

VIRTUAL PANEL DISCUSSION ON

I2U2: Towards a Transformative Quadrilateral Partnership

18
December 2024
Wednesday

1830-1945 (IST)
0800-0915 (EST)
1700-1815 (GST)

Introduction

CUTS International organised a Virtual Panel Discussion, titled "I2U2: Towards a Transformative Quadrilateral Partnership." The event served as a critical platform to examine the potential of the I2U2 grouping, which comprises Israel, India, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and the United States (U.S.). Hosted by the CUTS International Global Affairs Centre, the discussion brought together esteemed speakers and panellists from across the globe to explore this partnership's strategic, economic, and cultural dimensions. This report synthesises their contributions into a cohesive narrative, reflecting on the transformative potential of the I2U2 and its relevance in today's geopolitical and economic landscape.

Mihir Shekhar Bhonsale opened the session by introducing CUTS International and highlighting the webinar's significance as a forum for innovative dialogue.

The Vision of I2U2

Pradeep S. Mehta, Secretary General, CUTS International delivered the welcome remarks. He emphasised the transformative potential of the I2U2 partnership involving Israel, India, the UAE, and the U.S. Mehta characterised the group as a forward-looking collaboration, focusing on economic pragmatism and strategic cooperation, moving beyond conventional geopolitical alignments. He highlighted that the I2U2 deliberately sidesteps traditional conflict narratives. Instead of concentrating on historical tensions or regional disputes, the partnership prioritises pragmatic economic cooperation and technological innovation.

Drawing attention to recent developments, such as the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEG) and joint initiatives on food security and renewable energy projects, Mehta described the I2U2 as a beacon of collaborative potential amid geopolitical challenges. He expressed optimism about the group's ability to address shared global challenges through strategic investments.

As the session's moderator, Ambassador Triguniat contextualised the I2U2 within the framework of the Abraham Accords, describing it as a natural evolution towards deeper regional collaboration.

He noted that Sherpas have already been appointed and are actively meeting, with heads of government convening in 2022. Additionally, Triguñayat highlighted ongoing business meetings, underscoring the initiative's dynamism.

From India's perspective, he emphasised the strategic significance of the I2U2 as the country transitions from predominantly bilateral engagements to adopting a more regional and sub-regional approach. This includes synergies with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the Arab League.

The former Indian ambassador praised the swift progress made by the grouping, citing tangible achievements such as the US\$2bn investment in food parks and the establishment of innovation hubs. He called for strategic dialogues to align national and regional interests, thereby maximising the I2U2's impact.

Regional and Economic Perspectives

The discussion gained particular relevance in light of recent geopolitical developments. Former Israeli Ambassador to India, Italy, and the Netherlands, Naor Gilon, offered a compelling perspective on regional stability, stating that initiatives like I2U2 and IMEC foster synergy among strong economies, leveraging manufacturing, technology, and financial strengths to reshape realities. Despite challenges like October 7, Gilon emphasised that cooperation is key.

Ambassador Gilon highlighted the need for stronger organisational mechanisms, such as the establishment of a secretariat, to improve efficiency. While acknowledging the challenges posed by recent conflicts, he expressed optimism that the grouping's shared interests would promote stability and cooperation. The former Israeli ambassador also underscored the synergy between the I2U2 economies, particularly in the fields of technology and manufacturing.

Dr N. Janardhan, Director of Research and Analysis at the Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy in the UAE, emphasised the shifting global economic landscape. He noted that we are entering an era where geoeconomics is shaping geopolitics. The rewiring of supply chains and trade routes is shifting the global economic centre of gravity, with emerging powers such as China, India, and Brazil challenging the established order.

Elaborating on the UAE's role in the I2U2 as a pragmatic and future-focused initiative, Dr Janardhan contrasted the economic orientation of the I2U2 with the more security-driven focus of the Quad. Emphasising the importance of private-sector involvement, he commended the grouping's ability to adapt swiftly without excessive bureaucracy.

The historic ties between India and the UAE were highlighted by Dr Mustafa Taherali Saasa, Chairman of Raj Group of Companies. He noted that the India-UAE partnership, rooted in centuries of trade and cultural connections, has laid the foundation of I2U2, driving rapid progress in trade, infrastructure, and food security agreements.

The Chairman of the Raj Group of Industries highlighted that UAE's world-class infrastructure, exemplified by the Jebel Ali Port, serves as a critical trade hub connecting over 80 countries. This infrastructure supports global trade corridors, enabling the seamless flow of goods to regions, such as Eastern Europe, North Africa, and East Africa. The India-UAE bilateral partnership's emphasis on food security and innovative logistics frameworks, underscores its broader significance, delivering benefits that extend well beyond the two nations. Collectively, these initiatives advance the I2U2's vision of fostering regional and global economic integration.

Business and Strategic Implications

Kathleen Davey Mistry, CEO, Mistry Advisors LLC., USA, provided a business-oriented perspective, emphasising the mutual benefits of trade development and cultural understanding. She highlighted how the UAE's commitment to India's agriculture not only enhances food security but also generates employment opportunities and strengthen cultural and economic ties between the two nations.

Drawing on her experience with the UAE and India, the CEO, Mistry Advisors LLC, USA highlighted the region's strategic importance as a business hub. She encouraged companies to invest in long-term relationships, infrastructure, and local engagement, citing examples of UAE-India collaborations in food security and logistics.

Mr. Vas Chenoy, Chief Representative for Italy, Indian Chamber of Commerce, underscored the interconnectedness of trade, security, and cultural understanding. In his view, trade is not independent of geopolitics, culture, religion, or ideology, but rather a sum of all these elements.

He addressed the maritime dimension of this partnership, noting that India's emergence as a naval power and its strategic presence in the Indo-Pacific and Indo-Mediterranean regions reflect its growing role in shaping global trade and security dynamics. Furthermore, the ICC Chief Representative for Italy suggested incorporating European partners into the grouping to enhance its effectiveness and proposed a nimble, project-focused approach to minimise bureaucracy.

Israel-China Dynamics

A critical aspect of the discussion revolved around China's global influence and its implications for I2U2. Dr Witte pointed out that China's expansive presence across economic, technological, and strategic spheres underscores the necessity of international partnerships to counterbalance its dominance.

Dr. Witte stated that, from Israel's perspective, I2U2 and IMEC serve as crucial platforms for signalling strategic autonomy and fostering multilateral collaboration. She emphasised India's role as a key Indo-Pacific power and a counterbalance to China, as well as the UAE's strategic importance as a hub for China's trade with Europe and Africa. She noted out that the I2U2

partnership sends a strong message to China by leveraging mini-laterals to reshape the geo-strategic landscape and advance shared agendas through innovation, resilience, and collaboration.

European Engagement and Linking Global Corridors

An intriguing aspect discussed during the webinar was the synergy between the I2U2 initiatives and global connectivity projects. Velina Tchakarova, a Geopolitical Strategist and Certified Strategic Foresight Expert, Austria offered a European perspective, emphasised the importance of integrating Europe into the I2U2's connectivity projects. She cautioned that new connectivity corridors could exacerbate geopolitical rivalries and advocated for multilateralism and diplomacy to mitigate such risks. Tchakarova highlighted Europe's role as a sophisticated economic partner, capable of contributing to the group's long-term success.

Austrian Strategist, Tchakarova argued that the success of connectivity projects like the IMEC corridor depends heavily on European partnerships. She noted that free trade agreements between the EU, Gulf states, and India could redefine global trade and multilateral diplomacy.

James Carafano, Senior Counsellor to the President and E.W. Richardson Fellow at The Heritage Foundation, USA, highlighted the strategic importance of the partnership's geographical positioning. He emphasised that the I2U2 represents the confluence of four corridors and underscored the need to dramatically expand throughput through the Middle East as a global strategic imperative. This, he argued, is vital to the success of the Southern Corridors, with Three Seas Initiative being among the most critical.

Carafano further emphasised that the upcoming Three Seas Initiative meeting in Warsaw presents an opportunity for strategic alignment. With leaders, such as Prime Minister Modi, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, and potential U.S. representation at the forefront, the event could showcase the strategic momentum behind linking these corridors. He highlighted Italy, particularly the Port of Trieste, as a key junction for I2U2 and Three Seas initiatives, thereby enhancing Europe's role in these efforts.

The discussion also explored broader philosophy of global partnerships. Instead of adhering strictly to a rigid, rules-based order, panellists advocated for an interest-based approach. By fostering collaborations rooted in mutual benefits and connectivity, countries are offered the flexibility to participate or abstain, ensuring inclusivity and shared progress.

Conclusion

The webinar highlighted the I2U2's potential as a model for innovative international collaboration. Panellists emphasised the importance of fostering economic cooperation, addressing shared challenges, and promoting regional stability. Recommendations included strengthening organisational mechanisms, increasing private-sector engagement, and exploring partnerships with European actors to expand the grouping's global impact.