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The Strategic Significance of Defence Exhibitions for the United Arab Emirates

By Kristian Alexander

SYNOPSIS

IDEX/NAVDEX 2025 in Abu Dhabi attracted a record 206,073 visitors from 167 countries, showcasing the UAE's defence capabilities, fostering international partnerships, and driving economic diversification. The event reinforced the UAE's role as a global security hub, emphasising interoperability, defence industrialisation, and strategic autonomy while boosting its MICE sector and diplomatic influence.

COMMENTARY

The International Defence Exhibition and Conference (IDEX) and the Naval Defence Exhibition (NAVDEX) 2025, held in Abu Dhabi, attracted a record-breaking 206,073 visitors from 167 countries, marking a [55.5 per cent increase](#) over the previous edition. Attendees included defence contractors, weapons manufacturers, government representatives, policymakers, military officials, technology developers, cybersecurity specialists, academics, researchers, university students, journalists, media personnel, and industry analysts. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) government alone signed approximately US\$6.85 billion (Dh25.15 billion) worth of [defence contracts](#) during the five-day event.

The biennial events are not just a place to do business, however. By hosting one of the world's largest defence exhibitions, the UAE reinforces its image as a reliable security partner and a [hub for defence diplomacy](#). The Arabian Gulf nation can also showcase its indigenous defence capabilities, helping to assert its sovereignty in an increasingly multipolar world.

Economically, the UAE's hosting of IDEX/NAVDEX 2025 is also deeply intertwined with its diversification strategy. Beyond the value of its defence contracts, IDEX/NAVDEX contributes significantly to the country's Meetings, Incentives,

Conferences, and Exhibitions (MICE) sector, a vital component of [Abu Dhabi's Vision 2030](#).

These exhibitions also serve as a powerful tool for the UAE to shape international perceptions, providing a platform to showcase the country's cultural openness, technological sophistication, and commitment to innovation.

The Host Advantage

Access to Cutting-Edge Technology and Partnership Opportunities

The UAE ranked as the [fourteenth-largest arms importer](#) globally between 2019 and 2023 and relies on IDEX/NAVDEX to procure cutting-edge technology, replenish its stockpiles, and recalibrate its defence doctrine based on emerging threats by engaging directly with global defence manufacturers.

Recent procurement trends suggest a focus on acquiring systems that enhance the UAE's power projection capabilities and its ability to conduct asymmetric warfare. For instance, the [UAE's investments](#) in unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), missile defence systems, and cyber warfare capabilities underscore its emphasis on addressing emerging threats in the cyber and drone domains. The acquisition of [advanced naval assets](#), such as corvettes and submarines, further reflects the country's ambition to secure its maritime interests and project power in the Arabian Gulf and beyond.

At IDEX/NAVDEX 2025, the UAE emphasised its [commitment to interoperability](#) with allied forces, particularly through joint exercises and training programmes. The exhibition provided a unique opportunity for the Gulf nation to showcase its integration of advanced defence systems, such as NATO-compatible communication networks, joint command-and-control architectures, and interoperable weapon systems, which are essential for effective coalition operations.

This focus on interoperability is critical for the UAE's participation in multinational coalitions. By showcasing its ability to integrate with allied forces, the country reinforces its role as a key contributor to regional and global security. This focus on interoperability is not [merely a technical endeavour but a strategic one](#), as it strengthens the UAE's role as a "reliable partner" in multinational coalitions, such as the US-led Combined Maritime Forces.

An Opportunity to Showcase Strategic Autonomy

The UAE has consistently sought to position itself as a regional leader and a key player in global security affairs. IDEX/NAVDEX 2025 served as a stage for the UAE to demonstrate its commitment to maintaining regional stability and countering emerging threats, particularly from state and non-state actors in the Middle East.

The event also highlighted the UAE's pursuit of [strategic autonomy](#). In recent years, the country has diversified its defence partnerships beyond traditional allies such as the United States and engaged with countries such as Russia, China, France, and South Korea. This diversification reflects a calculated effort to reduce dependency on any single supplier and to leverage defence procurement as a tool for strengthening

bilateral ties. For instance, the [UAE's acquisition](#) of advanced Chinese drones and French Rafale fighter jets highlights its willingness to explore alternative sources of military technology, signalling a shift toward a more multipolar approach to defence cooperation.

At IDEX/NAVDEX 2025, the UAE also showcased its [indigenous defence capabilities](#), including products from its state-owned defence conglomerate, the EDGE Group. This emphasis on domestic production aligns with the UAE's broader vision of achieving self-reliance in defence manufacturing, a goal that has significant political implications. By reducing reliance on foreign suppliers, the UAE aims to enhance its strategic autonomy and assert its sovereignty in an increasingly multipolar world.

Defence Industrialisation

As part of its Vision 2030 agenda, the UAE has prioritised the development of a robust defence industrial base to reduce its dependence on oil revenues and create high-value jobs in the technology and manufacturing sectors. The defence industry is a key pillar of this strategy, with the UAE investing heavily in [research and development](#) (R&D) and fostering partnerships with global defence firms.

IDEX/NAVDEX 2025 provided a platform for the UAE to attract [foreign investment and technology transfers](#), further catalysing the growth of its defence sector. The exhibition featured joint ventures and co-production agreements, enabling the UAE to acquire cutting-edge technologies while fostering local expertise. Examples of such collaboration include teaming with South Korea's Hanwha Systems on missile defence systems and a partnership with Turkey's Baykar on drone technology.

IDEX/NAVDEX has a profound economic impact on the UAE, benefiting both the defence sector and the broader economy. The UAE Ministry of Defence signed over [US\\$6 billion](#) worth of contracts during the 2023 edition of the event; that number grew by 10 per cent in 2025. Notably, the UAE's defence, driven by EDGE Group and other domestic firms, is increasingly competitive on the global stage, attracting international clients and investment.

The economic benefits of IDEX/NAVDEX extend beyond the defence sector. The UAE's MICE (meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions) industry, valued at [US\\$5.21 billion in 2023, is projected to reach US\\$9.12 billion by 2030](#). The 2025 edition of IDEX/NAVDEX alone attracted over 206,073 visitors, boosting the tourism, hospitality, transportation, and business sectors and aligning with the government's broader economic diversification strategy.

Shaping Perceptions of the UAE

Beyond its political, economic, and military dimensions, IDEX/NAVDEX 2025 is a powerful tool for the UAE to project soft power. By hosting a diverse array of international participants, the UAE reinforces its image as a global crossroads and a bridge between East and West.

The UAE's emphasis on [sustainability and innovation](#) at IDEX/NAVDEX 2025 further enhances its soft power appeal. For example, the UAE's investments in renewable

energy and green technologies are likely to be reflected in its defence exhibits, aligning with its broader vision of sustainable development. This focus on sustainability resonates with global audiences and reinforces the UAE's reputation as a forward-thinking and responsible actor on the world stage.

Additionally, IDEX/NAVDEX 2025 provides an opportunity for the UAE to strengthen its diplomatic ties and build new alliances. The exhibition facilitates high-level meetings and dialogues between defence officials, fostering trust and cooperation among participating nations. These interactions are critical for advancing the UAE's strategic interests and enhancing its influence in international forums.

Prior to the main IDEX/NAVDEX 2025 events, the UAE hosted the [International Defence Conference](#), organised by ADNEC Group in collaboration with the Ministry of Defence and the Tawazun Council. The theme, "Defence Reimagined: Innovation, Integration, and Resilience", was held at the Emirates Palace in Abu Dhabi, bringing together defence and security leaders, experts, and companies from around the world to discuss key challenges and opportunities in the defence sector.

The conference featured [three key sessions focusing](#) on global disruptions and defence preparedness, mitigating threats to critical supply chains, and the role of misinformation and influence operations in modern conflicts. A dedicated session on the evolving space domain highlighted the UAE's recognition of space as a critical frontier in defence and security. These discussions bring together prominent international leaders, ministers, senior defence officials, academia, and industry stakeholders, fostering a multidisciplinary approach to addressing complex security challenges.

Conclusion

With IDEX/NAVDEX 2025, the UAE has carved out its position as a key player in global defence, security, and industrialisation. More than just a marketplace for arms deals, these exhibitions serve as a strategic platform for the UAE to bolster its defence capabilities, enhance interoperability with allies, and expand its diplomatic outreach.

By leveraging defence industrialisation as a pillar of economic diversification, the UAE has sought to strengthen its indigenous defence sector while attracting foreign investment and fostering cutting-edge innovation. As the defence landscape evolves, these exhibitions will remain central to the UAE's broader vision of security, economic resilience, and diplomatic engagement in an increasingly multipolar world.

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