



Indian Council
of World Affairs



CHANGING FOREIGN POLICY OF SMALLER GULF STATES



A Case Study of the UAE

DR. LAKSHMI PRIYA



UAE is not the Centre
of the Arab World;
it is Arab Centre
of the World...

— *Mohi-Din Binhendi*

Former Director General of Civil Aviation

Dubai



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ABSTRACT



The UAE is a small and relatively newly formed state, but the dynamism of its regional and foreign policy makes it an eminent player in the Middle East. This paper begins with identifying the major determinants of the foreign policy of the UAE. Later, it discusses the evolution of the UAE foreign policy over the last five decades. Geography, social composition, political system, public opinion and personality traits of the leaders are some of the factors that have played an important role in foreign policy formation in the UAE. Availability of immense economic resources too has a key role in moulding the external behaviour of the UAE. Despite being a small state, the UAE is expanding its reach in the region. Under the strong leadership of Mohamed bin Zayed, it strives to realise its foreign policy ambitions. The UAE has come a long way from consolidating the federation and playing an eminent role in the GCC to expanding its reach in the neighbourhood and beyond.

Keywords: United Arab Emirates, Foreign policy, Small States

INTRODUCTION



Foreign policy is a systematic statement of deliberately selected national interests while emphasising on the rationality and planning involved in the process.¹ It also gives a direction to the state's behaviour with other states, considering the limit of its strength and the realities of the external environment.² Foreign policy is a subject of study among scholars since long, however the focus was majorly on large, strong and dominant states. The focus shifted to the small states when it was realised that even with limited resources and manoeuvrability they pursued their interests actively. Foreign policy has been defined by scholars like Charles P. Schleicher³ who limits foreign policy to a set of actions by the government influencing human behaviour beyond the jurisdiction of the state. In this regard, Norman Padelford and George Lincoln⁴ have remarked that foreign policy is the key element in the process by which a state translates its broadly conceived goals and interests into concrete courses of action to attain those objectives and preserve its interests.

Foreign policy is the formulation and implementation of a group of principles which shapes the behaviour pattern of a state

Foreign policy is the formulation and implementation of a group of principles which shapes the behaviour pattern of a state while negotiating with other states to protect or further its vital interests.

while negotiating with other states to protect or further its vital interests.⁵ An important goal of foreign policy is to mould other's behaviour according to the national interest. In this context, George Modelski⁶ defines foreign policy as the system of activities evolved by communities for changing the behaviour of other states and for adjusting their own activities to the international environment. Mahendra Kumar⁷ emphasised that the foreign policy should strive to regulate along with changing the behaviour of other states and the behaviour of other states can be regulated through change as well as status quo.

With the evolution of foreign policy studies, it was considered that absence of a definite foreign policy is also a foreign policy.⁸ Strategic ambiguity of Washington's policy towards Taiwan is a case in point.⁹ By virtue of responding to external events and engaging with external actors, most of the states have a defined/undefined foreign policy, however, every state behaves in a different manner depending on specific needs and interests. Since every state has to pursue various political, economic, military and ideological objectives, it forms a number of policies based on its interests.

It is to be noted that the interests may change with the passage of time evoking diverse policies by the state. However, the foreign policy goals are more stable and evolve over time. Charles Lerche and Abdul Said¹⁰ explain the difference between 'foreign policy' and 'foreign policies' and state that the former is phrased in terms of goals whereas latter draw their relevance from objectives. A broad definition of foreign policy contains three elements: goals or objectives, policy plans, and actual actions undertaken by a state to regulate its external relations. Foreign policy is based on a number

of determinants like geography, society, politics and economic conditions specific to the state. It also depends on the regional and international environment. For small states, the determinants need to be studied closely as their capability of with standing the impact of global and regional events is limited.

This paper is an attempt to study the foreign policy of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and locate the major determinants that led to recent changes. It has been divided into three sections. The first section discusses the foreign policy determinants of the UAE and the second section examines the evolution of UAE's foreign policy towards its neighbours, regional actors and extra regional powers. The third section focuses on the changing dynamics of the UAE foreign policy.

**DETERMINANTS
OF THE UAE
FOREIGN POLICY**



Fig 1: Foreign Policy Determinants

A) GEOGRAPHY



Geography is an important internal determinant of foreign policy. Shape, size, topography, climate, natural resources, frontiers and neighbours shape the interests and concerns of the state. For example, if the size is large enough to support a population that can handle an adequate military establishment; the climate is uniform and conducive to physical vigour; the topography offers boundaries with natural defence barriers and the shape is compact; the state will have the potential to pursue an independent foreign policy. The advancement of science and technology has left the physical manifestations of geography redundant; however, the psychological manifestations of geography like size and the related attributes that are reflected in the foreign policy decisions have considerable relevance. Similarly, history, demography, natural resources, economic self-sufficiency, military capability and leadership have a strong role in shaping the foreign policy of a state.

The UAE shares its boundaries with Saudi Arabia in the South and Oman in the West and also shares a 19 km disputed border with Qatar. The existing border issues make the small Gulf state keen to pursue strong bilateral defence ties with countries within and outside the region. The border dispute with Saudi Arabia has not yet been resolved; Riyadh ratified the Jeddah treaty of 1974 in

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1993, however, the UAE is yet to sign the dotted line. The border issue with Oman too remains unsettled despite the two countries agreeing to delineate the border in May 1999. The dispute over three Gulf islands, namely Abu Musa, Greater Tumb and Lesser Tumb, still festers the UAE and Iran; the Emirates attempted to take it to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) despite Tehran's unwillingness. Persisting disputes led the UAE to pursue strong defence policy and allocate lion's share of its federal budget for defence purposes. The UAE features as the fourth largest importer of weapons and contributes 4.6 percent of the total import during 2011-2015.

The UAE shares a large boundary with Saudi Arabia, a regional heavyweight and consequently follows a semi-independent foreign policy. Nevertheless it adopted an independent foreign policy whenever it was able to counterbalance the Saudi pressure



Fig 2: Map of the UAE

Source: US Library of Congress, <http://countrystudies.us/persian-gulf-states/81.htm>

or when its national interests were under threat. For instance, the UAE took a more cautious approach towards the 1979 Iranian revolution than Saudi Arabia. However, the UAE aligned its foreign policy with Saudi Arabia occasionally as evident in the UAE-Saudi stand on oil prices in the 1976 Doha OPEC conference. With respect to Iran, the UAE's policy has always been considerate of the fact that Emirati oil fields are open to Iranian air-strikes, there is a large Iranian community in the UAE forming a significant Shiite minority and it has a re-export trade with Iran.¹¹

The border disputes have a strong mark on the UAE-Oman relations. The UAE ministry of foreign affairs mentions that the bilateral ties were founded on the signing of the border demarcation agreement with Oman in 1999. Moreover, the two countries signed a detailed map of border demarcation in 2005.¹² The UAE has a long coastline of 650 km in the Persian Gulf and 90 km in the Gulf of Oman. The long coastline and an access to the Strait of Hormuz provide a strategic heft to the UAE while also opening it to a number of challenges. After the alleged Iranian attacks on oil tankers in 2019, it is evident that a stable Persian Gulf as well as the Gulf of Oman is a pre-requisite for the prosperity of the UAE.¹³ Emirates joined the US-led maritime coalition of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, United Kingdom and Australia aimed at protecting international shipping in and near the Strait of Hormuz.

Nicholas Spykman mentioned in his article published in 1938 that it is important to study the geographical location, historical and political significance of the surroundings in order to understand the impact of regional location on the foreign policy of a state.¹⁴ Emirates' short history of five decades indicates that the UAE and

Sharing boundary with Saudi Arabia and Iran that possess 18 times larger territories, the UAE perceives itself as a small state in the Persian Gulf.

the US have been close partners. The two countries established diplomatic relations in 1972 and the US provides Export and Border Security (EXBS) assistance to the UAE. It is the US' single largest export market in the region, and more than 1,000 US firms operate in the country. The UAE's strong ties with the US have enabled it to pursue an active and assertive foreign policy in the region. Ample financial resources and a military trained and armed by the US have facilitated the UAE to counter the regional and domestic threats posed by Islamist organisations.¹⁵

The UAE joined Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Bahrain in boycotting Qatar in 2017 over the role of Islamists in governance among other issues. Sharing boundary with Saudi Arabia and Iran that possess 18 times larger territories, the UAE perceives itself as a small state in the Persian Gulf. Saudi Arabia looks at it as its partner state on various issues, while Iran perceives it as an easy neighbour. It believes that the UAE can be courted easily as compared to Saudi Arabia considering the shared possession of Salman gas fields. The other neighbouring countries of the Persian Gulf perceive Emirates as a small state in terms of territory possessing a strong economic

Presence of expatriates that form as much as the 88 per cent of the population is a major determinant of domestic as well as foreign policy formation in the UAE.

capability. In the last two decades, the UAE redefined its image and stature in the regional and international arena. Presence of ample hydrocarbon resources provided UAE the strength and stature that it lacked in terms of territory.

B) SOCIETY AND DEMOGRAPHY



Social situation and demographic structure have an important role in the formation of foreign policy. The UAE has a population close to 10 million, of which only 12 per cent is constituted by the natives. Thus, presence of expatriates that form as much as the 88 per cent of the population is a major determinant of domestic as well as foreign policy formation in the UAE. The UAE adopted laws concerning immigration and residence of migrants through Federal Law No. 6 of 1973¹⁶ and all matters concerning employment in the UAE are governed by the Federal Law No. 8 of 1980.¹⁷ The UAE has formulated a number of laws dealing with freedom of association, collective bargaining and the elimination of forced labour. It has also formed laws on employment, security and amenable work environment for the expatriate population.

It has also amended these laws from time to time to keep up with the changing scenarios and requirements; for instance, Federal Law No. 51 of 2006 dealing with combating human trafficking crimes was amended in 2015. The original law provided for sentencing of a person who traffics in human beings through deception or force while the amended version is more comprehensive and includes those who use threats of deportation to manipulate vulnerable people into exploitative labour conditions.¹⁸ The UAE has also formulated separate laws for people engaged in different sectors

including agriculture, public services and domestic work. The UAE hosts around 750,000 domestic workers¹⁹ and has accordingly formulated policies for the recruitment, payment of wages, leaves and compensations, occupational safety and dispute resolution (Federal Decree No. 10 of 2017).

The UAE prioritises expatriates coming from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and other Arab countries over those coming from non-Arab countries and it reflects clearly in the labour legislations. There are ministerial resolutions for GCC nationals; Ministerial Resolution No. 1215 of 2005 deals with registering the GCC nationals working in the private sector, Ministerial Resolution No. 4 of 2007 deals with permitting GCC nationals on practicing economic activities and professions in the country, and Ministerial Order No. 292 of 2015 regulates the conditions of employment of GCC national employees.²⁰ Similarly, the UAE has special laws regarding Arab nationals coming to work in the UAE; Law 24 of 2009 ratifies the agreement for recruitment of Syrian workers in the UAE, federal decree No. 92 of 2007 ratifies the manpower cooperation between the UAE and Jordan, and the Presidential decree No. 215 of 2005 ratifies the labour cooperation between the UAE and Yemen.²¹

Secondly, there have been a number of times when the UAE has made foreign policy decisions considering the presence of a vast population of expatriates. The heavy dependence on migrant labour has complicated the UAE's foreign relations more than once. India brought the issue of discrimination against Indian expatriates in the UAE in the International Labour Organisation (ILO) conference in Geneva in 1981. Following that, Israel accused

the UAE for discriminating against foreign labour at international forums. Emirates refuted these claims and officially asked the Arab North African countries to restrain from bringing issues of migrant labourers to ILO. Also, the vast majority of the Emirati citizens expressed resentment over the open-door immigration policy compelling the UAE to reduce dependence on non-Arab labour. The UAE aims to replace the non-Arab labour by Arab migrants through signing a number of labour agreements with African countries like Tunisia, Morocco and Sudan. The UAE also appointed labour attachés in the Arab countries.²² However, the measures clearly did not succeed; the UAE hosted 82 per cent migrant labourers in 1989 and after more than three decades, expats form 88 per cent of the total population in 2022.

Non-national demography impacts the UAE's foreign policy vis-à-vis the sender countries. The UAE and the Philippines lifted a ban on recruitment of domestic workers in 2021. The two countries signed an agreement to protect the Filipino domestic workers from abuse and ensure their right to a fair wage and suitable working conditions. Legal recruitment of maids from the Philippines stopped in 2014, when the country barred its citizens from taking on jobs as domestic workers in the UAE as a result of cases of negligence.²³ The Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratization (MoHRE) announced the opening of Tadbeer centres in order to supervise the recruitment process of domestic workers and provide one-stop centre to guarantee proper visas, orientation and training for workers. Saif Ahmed Al Suwaidi, under-secretary of Human Resources Affairs at MoHRE, said that the UAE signed MoUs with a number of countries including India, Sri Lanka and

As the UAE moulds its foreign policies in diverse directions, popular attitudes are roughly in sync with these decisions.

Kenya, as part of the ministry's plan to enhance cooperation with labour-exporting governments.²⁴ The UAE developed a legislative framework to regulate the recruitment of domestic workers and guarantee their rights, besides enhancing cooperation with labour-exporting countries to apply best practices through all stages of contractual employment.

The UAE has been accused for violation of human rights of domestic workers and has taken apt and timely measures to rectify the situation. Human Rights Watch (HRW) produced a 79-page report documenting the horrific consequences of the *kafala* or sponsorship system. The report mentions how the domestic workers in the UAE cannot move to a new job before their contracts end without the employer's consent, trapping many in abusive conditions. The *kafala* system ties migrant workers to individual employers who act as their visa sponsors, and restricts migrant workers' abilities to change employers. The system gives employers great power over employees as it entitles them to revoke sponsorship at any time.²⁵ In 2015, the Emirati Labour Minister, Saqr Ghobash, announced measures to reform *kafala* system and allow foreign workers to terminate their contract and change employer.²⁶

Thirdly, public opinion has an impact on the UAE's foreign policy. Despite not willing to offend Iran with which Abu Dhabi and Dubai had close ties, the UAE federal government supported Iraq



during the Iran-Iraq war. The UAE was not immune to Arab public opinion according to which the indifference over island issue was considered as lack of patriotism.²⁷ A pilot study by University of Wollongong in Dubai concluded that the public in the UAE puts strong emphasis on the UAE's national and international policies.²⁸ Another study by the, Washington Institute for Near East Policy poll documented the population's growing support on the Abraham Accords and enhancement of sport and business ties with Israel.

As the UAE moulds its foreign policies in diverse directions, popular attitudes are roughly in sync with these decisions. According to the Washington Institute study, after the isolation of Qatar by the quartet in 2017, 46 per cent of Emiratis agreed that the GCC and Arab countries should boycott Qatar until it accepts their demand. However, a year before the signing of Al-Ula declaration with Qatar, 59 per cent of Emiratis agreed that the way forward is for both sides to compromise in order to reach an agreement. On the question of importance of the US and other external actors for the UAE, 50 per cent of the participants agreed that the UAE can not count on the US and thus should look more towards China or Russia as partners.

Also, the survey shows that the popularity of Abraham Accords went downhill from 44 per cent support in June 2020 to 23 per cent in December 2020.²⁹ Pro-Palestine sentiment has been strong in the UAE since long and was also reflected in the Emirati exiled communities some of which were members of the Islamist group Al-Islah. Emirati activists see the normalisation deal as a blow to

The federal structure has an important role in foreign policy decision making in the UAE. The UAE constitution bestows majority foreign policy formation powers to the federation (Article 120-121) while providing legislative power over rest of the subjects (Article 122-123) to the respective emirates.

the future of the UAE and characterised it as an infiltration of the state by Israeli agents and a potential cover for future repression.³⁰ Also, as per the Middle East Public Opinion conducted by the Zogby Research Services in August-September 2018, anti-Assad views in the UAE softened significantly;³¹ interestingly the UAE reopened its embassy in Syria in December 2018.³²

C) POLITICS



The political system too has a major role to play in the foreign policy making of a country. Before being formed as a federation of seven emirates, the UAE was a British protectorate and it explains the west-oriented foreign policy of the UAE to an extent. The federal structure has an important role in foreign policy decision making in the UAE. The UAE constitution bestows majority foreign policy formation powers to the federation (Article 120-121) while providing legislative power over rest of the subjects (Article 122-123) to the respective emirates. It also provides responsibility to implement the foreign policy decisions to the federation (Article 125). Article 120 and Article 121 of the UAE constitution stipulate that foreign affairs, defence and security, immigration, labour relations and territorial waters are federal matters.



Article 122 mentions that individual emirates shall have jurisdiction in all the matters not conferred exclusively upon the federal authorities. Article 123 provides that a member emirate of the UAE may conclude limited conventions of a local and administrative nature with the neighbouring countries provided that such conventions are not in conflict with the interests of the UAE or the federal laws. Article 124 provides for prior consultation with the individual emirates while Article 125 mandates the emirates to implement the federal laws and the international treaties and conventions concluded by the UAE.³³ The main organs of the UAE government responsible for foreign policy making are the Federal Supreme Council (FSC), the Federal Council of Ministers and the Federal National Council (FNC).

Secondly, as the UAE is a federation of seven emirates without any organised political parties or groups, the individual emirates had an influence on the foreign policy decision making at least in the early decades when they were governed by a provisional constitution. Some of the intra-emirates issues in the first two decades after its formation were Fujairah-Sharjah territorial dispute over killing of 22 tribesmen, Ras al Khaimah-Sharjah dispute over phosphate deposits in a valley, Ajman-Sharjah-Umm al Quwain dispute over offshore oil deposits of Abu Musa, and tribal clashes between Fujairah and Ras al-Khaimah.

Inter-emirates rivalry and the tribal nature of the society had a bearing on the foreign policy as the individual emirates dealt with issues individually inviting neighbouring countries to resolve internal conflicts. As per the UAE weekly magazine *Al-Azminah Al-Arabiah*, Sheikh Sultan of Sharjah approached Sultan Qaboos

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of Oman to settle Dubai-Sharjah issue over an artesian well drilling by Dubai on Sharjah side of the border. The 1979 political crisis between Abu Dhabi and Dubai over centralisation and loose federation with economic autonomy led the UAE to seek Saudi support to end the crisis while Kuwait's foreign minister spent several days in mediating between the two in shuttle diplomacy.

There were also times when the UAE dominated by Abu Dhabi and Dubai made foreign policy decisions that were not commensurate with the views of the other emirates; for instance, in 1971 Ras al-Khaimah demanded that the UAE should take the three islands from Iran by use of armed forces but the federal government merely denounced the Iranian occupation of the Gulf islands; it is to be noted that Abu Dhabi, Dubai and Sharjah have close ties with Tehran. Similarly, during the Iran-Iraq war of 1980, the UAE supported Iraq while hoping for a rational solution while the Ras al-Khaimah ruler went overboard and made a visit to Baghdad. His expression of solidarity with the Arab country was not appreciated by the federal government.³⁴

Thirdly, the role of individual leaders and their personalities too had an impact on the foreign policy formation in the UAE. Leaders have been instrumental in shaping or changing course of foreign policy worldwide. From Adolf Hitler, Woodrow Wilson and Winston Churchill to Jacques Chirac, Vladimir Putin, Angela Merkel, Margaret Thatcher, Barack Obama and Donald Trump

Emirati foreign policy underwent a major shift after the demise of Sheikh Zayed bin Nahyan in 2004 and the Arab Spring that engulfed the entire region in 2011.

have shaped the course of international relations. Within the region Saddam Hussein, Gamal Abdel Nasser, Hafiz al-Assad, Faisal bin Abdulaziz al-Saud, Ruhollah Khomeini, Muammar al-Gaddafi and Sultan Qaboos bin Said have left their mark on the national and regional foreign policy formation. Similarly, in a short history of five decades, the UAE has had leaders whose personality and charisma moulded the foreign policy of the UAE.

The founding father of the UAE, Sheikh Zayid Bin Sultan al-Nahyan, was also the pioneer of the UAE's foreign policy. He advocated for Arab unity and supported the cause of Palestine. The UAE participated in the Arab oil embargo of 1973, and provided wide ranging support to the front-line states in the Arab-Israeli conflict.³⁵ In 1980s and 1990s, under his leadership the UAE followed a centrist policy placing mediation in regional conflicts at its centre.³⁶ Towards the end of 1990s, the UAE's foreign policy moved away from the Arab and Islamic issues under the leadership of Crown Prince Khalifa bin Zayed al-Nahyan, who acquired the centre stage because of his father's deteriorating health. The UAE's foreign policy grooved towards the global developments and international governance aiming to gather reserves of 'soft' and 'hard' power. Post-9/11, the UAE began deepening its ties with the US and positioned its forces in Afghanistan from 2001-2014 supporting the US combat forces. Bandwagoning was another trait of his foreign policy as the UAE relied on external guarantees

to ensure its security. It became part of the GCC in 1981 and after the Iraq's invasion of Kuwait it realised Saudi Arabia's inability to defend GCC member states like Kuwait. The invasion of Kuwait compelled UAE to look at external actors for security.

Emirati foreign policy underwent a major shift after the demise of Sheikh Zayed bin Nahyan in 2004; and the Arab Spring that engulfed the entire region in 2011. Though the UAE was ruled by Khalifa bin Zayed bin Nahyan since 2004-2022, the Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, who became the *de-facto* leader after his elder brother and UAE President suffered a debilitating stroke in 2014, is credited for the emergence of the UAE as a regional player punching above its geopolitical weight and asserting itself on the international scene to promote its own interest and to reshape the regional order.³⁷ Mohammed bin Zayed's political acumen enabled him to exert considerable influence over the Emirati decision-making process and currently the UAE's foreign policy is the direct product of his personality and worldview.³⁸

Mohammed bin Zayed conforms to a Hobbesian view of international relations and believes in the efficiency of the military as a tool to solve political differences; he conducted the consolidation of the Emirati armed forces and aims to establish an efficient indigenous defence industry. He is an ambitious ruler, who yearns to make his country a "regional power with an international reach."³⁹ He intends to transform the UAE into the dominant commercial and financial hub connecting East and West in the Western Indian Ocean world. He also intends to reshape the Middle East's regional political order based on the economic liberalism of Dubai, and the secular ultra-authoritarianism enforced by the Abu



The UAE is the third largest regional economy with a real GDP growth rate of around 2.2 per cent in 2021. It has 6 per cent of the world's oil reserves and the seventh largest proven natural gas reserves that will remain the basis of the UAE's economy in near future.

Dhabi.⁴⁰ Consequently, he has been able to combine the conflicting aspirations of Abu Dhabi and Dubai and transform into a major force at the regional as well as international stage.

D) ECONOMY



Economic changes and reforms are another determinant of foreign policy; liberalisation was an important development that changed the existing course of foreign policy of a number of countries including India. Economic diplomacy has become a preferred choice for countries replacing political diplomacy and is an important part of the geo-economic framework. Technological revolution, rising interdependence, disenchantment for ideological battles encouraged countries to pursue economic diplomacy instead of political diplomacy. Countries prefer to replace political confrontations, antagonism and differences with economic cooperation and dialogue.⁴¹ Some of the policy instruments used to advance a country's economic interests include trade, subsidies, export-import quota, voluntary export reservations and import expansions etc. Success of economic policy lies in possession of economic assets and abilities and a pre-requisite for a sound economic policy is to have a good economic domestic regime. Goal

of economic diplomacy is to ensure global tie-ups without hurting national sovereignty.⁴²

The UAE is the third largest regional economy with a real GDP growth rate of around 2.2 per cent in 2021. It has 6 per cent of the world's oil reserves and the seventh largest proven natural gas reserves that will remain the basis of the UAE's economy in near future. However, it has taken significant steps towards economic diversification and around 70 per cent of the GDP is now generated by the non-oil sectors. Celebrating 50 years of nationhood in 2021, the UAE launched 50 new economic initiatives to boost the country's competitiveness and attract US\$150 billion in foreign direct investment (FDI) over the next nine years.⁴³

The first 13 initiatives unveiled in September 2021 have the potential to make UAE the global economic hub. The provision for Green Visa for highly skilled professionals, investors, entrepreneurs and students; and the Freelancers Visa, the first federal visa for self-employed workers will attract talent to the gulf country. Similarly the 10 x 10 programme is a smart move by the UAE government and aims to achieve a 10 per cent annual increase in UAE exports to 10 global markets including China, the UK, the Netherlands, Italy, Russia, Poland, Luxembourg, Australia, New Zealand and Indonesia.⁴⁴

Aware of the significance of the regional and international economic cooperation, the UAE joined the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) in 1967 and provided full backing during the oil embargo in 1973. It is also aware of the importance of non-OPEC oil exporting countries; as together with

The UAE is China's largest export market and the second largest trading partner in the Arab region. It supports China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the cooperation is expected to go beyond the movement of goods.

the OPEC members, they own 55 per cent of the global oil supplies and 90 per cent of the proven oil reserves of the world. In March 2022, the UAE insisted that it is open to the OPEC+ agreement and its monthly oil production mechanism.⁴⁵ When Saudi Arabia led a push in OPEC to raise output by around 2 million barrels per day from August to December 2021 and extend remaining cuts to the end of 2022, the UAE stated that a cut in output beyond the initial deadline of April 2022 would be unfair;⁴⁶ the two countries reached a compromise deal in July 2021.⁴⁷ The UAE was opposed to the cut in output as unlike other Gulf OPEC members, Abu Dhabi has international companies as equity investors in its oil and gas fields. Long-standing partners such as British oil and gas company BP Plc and French energy company Total Energies SE, have been joined by companies from India and China in late 2010s.

Secondly, foreign investments have the potential to influence the foreign policy decisions. The UAE has seen an increase in foreign investments recently despite COVID-19 and FDI into the Emirates achieved a growth of 4 per cent during the year 2021 compared to 2020. The country has signed around 106 agreements to protect and encourage investments with its trading partners. In 2020, the UAE was the top ranker and accounted for 31 per cent of the total FDI inflow to the region.⁴⁸ Switzerland, the UK, India, the US, France, Austria, Japan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the Netherlands

are major investment partners of the UAE and the Gulf country evidently has good relations with all of them.

The UAE is China's largest export market and the second largest trading partner in the Arab region. It supports China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the cooperation is expected to go beyond the movement of goods. The UAE seeks to benefit from the digital aspects of the BRI and its close ties with China. Also, UAE and India have signed the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA). As UAE is aware of the benefits of maintaining good ties with countries investing in the Emirates, it is also well acquainted with the fruits of enhancing partnership through investing in other countries. The UAE is undertaking comprehensive economic agreements with eight strategic global markets under the Global Economic Partnerships with aim to achieve a Dh40bn annual increase in the current Dh257bn trade volume with these markets. UAE has also established a Higher Committee for Economic Agreements. Within the GCC framework, the UAE has signed GCC Free Trade Agreements with many countries including New Zealand, Singapore, and European Free Trade Association (EFTA) countries. Also, the negotiations are currently underway with several countries and trade groups, including the European Union, Japan, China, Korea, Australia, Pakistan, India, Turkey, and the MERCOSUR member countries i.e. Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay.⁴⁹

Consequently, it has begun investments in Israel; a major Emirati sovereign wealth fund has invested US\$100 billion in the venture capital funds in the Israeli technology sector. Abu Dhabi's Mubadala Investment Co. invested up to US\$20 million in six Israeli-based



or focused venture capital firms, including Mangrove Capital Partners, Entrée Capital, Aleph Capital, Viola Ventures, Pitango and MizMaa.⁵⁰ The UAE has also expanded its influence in Africa and in 2021, the Dubai-based logistics firm DP World pledged to invest more than US\$1 billion in infrastructure throughout Africa over the next few years.⁵¹ The UAE and Jordan have launched an investment fund of US\$100 million to enhance cooperation in technology.⁵² The UAE Ministry of Finance and Iraq's National Investment Commission have signed an agreement to promote and protect mutual investments.⁵³ The UAE contributes 11 per cent of total FDI in Lebanon⁵⁴ while the Emirati entities are weighing investment projects in Syria.⁵⁵

Energy diplomacy is an important part of the UAE's foreign policy. Hydrocarbons formed the backbone of the UAE's economy for long, however, Emirates is diversifying its economy in order to overcome the hovering consequences of depleting oil resources and slump in oil prices. Significant discoveries of oil deposits in other parts of the world, increase in production of shale oil due to technological advancements and the feasibility of use of alternative and renewable sources of energy are other factors that encouraged Emirates to go for economic diversification.⁵⁶ The UAE has long term partnerships with Asian countries and exports oil to Japan, China, India, Thailand and South Korea. The energy demand in these countries is not expected to go down in near future and India and China are predicted to drive much of the growth in the region.⁵⁷ The UAE is also extending cooperation with European Union (EU) and South Asian countries in renewable energy. Hydrogen energy is another aspect of the UAE's energy

partnership with UK, India, Austria, Germany, China, Greece and other countries.

Lastly, the UAE is one of the biggest desalination markets and is conducting a joint study on the desalination plants with South Korea.⁵⁸ The UAE Energy Minister Suhail al-Mazrouei said that the UAE may cooperate with Israel in the fields of water desalination and solar power as OPEC's third largest oil producer seeks to generate 44 per cent of its power from renewable energy by 2050.⁵⁹ The two countries signed a comprehensive bilateral agreement in February 2022, which stated that the potential for trade between the two economies is much greater and includes many fields including water desalination, purification, conservation and smart management.

E) SECURITY AND AID



Security is an important determinant for the foreign policy of the UAE. Defence and security are prime concerns since the formation of the federation. Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al-Nahyan wanted to develop a strong defence capability for the UAE in order to protect the national sovereignty, defend its natural resources and forge ties with nations capable of enhancing national security. He believed in the potential of defence diplomacy in fostering bilateral ties but was aware that it was most efficient when backed

Currently, the UAE military is considered the most capable force among the GCC countries and Emirates is known as the little Sparta that punches above its weight in a difficult neighbourhood.



by a strong national defence force. He saw the armed forces as a source of skill development and as an instrument of international policy and therefore planned to develop an Abu Dhabi Air Force. Considering the large states in the neighbourhood, he understood the need for large and well-equipped armed force.⁶⁰

Currently, the UAE military is considered the most capable force among the GCC countries and Emirates is known as the little Sparta that punches above its weight in a difficult neighbourhood. It is also the largest arms import partner of the US and imported around 55 per cent of the total arms export. In 2021, the Biden administration indicated that it will go ahead with more than US\$20 billion arms sales of up to 50 F-35 aircrafts valued at US\$10.4 billion, up to 18 MQ-9B armed drones worth US\$3 billion, and a US\$10 billion package of air-to-air and air-to-ground munitions to the UAE.⁶¹ Post-Gulf war, the Emirates realised the need to strengthen defence partnership with other countries and Sheikh Zayed al-Nahyan catalysed the indigenisation of defence industry in the UAE. To ensure a strong security, the UAE has signed defence partnerships with a number of countries; for instance, the US and the UAE have signed several defence cooperation agreements including the 1987 General Security of Military Information Agreement, the 2006 Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement, and the 2019 Defence Cooperation Agreement.⁶² Bilateral defence interaction between India and the UAE has been steadily growing and there have been regular high level exchanges at the level of service chiefs.⁶³ Turkey and the UAE have signed two memorandums of understanding (MoUs) for defence industry cooperation⁶⁴ and

Emirates is also discussing to inculcate defence partnership with France and Indonesia.

Similarly, the UAE is pursuing aid diplomacy in the region to foster strong ties with countries in the neighbourhood and beyond. Aid, that began as an act of benevolence by the founder of the UAE, Sheikh Zayed al-Nahyan, has transformed into a tool for expanding UAE's soft power under the current President Mohammed bin Zayed. Sheikh Zayed wanted the world to see the UAE as a worthy steward of its resources, open and receptive to the whole world and enhanced the UAE's stature through political mediation and foreign aid. In 1974, Abu Dhabi's foreign aid amounted for 28 per cent of its total income.⁶⁵ Sheikh Zayed was interested in long term results and provided funds to rebuild the Marib dam in Yemen. He believed in the idea of brotherhood and expanded it from the blood and kinship ties, and Arab and Islamic identity to that of the mankind and humanity. In 1990, he provided financial assistance and accommodation to the Kuwaitis fleeing from Iraqi invasion.⁶⁶ However, currently the UAE's foreign aid has emerged as a fundamental element of supporting branding, achieving the sustainable development goals, and influencing international relations. Foreign aid has emerged as a pillar of UAE's foreign policy and has the potential to shape the international environment.⁶⁷

F) REGIONAL ENVIRONMENT



Formation of GCC was one of the major regional developments that had an impact on UAE's foreign policy. Concerned at the intensity of tanker attacks in the Persian Gulf during the Iran-Iraq war, the UAE joined Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Bahrain



The rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia has had an impact on UAE's foreign policy formation.

in 1981 to form the GCC aiming at strengthening the security and economic cooperation among the member countries. The UAE joined the GCC states in condemning Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 while providing facilities for Western military forces. It also contributed troops for the liberation of Kuwait. Backed by the GCC states, the UAE objected to the strengthening of control over the disputed islands of Abu Musa and the Tumbs by Iran. As the Arab Spring reached the Gulf countries and protests were held in countries, like Bahrain and Oman, in line with supporting the GCC members, the UAE sent military troops and financial aid to the affected countries. In the post-Arab Spring era, the UAE began to unfold its wings and expanded its activism beyond the immediate neighbourhood. It joined the US-led air campaign against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), and also conducted limited air strikes in Libya in 2014. A year later, it joined a coalition led by Saudi Arabia against Houthi rebels in Yemen.

The rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia has had an impact on UAE's foreign policy formation. Being a small state and a newly founded federation, UAE decided to court the giant neighbour Saudi Arabia for recognition and in 1972 the two countries established diplomatic relations. The ties grew stronger and Saudi Arabia emerged as a dominant player in the partnership. In 1972 King Faisal stated that there will be no formal settlement of Saudi claim on Abu Dhabi's territory if the UAE established ties with Russia.⁶⁸ The UAE also played the role of a subservient partner to

Saudi Arabia. In 1973, the UAE President mentioned that the UAE suspended the decision to establish relations with the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) so as not to anger Saudi Arabia.⁶⁹ The mutual ties benefitted the UAE in gaining recognition while strengthening the existing dominance of Saudi Arabia. In 1976, the UAE supported Saudi stand on Gulf security and twice opposed the Shah of Iran's proposal for a collective security pact. A year later, the UAE President stated in *Al-Ittihad* that UAE foreign policy is derived from Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia as the biggest GCC country shaped the member's attitude towards Iran. Information Minister's Conference (1979) with the aim to counter the threat from Iranian revolution was led by Saudi Arabia and set the tone for GCC member's future response to Iran; it decided to demote the revolution from representing all Muslims to all Shiites to Iranian Shiites to only one party of Iran. In an interview to Hassan Hamdan, an UAE official had said that due to the massive territorial size, economic and political hold of Saudi Arabia and the geographical location of the UAE, the Saudi dimension constituted one of the main determinants of the UAE foreign policy. Similarly, Iran's occupation of the three islands of Abu Musa, Greater Tumb and Lesser Tumb, and Shah's support to Dubai in going independent of the Emirati federation led the UAE to develop close ties with Saudi Arabia. As Iran opposed the use of word Arab Gulf instead of Persian Gulf and supported Oman in Ras al-Khaimah dispute, the UAE got further inclined to develop stronger relations with the regional giant Saudi Arabia. The dynamics of closeness to Saudi Arabia and cold approach to Iran has continued. However, as the UAE is flexing its muscles and is ready

to play in the larger global arena, it is also taking an independent stand on some regional issues including on its approach towards Iran. Besides economic and security considerations, the UAE is considerate about presence of the Emirati Shia community and there are signs of its softening attitude towards Iran.

The Israeli-Palestinian and Yemen conflicts are notable examples of the regional environment impacting UAE's foreign policy towards a more independent approach. Emirates have been engaged in Yemen; it participated in a regional operation to support the legitimacy of the government of Yemen and responded to a request from President Abd Rabbu Mansour Hadi to help combat the Houthi rebels. It worked with the US in military operations against al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and ended its military involvement in Yemen in October of 2019. It continues to provide aid and emergency assistance to the Yemeni people and believes that only a political process can offer a lasting solution. However, the targeting of Emirati oil facilities in the Musaffah industrial area and the Abu Dhabi international airport by the Houthi drones in January 2022 changed the dynamics and has raised concerns over the security in the UAE. The Gulf country has asked the US for the re-designation of Houthis as a terrorist organisation and Washington has announced that it would send guided-missile destroyer USS Cole and fifth-generation fighter aircraft to the UAE.⁷⁰ In the struggle to come out of the Yemen quagmire, the UAE is getting closer to the US and has realised that it needs to devise a long-term approach to self-sufficiency in security and defence capability.⁷¹

Regional and international developments have direct impact on the foreign policy decision-making and states formulate policies according to the ongoing changes in the world order.

Sheikh Zayed led the foundation of the UAE foreign policy with an ideological support to the Palestinian cause; he mentioned in 1984 that liberation of holy places was a Muslim's foremost duty. However, linkages between the Gulf security and the question of Palestine led to a new approach. The Israeli threat to the vital Gulf instalments while sharing the common umbrella of the US created a dilemma for the UAE and in 2020 it signed the Abraham Accords with Israel. Taking a great leap from 1971, when Sheikh Zayed stated to *Akhbar al-Yaum* that no Arab country is safe from the perils of the battle with Zionism and Israel; in 2022 the UAE believes that an agreement with Israel is a significant advance in Arab-Israeli relations that lowers tensions and creates new energy for positive change across the region. It maintains the viability of a two-state solution as endorsed by the Arab League and the international community. It further emphasises that the UAE continues to steadfastly defend the Palestinian right to an independent state with Jerusalem as its capital and under the new deal, the UAE will use its position to forcefully advocate to that end.⁷²

G) INTERNATIONAL ENVIRONMENT



States function in an arena surrounded by other states and foreign policy is a tool to manoeuvre in the complex networks and realities. Regional and international developments have direct impact on the foreign policy decision-making and states

formulate policies according to the ongoing changes in the world order. International environment is an important determinant of the UAE foreign policy and the federation moulded its approach according to the changing global dynamics. Propelled by the threat of failure of conservative Gulf regimes and the possibility of Soviet control over Gulf oil questioning the survival of North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), the US engaged in strengthening of links with the Gulf and establishment of military pacts.⁷³

Despite joining the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), and occasional criticism of the role of US in turning Gulf into an arena of super power rivalry through Rapid Deployment Force, the UAE sided with the US since the formation of the federation. The UAE did not consider Soviet Union as an enemy state despite the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Sheikh Zayed mentioned in 1981 that Soviet Union did not constitute any threat to the UAE, however the Emirati foreign ministry opposed presence of Soviet forces in Afghanistan at a number of international platforms.

After the end of the Cold War and disintegration of the Soviet Union, the global order transformed from bipolar to uni-polar with rise of the US as the dominant power. However, with the changing global geo-politics and geo-economics a number of countries and blocs gained dominance gradually. The US was a dominant power due to its economic dominance, military might and the infallibility; however, the financial crisis of 2008 and relative gain of military might by other countries is a sign of erosion of US dominance. Also, with huge economic resources and advanced military capability along with the high standard of living, Russia has emerged as an important player.⁷⁴ Similarly with a strong and growing economy,

The US withdrawal from the West Asian region has persuaded the UAE along with other Gulf countries to have good ties with the other actors.

China has emerged as another imminent actor on the world stage. Some regional groupings like BRICS⁷⁵ and EU⁷⁶ have also emerged as powerful blocks with strong voice at the global level.

Changes taking place at the global level has impacted the foreign policy of the UAE. The US withdrawal from the West Asian region has persuaded the UAE along with other Gulf countries to have good ties with the other actors. The UAE has signed strategic partnership with Russia and share ideational synergies like hostility to grass root Islamist movements in the region.⁷⁷ It has taken a stance favourable to Russia in the regional conflicts; for instance, it recognised the Assad regime's hold over Syria and advocates normalising Arab ties with the regime. The UAE has also cooperated with Russia in Libya to combat Daesh and al-Qaeda. The UAE is in favour of countering forces like Daesh and Al-Qaeda and agrees with Russian position of supporting Khalifa Haftar and the Libyan National Army (LNA).⁷⁸ Similarly the UAE has encouraged investments from China and the two countries share a mutual desire for closer security and political cooperation.⁷⁹

**EVOLUTION OF THE
UAE FOREIGN POLICY**



Fig 3: Evolution of UAE Foreign Policy





The UAE foreign policy has evolved over the period of five decades and a trend has emerged about the Emirate's foreign policy maneuvering as a small state. As depicted in the Fig 3, the UAE has engaged in expanding the realm of its influence from the neighbourhood to extended neighbourhood and aims to have a considerable presence at international platforms. It began with creating a goodwill among the GCC members and went on to mark its presence among the other Arab countries. Subsequently, defying its small size, UAE intends to expand its influence beyond the region.

A) UAE AND THE GCC



The UAE became a founding member of the GCC when it was established in Riyadh in 1981; in view of its special relations, geographic proximity, similar political systems based on Islamic beliefs, joint destiny and common objectives with the other five members. Since then, it has been actively engaged with the council; the UAE Ministry of Finance (MoF) has implemented a unified economic agreement for the joint GCC economic action. Abu Dhabi is also engaged in relevant GCC projects for financial integration and establishment of free trade zones. It supports the implementation of the GCC Customs Union and Gulf Common Market. The MoF has established the Department of the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf Affairs for working with the member countries towards the Gulf integration process. The UAE has been pro-active in achieving GCC joint integration and it became the first member to permit citizens of member countries to own real estate and grant licenses for economic activities in 2013. Also, it

was the second member to attract citizens from GCC countries to work in its government sector while welcoming students from the GCC countries to avail public education. The UAE constitutes the 22 per cent of the volume of intra-regional trade of the GCC countries.⁸⁰

For the initial three decades, the UAE was engaged in developing ties with the five members of the GCC. Despite Saudi Arabia withholding recognition of UAE till 1974 due to the border disputes over the sovereignty of the Al-Ain/ Buraimi region, Zararah/ Shaybah, and Khor al-Udaid; UAE was keen to develop warm relations with the dominant neighbouring country. Sheikh Zayed, the ruler of Abu Dhabi and Sheikh Rashid, the ruler of Dubai, made official visits to Saudi Arabia in 1970. Sheikh Zayed also sought Saudi support for the consolidation of the UAE federation. In 1973, the then UAE Foreign Minister Ahmed bin Khalifa al-Suwaidi stated that relations with Saudi Arabia were stronger than the Buraimi question.⁸¹ The 1974 Jeddah treaty and the beginning of rule of King Khalid after the demise of King Faisal marked the beginning of warm ties between the two neighbours.

The UAE became a strong supporter of Saudi regional diplomacy and policy within OPEC. In turn, Riyadh committed to defend UAE against any threats from within as well as outside the territory. The UAE's quest to forge strong ties with Saudi Arabia was so

The UAE's political difficulties in consolidation of the federation had an indelible mark on its initial interaction with the neighbouring countries that later became members of the GCC.

strong that Abu Dhabi officially acknowledged its dependence on Riyadh in 1975. The UAE was keen to demonstrate to Iran that it was under the Saudi sphere of influence. King Khalid's support towards greater unity of the Emirates during his visit to the UAE in 1976 and Abu Dhabi's support to Riyadh in December 1976 OPEC meeting in Doha for increase of 10 per cent in oil prices as opposed to the proposal for 15 per cent increase by the other nine members signified strong ties and mutual dependence between the two neighbours.

Nevertheless, the Islamic revolution in Iran saw the two countries take varied positions; the UAE supported the decision made by the people of Iran while Saudi Arabia stood with the Shah of Iran. The UAE also adopted a policy differing from Saudi Arabia in 1979 OPEC meeting and sided with the other four members announcing 80 per cent rise in oil prices. Despite the ongoing political difficulties, by now Abu Dhabi had gained confidence and was certain of Riyadh's compulsions to support the Gulf countries in order to maintain the status as security bulwark in the Gulf. The UAE's support to Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war compelled Saudi Arabia to see UAE with a distinct perspective and it began to consider Emirates as a strong federation as well as an important partner in the region.

The UAE's political difficulties in consolidation of the federation had an indelible mark on its initial interaction with the neighbouring countries that later became members of the GCC. Kuwait that was engaged actively in the mediation during the formation of the union vouched for the nine-member federation (including Bahrain and Qatar). It was also engaged in the shuttle diplomacy with Saudi Arabia in ironing out political differences

among nine small emirates. Two decades after the formation of the federation, Emirates supported Kuwait during the Iraqi invasion in 1990. It was among the first Arab countries to oppose Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's plans to attack Kuwait. The UAE and Kuwait together disregarded the OPEC regulations and flooded the market with cheap oil. The UAE provided 2,000 military personnel on the ground and allowed allied forces to set up military bases in the territory along with the strong financial support of US\$3.3 billion for Kuwait.⁸²

The UAE maintained warm ties with Bahrain, however relations with Qatar remained strained; both Qatar and Bahrain had stipulated joining the federation in 1971. The UAE contributed 600 police personnel to the GCC's Peninsula Shield Force (PSF) in order to secure Bahrain's maritime borders when protesters blockaded Manama in 2011. The two countries together isolated Qatar in 2017 as well as signed Abraham accords with Israel in 2020. The UAE has invested in Bahrain's fiscal program and the two countries are working together on a number of joint projects while extending cooperation in space sciences. In 2018, the UAE along with Kuwait and Saudi Arabia announced a US\$10 billion aid package for Bahrain.⁸³

The UAE-Qatar rift became apparent in 2017 when Emirates along with Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Egypt decided to boycott Qatar

After strengthening its position among the immediate neighbours in the GCC, the UAE extended its reach towards the other Arab countries.

over regional policy divergences including approach towards Iran, support and funding to the designated terrorist organisations, unabashed reporting of *Al-Jazeera* and other Qatari news outlets, and interference in internal affairs of friendly states. The countries ended the blockade in 2021 with signing of Al-Ula declaration; however, the UAE has still not re-opened its embassy in Qatar. Abu Dhabi withdrew its envoy in Doha in 2014 over Qatar's support to the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. Notably, the UAE, Qatar and Oman are connected through the Dolphin Gas Project and the pipelines continued to function even when the ties were broken during Qatar crisis.⁸⁴ The UAE intends to maintain cordial ties with Oman; it tops in the GCC and Arab list of investors in Oman. Abu Dhabi and Muscat resolved their border disputes and finalised the border in 2008.⁸⁵ Oman also supported the UAE's normalisation of ties with Israel in 2021.⁸⁶

B) WIDENING REGIONAL FOOTPRINTS



After strengthening its position among the immediate neighbours in the GCC, the UAE extended its reach towards the other Arab countries. The UAE has been part of the Saudi-led military coalition that intervened in Yemen in March 2015 to restore the Hadi government in Sana'a. Nonetheless, it has supported the secessionist Southern Transition Council (STC) which now controls most of the Aden region. Yemen has strategic significance for the UAE as control over its southern territory is the key for power projection in the Bab al-Mandeb, Gulf of Aden, the Red Sea and East Africa.

Presence of a military base on the Mayun Island and Aseb port in Eritrea, access to Berbera port in Somaliland⁸⁷ as well as control over the Socotra Island through the STC provides the UAE leverage over the major shipping routes.⁸⁸ However, since 2019 it has gradually scaled down its involvement and ended all direct combat operations in Yemen. On 17 January 2022, Emirati oil facilities in the Musaffah industrial area and the Abu Dhabi international airport were hit by winged Quds missiles and Sammad-3 drones launched by the Houthis under Operation Hurricane Yemen. It led to three deaths including two Indian nationals. Consequently, the UAE and the Arab League asked the US to re-designate Houthis as a terrorist organisation.

Similarly, the UAE took an active approach in shaping its response to the Syrian crisis. The two countries maintained bilateral relations even during the peak of the conflict with regular flights offering a refuge for Assad's inner circle. The Gulf state also became the semi-permanent residence of Assad's sister Bushra after the assassination of her husband, Assef Shawkat. Dubai relied heavily on contributions from Syria's middle and upper-middle classes during its formative years. Syrian businessmen and politicians played a key role in the early rise of UAE as a petro-state. The UAE publicly called for the removal of US Caesar sanctions, is facilitating Syria's regional rehabilitation and providing medical

With the growing stature in the regional dynamics due to its economic resources and the perception of threat from the Islamist forces during the Arab Spring, the UAE extended its reach beyond the neighbourhood.

aid in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic. To the benefit of the UAE, Syria does not toe the Iranian line in Lebanon and Iraq. In the beginning of the conflict, the UAE contributed to a multilateral pool of funds to buy arms for approved rebel groups in Syria. However, in 2018, the UAE's MoS for foreign affairs acknowledged that it had been a major mistake to expel Syria⁸⁹ from the Arab League and cut diplomatic links with Damascus. In 2021, the UAE re-opened its embassy in Damascus and in 2022, the UAE hosted the Syrian President despite criticism by the US.⁹⁰

The UAE also extended hands towards Baghdad in post-Saddam era and contributed US\$7 billion for the stabilisation of Iraq, hosted German missions to train the Iraqi police and funded the reconstruction activities. In 2012, the UAE opened a consulate in the Kurdish-controlled autonomous region of Iraq. The UAE and other GCC states have proposed to provide Iraq with electricity and reduce its dependence on Iranian supplies. In 2020, the UAE delivered planeloads of equipment to help Iraq cope with the COVID-19 pandemic.⁹¹

C) GOING BEYOND THE MIDDLE EAST



With the growing stature in the regional dynamics due to its economic resources and the perception of threat from the Islamist forces during the Arab Spring, the UAE extended its reach beyond the neighbourhood. It pursued an active foreign policy in the African countries and was pivotal to signing of deal between Eritrea and Ethiopia in 2018. The UAE hosts large Arabic speaking Diaspora especially from the Horn of Africa and is a major banking hub for Somali businesses. It intends to emerge as a logistics hub

The 2017 Gulf crisis pushed leaders on both sides to seek alliances in the Horn of Africa. Since then, the UAE has nailed down diplomatic relationships and extended its reach, particularly along the Red Sea.

and regional headquarters and Abu Dhabi cannot achieve the desired model without ensuring freedom of maritime navigation through Bab al-Mandab and the Strait of Hormuz. Cooperation along the Red Sea corridor is a strategic priority for the UAE; it has been engaged in counter-piracy initiatives in the region. The UAE trained a marine police force in the semi-autonomous region of Puntland in Somalia and began experimenting with counter-terrorism operations against the Islamist Al-Shabaab insurgency.

Since the Arab spring engulfed the region in 2011, the UAE began to look at the countries along the Red Sea coast as commercial as well as strategic partners. Regional instability, Iran's growing influence, piracy emanating from Somalia and, the war in Yemen collectively mandated a stable Red Sea corridor. The UAE perceives Islamists and Muslim Brotherhood as an existential threat and their ascendancy in North Africa led the UAE to support its allies in Egypt and Libya. It lauded the ouster of Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohamed Morsi who became the first elected Egyptian President in 2012, after the toppling of Hosni Mubarak in February 2011. In Libya, the UAE joined several Gulf states in conducting air strikes to help armed Libyan rebels overthrow Muammar Qadhafi in 2011. It also sent weapons in support of eastern Libya-based Khalifa Haftar's LNA. In Tunisia, the Ennahda leader Rached Ghannouchi has alleged that the UAE was backing President



Kais Saied's sweeping of executive powers and supported the suspension of the constitution that was adopted in the wake of Tunisia's 2011 popular uprising.

The 2017 Gulf crisis pushed leaders on both sides to seek alliances in the Horn of Africa. Since then, the UAE has nailed down diplomatic relationships and extended its reach, particularly along the Red Sea. During the Gulf crisis, the UAE perceived the Somali government of President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed Farmajo as close to Qatar and supported the governments of the federal states of Somalia and the breakaway republic of Somaliland. With the help of the political alliances, aids, investments and port contracts, the UAE is marking its presence in Africa. Its role in the Eritrea-Ethiopia peace deal as well as easing of tensions between Ethiopia and Egypt has helped elevate the UAE's stature in Africa as an important regional player. The UAE has developed good ties with the new ruler of Ethiopia Abiy Ahmad and pledged US\$3 billion in aid and investments.⁹²

The UAE's engagement with Taliban is another example of Emirate's willingness to expand its reach outside the region. Prior to the September 11, 2001, attacks on the US, the UAE did not perceive the Taliban movement as a threat. It was one of three countries along with Pakistan and Saudi Arabia to recognise the Taliban as the government of Afghanistan during 1996-2001. However, after the September 11 attacks, the Emirates took an anti-

Expanding its influence within and beyond the region,
the UAE is not shying away from making bold moves
as far as its foreign policy is concerned.

Taliban stand and allowed the US to use its military facilities for operations in Afghanistan. Also, the UAE was a donor of aid to post-Taliban Afghanistan. Nevertheless, Emirates closed its embassy in Kabul after the Taliban takeover in 2021 and welcomed the ousted President Ashraf Ghani to live in exile. Currently, it has reopened its embassy in Kabul and is host to several thousand Afghans who were evacuated from Kabul in August 2021.⁹³

D) UAE'S BOLD MOVES AS A SMALL STATE



Expanding its influence within and beyond the region, the UAE is not shying away from making bold moves as far as its foreign policy is concerned. The UAE's foreign policy came of age during the 2010s with many bold, and even controversial, moves such as blockading Qatar, breaking with Saudi Arabia on Yemen strategy, signing of Abraham Accords, not aligning with the US on the Ukraine conflict, underlining greater independence.

Its relations with the two big neighbours, Saudi Arabia and Iran, have gradually become more rationalised and lesser subordinated. With Saudi Arabia, the relations can be defined as brotherly partnership, but Abu Dhabi has not shied away from expressing its differences on multiple issues and undertaking a divergent approach. For example, in 2009, the UAE opposed the Saudi project of a GCC currency and monetary union, after it lost the battle to host the monetary agency. In Yemen, after initially joining Saudi Arabia, the UAE moved away from Saudi position to pursue an independent policy of supporting the STC and withdrawing from active combat.⁹⁴ In 2021, the UAE entered into a dispute with Saudi Arabia over raising oil production; while most OPEC+ members supported a proposal to unwind the cuts on oil production in wake



The UAE's regional manoeuvring has given it strength to pursue an independent foreign policy and stand its ground against the US. It did not tow the US line on Ukraine crisis and took a balanced approach in reacting to the crisis.

of the pandemic by boosting output by 400,000 bpd every month until the end of next year, the UAE refused to endorse it unless its individual production quota was raised.⁹⁵

At the same time, despite the relations being defined by animosity, the UAE has taken steps to bring a semblance of normalcy in ties with Iran. The problems and threat perception vis-à-vis Iran are deep-rooted. Before recognising the UAE in 1971, the Iranian government had attacked the proposal of the UAE federation saying it was based on foreign intervention and predatory policies of branded powers.⁹⁶ In 1976, Iran began to place more importance on regional cooperation to uphold the security of the Gulf and developed a relationship that had semblance of friendliness. However, the UAE became cautious towards Iran post revolution and supported Baghdad quietly during the Iran-Iraq war. The UAE supported the 2018 US withdrawal from the Iran nuclear agreement and the application of a policy of maximum pressure. However, in mid-2019, concerned about risks to UAE's security in the event of a war with Iran, the UAE leadership began to engage Tehran. Dubai has often advocated engagement with Iran; it has the presence of the large Iranian-origin community as well as an extensive Iranian commercial presence. In July 2022, the Emirati and Iranian foreign ministers held a telephone conversation and discussed boosting ties; the UAE is reportedly considering sending an ambassador back to Tehran.⁹⁷

The UAE's regional manoeuvring has given it strength to pursue an independent foreign policy and stand its ground against the US. It did not tow the US line on Ukraine crisis and took a balanced approach in reacting to the crisis. Despite being an important US ally, the UAE abstained in the resolution tabled at the UNSC deploring Russia's intervention in Ukraine. In December 2021, the UAE threatened to pull out of a US\$23 billion deal with US to buy F-35 aircraft, Reaper drones and other advanced munitions. The UAE believed that the security requirements laid by the US to safeguard the weapons from Chinese espionage were onerous and would put Emirate's national sovereignty in jeopardy.⁹⁸

Secondly, despite Washington's displeasure, the UAE has been increasing engagements with China. In 2021, the US warned the Emirati government that a Chinese military presence in its country could threaten ties between the two countries. The US was concerned about building of a military facility at a Chinese port in the UAE and Emirates obliged by shutting down the facility promptly. However, the UAE seems to be unapologetically extending economic ties with China.⁹⁹ The country reportedly has bought armed UAVs from China and has used them for a strike in Libya. It is also accepting investments from China under the BRI. In April 2019, the UAE and China signed deals worth US\$3.4 billion to store and ship Chinese products at the Jebel Ali port.¹⁰⁰ During the pandemic, China-based Sinopharm tested its vaccine in the UAE. China is investing in UAE in agriculture; in 2012, the Chinese farm owner set up irrigation systems, installed fences and built air-conditioned greenhouses in Nazwa desert.¹⁰¹ In July 2022, Mohammed bin Zayed conferred the Order of Zayed, the UAE's highest civil decoration, on the Chinese President Xi Jinping.¹⁰² The

UAE and China are also looking at enhancing collaborations in energy along with science and technology.

Lastly, moving away from its official position of standing with the Palestinian people, the UAE signed Abraham Accords with Israel in 2020. The UAE's policy towards Israel-Palestine issue is based on Jerusalem's importance as the third holiest Islamic site and Arab nationalism. In 1972, Sheikh Zayed re-affirmed UAE's full support to the Arab cause with all the resources at its disposal. During the 1973 war, the UAE sent medical teams, donated US\$100 million to support the Arab war front and joined the oil embargo on the US for coming to the rescue of Israel. Later, its militant approach changed to that of peace and compromise.¹⁰³

Before the signing of the Abraham Accords in 2020, the UAE's official position was to support the establishment of a Palestinian state, and a just solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict based on the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative. However, since the beginning of the last decade, the UAE and Israel began to come closer. In 2011, the UAE and Israel actively collaborated with Egypt in counter-insurgency operations in Sinai peninsula¹⁰⁴ and in August 2020, Israel and UAE reportedly planned to establish spy bases on the Socotra Island.¹⁰⁵ The signing of the Accords enables the two parties to exchange ambassadors and cooperate in a number of areas including trade, telecommunications and civil aviation.¹⁰⁶ Israel's trade with the UAE touched US\$570 million in 2021 and the two sides expect to grow bilateral economic activity to US\$1 trillion by 2031.¹⁰⁷

**CHANGING DYNAMICS
OF THE UAE'S
FOREIGN POLICY**



Bruce W. Jentleson deduced in his book on American foreign policy that the national interests on which the super power bases its foreign policy decisions are the four core goals of power, peace, prosperity and principles.¹⁰⁸ The core goals can form the basis for foreign policy formation in a number of countries set in a similar milieu, however for a country like UAE that is situated in a region with specific characteristics and has undergone a distinct process of state formation, the core goals are more comprehensive. N. Janardhan has added prestige, profit, personality and propaganda as four more goals of UAE foreign policy formation. In case of UAE, it is evident that soon after the formation of the UAE, its foreign policy began to be shaped as per the national interests of power, peace, prosperity and principle, however in the post Zayed era, prestige, profit, personality and propaganda have emerged as the more dominant core goals.

A) THE ZAYED ERA:



A year after foundation of the UAE, Sheikh Zayed laid down the four objectives and principles of the foreign policy and abided by them for the next three decades. The first and foremost objective was to maintain good relations and cooperation between

It is evident that soon after the formation of the UAE, its foreign policy began to be shaped as per the national interests of power, peace, prosperity and principle, however in the post Zayed era, prestige, profit, personality and propaganda have emerged as the more dominant core goals.



Sheikh Zayed wanted UAE to emerge as a regional power, and realised that it needs to be insulated from the domestic instability as well as the regional and external interventions.

the UAE and neighbouring nations and settling disputes that may arise in future by cordial, peaceful means. The second objective was to abide by the UAE's commitment toward the Arab world and preliminary and fundamental Arab conventions. The third objective was to improve the Islamic solidarity and cooperation with Muslim states in all spheres. And the fourth objective was to maintain fruitful cooperation with all nations in all fields to establish security, peace and progress.¹⁰⁹

Sheikh Zayed wanted UAE to emerge as a regional power, and realised that it needs to be insulated from the domestic instability as well as the regional and external interventions. Therefore, he emphasized on maintaining the country's sovereignty through a strong defence force that would act as a deterrent. Internal consolidation was important for the UAE; being a small state and a new federation, the UAE had no qualms in seeking help in consolidation of the federation and resolution of the intra- and inter-federal disputes from other regional powers like Saudi Arabia.

Maintenance of peace was the second important aspect for Zayed's foreign policy. In regional disputes, neutrality was the hallmark of Emirati foreign policy; it was difficult for the UAE to choose sides during the Iran-Iraq war as Dubai, Sharjah and Umm al-Quwain had favourable relations with Iran while Abu Dhabi, Fujairah, Ras al-Kheimah and Ajman inclined towards Iraq. Also the UAE used

mediation and foreign aid as tools for propagation of soft power; Sheikh Zayed led the mediation efforts during the Iran-Iraq war, Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, territorial dispute between Bahrain and Qatar (1990) and the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. The UAE created the Abu Dhabi fund for Arab Economic Development in July 1971, months before it declared its independence in December 1971 and has been using it ever since for promotion of soft diplomacy through foreign aid in the region. Foreign aid accounted for 10 per cent of the Emirati GDP in the first two decades and a majority of it was received by the Arab world.¹¹⁰

Prosperity was the third important pillar of UAE foreign policy during the Zayed era. He was aware that the prosperity of a country was a pre-requisite for its longevity. Economic stability was a major consideration when UAE became one of the founding members of the GCC. As per the GCC charter, the basic objectives of the council are to have coordination, integration and inter-connection between member States in all fields. It also emphasizes on the formulation of similar regulations in economy, finance, trade, customs, tourism, legislation and administration. Other than that, the charter also mentions about fostering scientific and technical progress in industry, mining, agriculture, water and animal resources. The charter stresses on provisions for establishing scientific research centres, setting up joint ventures, and encouraging cooperation of the private sector. For decades, GCC formed the basis for UAE's policies in the region as well as beyond.

Principle was the fourth pillar of UAE's foreign policy. Post-independence, the UAE aimed at supporting regional and international justice along with adhering to the ideals of pan-



Arabism and pan-Islamism. It participated in the oil embargo of 1973 in support of the Arab and Palestinian cause. It is to be noted that the UAE politics bears the mark of political culture derived from tribalism and Islam. Attributes of tribal society and Islam had a major influence on the founder of the UAE, Sheikh Zayed, and it reflects strongly in the basis of the UAE foreign policy. Sheikh Zayed mentioned that the UAE should unify the Muslims and support their causes through participation in conferences and Islamic organisations and international forums.¹¹¹

B) THE POST-ZAYED ERA:



The post-Zayed era marks an important phase for the UAE. In the three decades, the world underwent significant changes and UAE was not an exception. In the post-Zayed era, UAE foreign policy has matured and Emirates is flexing its political and economic muscles while the focus is on the prestige, profit, personality and propaganda. The 21st century began with the younger generations of leaders coming to power or holding a significant influence in many countries. The young leaders came with bold ideas and were more willing to accept change as compared to the leaders of the older generation. For example, Bashar al-Assad came to power in Syria with the promise of big change in form of Damascus Spring. Similarly, the young Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman became

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an influential figure in Saudi Arabia and is the Prime Minister of Saudi Arabia. In case of UAE, though the state was ruled by Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed bin Nahyan after the demise of Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al Nahyan in 2004; it is evident that Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan was the real architect of UAE's foreign policy in the 21st century. Even before he became the third president of the UAE in 2022 after Sheikh Khalifa passed away in July, he had considerable hold over the UAE. Mohammad bin Zayed's visions directed UAE's growth to an extent that UAE became synonymous with him.

1) Capacity Building and Projection



During the first decade of the century, the UAE focused on the capacity building and it reflects in the foreign policy decisions taken by the leader. The task of capacity building was undertaken with an aim to enhance the prestige at the global stage while increasing the economic profits for the Gulf country. UAE government intended to develop competence among its citizens by investing in the human resource capabilities and leadership development. For instance, it built a strategy for the next two decades in order to build a competitive knowledge economy enabled by skilled national human capital that would save the money spent on hiring foreigners in future. Abiding by

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the government directives, UAE Central Bank worked towards improving the capabilities and skills of its employees while focusing on their career development strategies. The UAE provided technical knowledge to other OIC Countries like Yemen and Syria; and received teams from Central Banks of Libya and Mauritania. The UAE central Bank signed MoUs with regulatory authorities of Turkey, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan.¹¹²

The second decade of the 21st Century was dedicated to capacity projection for the UAE. The Government of Abu Dhabi announced the Abu Dhabi Economic Vision 2030 for the transformation and diversification of the Emirate's economy. The long term plan aimed to reduce reliance on the oil sector as a source of economic activity and put greater emphasis on knowledge-based industries in the future. The program identified the areas of immediate economic priorities for the government. It emphasized on building an open, efficient, effective and globally integrated business environment; and adopting a disciplined fiscal policy that is responsive to economic cycles. It also focused on establishing a resilient monetary and financial market environment with manageable levels of inflation while driving significant improvement in the efficiency of the labour market. It underlined the importance of developing a sufficient and resilient infrastructure capable of supporting anticipated economic growth, and developing a highly skilled, highly productive work force. Lastly it insisted on enabling the financial markets to become the key financiers of economic sectors and projects.¹¹³

ii) COVID-19 and Medicine Diplomacy



The third decade of the 21st century began with the COVID-19 pandemic engulfing the entire world and the UAE pro-actively engaged in the humanitarian efforts. The UAE was one of the first countries to reach out and support global humanitarian initiatives and its aid accounted for 80 per cent of the international response to countries struggling to curb the spread of the novel coronavirus. By July 2021, the UAE had sent a total of 2,154 tons of medical aid, ventilators, screening equipment, personal protection equipment and testing kits to 135 countries around the world. It was engaged in setting up of six field hospitals Sudan, Mauritania, Sierra Leone, Lebanon and Jordan, and 1 fully equipped mobile clinic in Turkmenistan. The UAE also provided in-kind aid to WHO amounting to USD 10 million.¹¹⁴ UAE's pro-active approach during the pandemic, especially its assistance in repatriation of migrant workers to their respective countries raised UAE's stature and prestige at the regional as well as international stage.

UAE has taken a nuanced approach in the recent years and it is reflected in its foreign policy outlook very well. UAE is no more satisfied with being a reactive force; it is taking pro active steps in foreign policy. The bold measures discussed in the previous section have built an image of an active and assertive state for the UAE. It is moving from idealist tendencies towards realism in evaluating issues and events as per its interests rather than perceiving things through a moral compass. The new leader is conscious of the ongoing regional and global changing dynamics and is willing



to make bold moves and take the associated risks. The impact of these changes is very much visible on the booming economy of the UAE; its GDP in 2020 was \$359 billion.¹¹⁵

iii) Image Projection



Along with the hard core changes, the UAE is also focusing on soft diplomacy. It is introducing changes at the societal level whose impact is resonating at regional as well as international level. The access of public spaces for women has created a liberal image for the UAE. UAE became the first country in MENA region to introduce paid parental leave for employees in the private sector and female labour participation rate of 57.5 per cent is one of the highest in MENA.¹¹⁶ The reforms related to the visa regulations and labour laws too project a benevolent and liberal face of the UAE. Similarly an overall secular outlook to the society portrays UAE as a country that is willing to respect other religions and cultures. It not only attracts more investments but also depicts UAE as a melting pot for people all over the world. UAE is home to the Dubai Shiva and Krishna Temple Complex for over 64 years and is opened the first large, independent traditional temple called as ‘Sindhu Guru Darbar temple’ at Jebel Ali village on the occasion

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of Dussera in October 2022.¹¹⁷ It helps UAE emerge as the global tourism and investment hub.

The lenient property and infrastructure laws ensure that the gulf country emerges as the first preference for the business offices. The Dubai government offers no corporate taxes for most types of companies along with no direct income taxes and no limitations on the repatriation of profits. The New Company Act (2015) and the New FDI Law (2018) are steps taken by the UAE government to attract investments. The New FDI Law allows foreign investors to own up to 100 per cent in companies operating in certain industries.¹¹⁸ Along with that the stringent anti-terrorism policy of the government also projects a positive image for the UAE.

The UAE has passed legislations to criminalise activities associated with terrorism. For example, Federal Law Number 7 of 2014 deals with combatting terrorism offences, Federal Decree-Law Number 2 of 2015 deals with combatting discrimination and hatred, and Federal Law Number 5 of 2012 focusses on combatting cyber crimes. The Federal Decree-Law Number 20 of 2018 stresses on anti-money laundering and combatting the financing of terrorism and illegal organizations.¹¹⁹ Although it has experienced perilous times, UAE has turned its foreign policy with the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood and ensured that it should eliminate terrorism from the region. The consequent positive image building provided UAE the tenacity to go from voting for other countries at various platforms to voting for themselves and seek a place at different forums. It has become member of the BRICS New Developemnt



Bank and is a dialogue partner at the SCO. Also it has graduated from seeking mediation from its neighbouring countries to being mediators in regional issues, especially in the horn of Africa.

iv) Diversifying the Security and Foreign Policy



Keeping the changing regional and global dynamics in mind, currently UAE is focusing on the security diversification. It has realized that this is the era of multi-vector partnerships and does not want to be associated with any single global dominant power. Failure of international actors in providing stability and security has prompted UAE to seek alternative support system. It is dependent on the USA due to lack of appropriate alternatives. It also believes that regional solution is needed for regional problems and it cannot be solved by the external actors alone. UAE is open to the idea of strategic hedging in foreign policy. In the years to come, UAE will push towards deeper economic cooperation with other emerging powers.

In order to compensate the loss of western alternatives, and diversify its foreign policy, the UAE began to look towards the East. UAE is a Middle Power in terms of technological advancement and is looking at forging collaborations with the Asian countries. For

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instance it is willing to cooperate on technological advancements and economic cooperation with India and China. The Indian Union Cabinet approved the proposal for signing a bilateral MoU between India and the UAE on Cooperation in the field of Industries and Advanced Technologies in June 2022. The MoU will focus on cooperation in strengthening the supply chain resilience of industries, space systems and artificial intelligence. It will also emphasize on the enabling technologies and standardization.¹²⁰ The Abu Dhabi Department of Economic Development signed a memorandum of understanding with the Shandong province of China on enhancing cooperation as well as exchanging expertise and data related to the industrial sector.¹²¹ UAE is looking at technology as the new oil and the qualified Asian expatriates are the best bet have the required qualifications and are best suited for the sector.

Along with the South Asia, UAE is also looking at the Central Asian countries for partnerships. UAE sees Kazakhstan as a major destination for the country's investment strategy; there are more than 200 Emirati companies operating in the country. Turkmenistan is important for its vast natural gas reserves and the sensitive geopolitical location north of Iran. UAE



looks at investment in its infrastructure projects while eyeing Ashgabat's future role as a natural gas exporter.¹²² Mubadala has also signed \$10 billion worth of investment agreements in Uzbekistan as well, covering the energy, manufacturing, agriculture, infrastructure, and development sectors.¹²³ Along with UAE, the GCC is looking towards Central Asian countries as well. Astana will be hosting the first Economic Forum of GCC and Central Asian countries in June 2023.¹²⁴

As a small gulf state, the UAE perceives India as a large growing economy and intends to form collaborations in various fields. It looks favorably at India as an energy market and wants to strengthen the existing economic partnerships on hydrocarbons as well as renewable energy. It also aims to collaborate on green hydrogen energy as well as IT industry. Secondly, UAE finds India as a reliable and stable partner in food security. India and UAE have signed Farm to Port project (2015) under which crops would be grown keeping the specific Emirati market requirements in mind.¹²⁵ Thirdly, UAE looks at India as a source of human resource owing to its young demography. Indians are respected in the UAE as well as other gulf countries for their hard work, sincerity and apolitical nature.

Lastly, UAE has realized that bilateral ties have limited benefits and the trilateral, minilateral and plurilateral partnerships are the future. In the multipolar world, multilateral partnerships over various specific issues spanning continents will be beneficial. UAE believes that the need is to connect the Gulf, Asia and Africa in order

to strengthen relations in the age of multi-network world. UAE also understands the significance of connectivity in the neighbourhood as well as and beyond. UAE is developing the Etihad Rail which is a 1200 km railway infrastructure project running from the Saudi border to Fujairah on the Indian Ocean coast with an estimated investment of \$11billion.¹²⁶ UAE is also exploring the possibility of connecting Mumbai to the city of Fujairah through an underwater rail network.¹²⁷ Also, UAE is the financial and trade centre of the Belt and Road Initiative.





CONCLUSION



Foreign policy of a state is based on a number of factors and an in-depth study of the latter helps in developing an understanding about the short- and long-term behaviour of the state. The UAE is a small and relatively newly formed state but the dynamism of its regional and foreign policy makes it an eminent player in the Middle East. Geography is an important determinant of the UAE's foreign policy. Being situated in the Gulf, the country harps on Gulf solidarity. Persisting border disputes lead UAE to pursue strong defence policy and allocate lion's share of its federal budget for defence purposes. Sharing a large boundary with a regional heavyweight like Saudi Arabia, UAE follows a semi-independent foreign policy.

Social matrix and demographic contours too play an important role in shaping the foreign policy decisions. The UAE has a population close to 10 million of which only 12 per cent constitutes of natives. Thus, presence of expatriates that form as much as the 88 per cent of the population is a major determinant of domestic as well as foreign policy formation in the UAE. The UAE prioritises expatriates coming from the GCC and other Arab countries over those coming from non-Arab countries and it reflects clearly in the labour legislations. Also, non-national demography impacts the UAE's foreign policy vis-à-vis the sender countries; Emirates and Philippine lifted a ban on recruitment of domestic workers in 2021.

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Similarly public opinion has the power to shape the foreign policy decision making in the UAE. During the Iran-Iraq war of 1980, Saddam Hussein made the restoration of three islands to UAE as first demand to Iran. Despite not willing to offend Iran with which Abu Dhabi and Dubai had close ties, the federal government had to support Iraq as UAE was not immune to the Arab public opinion. The political system of a country is another determinant for the foreign policy decisions taken at the regional as well as international level. Before being formed as an Emirate, the UAE was a British protectorate and it impacted the foreign policy of the newly independent UAE to keep it closer to the Western bloc in the Cold War dynamics.

The role of individual leaders and their personalities too had a major impact on the foreign policy formation in the UAE. In 1980s and 1990s under the leadership of Sheikh Zayed, the UAE followed a centrist policy to international relations placing mediation in regional conflicts at its centre. However, the current president Mohammed bin Zayed conforms to the Hobbesian view of international relations and believes in the efficiency of the military as a tool to solve political differences. He intends to transform the UAE into the dominant commercial and financial hub connecting East and West in the Western Indian Ocean. He also intends to reshape the Middle East's regional political order based on the economic liberalism of Dubai, and the secular ultra-authoritarianism enforced by Abu Dhabi.

Economic changes and reforms are another determinant of foreign policy and foreign investments have the potential to influence the foreign policy decisions. As the UAE is aware of the benefits of

With changing times the UAE has changed the course of its foreign policy from focusing on protecting its sovereignty and securing its territories to elevating its stature in the neighborhood as well as the wider region.

maintaining good ties with countries investing in the Emirates, it is also well acquainted with the fruits of enhancing partnership through investing in other countries; consequently, it has begun investments in Israel. Energy diplomacy is an important part of the UAE's foreign policy. Hydrocarbons formed the backbone of the UAE's economy for long, however, the Emirates is diversifying its economy in order to overcome the hovering consequences of depleting oil resources and slump in oil prices.

With changing times the UAE has changed the course of its foreign policy from focusing on protecting its sovereignty and securing its territories to elevating its stature in the neighborhood as well as the wider region. For the initial three decades, the UAE was engaged in developing ties with the five members of the GCC. The UAE's political difficulties in consolidation of the federation had an indelible mark on its initial interaction with the neighboring countries that later became members of the GCC. The UAE managed to maintain warm ties with all the GCC countries except Qatar. It supported the GCC member countries as and when needed. When Arab spring reached these countries in 2011 and protests were held in countries like Bahrain and Oman, the UAE sent military troops and financial aid to the affected countries.

After strengthening its standing among the immediate neighbors in GCC, the UAE extended reach towards the other Arab countries.



The UAE has been part of the Saudi-led military coalition that intervened in Yemen in March 2015 to restore the Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi government in Sana'a. Similarly the UAE took an active approach in shaping its response to the Syrian crisis. The UAE and Syria maintained bilateral relations even during the peak of the conflict with regular flights offering a refuge for Assad's inner circle. The UAE also extended hands towards Baghdad in post Saddam era and contributed US\$ 7 billion for the stabilization of Iraq, hosted German missions to train the Iraqi police and funded the reconstruction activities.

With the growing stature in the regional dynamics due to its economic resources and the perception of threat from the Islamist forces during the Arab Spring, UAE extended its reach beyond the neighborhood. It pursued an active foreign policy in the African countries and was pivotal to signing of deal between Eritrea and Ethiopia in 2018. The UAE's engagement with Taliban is another example of Emirate's willingness to expand its reach outside the region. After the September 11 attacks, the Emirates allowed the United States to use its military facilities for the U.S. operations in Afghanistan.

Expanding its influence within and beyond the region, the UAE is not shying away from making bold moves as far as foreign policy is concerned. Last decade witnessed the UAE standing on its own, being part of the quartet blockading Qatar, breaking with Saudi Arabia on the issue of participation in the Yemen conflict, not aligning with USA on the Ukraine issue and stalling the talks on US\$ 23 billion weapon sale with the USA. More importantly, the UAE signed the Abraham Accords with Israel in 2021.

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In the 21st century, the UAE has focused on the capacity building as well as capacity projection and it reflects in the foreign policy decisions taken by the leader. The UAE was one of the first countries to reach out and support global humanitarian initiatives and its aid accounted for 80 per cent of the international response to countries struggling to curb the spread of the novel coronavirus. UAE is no more satisfied with being a reactive force; it is taking pro active steps in foreign policy. The bold measures discussed in the previous section have built an image of an active and assertive state for the UAE. It is moving from idealist tendencies towards realism in evaluating issues and events as per its interests rather than perceiving things through a moral compass. The new leader is conscious of the ongoing regional and global changing dynamics and is willing to make bold moves and take the associated risks.

Along with the hard core changes, the UAE is also focusing on soft diplomacy. It is introducing changes at the societal level whose impact is resonating at regional as well as international level. The access of public spaces for women has created a liberal image for the UAE. The reforms related to the visa regulations and labour laws too project a benevolent and liberal face of the UAE. Similarly an overall secular outlook to the society portrays UAE as a country that is willing to respect other religions and cultures. The lenient property and infrastructure laws ensure that the gulf country emerges as the first preference for the business offices. Along with



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Keeping the changing regional and global dynamics in mind, currently UAE is focusing on the security diversification. It has realized that this is the era of multi-vector partnerships and does not want to be associated with any single global dominant power. In order to compensate the loss of western alternatives, and diversify its foreign policy, the UAE began to look towards the East and Asia in particular. UAE is a Middle Power in terms of technological advancement and is looking at forging collaborations with the Asian countries. UAE is also looking at the South Asian and Central Asian countries for partnerships. It perceives India as a large growing economy and intends to form collaborations in various fields. Lastly, UAE has realized that bilateral ties have limited benefits and the trilateral, minilateral and plurilateral partnerships are the future. In the multipolar world, multilateral partnerships over various specific issues spanning continents will be beneficial. UAE believes that the need is to connect the Gulf, Asia and Africa in order to strengthen relations in the age of multi-network world. UAE also understands the significance of connectivity in the neighbourhood as well as and beyond.

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As evident, despite being a small state, the UAE is expanding its reach within as well as beyond the region. Under the leadership of Mohamed bin Zayed, it aims to realise its foreign policy ambitions. Immense economic resources enable it to pursue a strong and multifaceted foreign policy in the coming decades. Abu Dhabi is looking to diversify its ties with extra-regional power in view of US' waning interest in the region. It is not shying away from developing ties with Russia and China. It aims to develop working relations even with regional pariah states like Iran. Despite being a small state, Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan's UAE has come of age and is expanding its wings under the leadership of Mohamed bin Zayed. With the advancement in science and technology and the growing economic heft, the UAE has managed to overcome its smallness to an extent and foreign policy has been a reliable and dependable tool to achieve the same.





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