

## **India's Foreign Policy towards the Gulf Cooperation Council**

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### **Abstract**

India's relations with Gulf countries and West Asia are very old. The West Asian region plays a significant role in India's economy, as it provides about two thirds of India's total oil import. For long times, millions of Indian migrants have been move to search jobs in the GCC countries and they are considered as a significant part of the total remittance received from out of the country. On the other hand, Indian always maintains a balancing political strategy with the GCC countries. The emerging security, regional and international order in the region demands increased interaction between India and the GCC. As the GCC also opening up, this paper argues that it time for India to look beyond trade and business, and engage the GCC in political, security and strategic fields.

### **Introduction**

India is an emerging power looking to engage with the world through cultural links, trade and diplomacy. New parameters have been set by it to forge foreign relations in this regard. Priorities in its foreign policy have seen changes too to make its international relations stable with the world community. The world community is also looking to forge strong relations with India. Same has stood the test of times when it comes to India's relationship with the Arab world or vice versa, even prior to the discovery of oil. For several centuries, India and the Arab world have been maintaining strong trade and diplomatic relations. In 1948, India voted against the partition of Palestine. India maintained close ties to both Iran and Saudi during the Cold War era. However, as the Cold War ended and reshuffling of world order began to take place, India too began to restructure its foreign policy.<sup>1</sup>

Since the inception of the GCC in 1981, India has maintained strong ties with it. An organization of six countries, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman and Qatar, the GCC is of significant importance to

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<sup>1</sup> P. R. Kumaraswamy, eds., *Persian Gulf 2013: India's Relations with Region*, (New Delhi: Sage Publication, 2014), 5-6.

India since they hold the largest oil reserves in the world. In this regard, India has maintained close relations with the GCC. The GCC is an amalgamation of wealthy nations<sup>2</sup> and India's relations with the GCC is rooted in history which evolved over a period of time. India and GCC have cooperated in various fields. The relations have sustained due to trade and cultural links, and due to the presence of large number of Indian nationals.<sup>3</sup> Even before the formation of the GCC, many high officials and dignitaries had visited India, such as the Kuwait's foreign minister in 1964<sup>4</sup> the first high level official visit from a member state of the GCC before the inception of the organization.

## Historical Links

India's relations with the GCC have been in place even before the independence of India or for that matter, before the independence of most of the GCC member states. For instance; India's relations with the Arabian Peninsula, or what comprises now of the GCC, is rooted in history and dates back to fourth millennium B.C. when sailing ships passed through Mesopotamia and India after the discovery of objects such as seals, pottery and jewelry etc. Later, people from the peninsula began trading pearls in India that was exchanged with teak wood which was used in building ships. During the colonial period special British officers known as commissioners were assigned by the British to further strengthen the Relationship between India and what now is the GCC peninsula.<sup>5</sup>

Discovery of oil further strengthened the relations between GCC region and Kuwait. Indian diaspora in the GCC region has also played a major role in bringing the two peoples and the countries together. Indian diaspora, which has been living in the region for several centuries has had a great impact on the Social, economic and political life of the GCC region.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, both GCC and India have come closer and maintained closer relationship with each other.

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<sup>2</sup>Mushtaq Hussain, "Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)," in *Persian Gulf 2013: Indian Relations with Region*, ed., P. R. Kumaraswamy, (New Delhi: Sage Publication, 2014), 273.

<sup>3</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of India, "India-Kuwait Relations," July 2016.

<sup>4</sup>M. K. Qureshy, "indo-kuwait relations," in *West Asia and India's Foreign Policy: International relations and foreign policy of india-4*, ed. Verindergrover (New Delhi: Deep and Deep publication, 1992), 368.

<sup>5</sup>PaulamiSanyal, "Kuwait" in *Persian Gulf 2013: india's relations with region* ed. P. R Kumaraswamy, (New Delhi: Sage Publication, 2014), 128.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p.128.

## India and the GCC: The Beginning of a Relationship.

India had recognized the sovereignty and independence of all the GCC countries after the independent nations emerged, for instance, in case of Kuwait and after its independence a consulate of it was opened in Bombay, now Mumbai, in Maharashtra India in 1961.<sup>7</sup> India had established bilateral relations with GCC countries from 1962 onwards.<sup>8</sup> The establishing of bilateral and diplomatic relations with each of what was to become GCC gave new direction to their relationship. Among the first countries to lend its support to India against China in 1962 war was Kuwait which was followed by other GCC members that was yet to be formed at that time.<sup>9</sup> A lot of visits from all countries to each other were witnessed.

In 1981, the late Prime minister of India, Mrs. Indira Gandhi visited one of GCC states, Kuwait, to boost relations with the organization at a multi dimension level.<sup>10</sup> One of the representatives of the GCC's member state Kuwait, at the insistence of the organization had been funding India for a long time to boost their relationship with each other. A little less than 153.97 crore aid was provided to India since 1981 to boost its Koplil hydel project, Anpara thermal power projects, Kerala Fisheries development projects and Thal Fertilizer projects.<sup>11</sup> However, in 1990, the GCC-India relations suffered a massive setback when Iraq invaded Kuwait and India's actions appeared to be less sympathetic towards the GCC member state where India quickly went onto close its embassy. For the GCC, these Indian actions appeared to be pro-Iraqi.

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<sup>7</sup> Mirza N.A. Baig, "Indo-Kuwait Relations after independence in West Asia and the region: Defining India's role" ed. Rajendra M. Abhiyankar (Academic Publications: New Delhi, 2008), p. 540.

<sup>8</sup> Paulami Sanyal, "Kuwait," in the Persian Gulf 2013: India's relations with region, ed. P R Kumaraswamy (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2008), 540.

<sup>9</sup> Sandra Santhosh, IIK Young, "An insight into Indo-Kuwait relations," March 15, 2016, *Indians in Kuwait.com*, accessed September 2, 2020, retrieved from <https://www.indiansinkuwait.com/news/An-Insight-into-Indo-Kuwait-Relations/>

<sup>10</sup> India Kuwait Relations, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, accessed September 2, 2020, available at [https://mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Kuwait\\_July\\_2016.pdf](https://mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Kuwait_July_2016.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> A. K. Pasha, "India's policy towards the Arab World in the 21<sup>st</sup> century," in India's Foreign policy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century ed. V.D Chopra (New Delhi: Kalpaz Publications), 228-229.

However, after Iraq retreated from Kuwait the Indian government approached Kuwait and other GCC member states to improve the relationship again.<sup>12</sup>

In this connection, Indian external affairs minister Madhav Singh Solanki visited Kuwait in February 1992. It was the first ministerial visit since the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait. The visit was later termed as a diplomatic win for India.<sup>13</sup> However, after the demolition of the Babri Mosque in India in 1992, the relationship of India and GCC again became complicated and one of the member states of the GCC proposed a bill to stop Hindu workers from working in these countries. However, that bill was out rightly rejected citing that the proposal violated political and religious norms. It was suggested that the bill would give an impression that Islam is a racist religion and would harm the cause of Muslims. One of the member GCC states then provided India with a mammoth RS 177 crore aid for its development till 1996.<sup>14</sup> Later several high profile visits were witnessed from external affairs ministers to the Prime Minister of India's visit to GCC countries.<sup>15</sup>

As the 20<sup>th</sup> century was drawing to a close memorandum of understandings were signed between India and GCC member states in the fields of trafficking, higher education, civil aviation, legal procedure, extradition, strategic consultation, judicial cooperation, cooperation in taxation and cultural and information exchange programs.<sup>16</sup> The heads of the GCC member states reciprocated their visits while signing agreements related to "trade, investment, industrial cooperation, particularly information technology, as well as energy came in particular mention."<sup>17</sup> These visits provided road maps between India and the GCC to strengthen their relationship.

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<sup>12</sup>PaulamiSanyal, "Kuwait" in *Persian Gulf 2013: india's relations with region* ed. P. R Kumaraswamy, (New Delhi: Sage Publication, 2014), 133.

<sup>13</sup>A. K. Pasha, "India's policy towards the Arab World in the 21<sup>st</sup> century," in *India's Foreign policy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century* ed. V.D Chopra (New Delhi: Kalpaz Publications), 229-230.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid. 230.

<sup>15</sup>"Kuwait-India Relations," *KuwaitConsulate.in*, accessed March 13, 2017, retrieved from <http://www.kuwaitconsulate.in/india-kuwait.html>

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>"India-Kuwait sign trade, extradition agreements," *Dawn*, August 26, 2004, accessed March 15, 2020, retrieved from <https://www.dawn.com/news/368621/newspaper/column>

In addition, as the world entered into new millennium the heads of the GCC member states on individual visits met with their Indian counterparts and signed various treaties such as mutual cooperation to sign to enforce trade and commerce, that included double taxation avoidance treaty, agreements on drugs and narcotics and agreement on cooperation in culture. The heads further discussed the regional and various international issues including the developments in post US led war on Iraq, Iranian unclears and Indo-Pak situation. These talks gave a new direction to Indo-GCC relations.<sup>18</sup>

These visits of the GCC heads were reciprocated by India and they too payed visits to GCC member states starting with Hamid Ansari's visit to Kuwait in 2009 and other GCC countries and sought investment in Energy and other infrastructure sectors.<sup>19</sup> Others such as educational exchange programs, agreements on cooperation in science and technology and cultural exchange programs were signed between India and the GCC states.<sup>20</sup> These visits bridged the gap between GCC and India and strengthened their political, economic and cultural relations. India also participated along with GCC states the 20<sup>th</sup> liberation anniversary of Kuwait from Iraq which was seen as a huge diplomatic victory for India given India's close association with Saddam Hussein whose occupation of Kuwait had witnessed India's approval.<sup>21</sup> With the starting of a new decade of the millennium the ex-Indian Minister of state for petroleum and natural gas paid a visit to GCC countries in 2011-2012. These visits further improved the relations of India and GCC tremendously. These visits continued and strengthened relations between India and GCC in wider and different ranges of cooperation.<sup>22</sup>

As a new administration took to the office in the Indian parliament under the premiership of Narendra Modi, the relations between India and the GCC began to touch new heights. Dr. V.K. Singh, the

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<sup>18</sup>“Kuwait Emir arrives on a six day state visit,” *One India News*, June 14, 2006, accessed September 2, 2020, retrieved from <http://www.oneindia.com/2006/06/14/kuwait-amir-arrives-on-a-six-day-state-visit-1150292359.html>

<sup>19</sup>“vice president Ansari concludes Kuwait visit,” *One India News*, April 8, 2009, accessed September 2, 2020, retrieved from <https://www.oneindia.com/amphtml/2009/04/08/vicepresident-ansari-concludes-kuwaitvisit.html>

<sup>20</sup>“Kuwait-India Relations,” *KuwaitConsulate.in*, accessed March 13, 2017, retrieved from <http://www.kuwaitconsulate.in/india-kuwait.html>

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

<sup>22</sup>Annual report 2016-2017, (New Delhi: Policy planning and research division), 69, *Ministry of external Affairs, Government of India*.

external affairs minister paid a visit to a GCC member state in 2016, that was to become the first visit of a high profile post holder from the Modi government. In the same year in 2016, the visit was reciprocated as one of the dignitaries from the GCC member state attended the international conference on the prevention of violent extremism through education that was held in new Delhi India in September 2016.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, remittances grew by over 14% in 2018 to \$78.6 billion for India from the GCC countries due to the strengthened economic cooperation between India and the GCC.<sup>24</sup> Presently, Indians constitute over 30% of the expatriate workforce in the Gulf States, where the proportion of non-nationals in the employed population is among the highest in the world.<sup>25</sup>

Nonetheless, after the breakout of the deadly pandemic known as Coved-19 or Novel Corona: “in India, authorities have raced to put in place protocols for receiving returning workers. ... Telangana Health Department officials had begun screening all returning migrant workers arriving at Rajiv Gandhi International Airport in Hyderabad. On March 18, an expanding compulsory quarantine at the port of first departure for a minimum period of 14 days for passengers coming from/transiting through UAE, Qatar, Oman, and Kuwait came into effect. With as many as 23 flights arriving daily from the Gulf, officials in Mumbai rushed to strengthen defenses by creating quarantine centers and administering tests for the estimated 26,000 asymptomatic (mostly blue collar) workers.”<sup>26</sup> These measures were made possible only through a better coordination between the GCC and India.

## Trade Relations

It has been noted that the new dimensions have been added to Indo-GCC pre and post-Gulf war period when Indian diplomacy through political and economic policies played a major role in bringing the relations back on track. One of the largest trading partner to India, a member state such as Kuwait of the

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<sup>23</sup>Ministry of External Affairs Government of India, “India-Kuwait Relations,” retrieved from

[https://mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Kuwait\\_July\\_2016.pdf](https://mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Kuwait_July_2016.pdf)

<sup>24</sup>World Bank, “Migration and Remittances Recent Developments and Outlook,” Migration and Development Brief (April 2019) 18, available at: [https://www.knomad.org/sites/default/files/2019-](https://www.knomad.org/sites/default/files/2019-04/MigrationandDevelopmentBrief_31_0.pdf)

[04/MigrationandDevelopmentBrief\\_31\\_0.pdf](https://www.knomad.org/sites/default/files/2019-04/MigrationandDevelopmentBrief_31_0.pdf)

<sup>25</sup>International Labour Organization (ILO), “Labour Migration: Facts and Figures,”

<https://www.ilo.org/beirut/areasofwork/labour-migration/lang--en/index.htm>

<sup>26</sup>John Calabrese, “India-Gulf Migration: A Testing Time,” *Middle East Institute*, April 14, 2020, retrieved from <https://www.mei.edu/publications/india-gulf-migration-testing-time>

GCC emerged as the largest supplier of oil to India in 2012-2013.<sup>27</sup> The investments and scientific technical cooperation between GCC and India has developed a direct and highly effective trade relations between them.

Total trade between GCC and India was estimated to be more than US\$ 6.2 billion in 2016 alone.<sup>28</sup> Indian companies such as new India Assurance Company, LIC Housing Finance, Air India and Air India Express has offices stationed in the GCC countries. Apart from that, “Indian Study Centre” were setup at faculty of social sciences and Indian schools that have affiliation to the Central Board of Secondary Education have been functioning for a long time.<sup>29</sup> The GCC investments in India are more than 5.37 billion dollars which is assessed to rise with due course of time.<sup>30</sup>

## Conclusion

Since the inception of the GCC in 1981, India and the organization have enjoyed cordial relations. This relationship was further strengthened by commitments and investments, and above all cultural links that stretch beyond trade and diplomacy. With the passing of each decade since its foundation, the relationship has become more intimate and has touched new heights. However, their relations suffered some strain as Iraq invaded Kuwait but later when the occupation ended and the Indian external affairs minister paid visits to the GCC countries individually, the trust deficit was later restored. Indian expat population working in the GCC has also played a major role in bring India and the GCC closer. Additionally, the signing of MOU’s in different fields such as in science and technology and other diplomatic and trade agreements helped to bring the two closer than ever in diplomacy and trade.

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<sup>27</sup>Sameer Ranjan Pradhan, India, GCC and the Global Energy regime: exploring interdependence and outlook for collaboration, (Academic Foundation: New Delhi, 2008).

<sup>28</sup>Annual report 2016-2017, (New Delhi: Policy planning and research division), 69, *Ministry of external Affairs, Government of India*.

<sup>29</sup>India Kuwait Relations, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, accessed September 2, 2020, available at [https://mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Kuwait\\_July\\_2016.pdf](https://mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Kuwait_July_2016.pdf)

<sup>30</sup>Ibid.