

Interview of Ambassador Pavan Kapoor – Khaleej Times, 2nd April, 2021

1. What are the key takeaways of the UAE Foreign Minister HH Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan's recent visit to New Delhi and meeting with his Indian counterpart Dr. S. Jaishankar?

Ans. India-UAE comprehensive strategic partnership has truly emerged stronger since the start of the COVID pandemic. The constant, high-level, empathetic exchanges between our leadership have ensured this outcome. In addition to several telephonic and virtual exchanges, External Affairs Minister, Dr. S. Jaishankar visited the UAE in late November 2020, his first bilateral visit overseas since the pandemic. During the visit, he met with HH Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, HH Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, the Ruler of Dubai, and his counterpart, HH Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the Foreign Minister of UAE. Last month, HH Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan visited Delhi from 25-26 February for meetings with Dr. Jaishankar and both leaders had an engaging conversation covering a diverse range of bilateral issues as well as issues of regional and international significance. Challenges of the ongoing pandemic and ways to consider further cooperation in the post-pandemic phase were also discussed.

2. India and the UAE ties have gained momentum amid mutual cooperation in trade, commerce, culture, heritage healthcare etc; since Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi came to power in May 2014. What are the recent breakthrough initiatives?

Ans. There is a clear commitment among the leadership of India and the UAE to enhance bilateral ties.

As our Prime Minister, Shri Narendra Modi, said in his speech to the nation on Indian Independence day in 2020, India's neighbours are not the only ones with whom India shares geographical boundaries, but also those with whom India has close and harmonious relations. Prime Minister referred to India's strong relationship with the countries in West Asia particularly UAE, which further strengthened in the last few years. He personally thanked the leadership of these countries for their help to the Indian community during the Covid-19 crisis.

Our relationship with UAE is a multi-faceted one with deep engagements in trade and investment, tourism, food security, culture, science and technology, defence and space. Our focus will continue to be on further strengthening our comprehensive strategic partnership and exploring new areas of cooperation. Food & health care have emerged as important sectors of growth during the pandemic showing how our strategic ties can adapt to the changing requirements. Energy will remain an important area of cooperation. However, we are not only investing in each other's energy sector, but also working together for a more sustainable and climate friendly future. We are expanding

capacities in the field of renewable energy, particularly in the field of solar energy, including through the International Solar Alliance. We are committed to working closely at IRENA and will also explore possible cooperation in newer areas like the 'Hydrogen economy'.

3. The UAE is the 10th largest FDI investor in India. What are the sectors where the UAE can invest more in India and similarly how New Delhi can help boost this country's economy?

Ans. The investment relationship between India and the UAE stands on a strong foundation of mutual trust and common aspirations. During Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the UAE in 2015, both countries agreed to set up India-UAE Infrastructure fund with an aim to reach US \$ 75 billion investments into India's infrastructure sector. Since then, we made great progress and major investors from UAE have made significant investments in the last few years and the trend is continuing.

It is also natural that investments would need hand holding at various stages to facilitate the procedures. In this context, we have worked and will continue to work closely with our UAE partners to facilitate their investments to India.

For example, the Government of India took a special decision in 2019 to not club various UAE sovereign wealth funds as one sovereign entity for the purpose of 10% limit on Foreign Portfolio Investment, and also agreed to grant tax exemptions for foreign sovereign investments like that of the Abu Dhabi Investment Authority (ADIA) made in long-term infrastructure projects in India. Last month, the Government of India also decided to extend special eligibility for foreign portfolio investors from the UAE that would expand their presence in India.

As a step towards strengthening the people to people, trade links and strategic ties between the two countries, India announced a visa on arrival scheme for UAE nationals in November 2019, only the third country to receive this facility from the Government of India.

4. How can the UAE invest through the National Investment and Infrastructure Fund (NIIF) and how can Abu Dhabi Investment Authority (ADIA) be a force multiplier, despite the raging Covid-19 pandemic?

Ans. India aims to become a US \$ 5 trillion economy by 2025. In addition to the potential for bilateral cooperation in existing areas such as realty, infrastructure and manufacturing, both sides are looking at health and insurance, banking and finance, education and online resources, retail, tourism and hospitality, new and emerging technologies like FinTech. The Indian start-up ecosystem with close to 20,000 start-ups is emerging as another platform for bilateral cooperation.

India believes in converting challenges into opportunities. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has given the direction to India's future growth through his vision of 'Aatmanirbhar Bharat' and UAE is a natural and an important partner in realising this vision. We concur with the UAE leadership that the Covid-19 pandemic is testing the strength of relationships between countries, but as our close cooperation even during this time has seen, our relationship is set to grow further and closer especially as we work to rebuild our economies in the post-Covid scenario.

ADIA is among the most active foreign investors in India. The National Investment and Infrastructure Fund (NIIF), India's first sovereign wealth fund, signed a US \$ 1 billion investment agreement with a wholly owned subsidiary of ADIA in October 2017 to invest in much-needed energy, transportation and other infrastructure-related sectors in India. ADIA is investing US \$ 1 billion in affordable and mid-income housing projects in India's leading cities through an HDFC housing fund. It has deployed its funds in real estate, private equity and backed two of the largest renewable energy companies of India, investing over US \$ 400 million in ReNew Power and Greenko, US \$ 500 million into renewable energy via Kotak and US \$ 300 million into the highways sector via Cube Highways. The NIIF and Dubai-based ports operator DP World Pvt. Ltd. announced the creation of an investment platform to invest up to US \$ 3 billion in ports, terminals, transportation and logistics businesses in India. These examples give some flavour of the larger investment interests of ADIA and other UAE players.

5. What is the latest on Abu Dhabi National Oil Co.'s (ADNOC's) plans to build the strategic oil reserve amid a rebound in global crude prices?

Ans. India and the UAE share a strategic energy partnership and we have come a long way in our journey together from a buyer-seller relationship to strategic cooperation and beyond. The strategic petroleum reserve in Mangalore, Karnataka has been commissioned and the historic first cargo of crude oil from the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC) for the Indian Strategic Petroleum Reserves Ltd. (ISPRL) reached India in May 2018 under an agreement between ADNOC and ISPRL, an Indian government-owned company mandated to store crude oil for strategic needs, to store 5.86 million barrels of ADNOC crude oil at the Karnataka facility in the Indian city of Mangalore. The participation of ADNOC in setting up our strategic reserve has been crucial and given us the confidence to continue on this path in the future too. We are confident that ADNOC will continue to play a prominent role in our future projects in this area.

6. Give us a sneak peek about the India pavilion at Dubai Expo 2020.

Ans. We greatly look forward to our participation at the Dubai Expo starting in October this year. We would bring in diverse participation to the event through the India Pavilion. The work on the India pavilion is almost complete and we are hopeful of a great participation from both India's public and private sectors.

India pavilion will showcase the face of India rising on the three pillars of opportunity, sustainability and mobility. The India pavilion is one of the largest pavilions in the expo and one of the few to have a permanent structure. India will showcase under the larger theme of Opportunity (to cover opportunity across all sectors, industry, technology, science, art and culture, covering modern day to futuristic). The building will be divided in 2 parts on every floor. One part will be the India story taking the visitor through an experience and understanding of India, while the second part would focus on Business showcasing – Thematically and by the different States of India.

7. What are the revised plans for the India pavilion amid the new normal because of the viral outbreak?

Ans. After a long period of lull with no major activities, because of the pandemic, the Expo 2020 event will give people an opportunity to go out and explore the best of the world at one place.

In a post pandemic world, governments, businesses, and individuals have now learned to better cope with the 'invisible' enemy. There is now an increasingly clear path towards vaccination. Also, in the post-pandemic world, success of Expo 2020 has become even more important because the world needs more collaborations in several areas and the Expo 2020 will be an opportunity for recovery. Healthcare and Pharmaceuticals are India's strong sector and Expo 2020 will give us new opportunities for collaboration.

The dynamism of the strong India UAE relationship will be reflected at India Pavilion, where India will be participating in a big way. We have maintained our plans for Expo 2020 and are proceeding apace with the revised time lines. We are confident of UAE's ability to organize huge events conforming to all health and safety requirements and look forward to contributing to a very successful Expo in Dubai.

8. The Indian mission in the UAE played a stellar role in repatriating stranded Indian nationals via Vande Bharat flights last year owing to the contagion. How many Indians and other nationalities were repatriated last year?

Ans. Since the onset of the pandemic in the UAE in February 2020, the Indian Embassy in Abu Dhabi and the Consulate in Dubai faced the challenge of reaching out to a huge number of Indians who were affected by the pandemic and were under distress. To assist the affected Indian nationals in the UAE, the Embassy and the Consulate took several emergency measures to ensure all possible help to the needy Indian nationals in the UAE such as starting emergency hot-lines and dedicated 24x7 E-mails, coordination with UAE authorities for quick redressal of the issues such as Covid testing, ambulance service, quarantine facility and medical treatment as quickly as possible. Our Missions in the UAE provided online medical counselling, provided food and arranged shelter to the needy people. Since the start of repatriation flights from

UAE to India on 7 May 2020, in a short period of less than three months, we had repatriated over 300,000 Indian nationals to India from the UAE. The numbers have since crossed over a million and a half but a very large number of people who traveled to India have since also come back, especially after we entered into a bilateral 'Air Bubble Arrangement' with UAE in July 2020, which is still on-going and supporting the strong people-to-people exchanges between the two countries. We are operating over 300 flights a week between the two countries, the largest of the 27 air bubble arrangements that India has in place presently. This successful effort at repatriation and continuing exchange of people would not have been possible without the strong support of the UAE government and their departments of Health, Civil Aviation, Interior and Foreign Ministries.

9. How is the mission looking at upskilling Indian workers, as many jobs and skill sets will become redundant in a post-pandemic world?

Ans. It is a fact that the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted every country in the world and one of the visible manifestation of this impact has been the return of a number of Indians from the Gulf region, including UAE. Our Emirati friends tell us that Indians are among the most preferred expatriate community in the UAE and are well-known for their hard work, discipline and law-abiding nature.

On one hand, the COVID-19 pandemic has altered the traditional areas of cooperation of global diplomacy while on the other it has thrown light on the areas that have not been explored previously. We will prepare our skilled workforce to adapt to the challenges and get ready to move into the new and emerging areas. At the same time, we are hopeful that with the passage of time, the global economic situation will improve and provide the opportunities for the return of Indian workers. India and UAE have an understanding on working together to find ways and means to enable Indian workers and professionals to find employment opportunities in UAE in a post-Covid scenario. During the visit of Minister of State for External Affairs, Shri V. Muraleedharan in January 2021, our Consulate in Dubai took the initiative to launch an 'Upskilling & Training Centre' for Indian workers in UAE at the Delhi Public School, Jebel Ali. In addition, the Consulate is also working with some State Governments in India and local partners in UAE to develop a model for imparting certain skill sets to Indian nationals that would also enable them to find appropriate jobs in the UAE.

10. You are a former Indian envoy to Israel, who was present in this country, when the historic Abraham Accords were signed on September 15, 2020 in Washington D.C. How do you think India can benefit from the accords, which give Israel access to new markets such as the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan?

Ans. India and UAE have convergence of views on many regional and geopolitical issues and the leadership on both sides maintain close and frequent communication to brief and coordinate with each other on these developments.

India has consistently supported peace, stability and development in West Asia, which is our extended neighbourhood. India welcomed the signing of the Abraham Accords leading to normalization of the diplomatic relations between the UAE and Israel. Both Israel and UAE are India's strategic partners, and the signing of the Abraham Accords provides opportunities for all the three countries to work closely in areas of mutual interest. I am confident that the dynamic Indian entrepreneurs in the UAE will play an important role in exploring business opportunities between UAE and Israel too.

11. UAE is one of the front runners in implementing a national vaccination programme and is also looking to play a major role in the logistics of Covid vaccines distribution. On the other hand, India is the Global Pharma House and producing over 60% of world vaccines. How do you see cooperation between India and UAE developing in this area?

Ans. The bilateral cooperation between India and the UAE emerged stronger even during the pandemic. There were newer areas of cooperation including healthcare and food security. India was pleased to supply adequate quantities of HCQ tablets to the UAE on a priority basis, and also facilitated the arrival of many more nurses and doctors from India to support the healthcare service providers in this country. India was itself grateful to receive medical supplies from the UAE in the initial phase of pandemic. Indian residents in the UAE, especially doctors and frontline health workers also provided their valuable services to the UAE authorities, including through effective participation in the UAE vaccination trials. It is a great tribute to the UAE leadership that, starting last December, they rolled out a free vaccination campaign for all its residents, which includes more than 3 million Indians. More recently, as part of India's 'Vaccine Maitri' or vaccine friendship programme, we were pleased to enable the supply of 200,000 doses of Indian manufactured Covishield vaccine to UAE in early February. As a natural progression, both sides are now exploring further opportunities in the health care sector. We have always emphasized the strength of collective efforts in fighting this pandemic, and India and the UAE have shown how useful this can be in practice.

12. The UAE is emerging as the leading seat of Arab culture. How can India and the UAE deepen their cultural ties?

Ans. India and the UAE enjoy strong bonds of friendship based on age-old cultural, religious and economic ties between the two nations. The Cultural Agreement of 1975 provides the basic framework for cooperation in the field of culture between the two countries. Under this broad framework, India the UAE have agreed to an Executive Programme for Cultural Cooperation (EPCC) which provides for a range of cultural exchange activities. We look to have a week of Indian Culture as part of our India@75 activities next year. Emiratis interest towards Indian culture is quite visible in their active participation at our cultural events and also celebration of major Indian festivals in the UAE. We also explore opportunities for participation in each other's major cultural

events. We are fortunate to have large Indian community who not only bring in values and traditions of their respective native places in India but also integrate and assimilate both Indian and Emirati cultures. The Indian diaspora continues to play a major role in driving cultural ties between India and the UAE.
