
India-Persian Gulf Relations: From Transactional to Strategic Partnerships

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India's relations with the Gulf countries have been exceptionally significant since ancient times and are multifaceted. The two have maintained historical ties with each other in terms of trade, energy, security as well as a vast expatriate population. While the Indo-Gulf relations are dominated by energy cooperation, recent years have experienced a shift in their dynamics. Owing to Persian Gulf countries' quest to achieve Vision 2030 through economic diversification, Indo-Gulf relations have seen an expansion in other non-conventional areas such as security cooperation and strategic partnerships. India is not in military alliance with any of the major powers, however, it shares close strategic and military relations with many major countries in the world. Owing to growing stature of India and its clout at the global table, India started to build strategic partnerships with major countries such as France, Russia, Germany, and the US, etc., since 1997.¹ It is noteworthy that India has extended its strategic partnerships with as many as four countries in the Gulf, namely, Iran, Oman, Saudi Arabia, the UAE since 2003.² This shows that over a period of time the region holds immense significance for India's ascendance as a growing regional and global power.

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India shares historical relations with the Persian Gulf which date back to ancient civilisations during the reign of Indus Valley in the subcontinent and Dilmun Empire in the region. This relationship was predominantly trade-oriented which continued to be the case until very late. Pre-independent India under British control showed its imperial interest in the Gulf and trade was monitored, pursued and administered from Bombay Presidency.³ Until the 1960s, the Indian rupee was a legal tender in most of the countries in the Gulf, namely, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman and the UAE.⁴ India traded in rupees which was a special note exclusively printed to be used in the Gulf, hence popularly known as “Gulf Rupee” since the time oil was discovered in Persia (then Iran), by the British on May 26, 1908.⁵ The trade basket during these times expanded from raw materials, silk, spices, etc., to majorly energy import. However, relations were still transactional in nature.

Geographically, the Persian Gulf was an immediate neighbour of India and was directly connected to Iran prior to its independence in 1947 and partition. However, the importance of the region still remains the same as it is an integral part of India’s extended neighbourhood in terms of geographical proximity, expansion of interests and growing Indian clout in the entire region.⁶ Today, Indo-Gulf relationships have expanded at many levels and the Persian Gulf is key to India’s growth story. The importance of the region is reflected in India’s continued interests and engagements. For instance, towards the beginning of the twenty-first century, India’s exports to the Gulf were more than its exports to the European Union.⁷ Strategic relations with the Persian Gulf are in many ways responsible for India’s economic development, social progress and political ascendance.⁸ This importance and recognition is reflected in the increased engagements that India has had with many countries in the region especially over the past decade.

The article delves into the change of perception of the Gulf for New Delhi, changing dynamics, growing terrorism, etc., that has compelled the

latter to expand its relations from transactional to strategic partnerships. Moreover, the present pandemic that has engulfed the entire world calls for more engaged strategic partnerships with the Gulf as terror outfits are likely to take a cue from the current situation and develop Corona-like viruses or biological weapons to target select nationalities. As terrorism is a concern for both India and the countries in the Gulf, coming times will probably see more engagements of the two in this regard.

India-Gulf: Traditional and Transactional Relations

Traditionally, India's relations with the Gulf countries have been dictated by energy imports since the discovery of oil in the region and the cheaper rates available. With a growing population and India's quest to become a fast growing economy,⁹ energy security is essential for its growth. Therefore, for very long, Indo-Gulf relations were purely of a buyer and a seller. The foundation of the relationship is based on the 3Es, namely, energy, economy and expatriates.¹⁰ Even though Indo-Gulf relations still rest on the 3Es, nevertheless, the 3Es have acted as a complementary factor in upping the strategic partnerships.

Currently, the countries of the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Iraq are among the top five import sources (as of 2019, Iraq has dropped to the sixth position) for India after China and the US.¹¹ The UAE is also the second-biggest export destination for the country. The bulk of imports from the region are dominated by oil and gas to fulfil India's energy requirements. Imports from the Gulf are crucial to the country's development. As of 2019, India's energy import dependence stood at 84 per cent,¹² out of which 55 per cent comes from the Persian Gulf alone.¹³ If this is not enough, even total trade component with the region is higher than many of India's immediate neighbours. In purely economic terms, India's total trade with the region for the year 2019-20 (till February 2020) stood at over US\$ 139 billion or more than 19 per cent of India's total foreign trade. Some of the Persian Gulf countries are top 25 trading Partners,

namely, the UAE (3rd), Saudi Arabia (4th), Iraq (6th), Qatar (22nd) and Kuwait (25th).¹⁴ Owing to recurrent US imposed sanctions and removal of waivers, Iran's place as the third trading partner has come down to 38th position and Oman stands at 35th.

Needless to mention, the trade statistics has not changed over the years. India's Director-General of Foreign Trade, the trade data collecting agency of the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, provides region-wise import-export data from 1996-97 onwards. Table 1 in that regard suggests that India's total trade, both imports and exports, have significantly increased over the period of time. While Persian Gulf's share in total imports increased marginally from 11.15 per cent in 1996-97 to 15.51 per cent in 2018-19, its export share almost doubled from 7.22 per cent to 12.61 per cent during the same time. In terms of imports 2010-14 was the most significant time period owing to lowering of oil prices. The table also reveals that for the past 3 to 4 years, while the imports had started to increase despite Iranian sanctions and removal of waivers for India, exports have seen a decline.

Table 1: Persian Gulf Share in India's Total Imports and Exports

| Year | Total Imports (US\$ million) | Persian Gulf Share (per cent) | Total Exports (US\$ million) | Persian Gulf Share (per cent) |
|-----------|------------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1996-97 | 39,132.41 | 11.15 | 33,469.95 | 7.22 |
| 1997-98 | 41,484.49 | 10.49 | 34,784.98 | 7.79 |
| 1998-99 | 42,388.71 | 13.25 | 33,218.72 | 9.09 |
| 1999-2000 | 49,738.06 | 12.39 | 36,822.49 | 8.71 |
| 2000-1 | 50,536.45 | 3.32 | 44,560.29 | 8.76 |
| 2001-2 | 51,413.28 | 3.28 | 43,826.72 | 8.66 |
| 2002-3 | 61,412.14 | 3.07 | 52,719.43 | 9.31 |
| 2003-4 | 78,149.11 | 4.16 | 63,842.55 | 11.06 |
| 2004-5 | 111,517.43 | 6.33 | 83,535.94 | 11.74 |
| 2005-6 | 149,165.73 | 5.23 | 103,090.53 | 11.42 |

| | | | | |
|---------|------------|-------|------------|-------|
| 2006-7 | 185,735.24 | 16.68 | 126,414.05 | 11.95 |
| 2007-8 | 251,654.01 | 17.91 | 163,132.18 | 13.33 |
| 2008-9 | 303,696.31 | 19.59 | 185,295.36 | 17.33 |
| 2009-10 | 288,372.88 | 18.55 | 178,751.43 | 17.05 |
| 2010-11 | 369,769.13 | 20.26 | 251,136.19 | 17.00 |
| 2011-12 | 489,319.49 | 20.88 | 305,963.92 | 14.82 |
| 2012-13 | 490,736.65 | 22.02 | 300,400.68 | 16.99 |
| 2013-14 | 450,199.78 | 22.61 | 314,405.29 | 15.33 |
| 2014-15 | 448,033.40 | 18.84 | 310,338.48 | 15.88 |
| 2015-16 | 381,006.62 | 14.64 | 262,290.13 | 15.89 |
| 2016-17 | 384,355.56 | 14.35 | 275,851.71 | 15.14 |
| 2017-18 | 465,580.99 | 13.76 | 303,526.16 | 12.97 |
| 2018-19 | 514,078.20 | 15.51 | 330,078.09 | 12.61 |

Source: Adapted from Director-General of Foreign Trade, New Delhi, www.dgft.gov.in

In the quest of diversifying the relations, India and the countries in the region have invested in infrastructure development in both India as well as in the Gulf. For instance, in June 2018, Saudi Aramco and Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC) signed an agreement with India to jointly develop the largest refinery in the world in Ratnagiri Refinery and Petrochemicals Limited (RRPCL) in Ratnagiri, Maharashtra. The refinery will produce about 1.2 million barrels per day of oil and all the three partners will supply at least 50 per cent of the crude that the refinery will process.¹⁵ Similarly, Indian companies such as HCL, L&T and TCS have emerged as strong potential investors in energy, transportation, food processing, and information technology sectors in the region.

If total trade with the Gulf remains significant for India, energy remains the main commodity for transaction. As stated earlier, presently around 55 per cent of India's energy imports are from the Gulf countries. The countries in the region are not only cheap suppliers of hydrocarbons but due to geographical proximity there is a further cost-cutting involved. Table 2 suggests that the importance of Persian

Gulf energy imports are highly significant and are majorly energy based. This has continued to be the case for many years. However, as reflected in the table, there is a slight decrease in energy imports, this is because owing to the political instability in the Persian Gulf and fluctuations in oil prices India has been trying to diversify its energy import partners and buys oil from the US, Nigeria and Russia as well recently. This is to “cut costs and help shield itself from geopolitical tensions.”¹⁶ For instance, owing to Iranian sanctions, in 2019 alone, India imported 4.49 million tonnes (MT) of crude oil from the US while Nigeria took Iran’s position as the third largest supplier of crude with 7.17 MT of crude for the same year.¹⁷ India increased its share of oil imports from Russia and bought 2.13 MT of crude from it. Moreover, the countries in the region are also trying to diversify their economy and thus investments in other sectors such as construction, banking, infrastructure development, etc., have increased.

**Table 2: India’s Energy Imports from the Persian Gulf Region
(in US\$ million)**

| Year | Total Persian Gulf | Total Imports | Per cent Persian Gulf Imports to Total Imports |
|---------|--------------------|---------------|--|
| 2007-8 | 54,365.01 | 86,384.04 | 62.93 |
| 2008-9 | 62,282.89 | 103,933.77 | 59.93 |
| 2009-10 | 55,904.14 | 96,321.16 | 58.04 |
| 2010-11 | 66,688.4 | 115,929.06 | 57.53 |
| 2011-12 | 105,056.26 | 172,753.97 | 60.81 |
| 2012-13 | 105,859.19 | 181,344.67 | 58.37 |
| 2013-14 | 106,400.75 | 181,382.56 | 58.66 |
| 2014-15 | 85,300.3 | 156,399.98 | 54.54 |
| 2015-16 | 50,992.26 | 96,953.02 | 52.59 |
| 2016-17 | 56,335.34 | 103,163.2 | 54.6 |

Source: Adapted from Director-General of Foreign Trade, New Delhi, www.dgft.gov.in

Notably, decrease in energy imports from Gulf is not indicative of India decreasing its engagements with the Gulf which has only increased over the years. This is because of expansion of relations from that based on transactions to partnerships.

Of the 3Es, expatriates play a crucial role in making the relations strong and robust. It is estimated that 8.5-10 million Indian expatriates dwell in the Gulf (Table 3). The 8.5 million to 9 million figure is estimated by the Ministry of External Affairs and Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs, however, Sebastian Irudaya Rajan estimates that there are about 10 million expatriates in the Gulf, many of whom are undocumented.

Table 3: Indian Expatriates in Persian Gulf, 2018

| Country | Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) | Persons of Indian Origin (PIOs) | Overseas Indians |
|--------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|------------------|
| Bahrain | 312,918 | 3,257 | 316,175 |
| Kuwait | 928,421 | 1,482 | 929,903 |
| Oman | 688,226 | 919 | 689,145 |
| Qatar | 691,539 | 500 | 692,039 |
| Saudi Arabia | 2,812,408 | 2,160 | 2,814,568 |
| UAE | 3,100,000 | 4,586 | 3,104,586 |
| Total | 8,533,512 | 12,904 | 8,546,416 |

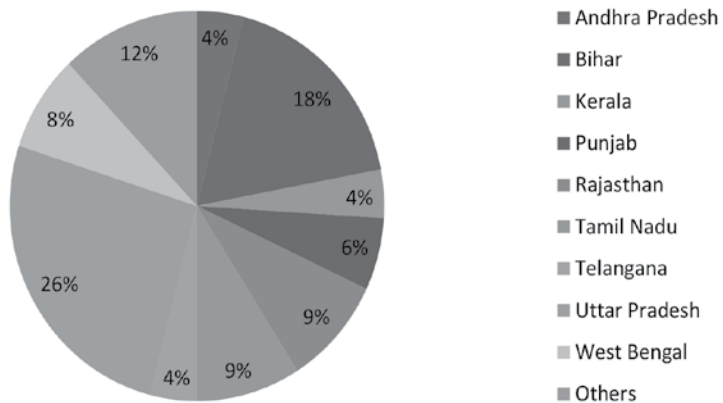
Source: Adapted from Ministry of External Affairs, https://mea.gov.in/images/attach/NRIs-and-PIOs_1.pdf

According to the World Bank, India is the top recipient of remittances in the world which amounts to US\$ 83.1 billion and accounts for 2.8 per cent of Indian GDP.¹⁸ This is attributed to India's position as the largest country of origin of international migrants. Since the "oil boom" of the 1970s, migration to the Gulf from southern states of India, especially Kerala, started and that gave impetus to the overall development of the country as remittances began to flow. In return, Indian migrant workers have also made substantial contribution to the development of Gulf States.

Notably, India-Gulf corridor is the second largest migration corridor in the world, after US-Mexico corridor. Of around 31 million non-resident Indians (NRIs), 8.5-10 million work in the Gulf and Indians constitute over 30 per cent of the expatriate workforce in the region.¹⁹

Southern states of India and especially Kerala have been the major source of origin for Gulf migration. However, over the past decades there has been a decline in Kerala migration to the Gulf and it is pointed out that return migration for Kerala is on the rise and that the “long history of migration from Kerala to the Gulf is in its last phase.”²⁰ As of now, it is the northern states that have filled the space, namely, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan and in southern states it is Tamil Nadu (Figure 1). It is noteworthy that the first three states are ranked as low-income states in the country and have declining job prospects in the formal and informal sectors alike and this has resulted in mass outflow of population to the Gulf.

Figure 1: State-wise Distribution of Gulf Migrants, 2018



Source: Prepared by the Author in consultation with the Ministry of External Affairs, Annual Report 2018-19.²¹

Nonetheless, due to economic slowdowns, fluctuating oil prices, and changes in Gulf labour policies in the region because of focus on indigenisation, there has been a slackening in the outflow of Indian migrants. Paradoxically, there has been an increase in remittances by 14-18 per cent by 2019. The advent of coronavirus pandemic has created an unprecedented health and livelihood challenge for the Indian migrants working in the Gulf and their dependants and this has led to many returning to India. However, a cross-sectional examination of the profile of the Indians that returned by May clearly indicates that only the dependants, dependants with health issues and the undocumented migrants are the ones that have returned.²² This phenomenon that will require absorption of returnees in the already shrinking job market in the country will be a daunting challenge for the Indian government.²³ Moreover, it is also pointed by Irudaya Rajan that because of lack of Public Relations (PR) policy in the Gulf for Indians in contrast to the ones in western countries, Gulf migrants by virtue of absence of PR policy have always been return migrants.

This is partly also because of the fact that the majority of Indian migrants in the Gulf are employed in blue-collar jobs in the “3Ds sector,” namely, “dirty, dangerous and demeaning,” and thus did not receive the due attention of policymakers for long. According to Rajan, “there is no such thing as an Indo-Gulf Person”²⁴ and therefore India should be prepared to absorb such migrants as and when necessary or should focus on creating a PR policy for the Gulf too. It was only recently, in the past few decades, that Gulf migrants’ contribution to the development of Gulf countries—as well as India, because of the remittances that it receives—has been well acknowledged. Therefore, a robust planning in this regard will be necessary to deal with the forthcoming population pressure on the country.

Following the trend, it is clear that Indo-Gulf relations in terms of economy, energy and expatriates have been affected over a period of time.

Even though the number of expatriates in the region has been increasing by number, the proportion of unskilled or semi-skilled workers from the northern states of India which are majorly low-income states, is on the rise (Figure 1). During corona crisis and after that there is a possibility that India will receive more numbers of Gulf returnees. If this is not enough, owing to diversification of economies in the Gulf, drive to achieve respective *Visions*, Gulf being conflict prone as a challenge to India's vast energy demands, fluctuating energy prices and India's own diversification of energy source and types, etc., have been the reasons for the decline in Indo-Gulf's economy and energy transactions.

Therefore, despite the challenges in all the three pillars, Indo-Gulf relations are thriving at a good pace. This is well reflected in India enhancing its relations at strategic levels with over half of the countries in the region, namely, Iran, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE; with Qatar, India has signed military training and cooperation agreement.²⁵ This suggests that despite all the traditional challenges to the relationship, the Gulf still remains an important region in India's foreign policy. This is reflected in the number of high-level visits that have taken place to and from the region, most of which took place since the time Prime Minister Narendra Modi was elected in May 2014.²⁶

Indo-Gulf: Ascendance to Strategic Partnership

Since 2003, India's relations with major Persian Gulf countries have been elevated to strategic partnerships. Iran not only became the first country in the region with which India established strategic relations in 2003 but also the relations were established prior to Indo-US relations at that level. This shift in attitude towards the region is attributed to the diversification of dimensions between the two. India currently has strategic partnerships with four countries in the Gulf and with Qatar it has a security and military cooperation. It is necessary to understand, despite the instability predicted for the region time and again, what the

reason is behind New Delhi's decision to elevate relations at that level. This is because, as of now, India has such agreements with some of the major countries in the world. Giving that space to the Gulf suggests that unlike the popular notion that India is shifting its focus from the Gulf (in terms of diversification of energy sources, challenges for Indian migrants due to indigenisation policies in many of the Persian Gulf countries and focus on the Indo-Pacific) to other parts of the world is unwarranted.

A strategic partnership entails "a long-term interaction between two countries based on political, economic, social and historical factors. Such partnership manifests itself in a variety of relationships."²⁷ India has strategic partnerships with around 30 countries in the world of which four are in the Persian Gulf. The US, China, Russia, the UK, Israel, Japan, France, and Germany are some of the major countries with which India has strategic partnerships. However, all the strategic partnerships are not the same and not equally important. Different dimensions play a major role in relationships with different countries. Some have a dominant political element while others may have a prominent economic dimension and security cooperation may be important for a few. Therefore, there is a hierarchy in strategic partnerships. India's strategic partnership with the Gulf countries involves the vital role played by all the dimensions. Owing to the largest number of Indian expatriates and huge remittance flow, the human security angle becomes important. The Gulf, being predominantly Muslim, becomes a political angle in Indo-Gulf relations to keep Pakistan at bay. Energy security and foreign investments are other areas of cooperation. Therefore, Indo-Persian Gulf is a special case and the two share a robust and dynamic strategic partnership.

Increasing incidences of terrorism, sprawling terror outfits and probability of re-emergence of Islamic State (IS) is a matter of concern to both India and countries in the region. Even though predominantly Arab, the Gulf is weary of Iran's activating terror

outfits to conduct proxy wars against them. India maintains a non-interventionist, non-prescriptive approach towards the region but is extremely aware and sensitive to Pakistan's terror adventurism particularly in the Kashmir valley. Owing to these challenges posed by terrorism, Indo-Gulf strategic partnership rests on counterterrorism, money laundering, cybersecurity, organised crime, human trafficking and anti-piracy, traditional dimensions notwithstanding.²⁸

The enhancement of relations has reached a fair degree of success and “encompass defence and naval cooperation, including joint exercises, regular Indian ship visits and broad-based MoUs.” Indian defence and military academies train Gulf armed-forces personnel and all Gulf countries are members of the Indian Navy-conceived Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS) established in 2008. Additionally, India has played an active role in enhancing the stability and security of the Gulf's sea lanes through its joint participation in anti-piracy patrols off the coast of Somalia since 2008.²⁹

Moreover, upgradation of Indo-Saudi relations to strategic partnership took place in February 2010 during the signing of Riyadh Declaration which includes defence cooperation as a major component. Some scholars like Rahul Roy-Chaudhury opine that despite official Indian concerns over “Saudi funding to fundamentalist Muslim institutions in India, the two countries are developing a coordinated approach towards counter-extremism.”³⁰ Additionally, a Saudi-Indian extradition treaty and agreement for transfer of sentenced persons have also been signed by the two. Under this arrangement, an Indian national Zabiuddin Ansari aka Abu Jundal, alleged handler of terrorists in 2008 Mumbai attack, was deported from Saudi Arabia and arrested in New Delhi on June 21, 2012.³¹

Counterterrorism plays a vital role as one of the primary drivers of increased security cooperation between the two regions is terrorism and radicalisation. Historically, both India and the Gulf countries have been

victims of terrorism which continues to manifest itself in various forms. Previously on a few occasions India has been critical of Gulf funding “the madrassas and terrorists groups in Pakistan” and has been wary of home-grown militants seeking refuge in the Gulf.³² Moreover, as per Indian Intelligence agencies, Indians who joined IS had links with individuals in the Gulf.³³ Given the highest number of Indian expatriates in the region, India is apprehensive of its citizens at higher risks of radicalisation or being victims of terror outfits.

Similarly, in recent years, the Gulf countries have also changed their stance having faced tremendous international pressure and terror attacks in their own respective countries. It is because of these concerns that during the February 2019 visit of Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman aka MBS to India post-Pulwama attack, the Crown Prince remarked that the common concern for both the countries is to curtail terrorism and extremism. He extended his cooperation in the matter and applauded India’s role in combating the issue head-on.³⁴ Given the concerns, the two countries agreed to constitute a comprehensive security dialogue at the level of National Security Advisors and to set up a joint working group on counterterrorism.³⁵

Even though strategic partnerships are not clearly defined certain ongoing collaborations suggest that both India and the Gulf will benefit tremendously in the long run. For instance, evacuation of Indian nationals during the time of crisis is also smoothed owing to the upgradation of relations to strategic levels. Evacuation of Indian expatriates during Yemen crisis was facilitated by efforts that involved countries in the region that otherwise do not see eye-to-eye. Therefore, this is the apt time when India should frame its otherwise absent evacuation policy under the upgraded strategic partnership. Notably, India has conducted the largest number of evacuation operations in the Gulf during conflict situations but yet does not have a robust policy for the same. In fact, during the corona crisis also, India had to send maximum number of flights to the

Gulf to fetch its citizenry. Given the equation with the countries an early warning system can be installed so that the country is not caught off guard and is fully prepared to fetch its expatriates.

To conclude, Indo-Gulf relations have transformed from traditionally transaction-based to strategic partnerships. This shift is despite decreasing trends in commercial and trade relations, energy diversification in terms of source and type, and number of expatriates. Owing to the pandemic, these figures will further drop. However, the elevation of relations to strategic levels will not be affected and relations will continue to flourish because of common concerns to counterterrorism and extremism. This suggests that the Gulf's role in Indian development is crucial and New Delhi should work in tandem with the Gulf nations to achieve its objective of becoming a regional and global power. Additionally, India should use the current circumstances of pandemic to its advantage and invest in framing a robust evacuation and PR policy to facilitate evacuation of its expatriates in the region. Moreover, India also needs to enhance its relations because of growing Chinese and Pakistani clout and this is when its 10 million strong expatriates will act as a leverage point to increase its own clout in the Gulf.

Notes

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