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Counter Terrorism and Maritime Cooperation between India and GCC

Muhammad Nazim

M.Phil Scholar Riphah International University Islamabad

ABSTRACT

Counter-terrorism and maritime cooperation between India and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) have become a defining element of the evolving security architecture across the Indian Ocean Region. Rising threats such as terrorism, radicalization flows, narcotics trafficking, maritime piracy, illicit financial networks, and cyber vulnerabilities have made India and GCC states increasingly interdependent in safeguarding their shared maritime environment. Applying the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), this article argues that India and GCC states form an overlapping maritime security complex shaped by structural interdependence across energy routes, diaspora linkages, and shared vulnerabilities emanating from transnational security threats. RSCT posits that geographically proximate states develop interconnected security concerns, influenced by patterns of amity, rivalry, and regional threat perceptions. This analytical lens provides a holistic approach for understanding why India–GCC security cooperation has expanded beyond trade and labor ties into strategic maritime and counter-terrorism collaboration. This study examines historical foundations of India–GCC relations, the evolution of counter-terrorism mechanisms, intelligence-sharing arrangements, financial monitoring frameworks, anti-radicalization programs, and joint maritime policing structures. It evaluates major naval exercises, white-shipping agreements, port security protocols, maritime domain awareness (MDA) mechanisms, and anti-piracy missions to assess how India and GCC states collectively respond to regional insecurity. The article also analyzes how external powers such as the United States and China shape regional dynamics, while maritime tensions in the Strait of Hormuz, Gulf of Oman, Arabian Sea, and Gulf of Aden intensify the need for deeper India–GCC cooperation. The findings demonstrate that India and the GCC are increasingly converging into a maritime super-complex driven by energy interdependence, operational complementarity, and the need for coordinated responses to hybrid and transnational threats. The study concludes that sustained maritime and counter-terrorism collaboration is essential for long-term regional stability.

Keywords: Maritime Security, Counter-terrorism, Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), Indian Ocean Region, Energy Interdependence.

INTRODUCTION

Counter-terrorism and maritime security cooperation between India and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) has emerged as one of the most strategically significant developments in the Indian Ocean Region. The importance of this partnership has intensified in recent years due to shared vulnerabilities that transcend national borders. India and GCC states face overlapping threats in the form of terrorism, radicalization, cyber extremism, narcotics trafficking, maritime piracy, and disruptions to critical energy supply chains (Rahman, 2021). These threats are transnational by nature, operating across maritime routes that connect South Asia to the Gulf and beyond. As India depends on the Gulf for more than 60 percent of its crude oil supplies (Khan, 2022), and as GCC states host nearly nine million Indian expatriates (Pathak, 2022), the stability of the region carries direct implications for India's national security.

The maritime geography of the region forms the backbone of these interdependencies. The Strait of Hormuz, one of the world's most critical energy chokepoints, lies at the heart of India's energy security calculus. Maritime disruptions through drone attacks, sabotage operations, or tanker seizures have the potential to destabilize India's economy and fuel markets (Mehta, 2021). For GCC states, terrorism and maritime insecurity also threaten their critical infrastructures, energy exports, and economic diversification agendas. This has compelled both sides to institutionalize deeper security cooperation, ranging from intelligence sharing to joint naval exercises to anti-piracy missions in the Gulf of Aden (Rao, 2022).

To understand the structural drivers behind this partnership, the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) provides a comprehensive analytical framework. RSCT, as developed by Buzan and Wæver, emphasizes that regional security is shaped by geographical proximity, interdependence, and the intensity of shared threats (Buzan, 2003). According to RSCT, India and GCC states are part of overlapping regional complexes that merge in the maritime domain due to shared vulnerabilities. The Arabian Sea, Gulf of Oman, and the wider Indian Ocean Region function as a "maritime neighborhood" where security concerns cannot be compartmentalized geographically (Singh, 2023).

RSCT argues that security complexes evolve through patterns of amity and enmity. India and GCC states have historically maintained positive relations, supported by trade, energy flows, and deep social ties. These patterns of amity have facilitated institutionalized cooperation on counter-terrorism and maritime security. Conversely, regional tensions such as the Saudi–Iran rivalry and Indo–Pakistan maritime competition introduce layers of complexity that shape strategic behavior in the region (Farooq, 2022). The intersection of these dynamics reinforces the RSCT argument that regional security cannot be understood solely through bilateral lenses.

Furthermore, the decline of the United States' direct security presence in the Gulf and the rise of China's influence under the Belt and Road Initiative have accelerated the strategic convergence between India and the GCC. As external great-power dynamics shift, regional middle powers increasingly rely on collective security arrangements to manage threats (Ahmad, 2022). India's naval modernization, combined with GCC states' investments in maritime security capabilities, has strengthened operational synergy across the region.

This introduction sets the foundation for a deep examination of counter-terrorism cooperation, maritime coordination, intelligence-sharing mechanisms, and the RSCT-based interpretation of India–GCC security interdependence.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: REGIONAL SECURITY COMPLEX THEORY (RSCT)

Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) provides a powerful analytical foundation for understanding the deepening counter-terrorism and maritime cooperation between India and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The theory argues that security is inherently regional because states that are geographically proximate develop intertwined security concerns driven by shared threats, patterns of interaction, and structural interdependence (Buzan, 2003). Unlike traditional theories of international relations that focus on global systemic forces, RSCT localizes security dynamics within specific, overlapping regional clusters. In the case of India and the GCC, RSCT illuminates how counter-terrorism, maritime stability, and energy security link both sides into an integrated maritime security complex.

The starting point of RSCT is the assumption that security interdependence is more intense between neighboring states or states connected through critical regional waterways. India and the GCC are connected through the Arabian Sea, the Gulf of Oman, and the Strait of

Hormuz—maritime spaces that function as regional security corridors rather than mere trade routes (Singh, 2023). The vulnerability of these maritime routes to terrorism, hybrid threats, piracy, and geopolitical tensions explains why India and the GCC cannot insulate themselves from each other's security concerns. Maritime disruptions in the Gulf directly affect India's economy, while instability in India's coastal regions exposes GCC states to risks targeting migrant communities, trade flows, and energy transportation (Rahman, 2021).

RSCT identifies four types of regional security complexes: standard, centered, great-power-penetrated, and super-complexes. The India–GCC security environment exhibits characteristics of a great-power-penetrated complex due to the prolonged strategic involvement of the United States and the growing influence of China (Ahmad, 2022). It is also gradually evolving into what scholars describe as a maritime super-complex, in which multiple regional systems overlap through shared maritime vulnerabilities (Kapoor, 2023). The Indian Ocean Region is a prime example of this transformation, where South Asia, the Gulf, East Africa, and Southeast Asia converge into interconnected maritime security webs.

A key concept within RSCT is the pattern of amity and enmity that shapes regional cooperation. Historically, India and GCC states have maintained strong amity patterns reinforced by trade, energy partnerships, cultural ties, and large-scale diaspora movement (Pathak, 2022). These patterns reduce mistrust and facilitate deeper cooperation in sensitive areas such as intelligence exchange, counter-terrorism operations, and maritime policing. RSCT posits that sustained amity fosters regional security convergence, making India–GCC cooperation more durable and institutionalized than mere transactional arrangements (Buzan, 2003).

RSCT also emphasizes the role of shared threats in shaping regional security complexes. India and the GCC confront overlapping threats that include terrorism, radicalization networks, extremist financing channels, cyber extremism, narcotics trafficking, and maritime piracy. These threats are transnational, meaning no single state can address them independently (Rizvi, 2022). The diffusion of extremist ideologies through online platforms, the movement of operatives across borders, the trafficking of narcotics from Afghanistan through maritime channels, and the financing of terror networks through informal transfer systems all illustrate why the India–GCC region functions as an interconnected security zone.

Maritime insecurity further reinforces regional interconnectedness. The Indian Ocean has become increasingly contested due to geopolitical rivalries, hybrid warfare tools, and hostile state-sponsored actors who use the maritime domain for disruptive operations (Mehta, 2021). Drone attacks on oil tankers, sabotage operations against commercial vessels, and hostile interceptions have raised the stakes for both India and GCC states. RSCT contends that when threats move across maritime boundaries, states sharing those boundaries inevitably form part of a common security complex (Singh, 2023). This explains the rising importance of maritime security in India–GCC strategic cooperation.

Another essential RSCT concept is the penetration of regional complexes by external powers. The United States has maintained a strong security footprint in the Gulf for decades, while China's growing maritime presence in the Indian Ocean through ports, naval deployments, and dual-use infrastructure has introduced new strategic dynamics (Farooq, 2022). RSCT argues that external penetration can alter the internal balance of a regional complex, compelling regional states to build indigenous or collective security mechanisms to reduce dependency on great powers (Ahmad, 2022). India and the GCC have responded by deepening bilateral and multilateral frameworks, including the establishment of maritime partnerships, defense cooperation agreements, and intelligence-sharing channels.

Energy interdependence between India and the GCC further supports RSCT's argument that regional security complexes are grounded in structural linkages. More than 60 percent of India's crude oil imports come from GCC states, and millions of Indians reside and work in the Gulf (Khan, 2022). This creates a dual security necessity: India's economic security depends on uninterrupted maritime flows, while GCC economies rely on the stability of the Indian workforce and secure transport routes. RSCT asserts that such structural interdependencies intensify regional security convergence because actors cannot disentangle their security from one another (Buzan, 2003).

Importantly, RSCT explains that security complexes evolve over time. The India–GCC partnership that once focused primarily on trade and energy has now expanded into intelligence cooperation, counter-terrorism coordination, and maritime security mechanisms. These developments reflect a transition from a standard regional complex to a more integrated maritime super-complex (Kapoor, 2023). The Strait of Hormuz, Gulf of Oman, Arabian Sea, and Gulf of Aden now serve as shared security spaces where the actions of one state impact the security of the others.

The theory also highlights the importance of securitization when states designate certain issues as existential threats requiring extraordinary measures. India's concerns about terrorism linked to regional networks, radicalization among diaspora populations, and maritime vulnerabilities have led to the securitization of counter-terrorism and maritime cooperation with the GCC (Rahman, 2021). Similarly, GCC states have securitized maritime threats due to attacks on energy infrastructure, piracy incidents, and growing geopolitical tensions in the Gulf (Rao, 2022). RSCT posits that when multiple states securitize the same issues, it accelerates regional security integration.

Finally, RSCT provides a framework to analyze how regional security cooperation evolves into institutionalized arrangements. The India–GCC region has witnessed increasing institutionalization in the form of defense pacts, white-shipping agreements, multilateral naval exercises, and financial intelligence cooperation. RSCT suggests that institutionalization reflects the maturity of a security complex and indicates long-term stability in cooperative relationships (Singh, 2023). As India and the GCC continue to expand joint training, naval interoperability, intelligence-sharing networks, and maritime domain awareness mechanisms, the region moves closer to a fully developed maritime security complex.

Through RSCT, it becomes clear that India–GCC cooperation is not merely a strategic choice but an outcome of structural, geographical, and threat-driven forces connecting both sides into a cohesive regional security system.

3.1 The Strategic Importance of the Indian Ocean for India–GCC Relations

The Indian Ocean constitutes one of the world's most strategically sensitive maritime spaces, serving as the central artery for energy flows between the Middle East and Asia. India's growing reliance on imported hydrocarbons especially crude oil and liquefied natural gas (LNG) has placed extraordinary emphasis on the security of maritime routes extending from the Gulf of Oman to the Arabian Sea. Nearly two-thirds of India's crude oil imports originate from the Gulf region, and this dependency creates an inherent security interdependence between India and the GCC states (Khan, 2020). The sea-lanes that link these regions operate as both economic and strategic lifelines, making them vulnerable to terrorism, piracy, and geopolitical confrontation.

The GCC states including Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Oman, Bahrain, and Kuwait view the Indian Ocean not merely as a trade route, but as a geographic extension of their own security environment. Maritime chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz and Bab el-Mandeb

illustrate the interconnected nature of regional security, where disruptions can immediately impact India and the GCC simultaneously (Farooq, 2021). These chokepoints are not only vital for oil shipments but also for global maritime stability. Because of this shared vulnerability, India and the GCC have steadily deepened maritime cooperation in surveillance, anti-terrorism operations, and naval coordination.

Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) explains this phenomenon by arguing that regions form security clusters where states become mutually dependent on one another's stability because threats are geographically proximate and contagious (Buzan, 2003). The Indian Ocean forms such a cluster, where India and the GCC states share maritime threats that require collective responses. Neither side can secure the region unilaterally, which naturally pushes them toward cooperative frameworks.

In addition to energy security, trade connectivity has reinforced the strategic significance of the Indian Ocean region. India is among the GCC's largest trading partners, and maritime routes facilitate more than USD 115 billion in annual trade (Saleem, 2022). As the GCC becomes a global logistics hub and India expands its naval footprint, their shared maritime geography becomes a focal point for mutual defense, counter-terrorism operations, and strategic engagement.

Maritime threats, including piracy off the coast of Somalia, terrorist infiltration through sea routes, and smuggling networks operating across the Arabian Sea, have further encouraged India–GCC naval cooperation. Because these threats often originate from non-state actors, cooperation is not only strategic but also necessary. As India modernizes its navy and the GCC enhances its maritime policing capabilities, joint naval exercises are becoming a structural part of regional security.

Thus, the Indian Ocean's strategic landscape sets the foundation for deeper India–GCC counter-terrorism and maritime cooperation, aligned with RSCT, which emphasizes that security must be understood through regional interdependence rather than isolated national strategies.

3.2 Shared Maritime Threats: Terrorism, Piracy, and Illicit Trafficking

The maritime security environment in the Indian Ocean has evolved rapidly, with non-state actors emerging as central threats to stability. Terror organizations have increasingly adopted maritime routes for transport, infiltration, and logistical operations. This shift stems from the difficulty of monitoring vast ocean spaces compared with land borders. For India and the GCC—both dependent on sea-based energy and trade flows—this creates shared vulnerabilities that require joint mitigation efforts (Raza, 2021).

One of the most documented incidents highlighting maritime terrorism is the 2008 Mumbai attack. Although not directly linked to the GCC, the incident demonstrated how naval penetration by terrorists can cause catastrophic consequences. For the GCC, which hosts critical energy infrastructure near the coastline, such threats are equally alarming. RSCT helps explain how India's maritime terrorism risks can organically spill over into neighboring regions, prompting cooperative responses from Gulf states.

Piracy near the Horn of Africa remains a persistent threat. Although international naval patrols have reduced piracy incidents, the underlying drivers—weak governance in Somalia, regional instability, and financial incentives for illicit maritime activity—remain unresolved (Akhtar, 2020). Pirates often target commercial vessels bound for Gulf ports or Indian markets, placing both regions within a shared zone of risk. Consequently, India and GCC states have deployed naval assets for escort missions and conducted joint patrols in vulnerable corridors.

Illicit trafficking including drugs, arms, and human smuggling is another critical maritime security concern. Networks operating from Iran–Pakistan coastal regions, the Makran Coast, and East Africa utilize the Arabian Sea as a primary route. These networks pose multidimensional threats: destabilizing societies, funding terrorist groups, and undermining state authority. India and the GCC have identified these smuggling corridors as high-risk zones requiring coordinated maritime intelligence (Sami, 2022).

Energy infrastructure located offshore presents another vulnerability. Many GCC nations operate offshore rigs and underwater pipelines, while India increasingly relies on offshore refining and LNG terminals. Terrorist organizations have previously considered offshore infrastructure as a target due to its economic importance and symbolic value (Haider, 2021). Protecting this infrastructure necessitates coordinated surveillance and threat monitoring between regional partners.

Additionally, cyber-enabled maritime threats are emerging. Shipping companies, port authorities, and naval systems have become lucrative targets for cyberattacks aimed at disrupting trade or espionage. The GCC and India have recently begun incorporating cybersecurity protocols into their maritime cooperation agreements, recognizing that digital intrusions can complement physical threats in hybrid warfare environments.

Therefore, the shared maritime threat matrix forms one of the strongest incentives for India–GCC collaboration, supporting RSCT's argument that geographically proximate states facing similar threats naturally gravitate toward security partnerships. The contagious nature of maritime insecurity makes cooperation not optional but unavoidable.

3.3 India's Expanding Naval Role in the Western Indian Ocean

India's naval footprint has grown significantly over the past two decades, transforming it into a major maritime power in the Indo-Pacific and western Indian Ocean. New Delhi's maritime strategy emphasizes securing sea-lanes of communication, protecting Indian citizens working abroad—especially in the Gulf—and projecting maritime influence to counter external powers' presence. For the GCC states, India's expanded naval capabilities provide an opportunity to strengthen regional security against terrorism and piracy (Rahman, 2022).

India's naval modernization includes increased deployment of advanced frigates, guided-missile destroyers, and maritime reconnaissance aircraft. The Indian Navy regularly conducts anti-piracy operations near the Gulf of Aden and maintains a continuous naval presence in the region through mission-based deployments. These deployments reassure GCC states that India is committed to safeguarding shared maritime routes (Shahid, 2023).

The Western Indian Ocean is also witnessing increasing strategic competition from global powers. China's maritime expansion including port access agreements and naval deployments has introduced new security dynamics. The GCC, although maintaining cordial relations with China, recognizes the need to diversify security partnerships. India offers a non-hegemonic, cooperative maritime presence aligned with regional stability (Masood, 2023).

India's humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) missions have further enhanced its maritime credibility. During crises such as the Yemen conflict or natural disasters affecting Gulf communities, the Indian Navy conducted massive evacuation operations and humanitarian missions. These operations demonstrated India's operational capacity to act swiftly in regional emergencies (Latif, 2021). GCC states view India as a reliable partner capable of responding to maritime contingencies.

India has also strengthened its maritime surveillance network. Through initiatives like the Information Fusion Centre–Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR), New Delhi monitors vessel movements, identifies suspicious activities, and provides intelligence to regional partners.

GCC states have begun integrating with this surveillance architecture to enhance situational awareness (Nadeem, 2022). This collaboration aligns directly with RSCT, establishing shared security mechanisms that reduce regional vulnerability.

India's naval diplomacy also includes bilateral naval exercises with the UAE, Oman, and Saudi Arabia. These exercises focus on maritime interdiction, anti-terrorism maneuvers, and improving interoperability. For GCC states, which are rapidly modernizing their navies but still require training and operational expertise, India's support accelerates military professionalization.

Through its evolving naval strategy, India demonstrates its readiness to participate in cooperative maritime defense frameworks. This military transformation enhances India–GCC maritime collaboration and reinforces regional security interdependence Cooperation Mechanisms.

4.1 Evolution of India–GCC Counter-Terrorism Cooperation

Counter-terrorism cooperation between India and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) has expanded significantly over the last two decades. This transformation stems from a convergence of security concerns, including extremist financing, logistics networks, cyber-radicalization, and maritime terrorism. India and the GCC states share deep economic, social, and political linkages, including the presence of over nine million Indian expatriates living and working across the Gulf. These demographic connections create an inherent need for joint security coordination, as threats affecting the Gulf directly impact Indian citizens, trade, labor flows, and energy security (Khan, 2021).

The post-9/11 environment served as a turning point for India–GCC counter-terrorism engagement. Gulf states began increasing domestic surveillance of extremist groups, restricting funding channels, and targeting cross-border radical networks. India simultaneously expanded its intelligence capabilities and adopted a more comprehensive approach to terrorism, eventually aligning its security priorities with Gulf partners (Rauf, 2020). As a result, cooperation broadened from bilateral agreements to multi-layered mechanisms involving intelligence sharing, security dialogues, policing collaboration, and maritime coordination.

The emergence of the Islamic State (ISIS) further accelerated cooperation. GCC governments viewed ISIS as a direct threat to political stability, national identity, and economic activity. India similarly identified the recruitment of Indian nationals into ISIS networks as a serious domestic security issue. This convergence led to joint monitoring of diaspora-linked radicalization patterns and cyber-based extremist propaganda (Azeem, 2022). Gulf states began deporting individuals suspected of supporting extremist organizations while coordinating arrests with Indian security agencies.

Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) explains this growing security convergence. RSCT argues that geographically proximate states facing the same threats especially threats that cross borders easily tend to align their security strategies (Buzan, 2003). Terrorism in the Gulf can quickly spill over into India through financial channels, ideological networks, and logistical routes. Likewise, extremist operations in South Asia can affect the stability of Gulf societies through labor migration links and digital pathways. As a result, counter-terrorism cooperation has become both necessary and predictable within the India–GCC regional security complex. Additionally, the GCC's economic diversification plans such as Saudi Vision 2030 and UAE Vision 2050 prioritize domestic security as a prerequisite for high-value investment and global integration. India's economic aspirations also depend heavily on uninterrupted Gulf energy

supplies and maritime stability. These economic factors make counter-terrorism cooperation structural rather than episodic.

Over time, this cooperation has evolved from reactive, event-driven actions to proactive intelligence coordination, strategic dialogue, and maritime counter-terrorism frameworks. As threats become more decentralized and technologically sophisticated, India and the GCC view each other as indispensable partners in regional security architecture.

4.2 Intelligence Sharing and Law-Enforcement Coordination

Intelligence sharing is the backbone of India–GCC counter-terrorism cooperation. Both sides recognize that terrorism networks operate across borders, and no country can effectively counter them in isolation. India and GCC states maintain regular exchanges of intelligence on extremist financing, radicalization pathways, travel movements of suspects, and maritime activities (Sadiq, 2021). These exchanges take place through secure diplomatic channels, defense attaché offices, and specialized intelligence liaison mechanisms.

A key feature of cooperation is the rapid deportation and extradition of individuals linked to extremist networks. GCC states have deported several suspects to India after gathering sufficient evidence of involvement in radical activities. This level of trust reflects the maturing strategic relationship between security agencies (Iqbal, 2022). India has acknowledged that Gulf states often provide timely intelligence on expatriate communities, digital radicalization trends, and underground financing operations.

Financial intelligence is another major component. Terrorist financing often exploits informal money transfer systems and clandestine remittances across the Gulf–India corridor. GCC states have strengthened banking regulations, increased monitoring of suspicious transactions, and coordinated with India's financial intelligence units to disrupt extremist funding pipelines (Mahmood, 2021).

Cyber intelligence sharing has grown rapidly due to the rise of online propaganda, encrypted communications, and digital recruitment. India and Gulf partners have begun to exchange information on extremist social media accounts, dark-web activities, and digital identities linked to terrorist organizations. This cooperation aims to prevent both recruitment and operational planning conducted through digital tools (Khalid, 2023).

From an RSCT perspective, intelligence sharing demonstrates how security interdependence becomes institutionalized. When states believe that threats are interconnected and contagious, they develop long-term mechanisms for exchanging information, conducting joint analysis, and coordinating policy responses. India and the GCC have moved in this direction steadily, reflecting the deepening of their shared security complex.

The role of joint training programs has also grown. India hosts officers from Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Oman, Qatar, and Bahrain for specialized counter-terrorism training. These programs include modules on explosive ordnance disposal, anti-radicalization strategies, cybersecurity, and interrogation techniques (Hassan, 2023). Likewise, India sends officers to Gulf training academies, enhancing familiarity and building interpersonal trust among security practitioners.

Law-enforcement coordination extends beyond terrorism to areas such as drug trafficking, smuggling networks, and maritime crime. The Arabian Sea has become a major route for narcotics smuggling, with proceeds sometimes financing extremist operations. Joint operations between Indian and Gulf coast guards have disrupted several trafficking networks operating across the region (Sultan, 2022).

Policing cooperation once limited to migrant labor issues has now transformed into a comprehensive counter-terrorism architecture backed by intelligence, legal coordination, and

shared operational expertise. The depth and breadth of this cooperation illustrate the maturing of India–GCC security relations within an interconnected regional security environment.

4.3 GCC Domestic Reforms and Their Impact on Regional Counter-Terrorism

The GCC states have undertaken extensive domestic reforms to strengthen their counter-terrorism capabilities, many of which directly complement cooperation with India. These reforms include legal restructuring, enhanced surveillance systems, improved border controls, and stricter regulations on financial transactions. These reforms reflect a broader understanding that counter-terrorism is no longer limited to policing but is a multidimensional process requiring synchronized economic, social, and ideological strategies (Fahad, 2022).

One of the most significant reforms has been the introduction of unified counter-terrorism laws across several GCC states. These laws criminalize extremist propaganda, financing, and recruitment, even when conducted online or outside national borders. For India, which often tracks extremist cells operating from abroad, such legal frameworks make cooperation more effective and transparent (Abbas, 2021).

Saudi Arabia's establishment of the Global Center for Combating Extremist Ideology (Etidal) represents a major step in countering radical narratives. The center works on monitoring online content, analyzing extremist messaging, and promoting counter-narratives. India and Saudi Arabia have explored cooperation between Etidal and Indian cyber-monitoring agencies to disrupt digital radicalization (Noman, 2023).

The UAE's domestic counter-terrorism strategy emphasizes community engagement, surveillance technology, and de-radicalization programs. Its model integrates artificial intelligence-based monitoring systems with predictive threat analysis. India has shown interest in replicating aspects of this model for counter-terrorism applications at home (Rehman, 2022).

Qatar has focused heavily on financial regulation, working with international organizations to reduce terror financing risks. Kuwait and Oman have expanded maritime policing capabilities, recognizing the link between maritime crime and extremist funding routes. Bahrain has invested in cybersecurity and countering online extremist networks (Hamid, 2020).

These internal reforms create an enabling environment for India–GCC cooperation. RSCT explains that when domestic reforms align with regional threat perceptions, the entire security complex becomes more cohesive and resilient. India benefits from these GCC reforms because they help prevent extremist groups from using Gulf territories as financial or logistical bases.

In return, GCC states benefit from India's vast counter-terrorism experience, especially in intelligence analysis, coastal surveillance, digital forensics, and deradicalization strategies. This complementarity reinforces the cooperative dynamics of the regional security complex. Overall, GCC domestic reforms have strengthened regional counter-terrorism capacity and opened avenues for deeper collaboration with India. They form the governance backbone of India–GCC counter-terrorism engagement, ensuring that operational cooperation is supported by strong legal and institutional foundations.

5.1 Joint Naval Exercises and Operational Interoperability

Joint naval exercises form the backbone of India–GCC maritime cooperation. These exercises strengthen operational coordination, enhance tactical compatibility, and develop shared doctrines for counter-terrorism and maritime security. Over the last decade, India has significantly expanded naval engagement with Gulf states, reflecting a broader strategic shift

toward deeper Indo–Gulf maritime integration. The exercises conducted between India and the GCC states increasingly simulate real-world maritime threats such as piracy, ship hijackings, terrorist infiltration, and attacks on energy infrastructure (Shafiq, 2021).

India's naval exercises with Oman one of its closest maritime partners in the region—are among the oldest and most structured. The Naseem-al-Bahr series focuses on advanced naval maneuvers, gunnery firing, Visit Board Search Seizure (VBSS) operations, and anti-submarine warfare techniques. Oman's geographic location at the mouth of the Strait of Hormuz makes it a vital security partner, as this chokepoint remains extremely vulnerable to both state and non-state disruptions. Through repeated exercises, India and Oman have built interoperability in coastal surveillance, maritime interdiction, and counter-terrorism responses (Baig, 2020).

India's Zayed Talwar exercises with the UAE reflect a new phase of operational cooperation. The UAE's navy, though smaller than Oman's, is technologically advanced and strategically located near critical shipping lanes. Exercises with the UAE emphasize high-speed interdiction, protection of offshore oil platforms, and countering asymmetric threats using fast-attack craft and unmanned aerial systems (Haris, 2022). These areas are directly linked to counter-terrorism, as extremist groups increasingly rely on small boats, drones, and hybrid naval tactics.

Cooperation with Saudi Arabia has expanded significantly since the initiation of Al-Mohed Al-Hind naval drills. These exercises include maritime surveillance, joint search and rescue (SAR), and coordinated response to simulated attacks on commercial tankers. Saudi Arabia's vast coastline along the Red Sea and Gulf coastlines makes maritime protection a strategic priority. India's participation signals growing mutual trust and contributes to a broader security umbrella protecting vital Saudi energy assets from potential terror threats (Qureshi, 2023).

India has also engaged with Qatar, Bahrain, and Kuwait in smaller-scale naval interactions and port calls, demonstrating an inclusive maritime engagement strategy. Port visits allow navies to train on communication protocols, refueling procedures, and rapid deployment practices—critical components for joint counter-terrorism missions (Aslam, 2021).

From the perspective of Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), joint naval exercises enhance what Buzan describes as “security interdependence” by aligning military responses to shared threats (Buzan, 2003). India and the GCC states realize that terrorism at sea, piracy, and maritime sabotage do not respect borders. Joint exercises standardize tactical procedures, enabling forces to respond collectively to incidents that could destabilize the entire regional security complex.

Operational interoperability also extends to communications systems, tactical signaling, and intelligence fusion protocols. Rehearsing these mechanisms during exercises ensures that in real crises such as hijackings, terror infiltration by sea, or attacks on oil tankers responses are swift, coordinated, and effective.

Thus, joint naval exercises serve not only as confidence-building measures but also as the practical foundation of India–GCC maritime counter-terrorism cooperation.

5.2 Anti-Piracy Operations and Protection of Sea-Lanes

Piracy in the Western Indian Ocean particularly off the coast of Somalia—has played a major role in shaping India–GCC maritime cooperation. Despite a decline in piracy incidents since the peak in the early 2010s, the threat remains structurally embedded due to political instability in Somalia and the presence of organized criminal networks (Idris, 2020). India and GCC states depend heavily on the safe movement of oil tankers, LNG carriers, and commercial

vessels passing through piracy-prone waters. A single pirate attack can disrupt multi-billion-dollar trade flows and risk human life.

India has continuously deployed naval vessels to the Gulf of Aden since 2008. These anti-piracy deployments are a critical asset for GCC states whose economic lifelines pass through the same waters. Indian warships have escorted thousands of ships belonging to multiple nationalities, including GCC-flagged vessels (Rasheed, 2022). This has strengthened India's reputation as a responsible security actor in the Western Indian Ocean.

The GCC states have also increased maritime patrols in high-risk shipping lanes. The UAE and Oman have invested in coastal radars, offshore patrol vessels, and maritime reconnaissance aircraft. Joint operations between Indian and GCC forces include information exchange on pirate mother ships, floating armouries, and suspicious vessels operating without identification systems (Hamza, 2021). This intelligence sharing allows rapid interception and prevents pirate groups from establishing maritime staging grounds.

RSCT explains why anti-piracy cooperation is necessary: piracy in the Indian Ocean threatens both India and the GCC simultaneously. The contagious nature of maritime insecurity binds states together in cooperative security patterns. Neither India nor GCC states can secure these shipping lanes alone, reinforcing the logic for joint operations.

The threat of piracy has also evolved with technological changes. Pirate networks now use GPS-enabled communication, drones for surveillance, and encrypted messaging apps for coordinating attacks. India and GCC states collaborate on cyber-monitoring of suspicious communication patterns, integrating digital intelligence into maritime security operations (Saeed, 2022).

Additionally, the rise of "fake fishing fleets" used as cover for smuggling or surveillance has forced India and Gulf navies to enhance joint inspection protocols. Shared databases of fishing vessels, maritime labor, and vessel registrations ensure quicker identification of non-compliant vessels.

Thus, anti-piracy cooperation is not just about protecting merchant shipping, it is also about safeguarding regional economic stability, national sovereignty, and the safety of millions of seafarers whose lives depend on secure sea-lanes.

5.3 Securing Offshore Energy Infrastructure and Maritime Critical Assets

A major component of maritime counter-terrorism cooperation between India and the GCC focuses on protecting offshore energy assets. The GCC states host some of the world's largest offshore oilfields, refineries, and LNG terminals. India, as one of the largest consumers of Gulf energy, relies on the uninterrupted security of this infrastructure (Bashir, 2020).

The threat of maritime terrorism targeting energy platforms has increased over the years. Terror outfits have repeatedly attempted attacks on oil tankers and offshore facilities in the Middle East and East Africa. These attacks aim to cause economic disruption, political pressure, and symbolic damage. India and GCC states share intelligence on potential maritime threats to offshore installations, including suspicious vessel movements, drone intrusions, and hostile surveillance patterns (Naseer, 2023).

The GCC has upgraded defense systems around energy infrastructure, deploying maritime command centers, underwater surveillance grids, and anti-drone technologies. India provides technical support through naval liaison officers, intelligence analysts, and joint security drills simulating underwater sabotage or suicide boat attacks (Hadi, 2022).

Given India's expertise in protecting offshore assets in the Bay of Bengal and Arabian Sea, its cooperation benefits Gulf partners, especially in the areas of underwater threat detection, counter-mine operations, and security zoning around rigs. Joint exercises with Oman and UAE

have included drills on intercepting fast-moving hostile boats tactics frequently used by non-state terror groups (Fareed, 2021).

RSCT highlights that critical infrastructure protection strengthens regional resilience. Since both India and the Gulf depend on these energy assets for economic stability, their protection becomes a shared security imperative. A successful attack on a Gulf offshore facility would not only destabilize GCC economies but also severely disrupt India's energy supplies, creating cascading regional effects.

There is also a growing focus on cybersecurity for offshore installations. Hackers linked to extremist organizations have attempted to breach oil company networks in the Gulf, posing digital threats to physical infrastructure. India and GCC cybersecurity agencies coordinate on threat mapping, vulnerability assessment, and cyber-forensics in maritime sectors (Hussain, 2023).

These measures reflect a robust India–GCC collaborative framework where traditional naval power combines with modern technological tools to secure vital offshore assets from evolving terror threats.

5.4 Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) and the Information Fusion Centre (IFC-IOR)

Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) is an essential component of India–GCC cooperation. Shared knowledge of vessel movements, suspicious maritime patterns, and environmental conditions increases the ability of states to identify and respond to threats in real time. India's Information Fusion Centre – Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR), established in 2018, serves as a regional hub that integrates maritime data from partner countries (Rizwan, 2021).

GCC states have developed strong links with IFC-IOR, including liaison officers and secure data-sharing agreements. Through this platform, India provides Gulf partners with:

- Real-Time Vessel Tracking
- Analysis Of Maritime Threats
- Reports On Illicit Trafficking Patterns
- Alerts on Suspicious Maritime Movements
- Piracy Risk Assessments

This cooperation has enhanced Gulf states' ability to monitor their maritime zones more efficiently. Because threats such as drug trafficking, arms smuggling, and terror infiltration often use the same maritime corridors, MDA becomes a shared protective shield.

IFC-IOR allows India and the GCC to coordinate responses far more effectively than bilateral communication alone. For example, through shared tracking data, GCC countries have intercepted suspicious dhows carrying narcotics or weapons before they entered their territorial waters (Adnan, 2022).

RSCT views information fusion mechanisms as markers of a mature regional security complex. When states begin sharing classified maritime data in real time, it reflects high levels of strategic trust and convergence of threat perceptions (Buzan, 2003). India–GCC cooperation through IFC-IOR demonstrates that both sides increasingly see themselves as part of the same maritime security ecosystem.

The GCC is also developing its own information-sharing platforms, and India is contributing expertise in surveillance technologies, satellite data processing, and coastal radar systems. The integration of these networks ensures that maritime threats can be identified early and neutralized before they escalate.

Maritime Domain Awareness serves as the informational backbone of maritime counter-terrorism, enabling India and the GCC to prevent, anticipate, and respond to security threats cooperatively.

6.1 Strategic Convergence in the Indian Ocean and the Gulf

India and the GCC are increasingly aligned in their strategic outlook on the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and the Arabian Gulf. Both regions are deeply interconnected through energy flows, diaspora movements, trade routes, and shared security concerns. Maritime cooperation, particularly in counter-terrorism, reflects this strategic convergence. The GCC states rely heavily on the Indian Ocean for exporting oil and gas, while India depends on the Gulf for more than 60% of its crude oil imports (Rahman, 2020). This mutual dependence makes maritime stability a core strategic priority.

India's growing naval presence in the Arabian Sea aligns with GCC security interests, especially amid rising geopolitical tensions such as Iran–Saudi rivalry, piracy near the Horn of Africa, and the increasing use of maritime routes for extremist infiltration (Hussain, 2022). GCC states view India as a stabilizing power capable of contributing to maritime security, providing intelligence support, and complementing existing Western military deployments in the Gulf. For India, cooperation with GCC states enhances its influence in the Western Indian Ocean—a region where multiple powers, including China, the United States, and European navies, compete for strategic space. India's maritime engagement allows it to counterbalance China's expanding naval footprint, especially through the Belt and Road Initiative and port developments in the Middle East and East Africa (Sadiq, 2021).

From the perspective of Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), this strategic convergence stems from overlapping security patterns. Maritime terrorism, piracy, and energy insecurity generate "regional security interdependence," binding India and the GCC into a shared strategic framework (Buzan, 2003). No single actor can address these threats alone, making cooperative security not optional but structurally necessary.

India's "Look West Policy" and the GCC's diversification agendas such as Saudi Vision 2030 and UAE Vision 2050 further reinforce this convergence. Both sides recognize that economic modernization requires stable sea lanes, secure offshore assets, and reliable counter-terrorism cooperation.

6.2 India–GCC Cooperation in a Multipolar World Order

The global security environment is increasingly multipolar, with rising powers asserting influence in the Indian Ocean and Middle East. This multipolarity creates both opportunities and complexities for India–GCC cooperation. India seeks to enhance its autonomy by diversifying partnerships beyond Western alliances. The GCC states, especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE, are simultaneously expanding their strategic relationships with China, Russia, and European countries while maintaining traditional ties with the United States (Farooq, 2023).

In this environment, India emerges as a partner that offers geopolitical balance without the baggage of military interventionism. GCC states increasingly view India as a dependable actor capable of contributing to regional security through economic strength, naval power, and stable diplomatic relations with all major powers (Imran, 2022). India's commitment to non-interference and respect for GCC domestic security norms makes it an attractive partner in counter-terrorism and maritime cooperation.

At the same time, India benefits from the GCC's strategic partnerships with global powers. For example, GCC modernization programs often involve Western or East Asian technologies, which complement India's own defense and intelligence capabilities. As cooperation deepens, India positions itself as a key security provider in the IOR, enhancing its credibility and expanding its geopolitical profile.

From the RSCT viewpoint, multipolarity intensifies regional security dynamics by increasing external penetration into the regional security complex. India–GCC cooperation acts as a stabilizing force, enabling regional actors to manage security threats without excessive reliance on external powers (Buzan, 2003). The partnership thus helps maintain regional balance and autonomy.

6.3 Countering Non-State Maritime Threats in the Shared Security Complex

Non-state actors: pirates, extremist groups, smugglers, and maritime terrorists pose significant challenges across the Indian Ocean and Gulf. These actors exploit ungoverned maritime spaces, weak surveillance zones, and busy shipping lanes. The India–GCC partnership is central to countering these threats.

Extremist organizations operating in Yemen, Somalia, and East Africa have previously targeted vessels, port facilities, and offshore energy infrastructure (Karim, 2021). India and the GCC share intelligence on extremist movements, maritime smuggling routes, and cyber footprints of terror groups. Joint naval patrols and coordinated surveillance missions help disrupt terror logistics and prevent infiltration by sea.

Drug trafficking is another major threat. Narcotics produced in Afghanistan and trafficked through the Arabian Sea generate revenue for extremist groups. India and GCC navies have intercepted multiple narcotics-laden vessels, with joint operations becoming increasingly common (Nadeem, 2022). Such operations weaken terror financing pipelines.

Illicit arms trafficking often linked to non-state militant groups poses similar risks. The GCC's proximity to conflict zones makes it vulnerable to arms smuggling via maritime channels. India contributes operational experience and intelligence that support Gulf interdiction efforts (Hadi, 2021).

RSCT explains this cooperation through the concept of "contagious insecurity." Threats originating in one part of the regional security complex quickly spill into neighboring regions. India and the GCC face a shared risk environment where disruption in one maritime zone destabilizes the entire system (Buzan, 2003). Thus, countering non-state maritime threats requires collaborative strategies grounded in joint surveillance, shared intelligence, and coordinated naval responses.

6.4 Strengthening Multilateral Security Frameworks in the Indian Ocean and the Gulf

India–GCC cooperation increasingly intersects with broader multilateral security initiatives. These frameworks support information sharing, training, and coordinated responses to maritime threats.

India participates in the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF), a multinational naval partnership headquartered in Bahrain. Although not all GCC states participate equally, CMF offers a platform for India and the Gulf to coordinate operations on piracy, smuggling, and maritime terrorism (Saleem, 2022).

Similarly, India's engagement with the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) supports multilateral maritime governance. GCC states collaborate within these forums to strengthen coastal security, humanitarian assistance, and disaster response protocols (Latif, 2023). India's leadership roles allow it to channel GCC priorities such as protecting energy routes into regional agendas.

RSCT views these multilateral frameworks as mechanisms that extend the regional security complex. They facilitate "complex-wide security practices," ensuring that regional actors maintain shared threat assessments and coordinated strategies (Buzan, 2003). India–GCC maritime cooperation, therefore, shapes not only bilateral relations but also regional maritime governance.

6.5 Implications for Regional Stability and Economic Security

The security of maritime routes is vital for the global economy, especially for energy-importing and energy-exporting states. India–GCC cooperation reduces vulnerabilities in the supply chain and ensures the smooth flow of oil, LNG, and commercial goods. Disruptions caused by piracy, maritime terrorism, or regional conflict would severely impact both sides. For the GCC, stable maritime routes protect national revenues and support diversification efforts that depend on uninterrupted energy exports (Yasir, 2021). For India, maritime security ensures affordable energy supplies, economic growth, and the safety of millions of Indian workers in the Gulf.

Furthermore, enhanced maritime security fosters investor confidence, as global markets rely on predictable maritime supply chains. Joint counter-terrorism and maritime cooperation thus contribute directly to regional stability, economic resilience, and long-term strategic alignment.

Conclusion:

Counter-terrorism and maritime cooperation between India and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) has emerged as one of the most strategically significant regional partnerships in the 21st century. Using Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) as the overarching analytical framework, this study demonstrates that India and the GCC exist within an interlinked *security neighborhood* where threats are geographically proximate, transnational in character, and mutually reinforcing. RSCT highlights that regional security is shaped not merely by global major powers, but by the patterns of amity, enmity, interdependence, and shared vulnerabilities among neighboring states. When applied to the India–GCC strategic environment, RSCT helps explain why maritime security, counter-terrorism, energy protection, and geopolitical stability have become core pillars of bilateral and multilateral alignment.

The maritime domain stands at the center of this security complex. The Arabian Sea, the Indian Ocean, the Strait of Hormuz, and the Gulf of Oman form a single operational theater where piracy, terrorist infiltration, arms trafficking, and attacks on critical oil infrastructure threaten both sides. RSCT's emphasis on regional interdependence becomes highly relevant here: security threats emerging from the Arabian Peninsula quickly spill into the western Indian Ocean region, compelling India to deepen maritime diplomacy with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Oman, Bahrain, and Qatar. India's naval deployments, port calls, logistics agreements, anti-piracy patrols, and joint maritime exercises demonstrate a shift towards a shared security community driven by overlapping maritime vulnerabilities.

In counter-terrorism, RSCT underscores that India and the GCC face common extremist networks that transcend borders. The ideological, financial, and operational webs connecting South Asian militant groups, Gulf-based funding channels, online radicalization networks, and transnational recruitment pipelines produce a cross-regional pattern of insecurity. India's robust intelligence cooperation with Saudi Arabia and the UAE has resulted in multiple arrests and deportations of extremists. The legal harmonization, information sharing, financial monitoring, and counter-radicalization programs developed between India and GCC states reflect an increasing convergence of internal security strategies. This aligns with RSCT's argument that regional complexes evolve when states integrate their security practices against shared threats.

Economically, India–GCC interdependence especially energy trade, expatriate labor flows, technology transfers, and maritime commerce serves as a stabilizing force. RSCT emphasizes that security complexes are influenced by patterns of economic reliance, and this is clearly

visible in India–GCC relations. The protection of sea lanes, energy supply continuity, and trade security drives deeper maritime coordination. India's cooperation in digital security, cybersecurity, and financial intelligence is strengthening the institutional architecture supporting regional counter-terrorism frameworks.

Geopolitically, India–GCC cooperation is also shaped by shifting alignments in the Indo-Pacific, Middle East, and Indian Ocean arenas. RSCT explains how regional order is transformed when new external actors, such as the United States, China, and European powers, influence security regionalization. India's growing role in the Gulf is partly the result of strategic vacuums and realignments in the Middle East, including the Abraham Accords, Saudi–Iran rapprochement, and the recalibration of U.S. military presence. GCC states view India as a stable, rising power with economic weight, manpower strength, and naval capabilities capable of contributing to regional stability. India, in turn, sees the GCC as an indispensable partner for securing offshore energy supplies, maritime trade routes, and counter-terrorism networks.

The evolution of India–GCC counter-terrorism and maritime cooperation demonstrates that the regional security complex is transitioning from a loosely connected subsystem to a more cohesive security architecture. Both sides now operate within a framework of shared threat perceptions, converging security interests, and harmonized operational practices. This development reflects the key propositions of RSCT: that geographically linked states form security clusters characterized by interdependence, mutual vulnerabilities, and coordinated responses.

In conclusion, as India and the GCC move toward deeper strategic alignment, the regional security complex encompassing the Indian Ocean and Gulf region will continue to consolidate. This partnership not only enhances bilateral security but contributes significantly to broader regional stability. Strengthened maritime domain awareness, joint naval operations, enhanced intelligence sharing, counter-financing of terrorism frameworks, and emerging security dialogues are transforming India–GCC relations into a model of cross-regional cooperation rooted in RSCT dynamics. Given the evolving threat environment and geopolitical uncertainties, India–GCC cooperation will remain a cornerstone of the emerging security order in the broader Indian Ocean–West Asia region.

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