



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



DPG WEST ASIA REVIEW



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Delhi Policy Group

Core 5A, 1st Floor, India Habitat Centre, Lodhi Road, New Delhi- 110003

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DPG WEST ASIA REVIEW

DPG West Asia Review contains major developments in West Asia of strategic relevance to India, compiled from open source media. To subscribe please [click here](#).

Your comments and feedback can be addressed to Sanket Joshi at sanket@dpg.org.in.

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Abstract

Indian Army Chief General M.M. Naravane on December 9 embarked on a historic visit to the United Arab Emirates and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Gen. Naravane held talks with the UAE and Saudi Arabia's Land Forces commanders respectively. Army Chief's visit to the two major Gulf countries is a reflection of India's growing strategic engagement in the region and is expected to further open up avenues for cooperation in the defence and security spheres. Earlier, Indian Minister for Petroleum and Natural Gas Dharmendra Pradhan had highlighted 'India's Look West' policy and a fundamental reset in relations between New Delhi and the Gulf nations that is characterised by camaraderie, mutual respect and a high degree of trust. In another development, Saudi Arabia deported a group of NRIs (Non-Resident Indian's) for protesting against India's proposed 'National Register of Citizens (NRC)' last year.

The U.S. Congress approved 'National Defence Bill' authorizing an annual USD740 billion U.S. military budget for the fiscal year 2021. President Trump has promised to veto the bill, announcing that, "China is the biggest winner of (this) new defence bill". The bill limits President Trump's authority to withdraw troops from Afghanistan, South Korea and Germany in the closing days of his presidency, and authorises USD69 billion for overseas military operations. It provides USD3.1 billion annual military aid to Israel as part of the 10-year commitment reached by former U.S. President Barack Obama. In another important development, the U.S. Senate failed to block the Trump administrations proposed arms sales including the F-35 stealth aircrafts to the UAE worth around USD23 billion. Further, Israel and Morocco normalised relations in a deal brokered by the United States. As part of the deal, the U.S. has agreed to recognise Morocco's claim over the disputed Western Sahara region. Israel and Bhutan also announced normalisation of relations.

U.S. President-elect Joe Biden is likely to name former CENTCOM Commander General Lloyd J. Austin as America's next Defence Secretary. During the past week, two B-52 bombers flew to the Persian Gulf as a show of strength to deter Iran amid rising tensions between the two nations. The U.S. also sanctioned Iran's Ambassador to the Houthi rebels of Yemen. In a related development, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov reiterated Moscow's rejection of the U.S. sanctions on Iran and stressed on the enhanced trade with Tehran.

On the investments front, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Amir of Qatar, Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al-Thani discussed the creation of a special task force to facilitate investments by the Qatar Investment Authority into India. Both leaders also “resolved to explore Qatari investments in the entire Indian energy value-chain”. On December 08 and 09, UAE-India food summit was held in Dubai. The proposed UAE-India food corridor is projected to draw investments of up to USD7 billion from the Emirates to the Indian subcontinent. Further, UAE-based Lulu Group International also announced a plan to set up a food processing centre in Srinagar for sourcing agricultural products from the Indian Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir.

On December 11, India’s Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) organised two virtual Panel Discussions on GCC-India in the run up to the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas Convention to be held in January 2021. The topics of these Panel Discussions were: one, India and the Gulf: leveraging energy partnerships, investment opportunities and emerging technologies for ‘Atmanirbhar Bharat’, second, skill sets of the future for Indians in the Gulf.

India, Iran and Uzbekistan will hold a trilateral dialogue on the joint use of strategically important Chabahar port, a fulcrum of connectivity to Central Asia on December 14. On the security front, India plans to purchase 1,580 artillery guns from the Israeli firm Elbit Systems, which has promised to make 70 percent of these weapon systems in India. In another development, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi congratulated Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah, on his re-appointment as the Prime Minister of Kuwait, after the successful National Assembly elections on December 5. Meanwhile Oman has exempted Indian citizens from mandatory entry visa requirements for a travel of up to 10 days.

On the regional security front, India urged the international community to address the presence of terrorist organizations like Al-Qaeda and ISIS in parts of Yemen. India’s Deputy Permanent Representative to the UN also stressed on global unity to fight “dark forces of terror” and the need to hold those who support and shelter terrorist groups accountable.

In a significant development, China has sanctioned USD1.5 billion loan to Pakistan which Islamabad will use to repay USD2 billion debt owed to Saudi Arabia. While China’s state-run Zhenhua Oil is set to sign a multibillion-dollar contract with the Iraqi government for long-term oil supply. China also urged President-elect Biden

to unconditionally return to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran.

Links to major developments in West Asia of strategic relevance to India, compiled from open source media, can be found below.

Bahrain

[Bahrain's Investcorp Sets \\$1.5bn Medium-Term Investment Target in India](#)

December 02, 2020, Arabian Business

Investcorp, the Bahrain-based global alternative asset management fund, has set a medium-term target of reaching \$1.5 billion assets under management (AuM) in India, top executives of the fund have recently said.

[Why Bahrain's Investcorp is Thinking Small to Grow Big in India](#)

December 10, 2020, Arabian Business

Investcorp, the Bahrain-based global alternative investment fund, is looking to target smaller investments in India in the \$15-\$40 million range rather than big ticket deals as it looks to grow its assets in the country.

[Bahrain Joins Gulf Allies in Condemning the Killing of Iranian Nuclear Scientist](#)

November 30, 2020, The Times of Israel

The Bahraini government condemned the assassination of nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh. Bahrain calls on all parties to exercise 'maximum restraint' to prevent 'new levels of instability' that could threaten peace.

Egypt

[Egypt, Bahrain and UAE Praise US-brokered Normalization between Israel & Morocco](#)

December 11, 2020, The Times of Israel

Egypt, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates welcomed the announcement that Israel and Morocco are to establish full diplomatic relations on Thursday (December 10), with all three countries predicting the development will contribute to regional stability.

[Egypt Receives First Batch of Sinopharm Coronavirus Vaccines](#)

December 11, 2020, Reuters

Egypt received its first shipment of vaccines developed by China National Pharmaceutical Group (Sinopharm) late on Thursday (December 10) and will get more deliveries soon.

[Egypt to Provide Free Covid-19 Vaccine to Citizens](#)

December 11, 2020, Arab News

Egyptians will be provided with a free Chinese Sinopharm coronavirus vaccine, local daily Egypt Today reported on Friday (December 11) citing Egyptian Health Minister Hala Zayed.

[Egypt Mobilizes Gulf, Arab Support to End Syrian Crisis](#)

December 09, 2020, AL-Monitor

Egypt appears to be leading Arab efforts to bring Damascus back to the Arab League and find a political solution to the Syrian crisis, in a bid to confront Turkey's military ambitions in Syria.

Iraq

[China Prepares to Sign a Multi-billion Dollar Oil Deal with Iraq](#)

December 10, 2020, TRT World

China's state-run Zhenhua Oil is set to sign a multibillion-dollar contract with the Iraqi government for long-term oil supply. Iraq will export 4 million barrels a month, or about 130,000 per day, under the deal. Zhenhua Oil will pay more than \$2 billion to Iraq in advance.

[Joe Biden to Name Former CENTCOM Commander General Lloyd J. Austin Who Oversaw Iraq War as Pentagon Chief](#)

December 08, 2020, The Arab Weekly

US President-elect Joe Biden will nominate former 'CENTCOM' Commander General Lloyd J. Austin to be Secretary of Defense, according to four people familiar with the decision. If confirmed by the Senate, Austin would be the first Black leader of the Pentagon.

[Attack Sets Ablaze Kirkuk Oil Wells, ISIS Suspected](#)

December 09, 2020, The Arab Weekly

Two wells in a small oilfield in northern Iraq were set ablaze by explosives in a "terrorist attack" on Wednesday (December 09) but overall production from the field was not affected, the oil ministry and officials said.

[Dozens Killed, Injured in Iraq's Kurdistan Protests as Some Consider Leaving](#)

December 11, 2020, AL-Monitor

Protests beginning Dec. 2 in Sulaimaniyah over unpaid public sector salaries have escalated, with political party headquarters and government buildings burned, several killed and scores injured in the southeastern part of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

Iran

[India, Iran and Uzbekistan to Have Trilateral Dialogue on Chabahar Port](#)

December 13, 2020, The New Indian Express

For the first time, India, Iran and Uzbekistan will hold a trilateral dialogue on Monday (December 14) on joint use of the strategically located Chabahar port which is being increasingly seen as a fulcrum of connectivity to Central Asia.

[Iran Executes France-based Dissident Journalist Captured Last Year](#)

December 12, 2020, Reuters

France reacted with anger to the hanging of the Paris-based journalist, which it called "barbaric and unacceptable" and said ran counter to Iran's international obligations.

[Russia 'Looking to Counter' U.S. Sanctions against Iran](#)

December 12, 2020, Radio Liberty

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has said Moscow continues to reject U.S. sanctions against Iran, has put its money where its mouth is by increasing trade with Tehran, and that Moscow will continue to look for new ways to counter the punitive measures.

[To Deter Iranian Attacks on U.S. Troops, Pentagon Orders B-52 Flights to Middle East](#)

December 10, 2020, The New York Times

Two American B-52 bombers flew a show-of-force mission in the Persian Gulf on Thursday (December 10) that military officials said was intended to deter Iran and its proxies from carrying out attacks against United States troops in the Middle East amid rising tensions between the two countries.

[Iran's 'Envoy' to Yemen's Houthi Rebels Sanctioned by US](#)

December 08, 2020, Arab News

The US imposed terrorism-related sanctions Tuesday (December 08) on Iran's envoy to the Houthi militants in Yemen. Despite Iran describing him as an "Ambassador," Hasan Irlu operates for the overseas wing of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) known as the Quds Force, the US Treasury Department said.

[China Urges Biden to 'Unconditionally' Return to Iran Nuclear Deal](#)

December 09, 2020, Newsweek

China urged the incoming administration of President-elect Joe Biden to return to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action—known commonly as the Iran nuclear deal.

[India's UCO Bank May Reconsider Plan to Cut Ties with Iran](#)

November 17, 2020, Financial Tribune

UCO Bank of India may reconsider cutting ties with Iranian banks following the victory of Joe Biden in the US presidential elections and an anticipated change in Washington's Iran policy, Parham Rezaei, the deputy chief of Iran-India Chamber of Commerce said.

[UN Chief Urges Iran to Address Concerns Over Its Nuclear, Ballistic Missile Programs; Return to Deal](#)

December 09, 2020, i24 News

United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres is urging Tehran to address concerns raised about its nuclear and ballistic missile programs and return to "full implementation" of its 2015 nuclear deal (JCPOA).

[CISA Warns About Iran's Offensive Cyber Capabilities](#)

December 07, 2020, Defense One

Amid renewed tension between the U.S. and Iran, the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency issued a warning to be vigilant for activity from Iranian hackers.

Israel

[Afghan Deal, Israel Aid: a Look at \\$740 billion US Defence Bill](#)

December 11, 2020, AL Jazeera

The United States Congress has overwhelmingly approved a national defence bill authorising an annual \$740bn US military budget – the world's largest – for the 2021 fiscal year, despite President Donald Trump's promise to use his veto.

[Israeli Firm Elbit Systems offers to Build 70 Percent of Artillery Guns in India](#)

December 10, 2020, Business Standard

After quoting far cheaper than French gunmaker Nexter in a government tender to supply the Indian Army with 1,580 artillery guns, Israeli firm Elbit Systems has written to Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, sweetening its offer by promising to build 70 per cent of the weapon in India.

[Israeli Government to Reconsider Using Shirbit Insurance after Large Cyber-attack](#)

December 07, 2020, The Jerusalem Post

The Israeli government will reconsider using Shirbit as an insurance provider for government employees after thousands of documents containing personal information were leaked in a large cyber-attack that targeted the company recently.

[Former Israeli Space Security Chief Says Aliens Exist, Humanity Not Ready](#)

December 10, 2020, The Jerusalem Post

Haim Eshed – who served as the head of Israel's space program for nearly 30 years and is a three-time recipient of the Israel Security Award – explained that Israel and the US have both been dealing with the aliens for years.

[Israel Establishes 'Formal Diplomatic Relations' with Bhutan](#)

December 12, 2020, The Guardian

Israel established diplomatic relations with the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan on Saturday (December 12), the Israeli foreign ministry said, in the latest of a string of normalisation deals agreed by the Jewish state.

[Morocco Latest Country to Normalise Ties with Israel in US-brokered Deal](#)

December 11, 2020, BBC News

Morocco has become the latest Arab League country to agree to normalise relations with Israel in a deal brokered with US help. As part of the deal, the US has agreed to recognise Morocco's claim over the disputed Western Sahara region.

[India and Israel Discuss Security, Start-ups](#)

December 08, 2020, The Tribune

India and Israel held their 16th round of Foreign Office Consultations through video-conference on Monday (December 07). Talks revolved around the core areas of defence, agriculture, science and technology, education and homeland security.

Jordan

[Jordan's King: 'We Will Confront Any Attempt to Impose New Reality in Jerusalem'](#)

December 02, 2020, Middle East Monitor

The Jordanian king said: "Holy Jerusalem and its sanctities have been and will remain the focus of our attention and care," adding that "the guardianship will remain a duty and a historic responsibility that we cherished for more than 100 years."

Kuwait

[Indian PM Modi Eyes Closer Links with Kuwait](#)

December 09, 2020, Gulf News

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has voiced confidence about prospects for closer links between India and Kuwait under the leadership of Emir Sheikh Nawaf Al Ahmad. PM Modi made the remark after Sheikh Nawaf's reappointment of Sheikh Sabah Al Khaled as Kuwait's prime minister on Tuesday, two days after the Gulf nation held its parliamentary election.

Lebanon

[Lebanon's Collapse is Like the Titanic's Sinking, Only without the Music: Le Drian](#)

December 14, 2020, Reuters

French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said Lebanon's political and economic collapse was like the sinking of the Titanic, only without the music. "The Lebanese are in complete denial as they sink, and there isn't even the music", French minister added.

Oman

[Indian Nationals Can Now Enjoy Visa Free Travel to Oman](#)

December 09, 2020, Times of Oman

Indian citizens who wish to travel to Oman can stay in the country for up to 10 days without the need for an entry visa.

Qatar

[Task Force to be Set Up to Boost Qatari Investments into India: PM Modi](#)

December 08, 2020, Livemint

India and Qatar on Tuesday (December 08) discussed the creation of a special task force to facilitate investments by Qatar Investment Authority into India. The two countries also "resolved to explore Qatari investments in the entire energy value-chain in India,".

Saudi Arabia

[Indian Army Chief Gen. Naravane Holds Talks with Royal Saudi Land Forces Commander on Defence Cooperation](#)

December 13, 2020, Hindustan Times

Indian Army chief General M M Naravane on Sunday (December 13) discussed issues of bilateral defence cooperation with Commander of the Royal Saudi Land Forces General Fahd Bin Abdullah Mohammed Al-Mutir during his historic visit to the Gulf Kingdom.

[India is Looking West: Relations between New Delhi and the Gulf Nations Have Undergone a Fundamental Reset](#)

December 06, 2020, The Times of India

The Gulf region is a reliable partner for energy security for India while India augments food security in the region. However, our relationship has moved beyond mere transactional value. Prime Minister Modi and the Gulf leadership are recreating a civilizational connect that had rusted over the years.

[Saudi Arabia Deports NRC Protesters](#)

December 11, 2020, The Siasat Daily

A group of NRI protestors from Saudi Arabia were deported from the Kingdom recently. They had held a protest by holding placards against the proposed NRC of India in downtown of Balad in Jeddah last year.

[China Bails Out Pakistan, Sanctions \\$1.5 Billion Loan for Saudi Arabia Debt: Report](#)

December 13, 2020, Moneycontrol

China has sanctioned a \$1.5 billion finance line to Pakistan for the country to repay a \$2 billion debt owed to Saudi Arabia – half of which is due this Monday (December 14).

[To Normalize Ties with Israel, Saudi Crown Prince Must Placate His Father – and Biden](#)

December 13, 2020, Haaretz

While the king sees his realm as the guardian of the whole Arab world, his son backs a Saudi-first approach. This debate will be key in relations with Israel, Iran and the new U.S. administration.

[Saudi Arabia Said to Have Played Role in Israel-Morocco Normalization Agreement](#)

December 11, 2020, The Times of Israel

Saudi Arabia plays a central role in the region, particularly among Sunni states, leading many analysts to speculate that none of the recent normalization deals with Israel would have been allowed without a green-light from Saudi Arabia.

Syria

[Syria Makes Command Changes to 1st Corps Following Israeli Threats](#)

December 13, 2020, The Jerusalem Post

The Syrian Arab Army has made changes to the leadership of the 1st Corps and its operations center in the southern part of the country, following threats to its leadership by the Israeli military.

[Car Bomb Kills 16 Including 3 Turkish Troops in Northeast Syria](#)

December 10, 2020, Hindustan Times

A car bomb killed 16 people including two civilians and three Turkish personnel Thursday (December 10) at a checkpoint in the Turkish-held border town of Ras al-Ain in northeast Syria.

Turkey

[Europe's Stance on Turkey Toughens with Sanctions, Weapons Talk](#)

December 11, 2020, AL Jazeera

European Union leaders plan to discuss arm exports to Turkey with the NATO allies and the United States, German Chancellor Angela Merkel said on Friday (December 11) after Greece pushed for an arms embargo on Ankara.

[1st Turkey-China Freight Train Reaches Georgia](#)

December 09, 2020, Anadolu Agency

The first train carrying goods from Turkey to China has arrived in Akhalkalaki in southern Georgia, authorities said on Wednesday (December 09). Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway line is an important part of the logistical corridor connecting Europe to Asia.

UAE

[Indian Army Chief General Naravane Holds Talks with UAE's Land Forces Commander on Defence Cooperation](#)

December 11, 2020, The New Indian Express

Chief of Army Staff Gen. MM Naravane has met Commander of the UAE's Land Forces and Staff Major General Saleh Mohammed Saleh Al Ameri and discussed key issues of mutual interest and defence cooperation, the Indian Army said on Friday (December 11).

[Pravasi Bharatiya Divas Conference: Panel Discussions on GCC-India](#)

December 10, 2020, MEA India

India's Ministry of External Affairs organised two virtual Panel Discussions on GCC-India on December 11, 2020 in the run up to the PBD Convention to be held in January 2021. The topics of these Panel Discussions were: I. India and the Gulf: Leveraging energy partnerships, investment opportunities and emerging technologies for 'Atmanirbhar Bharat', II. Skill sets of the future for Indians in the Gulf.

[UAE Investors Look to Move into India-UAE's \\$7b Food Corridor](#)

December 08, 2020, Khaleej Times

The proposed UAE-India food corridor initiative is projected to draw investments of up to \$7 billion from the Emirates to the Subcontinent. The corridor is expected to benefit two million farmers and create 200,000 jobs in India by managing food supply chains and through the establishment of logistics infrastructure and major agricultural projects.

[UAE's Lulu Group to Set up Food Processing Centre in Jammu and Kashmir](#)

December 11, 2020, The Economic Times

The UAE-based Lulu Group International has announced a plan to set up a food processing centre in Srinagar for sourcing a wide range of agriculture products from Jammu and Kashmir.

[Senate Fails to Block Trump-backed Arms Sale to United Arab Emirates](#)

December 10, 2020, CNN

The U.S. Senate on Wednesday (December 09) failed to pass two disapproval resolutions pushed by a bipartisan group of senators to block a \$23 billion US arms sale to the United Arab Emirates that was approved by the Trump administration.

The first procedural measure failed to advance on a 46-50 vote and the second procedural vote failed to advance by 47-49.

[Middle East Facing 'Cyber Pandemic' as Covid-19 Exposes Security Vulnerabilities, UAE's Cyber Chief Says](#)

December 06, 2020, CNBC

The Middle East region is facing a “cyber pandemic” with Covid-19 related attacks skyrocketing this year, according to the United Arab Emirates government’s top cyber security chief.

Yemen

[Presence of ISIS, Al-Qaeda in Parts of Yemen Needs to be Addressed: India](#)

December 04, 2020, The Economic Times

India has said the presence of terrorist elements like ISIS and Al Qaeda in parts of Yemen and their continued attacks on civilian population needs to be addressed, stressing that the international community must unite to fight the "dark forces of terror" globally and hold those who support and shelter such terror groups accountable.

[Iran Blacklists US Ambassador to Yemen in Tit-for-Tat Move](#)

December 09, 2020, AL Jazeera

Iran imposed sanctions on the United States ambassador to Yemen a day after the administration of US President Donald Trump blacklisted Tehran's envoy to the embattled country.



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