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**EDITORIAL ANALYSIS**

# UAE-Saudi Rivalry and the Hollowing of the Abraham Accords

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# UAE-Saudi Rivalry and the Hollowing of the Abraham Accords

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## INTERVIEW ANGLE

*"Does the IMEC corridor remain viable if the Gulf's two anchor states diverge geopolitically, and what is India's Plan B for its West Asia strategy?"*

## EDITORIAL SUMMARY:

The Indian Express argues that Saudi-UAE rivalry has rendered the Abraham Accords structurally hollow. India's West Asia strategy must shift from multilateral assumptions — IMEC, Negev Forum, anti-Iran coalition — to robust bilateral hedging tracks with each capital, anchored in the India-UAE CEPA, the India-Saudi Strategic Partnership Council, and I2U2.

## THE ACCORDS AND THEIR ASSUMPTIONS

The September 15, 2020 Abraham Accords, brokered by the United States, normalised relations between the United Arab Emirates and Israel and were extended within months to Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco. The framework rested on three implicit assumptions. The first was that Saudi Arabia, the largest Sunni economy and the custodian of Islam's holiest sites, would eventually follow. The second was that the anti-Iran consensus — sharpened by Iran's regional missile and proxy posture, by the Houthi war in Yemen, and by the JCPOA's instability — would harden into an operational coalition. The third was that economic integration through trade agreements, joint mega-projects and the Negev Forum process would lock political alignment into structural interdependence.

Six years later, each assumption is weaker. Saudi Arabia has not normalised. The anti-Iran consensus has dissolved as the UAE (2022) and Saudi Arabia (March 2023, Beijing-mediated) separately restored diplomatic ties with Tehran. And the integration architecture has been overtaken by competition between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi.

## FROM CONVERGENCE TO COMPETITION

The 2015-2022 period saw close Saudi-UAE coordination. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman of Saudi Arabia and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed of the UAE jointly led the Yemen war coalition (from 2015), the four-state embargo against Qatar (2017-2021), and the broader anti-Iran posture. Their convergence shaped Gulf Cooperation Council politics through this period.

The reversal has accumulated across multiple files.

DIMENSION	SAUDI POSITION	UAE POSITION
OPEC+ production quotas	Sustained voluntary cuts; price discipline	Pressed for higher quotas reflecting capacity
Yemen war	Continued lead role through 2024-25	Withdrew Hodeidah forces 2019; reduced footprint
Iran normalisation	March 2023 China-mediated restoration	Restored full ties 2022 (separately)
Israel and Gaza (post-Oct 2023)	Suspended normalisation track; Palestinian state precondition	Maintained ties while urging restraint
Anchor mega-project	NEOM (\$500 billion futuristic city)	Dubai and Abu Dhabi clusters; Etihad Rail
Connectivity vision	Saudi Land Bridge rail concept	Etihad Rail integrating to wider Gulf
Regional leadership claim	Custodian of Islam's holiest sites; OIC anchor	Indo-Pacific economic hub; minilateral anchor

These are not transient disagreements. They are structural competition over who speaks for the Gulf — and the answer increasingly depends on the issue.

## THE GAZA WAR AND THE NORMALISATION TRACK

The October 7, 2023 Hamas attack on Israel and the subsequent military operations in Gaza had divergent effects on Saudi and Emirati positions. The UAE maintained its diplomatic ties with Israel and urged restraint; Saudi Arabia publicly suspended normalisation talks and conditioned any resumption on a credible pathway to a Palestinian state. The Negev Forum process — launched in March 2022 as a structured multilateral platform involving Israel, the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, Egypt and the United States — slowed materially.

The result is that the political project the Accords were intended to enable — a Sunni-Israeli alignment that would isolate Iran and integrate the region economically — is now indefinitely deferred. Technical cooperation continues; political ambition has been parked.

## THE IMEC QUESTION

For India, the most directly affected initiative is the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC). Announced at the G20 New Delhi Declaration in September 2023, IMEC envisages two arms: an eastern arm connecting India to the Gulf by sea and an extension of Saudi Land Bridge / Etihad Rail to a northern arm connecting the Gulf to Europe through Israel and Jordan, with maritime links to the Mediterranean. The corridor requires Saudi, Emirati, Israeli, Jordanian and EU coordination on customs, rail interoperability, digital infrastructure and shipping.

The October 2023 Gaza war froze IMEC's political momentum almost immediately. The Saudi-UAE rivalry adds a parallel drag: if Saudi Land Bridge and Etihad Rail evolve as competitors rather than complements, the corridor's eastern arm becomes harder to integrate. India has reaffirmed IMEC at successive G20 platforms, but the architecture's full activation depends on political coherence that the Gulf does not currently supply.

The implication is not that IMEC is dead. It is that India should hold INSTC (International North-South Transport Corridor, Chabahar-anchored) and Eurasian land-bridge alternatives as live options, and should ensure that no single corridor becomes the sole pillar of its West Asia connectivity strategy.

## INDIA'S BILATERAL ARCHITECTURE

India's bilateral instruments in the Gulf are unusually robust and provide the foundation for a bilateral-first hedging strategy.

- **India-UAE CEPA:** Signed February 18, 2022; in force May 1, 2022 — India's first deep CEPA with a major Gulf economy. Bilateral trade has grown to approximately \$85 billion annually; the UAE hosts the largest Indian expatriate community (around 4.3 million); investment flows in both directions have accelerated.
- **India-Saudi Strategic Partnership Council:** Established 2019; bilateral trade approximately \$42 billion; Indian diaspora roughly 2.7 million; remittance corridor substantial. The Riyadh Investment Authority cooperation has expanded since 2023.
- **I2U2 (India-Israel-UAE-US):** Launched July 2022; food security and energy infrastructure project pipeline.
- **Israel bilateral:** Defence cooperation (Heron, SPYDER, Spike, Harop), agricultural technology, water management. UPI interoperability has expanded in 2024-25.
- **Iran bilateral:** Chabahar Port long-term lease (IPGL-Iran, May 2024) for Shahid Beheshti terminal; INSTC connectivity to Central Asia.

INDIA'S ANCHOR	YEAR / STATUS	STRATEGIC USE
India-UAE CEPA	Feb 2022 signed; May 2022 in force	Trade, investment, financial services
Strategic Partnership Council (Saudi)	2019	Energy, defence, investment
I2U2	July 2022	Food, water, clean energy minilateral
India-Israel partnership	Long-standing	Defence, water, agri-tech, UPI
Chabahar lease (Iran)	May 2024	Pakistan-bypass connectivity, INSTC

## THE HEDGING DOCTRINE

India's West Asia strategy under the current configuration should follow four principles. First, deepen bilateral instruments — CEPAs, Strategic Partnership Councils, defence agreements — so that India's interests are not contingent on multilateral coherence in the region. Second, pursue minilaterals (I2U2, Quad-aligned working groups) where they add operational value but do not over-invest in their political robustness. Third, diversify connectivity — IMEC where possible, INSTC and Chabahar as parallel anchors, and Eurasian land-bridge options held in reserve. Fourth, insulate India's Indo-Pacific primary security space from West Asian volatility through Quad, IORA, and Indian Navy capacity in the western Indian Ocean.

## UPSC MAINS ANALYSIS

### GS Paper 2 — India's Bilateral and Multilateral Relations in West Asia

- **Abraham Accords (September 15, 2020):** US-brokered UAE-Israel normalisation; extended to Bahrain, Sudan, Morocco; predicated on Sunni-Israeli alignment against Iran.
- **Iran normalisations:** UAE restored full ties 2022; Saudi Arabia agreed Beijing-mediated restoration of ties with Iran, March 2023.
- **Negev Forum:** Launched March 2022 — multilateral platform involving Israel, UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, Egypt, US; slowed after October 2023.
- **India-UAE CEPA:** Signed Feb 18, 2022; in force May 1, 2022; trade approximately \$85 billion annually; Indian diaspora about 4.3 million.
- **India-Saudi Strategic Partnership Council:** Established 2019; trade approximately \$42 billion; diaspora about 2.7 million.
- **I2U2 (India-Israel-UAE-US):** July 2022 minilateral; food security, energy, infrastructure.
- **IMEC (India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor):** Announced at G20 New Delhi Declaration, September 2023; requires Saudi, UAE, Israel, Jordan, EU coordination.

- **NEOM:** Saudi Arabia's \$500 billion futuristic city; anchor mega-project competition with UAE.
- **Etihad Rail (UAE) and Saudi Land Bridge:** Rival regional connectivity infrastructures.
- **Chabahar Port:** Long-term lease IPGL-Iran, May 2024; Pakistan-bypass corridor aligned with INSTC.
- **India's Indo-Pacific anchors:** Quad, IORA, Indian Navy western Indian Ocean presence.

### Mains Questions:

- ❶ “The Abraham Accords have been structurally hollowed by Saudi-UAE rivalry and the Gaza war.” Examine and discuss the implications for India's IMEC strategy.
- ❷ India's West Asia policy must combine bilateral instruments, minilaterals and corridor diplomacy. Evaluate the architecture, identifying gaps and priorities.
- ❸ The India-UAE Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement of 2022 marked a strategic shift in India's Gulf engagement. Analyse its trajectory and lessons for future Indian CEPAs.
- ❹ The China-brokered Iran-Saudi rapprochement of March 2023 has implications for India. Discuss the strategic significance and India's response.

**Keywords:** Abraham Accords September 2020, UAE-Israel normalisation, Saudi-UAE rivalry, Negev Forum March 2022, India-UAE CEPA February 2022, Strategic Partnership Council India-Saudi 2019, I2U2 July 2022, IMEC G20 New Delhi Declaration September 2023, NEOM, Etihad Rail, Saudi Land Bridge, Beijing-mediated Saudi-Iran restoration March 2023, October 7 2023 Hamas attack, Gaza war, OPEC+ quota disputes, Chabahar lease May 2024, INSTC, Pakistan-bypass connectivity, Indo-Pacific anchors, Quad, IORA

*Indian Express's underlying argument is that the Abraham Accords were never about Abraham — they were about an anti-Iran coalition wrapped in normalisation theatre. The wrapping has frayed. Riyadh and Abu Dhabi compete; Tehran is no longer outside; Gaza has divided the very capitals the Accords aspired to unite. India built parts of its West Asia strategy on the assumption that the architecture would hold. The course correction is not to abandon West Asia — India's energy, diaspora and trade stakes there are immense — but to deepen the bilateral, minilateral and corridor diversification that does not depend on Gulf multilateral coherence. Hedging is the new architecture.*

**Source:** Indian Express — Editorial Pages

#### ● KEY ARGUMENTS AT A GLANCE

**Deepening economic, ideological and regional-leadership competition between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi has structurally**

**hollowed the Abraham Accords (2020) framework, which depended on a unified Sunni-Israeli front against Iran; India's West Asia strategy must hedge by deepening bilateral tracks with each Gulf capital rather than relying on a multilateral architecture that is no longer politically coherent.**

**✓ SUPPORTING**

- Saudi-UAE convergence between 2015 and 2022 — Yemen war coalition, the anti-Qatar embargo of 2017-21, and a shared anti-Iran stance — has reversed into competition over OPEC+ production quotas, divergent responses to the post-October-2023 Gaza war, and rival mega-projects (NEOM vs Dubai-Abu Dhabi).
- Both Gulf capitals have separately normalised with Iran — the UAE restored full diplomatic ties in 2022, and Saudi Arabia agreed the China- brokered restoration of ties with Iran in March 2023 — undermining the anti-Iran consensus on which the Abraham Accords were premised.
- The India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), announced at the G20 New Delhi Declaration in September 2023, requires sustained coordination among Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Israel, Jordan and the European Union — coordination that the Gaza war and Saudi-UAE competition have made significantly harder.
- India's bilateral architecture remains robust — the India-UAE Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement signed in February 2022 and effective from May 1, 2022; the India-Saudi Strategic Partnership Council (2019); I2U2 (India-Israel-UAE-US, July 2022) — providing the platform for a bilateral-first West Asia strategy.

**⚠ COUNTER**

The Abraham Accords retain technical and economic functionality even where political salience has eroded — UAE-Israel trade has grown substantially since 2020, intelligence cooperation continues, and the Negev Forum framework persists; reports of "hollowing" risk understating the institutional inertia that keeps the architecture alive.

**→ WAY FORWARD**

India should pursue a bilateral-first hedging strategy — deepen CEPA-style trade agreements with both Saudi Arabia and the UAE, diversify IMEC routing with INSTC and Eurasian alternatives, leverage I2U2 for project finance, and use Quad and IORA

architectures to anchor Indo-Pacific stability so that West Asian volatility does not cascade into India's primary security space.

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### MAINS ANSWER FRAMEWORK

#### QUESTION

*Saudi-UAE rivalry has hollowed out the Abraham Accords as a regional security architecture. Critically examine the divergences and their implications for India's West Asia strategy, including the IMEC corridor. (250 words)*

#### INTRODUCTION

The Abraham Accords of 2020 reorganised West Asian geopolitics around a Sunni-Israeli front against Iran. Six years later, Saudi-UAE rivalry, separate normalisations with Iran, and the post-October-2023 Gaza war have hollowed out that architecture, leaving India to recalibrate a West Asia strategy that had assumed multilateral coherence in the Gulf.

#### BODY

The September 15, 2020 Abraham Accords formalised UAE-Israel normalisation, extended in subsequent months to Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco. The architecture rested on three implicit assumptions: that Saudi Arabia would eventually follow, that the anti-Iran consensus would harden into an operational coalition, and that economic integration — including the Negev Forum process — would lock in political alignment.

Each assumption has weakened. The UAE restored full diplomatic ties with Iran in 2022, and in March 2023 Saudi Arabia agreed a Beijing-mediated restoration of diplomatic relations with Tehran, dissolving the bloc logic.

The October 7, 2023 Hamas attack on Israel and the subsequent Gaza war diverged the two Gulf positions further — the UAE maintained ties while urging restraint; Saudi Arabia publicly suspended normalisation talks and conditioned any resumption on a Palestinian state pathway. OPEC+ production disputes surfaced repeatedly, with the UAE pressing for higher quotas.

Mega-project competition between NEOM (Saudi Arabia's \$500 billion futuristic city) and the Dubai-Abu Dhabi economic clusters, and between the Saudi Land Bridge rail concept and Etihad Rail in the UAE, embedded the rivalry in infrastructure. India's exposure to these divergences is structural.

The IMEC corridor — announced at the G20 New Delhi Declaration in September 2023 — requires

Saudi, Emirati, Israeli, Jordanian and European coordination; the Gaza war and the Saudi-UAE rivalry have raised the coordination burden materially. Yet India’s bilateral instruments are strong: the India-UAE CEPA signed on February 18, 2022 and in force from May 1, 2022 has structured bilateral trade above \$85 billion annually; the Strategic Partnership Council with Saudi Arabia (2019) underpins around \$42 billion of trade and a Saudi-Indian remittance corridor that supports a diaspora of approximately 2.7 million; and I2U2 (July 2022) provides a minilateral platform for food, water and energy projects with the United States.

### CONCLUSION

The lesson for India is that multilateral assumptions in West Asia are fragile — the Abraham Accords have not collapsed, but they no longer carry the political coherence that justified building strategies around them. India’s response must be a bilateral-first hedging architecture: CEPAs, Strategic Partnership Councils, I2U2, IMEC where possible but with INSTC and Eurasian alternatives held in reserve, and Quad-IORA anchors that insulate India’s primary Indo-Pacific space from West Asian volatility.

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