

A time-honoured connect: Bridge the Gulf

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Context:

Oman has a pivotal role to play in India seeking deeper engagement and collaboration in West Asia.

Introduction:

1. The Sultan of Oman, Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, is visiting India from December 16 on a state visit. This is his first visit to India after taking over in January 2020 following the passing of Sultan Qaboos.
2. The Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, had visited Oman in February 2018 in his first visit to Oman as Prime Minister. In what proved to be a landmark visit, key agreements on trade, defence and security were agreed upon, making it a milestone in diplomatic relations between India and Oman.

Geography of Oman:

1. Oman is the closest neighbour to India in the Arabian Gulf region.
2. With key Omani ports abutting the coastline along the Arabian Sea as well as the Gulf of Oman leading into the Persian Gulf and towards the Gulf of Aden, Oman's location is of utmost strategic importance to India.
3. Along with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Oman completes the trio of key strategic partners of India in the Gulf region.

Strong connection with India:

1. The ruling family of Oman has always had a strong connection with India. Sultan Qaboos was always favourably disposed towards India and invited Indian companies and professionals to undertake projects apart from sourcing supplies from India.
2. At the people-to-people level too, India and Oman enjoy close ties. There is a large Indian community of almost seven lakh people which has contributed to the constantly evolving vibrant relations.

During the Cold war era, and thereafter:

1. During the Cold War era, and even thereafter, when the Arab world was largely ambivalent towards India and was often soft and supportive of Pakistan, it was Oman which kept its doors open to India. In a conflict-prone region, Oman has always been an island of peace.
2. It has pursued a foreign policy which is based on the twin strands of moderation and mediation, including a policy of deliberate neutrality in dealing with regional issues and conflicts.
3. It has carefully balanced its close relations with the western powers and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, with a pragmatic approach to neighbouring Iran, maintaining that

the Straits of Hormuz will not be closed.

4. Even during the Persian Gulf crisis in 2019, when the United States and Iran were on the brink of a military conflict, it was Oman which played a key role in diffusing tensions.
5. Oman's key role in the Iran nuclear deal in July 2015 is well documented and acknowledged too. During the GCC-Qatar diplomatic stand-off, Oman refused to join Saudi Arabia and other countries in breaking diplomatic ties with Qatar in June 2017.
6. Much before the Abraham Accords were signed between Israel, the UAE and Bahrain in September 2020, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had made a surprise visit to Oman in October 2018, once again confirming the importance of Oman in the region.

India-Oman strategic partnership:

1. Oman is a crucial pillar of India's West Asia policy, with their multi-faceted engagement increasingly taking on a more strategic shape in recent decades.
2. The India-Oman strategic partnership was signed during Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to Oman in November 2008 and is based on twin pillars of mutual trust and shared interests. Oman was one of the few countries to have been invited by India to its G-20 presidency as a guest nation earlier this year.

Key pillars:

1. Defence and security engagement form a key pillar of this strategic partnership and are governed by a memorandum of understanding (MoU) signed in 2005.
2. Oman is the first Gulf country with which all the three wings of India's defence forces hold joint exercises. Since 2012-13, an Indian naval ship has remained on duty in the Gulf of Oman for anti-piracy operations.
3. During the Persian Gulf crisis in June 2019, the Indian Navy launched 'Operation Sankalp' to ensure the safe passage of Indian flagged ships which most often operated off the coast of Oman.
4. The MoU on Duqm Port during Mr. Modi's visit is a historic landmark in our security cooperation, providing basing facilities, Operational Turn Round and other logistics facilities to Indian naval ships operating in the region.
5. Trade and commerce forms yet another important pillar of engagement. Bilateral trade during FY2022-23 reached \$12.388 billion. There are over 6,000 India-Oman joint ventures in Oman, with an estimated investment of over \$7.5 billion.
6. India was the second largest market for Oman's crude oil exports for the year 2022 after China. In October 2022, India and Oman launched the Rupay debit card in Oman, a key footprint of India's initiative of promoting digital public infrastructure (DPI) in the world.

Looking forward to increased engagement:

1. India and Oman are looking forward to increased engagement in strategic areas such as space cooperation — an MoU on this was signed during Mr. Modi's visit.
2. The possibility of an agreement on joint exploration of rare earth metals, vital to modern electronic equipment, could add strength to the partnership.
3. The proposed India-Middle East-Europe Connectivity Corridor (IMEEC) infrastructure project to link India to Europe across West Asia could also see Oman playing an important role.
4. There is a proposal from the South Asia Gas Enterprise (SAGE), a private consortium based in India, to lay a 1,400 km long deep-sea pipeline from Oman to India for the transfer of gas. With IMEEC too looking at similar undersea connectivity, there could be convergence on it with Oman in the future.

India's gateway to West Asia:

1. The list of convergence and shared interests is thus long and limitless. As a part of its broader global outlook and its outreach in the extended neighbourhood, India is seeking deeper engagement and collaboration in West Asia, of which Oman is an important pillar.
2. Security challenges in the region have a ripple effect in India and, therefore, any instability in the region has a direct bearing on the safety and security of millions of Indians working there, India's energy security and its steadily growing trade relations.
3. Apart from being India's oldest strategic partner in the region and closest neighbour, Oman is an integral part of all important groupings in the region; the GCC, the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, the Arab League.
4. Its ability to manage rival ideologies and power games in the region makes it vitally important to India.

Conclusion:

Both countries consider themselves as ambassadors of peace and enjoy goodwill across ideologies in the world. Oman is, therefore, India's gateway to West Asia. And with the ongoing Israel-Hamas war testing the region to its limits, the visit of Oman's Sultan is timely and very important for India and the region.



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