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Oman's Land and Sea Partnership with India

Oman and India have further expanded their multi-layered cooperation, on the occasion of the first Indian Prime Minister's visit to the Sultanate, during his Middle Eastern journey (9-12 February). Modi also visited the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the second time since 2015. In Muscat, Narendra Modi met with Sultan Qaboos bin Al-Said at the Royal Palace (Bait al-Baraka). About 1,2 million of Indians live in Oman [International Migration Report 2017]: this workers' community generates considerable remittances, as the other Indian expatriates in the Gulf, benefitting also the Sultanate.

In the Omani-Indian rising partnership, it is actually difficult to disentangle what is about *the land* and what regards *the sea*: Muscat and New Delhi are maritime powers, with shared interests in "water domains" as trade, ports, tourism and naval defence. Oman allowed the use of the Duqm port for Indian military vessels, plus a dry dock for their maintenance: Modi called Indian businessmen for investments in the Special Economic Zones (SEZ) which surround Sohar, Salalah and al-Duqm.

Oman and India highlighted the urgency to fight extremism and religious violence: they agreed to widen cooperation to an area of mutual concern as cyber-security. According to the agreements signed, other topics to explore are food security and renewable energy.

From a strictly military point of view, Muscat and New Delhi agreed on joint military exercises and collaboration in coastal defence. In Abu Dhabi, Modi also signed for combined naval drills with the UAE. Omanis and Indians also engaged in the joint participation to defence exhibitions: India regularly participates to the biennial defence trade show International Defence Exhibition and Conference (IDEX) in the UAE.

Looking at the wider strategic picture, the Sultanate of Oman needs foreign direct investments (FDI) to implement its national transformation plan for economic diversification: Muscat's debt/GDP ratio continues to rise and it must introduce (and support politically) unpopular measures like cuts on welfare

and benefits. As a result, trade and infrastructures (as the Duqm project) are main assets for the Omani post-oil economy. With regards to India, New Delhi aims at limiting China's economic penetration in the Gulf: Beijing had already invested in the development of Duqm and its SEZ, while Muscat borrowed in 2017 more than \$3 billion from Chinese banks.

The whole Arab Gulf looks at New Delhi with increased interest. King Abdullah of Jordan travels to India on February 27-29. Security and defence will be at the centre of bilateral talks. Jordan and India are to sign a defence agreement encompassing joint military exercises and training, intelligence sharing. The pact would also include chapters on capacity building, cyber security and military industry.

The current multipolar system of international relations boosts the geostrategic relevance of the Western Indian Ocean: emerging, emerged and re-emerged powers all have competing, sometimes conflicting interests in these crowded waters.

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