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India Blog Series: Cooperation with India: An Option or A Must? ^[1]

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It is a fact that India's booming economy and population will result in a substantial increase in need of energy resources and global partners. Many countries around the globe are recognizing India's rising power and are working to strengthen their economic, political, and social ties with her. Partnering with India has been increasingly present on the agendas of many Arab states, particularly those in the Gulf, but not as a priority. Despite the awareness of the importance of India as a strong potential ally and trade partner, Arab states are still not fully engaging with India, especially on the public diplomacy front. The current efforts primarily revolve around trying to agree on bilateral trade and energy agreements. Diplomacy between the Gulf nations and India have not involved their respective publics and have remained at the government level.

A few cooperation agreements have been signed between Arab states and India, while many others are slowly being negotiated. In 2004, the GCC countries (Gulf Cooperation Council) signed an initial framework agreement with India in efforts to advance multilateral relations. This framework led the two parties to enter negotiations and sign a FTA (Free Trade Agreement) that would open the door to more significant cooperation opportunities. FTA negotiations have not been going well because of disagreements between India and the GCC countries around petroleum products in the negative list of the FTA. This agreement opportunity has been met by lots of pessimism and predictions of failure, as the disagreement between the FTA parties has been described to be irreconcilable. However, this disagreement does not mean the end of the negotiations. Nevertheless, it will impact public diplomacy efforts, pushing them aside until the differences are resolved.

On another front of cooperation, in a rare move in 2006, King Abdullah Ben Abdul-Aziz of Saudi Arabia conducted a four-day visit to India to strengthen bilateral ties. The Saudi King and the Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh signed two major agreements. The first agreement provided India with a "stable and increased" supply of crude oil; the second agreement improved cooperation between the two nations to combat terrorism. Both nations described the visit as "heralding a new era in India-Saudi Arabia relations and constitutes a landmark in the development of increased understanding and cooperation between the two." This visit has benefited the economy of both countries and increased their export and import rates. However, it was not significant to the average citizen in India or Saudi Arabia. It remained just one of many official visits they heard about in the media, without feeling its real impact in their daily lives.



The follow up to the Saudi Kings' visit was a bit late. It was not until 2010 that the Indian Prime Minister visited Saudi Arabia. The three-day visit was described as historic since it was the first of this magnitude since the visit of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1982. The main goal of this tour was to boost India-Saudi cooperation efforts to a higher level, particularly in the field of energy. Eight agreements were signed during this visit in the fields of energy, science and technology, and extradition. Manmohan Singh stated that "I am conscious of the fact that this will be only the third visit by an Indian prime minister to Saudi Arabia. My visit reflects the strong mutual desire of both countries to reinvigorate our relations, as manifested in King Abdullah's historic visit to India in 2006 as the chief guest at the Indian Republic Day (...) India and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia have enjoyed special relations based on several millennia of civilizational and cultural linkages and people-to-people exchanges." Religion is a major area of connection between India and Saudi Arabia, as every year, around 140,000 Indians visit Saudi Arabia for pilgrimage.

Developing strong and sustainable relations with India should not be considered by Arab states as an option, but as a must. India's regional and global role is changing, growing very rapidly, and its say in global matters is becoming more significant. For instance, India is one of the world's major nuclear powers and has the third largest armed forces in the world. It has the ninth largest world economy and it is a member of the G20 and the BRICS. Therefore, Arab states should seize the opportunity and engage India more aggressively to boost and build relations based on cooperation, mutual respect, and friendship. There are many fields that can be explored by both Arab states and India to improve their current relations. In addition to trade agreements, the two parties should consider other public diplomacy venues to develop substantial social and cultural exchanges, and boost larger people-to-people relations. Cultural public diplomacy is one of the promising venues through which the Arab states and India can develop more relations. Activities can be organized around religious dialogue, student exchanges, and other cultural and educational issues that would bring both states and publics closer together.

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