two pertinent queries that this article aims to address are:

- a) How does I2U2 provide India an opportunity to make inroads into the Middle East?
- b) How does it impact Pakistan's traditional relations with the Middle Eastern states?

Background

Historically, the Middle East was a region where the colonial powers competed with each other in order to exert their influence. After World War I, Britain and France divided the region amongst their respective mandates. These colonial powers controlled the land of Arabs and beyond to access the resources, particularly the newly discovered oil. Their alliance with the Arabs which proved effective in defeating the Ottomans also reaped results in their rule over their respective mandates by granting limited autonomy to certain sheikhdoms before providing them complete freedom in the wake of World War II. As the WWII ended, the Cold War between the US and USSR engulfed the Middle East along with the entire globe. The US initiated its alliances with the Gulf states and Israel to foster its regional objectives, i.e., to contain the spread of communism and secure the flow of oil. In response, the Soviet Union established strong military alliances

with Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Libya who were adopting the socialist lines and a pan-Arab ideology. These states were also overtly apprehensive against the creation of Israel. These states were significant as they provided their ports to Moscow from where it could easily exercise its authority around the region. Nevertheless, the successive defeats of Egypt and Syria in their wars against Israel and Iraq's inclination towards the US led to the shattering of Soviet's influence in the Middle East.

Towards the end of Cold War, two tragic events in the Middle East remained pivotal, i.e., Iraq-Iran eight-year long war (1980-88) and Iraq invasion of Kuwait (1991). These two serious conflicts initiated a series of major problems such as terrorism, ethnic conflicts, and sectarianism. Due to these two events, regional Gulf remained dependent on external security providers like the US. The 9/11 attacks and the subsequent removal of Saddam paved the way for the prolonged US presence in the region. By declaring the rise of terrorism in the Middle East as a global threat, the US stationed its troops for the promotion of peace and liberal order. In this way, the Middle East came under the dominance of the US. The US also promoted itself as a sole guardian of the Gulf security against the rising Iran. However, with the passage of time, the US presence in the region not only provoked the proxy wars but the indigenous statehood of the Middle East also weakened with the rise of multiple non-state actors which eventually led to an increase in terrorism. Many experts believe that the Iraq war was unjustified and unlawful since it lacked any legitimate backing by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). Therefore, when Obama administration came to power, it decided to withdraw the US troops from Iraq. The

withdrawal of the US troops from Iraq created a vacuum for other emerging states like China and Russia and also for the regional powers like Iran to increase their role in the region. Russia's military deployment in Syria in the wake of Syrian Civil War and the consolidation of Iranian footprints across the region, contradicted directly with the US interests and the interests of its regional allies. Nevertheless, the foremost threat which the US considers is the rise of China and while the US is aiming to contain China globally, the Middle East, once again, has become the focal point for the US foreign policy where China's Belt and Road Initiative is gaining pace.

I2U2 and US-China Competition

As a renewed power competition is being unfolded at the global level, the pivot of which is Asia, the US has been creating new alliances in the region. Foremost among these alliances is the Quad in the Indo Pacific including Japan, Australia and India to counter the growing Chinese influence and to ensure 'free and rule-based regional order'.⁶ However, to assert itself in a more militaristic manner, the US also established AUKUS in August 2021 under which the US along with the UK aims to provide nuclear-powered submarines to Australia, hence, explicitly indicating assertiveness towards China. However, as the Chinese influence has been consistently growing and owing to its flagship project BRI, it has established its footprints in other regions as well. Resultantly, the US went beyond the Indo Pacific to counter China elsewhere as well. It is reflected by the US-led I2U2, comprising of India, Israel, and the UAE alongside the US, in the Middle East, the region where China has invested the most under its BRI project.

For China, the Middle East is crucial for two reasons; firstly, due to its dependence on Middle Eastern energy resources as half of its imports are from the region and secondly, due to the connectivity which the region provides for China to successfully implement its BRI initiatives across Africa and Europe. Therefore, although I2U2 might be a new platform, its members are quite concerned about the new strategic partnerships and their role in the region. For example, for the US, containing China in the Middle East is imperative to remain as the sole hegemonic global power and hence, building alliances is necessary. Since the Cold War, the US federal government has spent a huge sum of investment on securing its interests and defending its allies in the region. The US has strong ties with Israel and the Gulf countries. The diplomatic rapprochement between the UAE and Israel through Abraham Accords has resolved the long-standing policy hurdle for the US in uniting its allies in the Middle East. Another motive for the US to include the UAE in the I2U2 is its significance in China's BRI. The UAE is one of the biggest trading partner of China considering that their bilateral trade accounted for more than \$72.4 billion in 2021.⁷ Moreover, China is building multiple projects such as Jiaozi and Dubai Trade Market in UAE while UAE's ports complement China's BRI owing to its reliance on ports for the Maritime Silk Route. Similarly, Israel's advancements in technology and its collaboration with China brings the bilateral relations between the two countries closer to each other. Their bilateral relations became stronger when the Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu visited China in 2017. Xi and Netanyahu signed multiple agreements on air pollution control, water conservation, and environmental monitoring. The visit was also fruitful in terms of

free trade agreements between China and Israel as they signed more than ten business projects worth of \$25 billion.⁸ Hence, for the US, it is imperative to limit the cooperation between its Middle Eastern allies and China in order to achieve its policy of containing China.

Indian Role

One of the major members in I2U2 is India. India's relations with the Middle Eastern states are based on two pillars; one, India's export of cheap labour to the GCC States and two, its import of energy resources from the region to support its growing economy. India shares strong ties with the GCC countries and gets huge sums of remittances every year. Between 2021-2022, it received a total of \$87 billion in foreign remittances from multiple countries wherein a major share was from the GCC countries following the United States.⁹ Alongside this, although India is not a Muslim state, yet its sizeable Muslim population in terms of numbers also provides the basis for its closer ties with the Middle Eastern states. Nevertheless, notwithstanding with its relations with the GCC, India has also fostered good relations with two of GCC opponents i.e., Iran and Israel. Whereas its relationship with Iran provides India not only the energy resources but also a backyard to countercheck Pakistan's westward influence, its closer relations with Israel ensures the sustainability and advancement of its military arsenals owing to the former's huge military industrial complex.¹⁰ The relations between Israel and India remained normal in previous decades although it got significance when the Bhartiya Janata Party came into power in 2014. The Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Israel for the first time followed by

the Israeli Prime Minister in 2018 from where the bilateral ties gained momentum. Today, their relations cover many areas such as science and technology, telecommunication, smart cities, trade, and above all the most prominent factor is their defence cooperation. In 2017, the defence deal signed between Israel and India is said to be the largest defence deal for Israel while in 2021, both the states signed a 10-year defence cooperation agreement.¹¹ Moreover, Israel's arms exports to India accounts for roughly 43 per cent of its total arms supplies around the globe.¹²

Due to the aforementioned partnership of India with the Middle Eastern states in a variety of fields, it acquired a significant position for the US to act as a counter force to the growing Chinese presence in the region. The formation of I2U2 and India's presence in it only validates the US aim of presenting India as an alternative for regional countries. However, for India, participation in the I2U2 is not necessarily tantamount to counter China. India has never actively participated in the Middle Eastern conflicts and unlike China, it has remained neutral over the US invasions and current Russian military presence inside Syria. Furthermore, despite the US apprehensions, India has maintained its economic and political ties with Iran. In fact, the economic partnership between the two countries is so deep that India is developing the Chahbahar port in Iran and has invested a significant amount in this project.¹³ In this case, I2U2 is important for India not to pursue the US aims of countering China but for India's own benefits in terms of political, social, and economic aspects. Partnership with the Middle Eastern states under I2U2 platform provides India with much stronger footprints in its own region, i.e., South Asia. By becoming a part of both, the Indo Pacific Quad and the Middle Eastern I2U2, India has

assumed a connectivity status between the two regions, hence, amassing a significant amount of power to establish its authority in South Asia. Through I2U2, the UAE's Emaar group is investing \$5 billion to establish food parks and conserve fresh water in India. The initial investment of \$2 billion has already been announced in the I2U2 summit on July 2022.¹⁴ Recently, both India and the UAE have also signed Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) which aims at increasing the bilateral trade from \$60 billion to \$100 billion within the next five years.¹⁵ India is also converting its agriculture sector with multiple imported technologies from Israel. It helps India to grow drought resistant crops and enhance the quantity with better quality of vegetables and fruits. For instance, there are agreements of states within India like Karnataka and Rajasthan with Israel to facilitate olive growth. Israel and India have also formulated ties in space sector and have jointly worked on TecSar and RISAT satellites.¹⁶

Concerns for Pakistan

Pakistan and Middle East have historical ties since the independence. Pakistan's relations with the Middle Eastern states are based on three pertinent aspects; one is the Islamic solidarity, second is the economic assistance which the GCC provides to Pakistan while the third is the security guarantees and Pakistan's ability to mediate between GCC and Iran. In terms of economy, especially inflow of remittances from gulf countries increased by 54.1 per cent, and Pakistan received \$16.95 billion remittances in the fiscal year 2022.¹⁷ GCC states are also important for Pakistan as they provide the latter with much needed energy requirements and the loans. GCC countries have always been helpful for

Pakistan during financial and economic crises. For instance, Saudi Arabia and the UAE provided \$30 billion to Pakistan in the shape of loans and investments during the year 2019 in addition to \$3 billion extended by Qatar in June of the same year. Pakistan's utilisation of petroleum in a year is about 21 million tons and about 80 per cent of it is imported from the GCC countries. Pakistan imports its 29 per cent of gas from Qatar. Furthermore, for security and training purposes, a certain amount of Pakistani troops is also stationed in various Gulf countries most notably in KSA, UAE, and Qatar.

Despite sharing strong relations, Pak-GCC ties in recent years have remained problematic. The rift became more intense when Pakistani parliament refused to allow the deployment of Pakistani troops against Houthis in 2015. Furthermore, Pakistan's muffled opposition to GCC silence over Indian atrocities in Kashmir resulted in Saudi Arabia's withdrawal of its money from Pakistani banks that amounted to \$3 billion.¹⁸ The second challenge which undermined the relationship between Pakistan and the GCC is the increasing influence of India in the Middle East. As discussed earlier, India's huge market potential made it an attractive destination for the GCC which pushed Pakistan towards alternative Muslim countries like Iran, Malaysia, and Turkey. These countries provided Pakistan with diplomatic support on Kashmir issue and publicly denounced Indian steps in Kashmir valley. Considering the fact that it is a challenge to its supremacy in the Muslim World, KSA also discouraged Pakistan from attending Malaysian Summit jointly organised by Turkey, Iran, and Malaysia. However, such instances reflected Pakistan's desire to diversify its foreign relations to counterbalance Indian inroads within the

Muslim World. While Pakistan quested for alternative Muslim powers, India-GCC ties strengthened further. For instance, the UAE awarded the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi with its highest civilian award in 2019 after the abrogation of Article 370 and 35A related to Kashmir's special status. Moreover, KSA also announced an investment of \$15 billion for Indian oil refineries and chemical industries.¹⁹

As the renewed Indo-GCC has been unfolding coupled with the emerging Indo-Israel nexus under the I2U2, the foremost concern for Pakistan is grave in the maritime sector. Not only the Indian participation in the Middle East would compromise Pakistan's tradition position but it also has the potential to endanger Pakistan's security interests in the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean. This is because of India's geostrategic position as being the part of both Quad and I2U2, hence, granting wider operational scope for India in the maritime domain. India is upgrading its maritime defence to position itself at the global level. The aim of maritime defence upgradation is to contain Chinese influence in South Asia. India has developed aircraft carrier by itself which shows its ambitions for countering China.²⁰ Moreover, India is closely working with Israel to develop its naval force. For instance, in 2017, India got Barak-8 missile system and Integrated Under Water Harbor Defence and Surveillance system to secure and protect its territory from threats.²¹

China and Iran Factor

China is a crucial factor for Pakistan in reviving its previous status in the Middle East. Out of the six corridors of BRI, CPEC is probably the most significant one for China and it could act as a

transit route between the Persian Gulf and China. Complementing its status is the renewed investment of China in Iran that is worth of \$400 billion, the important aspects of which are the energy, communication and transportation sectors.²² The economic potential of China coupled with the geostrategic location of Pakistan and the energy resources of Iran, would make the perfect troika that could overshadow the increasing Indian presence in the Middle East. These countries have bright future for their cooperation as their economic, strategic interests are overlapping with each other. Iran, being a major regional player of the Middle East, has not only managed to thwart the security threats but on the contrary, it has expanded its influence in the region through its proxy networks which have engaged both GCC and Israel within their bordering areas. Furthermore, owing to the persistent US sanctions and on the other hand, dependence of China on the energy resources, Iran has fostered its relations with the eastern powers like China and Russia. China has imported the total amount of \$200 million energy resources from Iran in the third quarter of 2020.²³ Due to the similar anti-US stance, China, Iran and Russia have formed a loose axis in opposing the US policies in the Middle East. Moreover, Iran imports non-energy products from China and Russia as well, primarily the arms and arsenals. Iran and China have close defence ties as Iran imported 24 percent of its arms from China in the year 2010-2019 which amounted for \$166 million. Similarly, Russian defence exports to Iran were \$521 million.²⁴ Unlike the GCC states, which have strong economic ties with China but still depend upon the security guarantees of the US, Iran, both economically and strategically, has partnerships with China. This grants Iran an important position in the China's Middle Eastern

policy. China considers Iran a gateway to the larger Middle Eastern region that provides China the energy resources in Iraq and investment opportunities in post-war Syria. Therefore, Chinese factor also helps in cementing Pak-Iran bilateral relations. Not only with the participation of China, the prospects of Gwadar and Chahbahar ports as 'sister ports' have brightened up but due to the continuous upward momentum of Indo-Israel ties, Iran's apprehensions towards India have become evident. It is clear with Iran's recent criticism over India's suppressive measures in Jammu and Kashmir region. The Iranian reaction to Indian government on revoking special status of Kashmir was rare because the leaders of Iran was never much vocal because they wanted to balance its relation with Pakistan and India. The political and religious leaders in Iran criticised India and called it an ugly action to suppress the Kashmir people. Furthermore, they also laid emphasis on the global Muslim community to be the voice of oppressed people of Kashmir and Palestine.²⁵

Conclusion

It is evident that in the Middle East, the power dynamics have been shifting. The more focus is now being generated in the regional states in which the great power like the US has resorted to offshore balancing instead of actually tackling the regional challenges. Furthermore, since the terrorism factor has subsided to the large extent, the security features of the region has shifted from being 'land-based' to 'maritime-based'. Being as aspirant of becoming a great power, India is getting a lion share in the US strategy of tackling China globally. Through participating in multiple alliance networks in Indo-Pacific and the Middle East,

India aims for enhanced cooperation and deep inroads in these regions. Since, its market potential is immense, India's renewed ties with the Gulf States strengthened during the past decade. As the last hurdle i.e. the rift between GCC states and Israel has subsided, it further allows India to pursue regional hedging in parallel manner. While the Indian intent and capability of counterbalancing China is dubious, its policy implications for Pakistan are inevitable. India's consolidation of ties in the Middle East coincided with Pakistan's receding role in the Arab World, particularly after the Yemen War. Furthermore, the rise of Turkey and Iran in the region also led to Pakistan's foreign policy dilemma as both these states contend for regional hegemony alongside KSA. Nevertheless, what is important to understand is the re-entrance of global power competition in the region in which Pakistan's ties with China are of significant importance. The only way through which Pakistan could counter check India in the Middle East, is through aligning with China. China's strategic partner, Iran, could provide Pakistan a breathing space in the region. In order to materialize this policy, what is imperative is the normalization of Iran-GCC relations in which Pakistan could play a major role. As the peace talks between Iran and KSA are already taking place in Iraq, Pakistan could further accelerate the process by assuming its traditional role of a mediator. Conclusively, partnering with China and mediating between Iran and KSA, ought to be Pakistan's two primary objectives in the region to evade global powers competition and subside India's inroads in the Middle East.

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