



Original Article

India's West Asia Diplomacy in Transition: The Strategic Significance of I2U2 (India, Israel, United States, and United Arab Emirates)

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Abstract

India's diplomacy in West Asia has historically turned around energy dependence, diaspora connections, and complex geopolitical balancing. Today, though, this engagement is undergoing a significant transition, marked by the increase of new frameworks of cooperation. Between them, the I2U2 grouping comprising India, Israel, the United States, and the United Arab Emirates stands out as a milestone experiment in bilateralism. Unlike traditional multilateral institutions, often forced by large memberships and slow agreement building, I2U2 operates as a quick, project driven coalition focused on geo-economic consequences. For India, participation in I2U2 is both strategic and practical. It enables New Delhi to reinforce its image as a responsible stakeholder while expanding partnerships beyond its traditional alignments. The grouping's early initiatives highpoint this promise. A \$2 billion food corridor connecting India and the UAE, powered by Israeli agricultural knowledge and American logistical support, exemplifies the potential of resource pooling for touchable developmental gains. Also, renewable energy undertakings in Gujarat, backed by Emirati investment and U.S. technology, prove a progressive agenda aligned with sustainability and climate imports. What differentiates I2U2 is its practical orientation. It avoids the ideological weight of security centric groupings like the Quad and instead underlines development, connectivity, and human security. This framing vibrates with the Global South and strengthens India's ability to balance ties across Western and Gulf partners. Ultimately, I2U2 signals the evolution of India's West Asia diplomacy, offering a flexible model of functional cooperation that mirrors the realities of a multipolar world order.

Keywords: I2U2, India's West Asia diplomacy, Abraham Accords, Act West policy, food security, renewable energy, IMEC, Indo-Pacific.

Introduction

India's engagement with West Asia has witnessed a profound transition over the last two decades, driven by shifting regional geopolitics, global power realignments, and New Delhi's expanding economic and strategic interests. Historically, India's diplomacy in the region was shaped by three principal factors: energy dependence on the Gulf, the welfare of its large diaspora, and a cautious balancing act in the Israel-Palestine conflict. However, the emergence of new alignments such as the Abraham Accords (2020), coupled with the rise of flexible Mini lateral mechanisms, has pushed India to recalibrate its strategy toward West Asia. Within this evolving matrix, the I2U2 grouping comprising India, Israel, the United States, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) emerges as a significant platform, symbolizing India's transition from transactional engagement to strategic partnerships in the region (Suri Navdeep, (2022). India's approach to West Asia has often been contrasted with its "Look East" and later "Act East" policy, which emphasized strategic and economic engagement with Southeast and East Asia. Recognizing the centrality of West Asia to its energy security, connectivity, and geoeconomic ambitions, India has articulated a complementary "Act West Policy," signalling its intent to extend its influence and partnerships westward. The I2U2 initiative represents the institutional manifestation of this orientation, highlighting India's capacity to operate simultaneously in both the Indo-Pacific and West Asian theatres.

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The geopolitical context of I2U2 is rooted in the Abraham Accords, which normalized relations between Israel and several Arab states, most notably the UAE. This breakthrough created diplomatic openings for new forms of regional cooperation, enabling the United States to consolidate its allies into flexible, issue-based coalitions. For Washington, I2U2 fits into its broader strategy of creating “Mini lateral” partnerships that distribute strategic burdens and counterbalance China’s growing influence across Eurasia and the Middle East (Alterman, 2022). Unlike traditional alliances, these Mini laterals are designed to be pragmatic, functional, and sectoral, targeting areas such as infrastructure, energy, and technology.

India’s participation in I2U2 reflects its aspiration to be seen not only as a regional power but also as a global connector between strategic geographies. The grouping’s initial projects such as a \$2 billion UAE-backed investment in food parks in India and a \$330 million hybrid renewable energy project in Gujarat demonstrate how development-oriented cooperation can address mutual concerns like food and energy security while boosting India’s domestic growth (MEA, 2022). I2U2 aligns India’s domestic goals with partners’ developmental agendas, emphasizing geo-economics over security. Unlike the Quad’s maritime focus, I2U2 prioritizes energy, water, health, food, and space, projecting a development-driven character. This allows India to strengthen ties with the U.S. and Israel while complementary relations with Gulf states through multi-alignment (Jaishankar, 2020). The representative value of I2U2 should not be underestimated. It proves India’s growing confidence in engaging diverse actors, linking divides between Israel and the Arab world, while concurrently partnering with the United States on regional issues. This imagery underscores India’s rise as a bridge-builder and agenda-setter in the developing multipolar order. It also highlights New Delhi’s ability to align its Act West policy with its global drives of becoming a key investor in issue created international coalitions.

The I2U2 Agenda: Origins and Progress

I2U2, union India, Israel, the U.S., and UAE, signifies a functional coalition in West Asia and the Indo-Pacific. Diverse broad multilateral bodies, it focuses on sectoral issues like food, energy, infrastructure, and technology. Its development reflects shifting regional chains and global power shifts in the 21st century.

1. Origins of I2U2

The origin of I2U2 can be traced to a combination of geopolitical, economic, and diplomatic developments. While the grouping was formally launched at the virtual summit in July 2022, its theoretical roots go back to October 2021, when the foreign ministers of India, Israel, the UAE, and the U.S. held their first quadrilateral meeting on the pastimes of the Abraham Accords. At that stage, the initiative was informally called the “West Asian Quad,” signalling parallels with the Indo-Pacific Quad (India, Japan, U.S., and Australia). Signed between Israel and several Arab states, including the UAE and Bahrain, the accords normalized relations and created a diplomatic space for trilateral and quadrilateral cooperation. Without this breakthrough, it would have been difficult for India and the U.S. to push for a grouping that included both Israel and the UAE. As Washington reduced its military footprint in the Middle East most visibly after the withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 it sought to maintain influence through Mini lateral partnerships. The U.S. strategy was to empower important partners like India, Israel, and the UAE to assume greater roles in stabilizing and shaping the region (Alterman, 2022). India was concurrently deepening bilateral ties with all three I2U2 partners. With Israel, India had advanced defence and technology cooperation; with the UAE, it had robust trade and diaspora linkages; with the U.S., it was developing an inclusive global partnership. I2U2 provided New Delhi a platform to integrate these bilateral equations into a multilateral framework. Unlike security-heavy groupings, I2U2 was designed to focus on practical challenges such as food and energy security. These issues vibrated strongly amid the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Ukraine war, both of which exposed vulnerabilities in global supply chains.

2. Institutionalization of the Grouping

The first leaders’ summit in July 2022, hosted virtually by U.S. President Joe Biden, marked the formal institutionalization of I2U2. The joint statement emphasized six key areas of cooperation: water, energy, transportation, space, health, and food security (MEA, 2022). These areas were deliberately chosen to reflect shared developmental priorities and to avoid polarizing issues like hard security or military alignment. \$2 billion UAE-funded investment in food parks in India, leveraging advanced Israeli agricultural technology and American private-sector expertise. The goal was to boost agricultural productivity, reduce food waste, and create sustainable supply chains in South Asia. 300 MW hybrid renewable energy project in Gujarat, combining wind and solar technologies, with the potential for private-sector scaling.

These projects highlighted the synergistic complementarities among the four members:

- Israel’s technological expertise,
- The UAE’s financial capacity,
- India’s demographic and market potential, and
- The U.S.’s global leadership and private-sector innovation.

3. Evolution of the Framework

Originally hailed as a “West Asian Quad,” I2U2 carried significant symbolic value demonstrating the linking of Arab Israeli divides, U.S.-India cooperation, and India’s role as a regional balancer. Over time, however, the grouping has shifted toward practical, issue-based projects, which enhance its resilience and reduce the risk of being perceived as a security bloc. I2U2 has not developed in isolation. It intersects with other emerging platforms like the India Middle East Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), announced at the G20 Summit in New Delhi in 2023. IMEC envisions a multimodal trade and energy corridor linking India with Europe via the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Israel. Many analysts see I2U2 as a building block for such mega-initiatives (Financial Express, 2024). While officially limited to four members, I2U2 has maintained an open, flexible character. There is speculation that countries like Saudi Arabia or Egypt may, in the future, join certain projects under the I2U2 umbrella.

This expansionary potential could transform the grouping into a larger West Asian developmental coalition, akin to ASEAN-plus arrangements in Asia (Singh, 2023).

4. **Significance of I2U2's Evolution**

It strengthens India's role as a connection across geographies linking the Indo Pacific with West Asia and Europe. It also supports New Delhi's domestic development goals by attracting investments in food security and renewable energy. I2U2 provides Washington with a means to maintain strategic relevance in West Asia without large-scale military commitments. It also demonstrates the U.S. strategy of "partnering up, not patrolling" leveraging allies to share responsibilities (MEA, 2022). I2U2 embodies the spirit of pole Abraham Accords regionalism. By fostering cooperation between Israel and the UAE with India and the U.S., it signals a pragmatic turn in Middle Eastern geopolitics. I2U2 demonstrates the viability of issue founded Mini laterals, which could become a template for other regions. Unlike rigid alliances, these coalitions focus on deliverables and adaptability, making them more suitable for the multipolar 21st century.

India's Stakes and Strategic Interests in I2U2

India's I2U2 appointment reflects energetic energy, trade, diaspora, and geopolitical stakes in West Asia, enhancing its role as a responsible stakeholder while following opportunities in technology, connectivity, and multilateral cooperation.

1. **Energy Security and Renewable Pathways**

Energy has traditionally been the cornerstone of India's relations with West Asia. The Gulf region, particularly the United Arab Emirates (UAE), supplies a significant share of India's crude oil and liquefied natural gas (LNG). According to India's Ministry of Commerce, the UAE is among India's top three energy suppliers, and energy trade constitutes a vital component of their bilateral ties (MEA, 2023). Through I2U2, energy cooperation is diversifying beyond hydrocarbons.

One landmark initiative is the proposed 300 MW hybrid renewable energy project in Gujarat, funded by the UAE with Israeli expertise and U.S. technological support. This project is emblematic of the group's focus on sustainable solutions, offering India a chance to accelerate its transition toward green energy (The Hindu, 2022). Additionally, joint explorations into hydrogen fuel, solar technologies, and clean energy supply chains reflect India's long-term goals of reducing carbon dependence while securing stable energy supplies.

2. **Food Security and Agricultural Cooperation**

Another key agenda of I2U2 is food security, a critical concern for both India and its West Asian partners. India, with its vast agricultural base, can serve as a reliable food supplier to the UAE and Israel, both of which face constraints in agricultural production due to limited arable land and water scarcity. Under I2U2, the UAE has pledged to invest \$2 billion in developing integrated food parks in India. These parks, to be located across states like Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh, will use advanced technology from Israel and logistical expertise from the U.S. to enhance storage, distribution, and efficiency (MEA, 2022). For India, this represents an opportunity to modernize its agricultural infrastructure, generate rural employment, and strengthen its export competitiveness. In a broader sense, food parks reinforce India's role as a key factor in addressing regional and global food supply challenges, particularly in times of geopolitical disruption like the Russia-Ukraine war.

3. **Technology and Innovation Synergies**

Israel's reputation as the "Start-Up Nation" and the U.S.'s strength in advanced technologies position I2U2 as a platform where India can deepen its technological partnerships. India's vibrant IT sector and growing innovation ecosystem complement these strengths. Joint ventures in space exploration, AI, cyber security, and healthcare innovation form part of the framework's agenda.

One example is collaboration in space cooperation, with India's ISRO exploring partnerships with NASA and Israeli firms under the I2U2 framework. Another area is water technology, where Israel's expertise in desalination and drip irrigation can be applied to India's water-stressed regions (Fathah, 2022). Such synergies not only strengthen India's domestic modernization drive but also elevate its position in global technology supply chains.

4. **Diaspora and Soft Power Leverage**

The Indian diaspora, particularly in the Gulf, is another vital factor in India's meeting through I2U2. Over 10 million Indians live and work in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, with remittances playing a substantial role in India's economy. The UAE alone hosts more than 3.5 million Indians, making it India's largest expatriate community abroad (MEA, 2023). I2U2 offers an indirect mechanism for India to strengthen its diaspora diplomacy. By building stronger economic linkages with the UAE and Israel, India secures the wellbeing of its overseas citizens, though also expanding cultural and people-to-people ties. This balances New Delhi's broader use of soft power, from Bollywood to yoga, in strengthening its identity as a bond builder between regions.

5. **Connectivity and Goeconomic Corridors**

A crucial strategic interest for India lies in connectivity. The India Middle East Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), announced during the G20 Summit in New Delhi in 2023, directly overlays with I2U2's objectives. IMEC proposes linking India with the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and onward to Europe through rail and port networks, with U.S. and EU support. This project offers India an another to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), enabling it to expand its trade networks while avoiding debt trap diplomacy (Ministry of External Affairs, 2023). For India, the corridor enhances access to European markets, reduces transport costs, and supports its role as a hub in the evolving Eurasian trade architecture. Strategically, it ties India's Indo Pacific aspirations with West Asian outreach, making a continuum of connectivity stretching from the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean.

6. Security and Counterterrorism Cooperation

Though I2U2 is largely outlined around development and economic cooperation, security thoughts remain embedded in India's interests. Israel is a key defence partner, supplying advanced weapons systems, drones, and surveillance technologies to India. The U.S., too, remains India's most significant defence partner. The UAE, traditionally aligned with India on counterterrorism, also enhances regional stability through intelligence sharing. Through I2U2, India aids from intelligence cooperation on maritime security, counterterrorism, and cyber threats. While not as openly security concerned with as the Quad, the grouping still contributes to India's broader security calculus, particularly in stabilizing sea lanes in the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean.

Challenges and Constraints of I2U2

India's I2U2 role emphasizes West Asia's energy, trade, and geopolitical rank while advancing technology, connectivity, and cooperative opportunities.

1. Diverging Strategic Priorities

While the four members share overlying interests, their broader foreign policy objectives are not always aligned. For the United States, I2U2 is part of a larger effort to uphold influence in West Asia and integrate the region into its Indo-Pacific strategy, countering China's Belt and Road Initiative. For India, though, the grouping is more about expanding economic linkages, energy security, and connectivity, rather than directly balancing China. Likewise, while Israel sees I2U2 as an opportunity to normalize its presence in the Arab world, the UAE's motivations are primarily economic and based on securing food and technology partnerships. These asymmetries could limit long-term coherence.

2. The Iran Factor

One of the most significant geopolitical constraints is Iran. India has historically maintained strong ties with Tehran, particularly for access to the Chabahar Port, which is vital for its connectivity to Afghanistan and Central Asia. However, the United States and Israel remain deeply antagonistic toward Iran, confusing India's diplomatic balancing act (Singh, 2023). The UAE, too, has fluctuating relations with Tehran. If I2U2 projects are perceived as excluding or containing Iran, this could spark regional friction and reduce India's manoeuvrability in West Asia.

3. China's Expanding Influence

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), including projects like the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and its growing presence in Gulf ports, poses a direct challenge to the geoeconomic logic of I2U2. For instance, the UAE and Israel both maintain strong economic ties with China, even as they engage with I2U2. If the U.S. pushes I2U2 as a counter-China mechanism, smaller members like the UAE may hesitate to take overtly confrontational positions, thereby diluting the framework's effectiveness.

4. Institutional Weakness

Different the European Union or ASEAN, I2U2 lacks a permanent institutional framework. There is no secretariat, dispute resolve mechanism, or binding agreement. Decisions are ad hoc and project-based, leaving implementation dependent on the political will of each government. While this allows flexibility, it also creates risks of delays, funding shortfalls, or discontinuities when leadership changes. For instance, political transitions in Israel or the U.S. could alter priorities, potentially stalling momentum.

5. Domestic Political Constraints

Respectively member faces internal political pressures that could constrain commitments. In India, concerns over sovereignty and scepticism of Western conquered frameworks may influence how far New Delhi integrates into I2U2. In the UAE, balancing ties with both Washington and Beijing could create hesitation. Israel faces periodic domestic political instability, which often distracts from external promises. Temporarily, in the U.S., a change in administration could deprioritize West Asia in Favor of other regions, weakening sustained engagement.

Comparative Analysis Integrating I2U2 with News Insights

The rise of minilateral forums like Quad and I2U2 reflects flexible alliance building, enabling states to achieve strategic aims efficiently, though their purposes, membership, and symbolism differ substantially.

The Quad, comprising India, the United States, Japan, and Australia, emerged as a response to shared concerns over China's expanding influence, particularly in the Indo Pacific domain. It has steadily institutionalized its cooperation through virtual summits, working groups, and joint exercises, reflecting a strategic security orientation that includes maritime security and technology cooperation (Foreign Policy, 2023). In contrast, I2U2 comprising India, Israel, the UAE, and the U.S. orders development created cooperation in areas such as food security, renewable energy, water management, health, and space, deliberately avoiding the messaging of a security alliance. This distinction softens geopolitical anxieties and enables broader acceptance within the volatile Middle East. News commentary often draws direct comparisons between the two. At its inaugural summit in July 2022, the Times of India described I2U2 as potentially becoming the "West Asian Quad," highlighting its resemblance to the Indo-Pacific grouping in format but differentiating its economic focus (Times of India, 2022). The strategic emphasis of the U.S. was clarified by national security advisor Jake Sullivan, who stated that I2U2 could become a defining feature of a "more globally integrated Middle East," signalling a deliberate shift from traditional militarized frameworks toward development cooperation (Hindustan Times, 2022). The analogy to the Quad underscores the symbolic value of India serving as a connecting pillar across regions.

Yet, another layer of analysis suggests a nuanced strategy at play. A blog discussion in *The Diplomat* cautioned that I2U2's economic orientation may conceal strategic intent working as an indirect counterweight to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) through market driven collaboration rather than overt confrontation (Tdhj.org, 2022). Similarly, analysis from the Foreign

Policy Research Institute emphasizes the broader significance of Mini laterals, they offer a novel mechanism for U.S. allies to provide regional public goods while reducing dependence on broader, slower multilateral institutions (FPRI, 2023). Quad unites democracies on maritime security, while I2U2, shaped by the Abraham Accords, pragmatically combines UAE's capital, Israel's innovation, U.S. technology, and India's demographics for human security. (IDSA, 2022).

Challenges and Future Prospects of I2U2

Despite its innovative framework and early optimism, the I2U2 initiative is not free from challenges. The grouping's success will depend on its ability to navigate structural, political, and regional complexities while sustaining momentum in delivering tangible outcomes. At the same time, its future prospects appear promising if the participating states can effectively align their diverse interests. One of the foremost challenges for I2U2 lies in the volatility of West Asia. The Middle East continues to be a hotspot of political instability, sectarian conflict, and great power rivalries. The recent Israel Hamas conflict in 2023 significantly strained the cooperative environment in the region, as reports from *The Hindu* (2023) indicated a temporary slowdown in joint projects due to heightened tensions. Although the grouping does not frame itself as a political-security alliance, the shadow of conflict inevitably influences its ability to function smoothly.

A second challenge emerges from divergent national interests. While the U.S. views I2U2 as part of its broader Indo-Pacific and West Asia strategy to counterbalance China, India perceives it as an opportunity for developmental diplomacy, projecting itself as a bridge between regions. The UAE and Israel, meanwhile, see in I2U2 avenues to deepen economic modernization and diversify strategic partnerships. This asymmetry of priorities, while offering complementary strengths, could also hinder consensus on sensitive issues, particularly if projects intersect with geopolitical rivalries such as China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Additionally, the absence of a formal institutional framework poses questions about the durability of I2U2. Unlike the European Union or ASEAN, which operate with structured mechanisms, I2U2 remains an ad hoc, project-driven arrangement. As noted by *The Print* (2022), this flexibility allows for innovation but also risks fragmentation if political will weakens. Without a permanent secretariat or legally binding commitments, the forum depends heavily on the continuity of leadership priorities in member states. However, the future prospects of I2U2 remain significant. News reports from *The Hindu* (2022), I2U2 has launched a \$2 billion India UAE food corridor using Israeli Agri-tech and U.S. logistics, alongside renewable energy projects in Gujarat with Emirati investment and American expertise. These initiatives highlight practical, sustainable cooperation. Analysts suggest I2U2's developmental focus, non-ideological approach, and cross-regional model could redefine middle-power roles and resonate with Global South priorities. India leverages I2U2 projects in food, energy, and tech to boost its global image and diversify ties, while the U.S., UAE, and Israel gain influence, stability, and connectivity.

Conclusion

I2U2 is more than a new acronym in global politics; it represents a shift in how countries cooperate in a rapidly changing world. Emerging from the opening created by the Abraham Accords, this grouping brings together four very different nations India, Israel, the UAE, and the United States around a shared agenda of food security, renewable energy, and technology partnerships. Unlike traditional alliances that focus heavily on security, I2U2 emphasizes development, showing that diplomacy today is also about solving everyday problems. For India, this framework fits neatly into its "Act West" policy and complements its Indo-Pacific engagements. It allows New Delhi to work with both old partners like the U.S. and new ones like the UAE, while also deepening ties with Israel. This balance reflects India's growing role as a connector between regions and interests. Challenges are inevitable, particularly given West Asia's volatile politics, as seen during the 2023 Israel Hamas conflict. Still, early results such as investments in India's food corridors and clean energy projects highlight its potential.

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