

Think West: India's Gulf *ties on an upswing*

The economic and strategic partnership between India and the Gulf region has been transformed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's path-breaking visits to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and the return trip by Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi to New Delhi

text | Manish Chand



Spiritual home of Islam and the world's energy powerhouse, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf's most powerful economy, rolled out the red carpet early April to welcome India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi on his maiden visit to the country that has culminated in version 2.0 of India's multifarious relations with not just Riyadh, but also with the strategically important region.

The atmospherics surrounding the visit symbolised a new energy and dynamism in relations between the two countries. Flags of India and Saudi Arabia, home to

nearly three-million strong Indian diaspora, fluttered in the balmy desert breeze at the city square and on streets leading to the majestic King Saud Guest Palace where the Saudi monarch hosted the Indian leader and his entire delegation.

The two-day visit by PM Modi to Saudi Arabia (April 2-3), the first trip by an Indian Prime Minister to the world's largest producer of oil after a gap of six years, pitched the

India-Saudi strategic, economic and energy ties onto a higher trajectory, and buttressed four key pillars of India-Saudi relationship: energy, business, security and diaspora.

PM Modi's visit to Saudi Arabia was first trip by an Indian PM to the world's largest producer of oil

Facing page: Indian Prime Minister being received at the Royal Court in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia;
Below: PM Modi meeting the Saudi Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr Adel Al Jubeir, in Riyadh

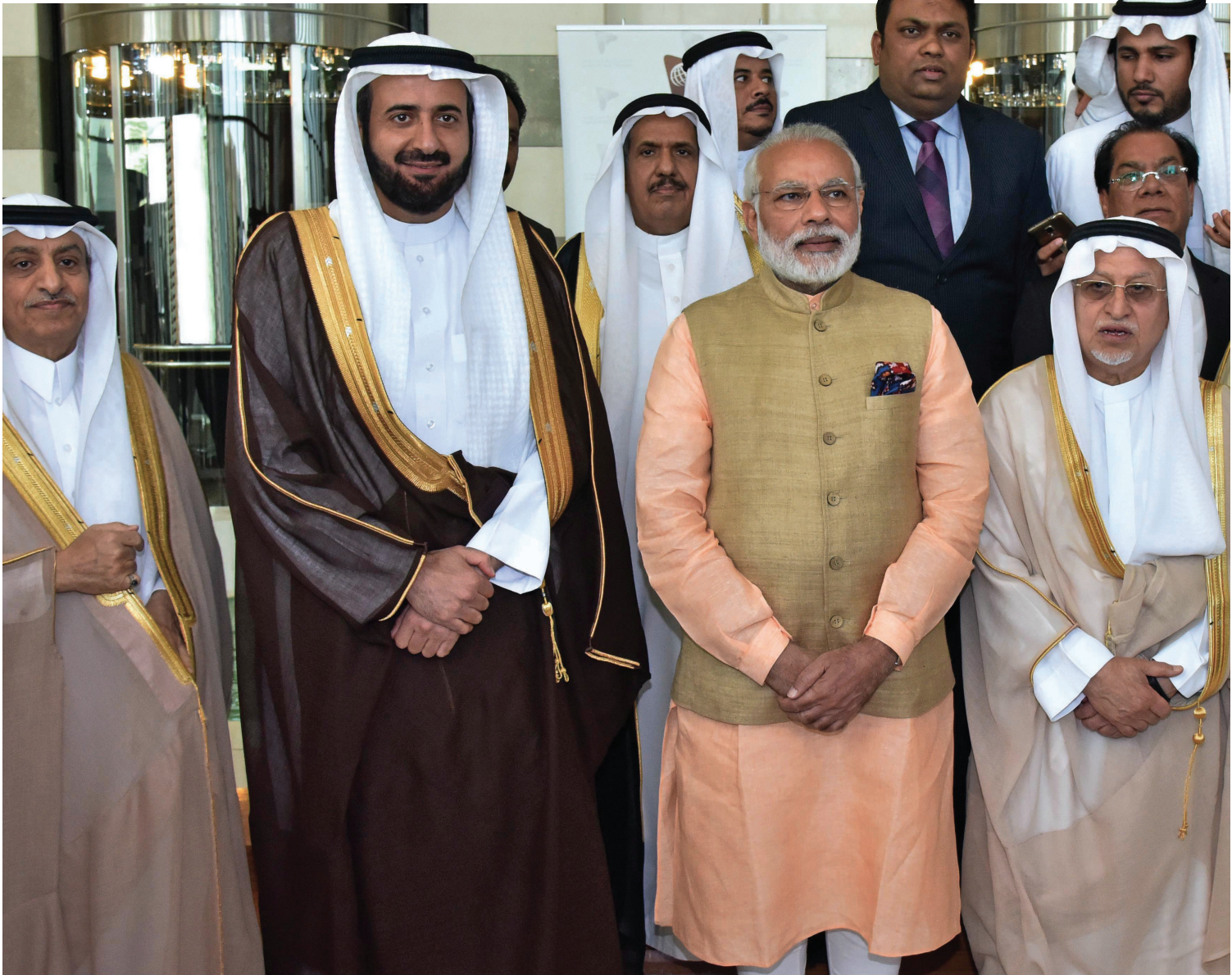


Boosting strategic and security cooperation

The primary takeaway was a marked deepening of strategic and security partnership, with the two countries signalling a paradigm shift in their counter-terror cooperation by signing a crucial pact to target terror financing, and calling jointly for

dismantling sanctuaries of terror. The first full-spectrum talks between PM Modi and the Saudi monarch King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud at the Royal Court in Riyadh on April 3 culminated in an all-embracing template for intensifying counter-terror cooperation that includes intelligence-sharing, joint action against illegal transfer of money and

Indian Prime Minister with Saudi business leaders at Saudi Chambers of Commerce in Riyadh



capacity-building to bolster cooperation in law enforcement, anti-money laundering, drug-trafficking and other transnational crimes.

In a striking illustration of converging perceptions, the leaders of India and Saudi Arabia “rejected totally any attempt to link this universal phenomenon to any particular race, religion or culture.” According to the



Human bonding in Riyadh: Selfies, sharing and eating together

It was the Modi diaspora connect show, albeit with a difference. The usual glitz, song-and-dance spectacle was missing; but PM Modi's soaring speech struck a chord as he chatted casually with Indian workers, shared food, heard them out, showered praise on them, and let them take selfies with him.

The community event in Riyadh was structured into two parts: a smaller meeting with around 600 prominent Indians at a luxury hotel in the Saudi capital and a bigger interactive meeting with around 1,000-odd blue collar workers, who comprise nearly 80 per cent of around 2.9 million-strong Indian diaspora in Saudi Arabia. The two separate meetings were organised keeping in mind different profiles and interests of the Indian community.

Bonding with Indian workers at the L&T workers and residential complex at Dahiat Namar, located around 40 km away from central Riyadh, the Prime Minister lauded the efforts made by the workers for the Metro project they are building, saying, “your hard work and toil has brought me here.” He stressed that the work being done by Indian workers abroad not only earns money, but also raises the stature of India. Indians living in Saudi Arabia send home around \$10 billion annual remittances. In his emotive address, Mr Modi underlined that in future, the Riyadh Metro would bear an eloquent testimony to their contribution to the Saudi capital. “I feel I am a part of your family. Your happiness is mine,” he told an audience comprising workers including masons, carpenters, brick-layers and plumbers.

“Eating together, hearing each other's thoughts & experiences... at L&T Workers' Residential Complex in Saudi Arabia,” PM Modi tweeted. L&T, India's engineering and infrastructure giant, is executing around \$6 billion worth of work on one line of the Riyadh Metro Project, the single largest contract won by an Indian company in any foreign country. The focus on the welfare of the Indian community was aptly encapsulated in the signing of an agreement on labour cooperation for recruitment of General Category Workers.

joint statement, “They called on all states to reject the use of terrorism against other countries; dismantle terrorism infrastructures where they happen to exist and to cut off any kind of support and financing to the terrorists operating and perpetrating terrorism from their territories against other states; and bring perpetrators of acts of terrorism to justice.”

Support for CCIT

Significantly, Saudi Arabia agreed to work with India and the international community towards the adoption of India’s proposed Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism in the United Nations. Taking the long view, the

India and the Gulf’s most powerful country also decided to bolster defence cooperation

two sides decided to blend intensified counter-terror cooperation with joint efforts to promote cooperation in cyber security, including prevention of use of cyber space for terrorism, radicalisation and for disturbing social harmony.

This enhanced counter-terror cooperation comes in the backdrop of the rise of the IS in the volatile Middle East region and shared apprehensions about potential terror strikes against India and Saudi Arabia emanating from different terror outfits.

The pact to curb terror will reinforce recent trends of cooperation that has generated much goodwill in India. Besides anti-terror cooperation, India and the Gulf’s most

PM Modi in a meeting with Saudi business leaders in Riyadh



powerful country also decided to bolster defence cooperation which will entail exchange of visits by military personnel and experts, conducting joint military exercises, exchanging visits of ships and aircrafts and supplying arms and ammunition and their joint development. Maritime security is also set to acquire greater salience, with the two countries declaring their intent to enhance maritime security cooperation in the Gulf and the Indian Ocean region.

The two countries also declared their intent to strengthen maritime security

Business Bonding

The talks in Riyadh marked a qualitative transformation of India-Saudi relations which will bring the two countries closer not only in

the security realm, but will also widen the canvas of their economic partnership. In this regard, PM Modi's meeting with 30 top Saudi CEOs and Indian business leaders at the plush Council of Saudi Chambers of Commerce in the heart of Riyadh was an important exercise to change the narrative of India and the ease of doing business in the world's fastest growing economy. Underlining his commitment to enhance the ease of doing business in India, PM Modi pitched for a more diversified economic relationship, focussed on joint investments and exploring new areas like renewables. "From petroleum to renewable energy, infrastructure, defence and agriculture, there is a tremendous opportunity



High honour for PM Modi

In a unique gesture acknowledging his commitment to deepening ties with Riyadh and the Gulf region, Saudi monarch King Salman bin Abdulaziz conferred his country's highest civilian honour, the King Abdulaziz Sash, on PM Modi. The award is named after Abdulaziz Al Saud, the founder of the modern Saudi state. With this special honour, PM Modi joins a distinguished roster of world leaders, including US President Barack Obama, British Prime Minister David Cameron, Russian President Vladimir Putin, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Indonesian President Joko Widodo.

Women Power

PM Modi was charm personified as he visited the first-of-its-kind all-women Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) training centre in Riyadh, and spoke eloquently about the transformative power of technology and gender empowerment. The enthusiasm was palpable, as clad demurely in burqa beaming young Saudi women competed with each other to take selfies with the visiting Indian leader. In his interaction, PM Modi spoke about the crucial role women play in development of countries. "For the world, it is considered to be a main headline news that in Riyadh today I am meeting those IT professionals who I can say today represent the glory of Saudi Arabia," PM Modi said during his interaction with TCS women professionals. The all-women centre was set up by TCS in 2013 in partnership with GE, and serves as a training ground for building new capabilities, skills and careers for women in the country.



for expanding our cooperation," he added. With Saudi Arabia planning to set up \$2 trillion fund, PM Modi invited Saudi Arabia to be a partner in India's growth story and encouraged Saudi Aramco, SABIC and other Saudi companies to invest in the infrastructure sector in India and to participate in projects creating mega industrial manufacturing corridors, smart cities as well as the Digital India and Start up India programmes. In this context, the signing of the framework agreement between the General Investment Authority in Saudi Arabia and Invest India will spur investments by the private sectors in the two countries. In a cheering assurance for India, Saudi Aramco is looking at India as its No. 1 target for investment. "The two leaders agreed to transform the buyer-seller

PM Modi's trip to Saudi Arabia coalesced multiple strands of India's Think West policy

relationship in the energy-sector to one of a deeper partnership focussing on investment and joint ventures in petrochemical complexes, and cooperation in joint exploration in India, Saudi Arabia and in third countries," said the joint statement.

PM Modi's trip to Saudi Arabia coalesced multiple strands of India's Think West policy, which entails accelerated across-the-spectrum engagement with the West Asia region, the source of over 60 per cent of India's energy supplies and home to nearly eight million-strong Indian community.

Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi's visit to India

This Think West policy has coincided with the Act East policy by the Gulf countries,



Left: PM Modi interacts with the employees at the All Women TCS IT Centre in Riyadh; Above: Prime Minister Narendra Modi with King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud of Saudi Arabia at the Royal Court, Riyadh

which are looking at the India opportunity anew, a new synergy which has also been reflected in the visits by PM Modi to the UAE in August last year, and the return visit by Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan to India (Feb 10-12, 2016). In a special gesture, PM Modi received him at the airport, signifying India's intent to scale up the India-UAE relationship. The big takeaway from the Crown Prince's visit was an upgradation of economic partnership and the unveiling of a concrete plan to rope in the UAE as a preferred partner in India's growth story. PM Modi invited UAE companies to participate in projects creating mega industrial manufacturing corridors, including the Delhi-Mumbai Industrial Corridor, and

also invited UAE to participate in the Digital India and Start up India programmes.

Building on the Infrastructure Fund unveiled during PM Modi's trip to Dubai last year, the UAE has underlined interest in investing in infrastructure development in India, especially in priority areas such as railways, roads, ports, and shipping, which is crucial in reaching the \$75 billion target for UAE investments in India's infrastructure development plans. Another important development was the decision by Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC) and the Indian Strategic Petroleum Reserves Ltd. (ISPRL) to conclude negotiations for establishing a Strategic Petroleum Reserve in India in near future.

The security and strategic cooperation between India and UAE is set to be enhanced with plans to expand cooperation in counter-terrorism, maritime security, and cyber-security. Additionally, the two countries are looking to identify projects for the joint production of defence equipment in India.

Manish Chand is Editor-in-Chief of India Writes Network, www.indiawrites.org, an e-magazine and journal focussed on international relations and the India story. He visited Riyadh for Prime Minister Narendra Modi's April 2-3 visit



f Like
INDIAN DIPLOMACY



t Follow
@INDIANDIPLOMACY



YouTube Channel
INDIAN DIPLOMACY