Retuning India's Relations with Gulf Countries

What is the issue?

- The Gulf States are increasingly taking responsibility for managing the regional order.
- With this, India could not afford to take a purely bilateral approach but must adopt a more integrated regional strategy.

How is India-Gulf relations at present?

- India’s relations with the key Gulf countries have never been as good as they are today.
- **Trade** - The Gulf is among India’s top trading partners.
- The deepening energy interdependence is marked by growing volumes of energy imports into India.
- There is also the prospect of substantive investments from the Gulf into the Indian hydrocarbon sector.
- The number of Indian migrant workers in the region stands at more than 7 million.
Security - A high-level engagement between India and the Gulf has blossomed in recent years.

- Top leaders from both sides have travelled frequently to each other regions.
- The expansion of the political engagement has been matched by the growing security cooperation, especially on counter-terrorism.
- India and its Gulf partners are also taking tentative steps towards defence cooperation.

What is the drawback?

- India's political neglect of the Gulf has certainly ended during the last few
But India’s relations with the Gulf have been constrained by focus only on the bilateral relations.

India is paying too little attention to the growing weight of the Gulf in regional affairs.

It is also not attentive to the strategic possibilities that the Gulf's regional affairs open up for India.

What are the recent developments in the Gulf?

- **Saudi Arabia** - Saudi Arabia has long been a pivotal state in the Gulf region.
- It is one of the world’s largest petroleum reserves and is capable of modulating its oil production.
- By this, it has played a critical role in shaping the world energy markets since the 1970s.
- Also, as the home to Mecca and Medina, Saudi Arabia has a unique place in the Islamic world.
- Since the late 1960s, it has exercised significant political influence in the evolution of the Middle East.
- **UAE** - The rise of the UAE, in contrast to Saudi Arabia, has been less noticed.
- But UAE has turned into a strategic actor of consequence in the Middle East and beyond.
- The events of 9/11 and the Arab Spring have convinced the UAE that it must act boldly.
- It is now inclined to generate the capabilities to survive amidst the regional turbulence.
- E.g. It’s defence budget is reportedly around $22 billion - nearly 40% of India’s defence spending.
Notably, the UAE was the fourth-largest importer of weapons during 2013-17.

The UAE is also a major player in the global logistics market, with the development of Dubai as a major port and aviation hub.

It is now striving to emerge as a centre of art, higher education and technological innovation.

As the home to multiple nationalities from around the world, it has become a small but important cosmopolitan centre.

What does this offer for India?

If India looks beyond the bilateral, it will find two very important axes of potential partnerships in the Middle East.

“Moderate Arab centre” - The UAE believes that only a coalition of moderate Arab states can move the region out of its current deeply troubled state.

It sees the construction of such a core around Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

So the UAE leadership has made the construction of a moderate bloc in the region its highest regional priority.

It also believes that certain values which helped the Emirates succeed can be extended to other parts of the Middle East.

These are cultural openness, religious tolerance, women’s empowerment, and economic opportunities for younger people.

There are many obstacles to the realisation of this ambitious project, especially the deepening divisions within the Gulf.

But the idea of a moderate Arab centre should resonate deeply with India’s natural ethos.

India's traditional empathy for modernising forces in the Arab world should
favour this.

- **Indian Ocean Region** - Another potential area is the growing impact of the Gulf countries in the Indian Ocean region. E.g. the Horn of Africa.

The recent success of the UAE and Saudi Arabia in brokering peace between Ethiopia and Eritrea underlines the positive role of the Gulf in Africa.

- Alliances, military bases, interventions and peace-making have long been considered as the preserve of great powers.

- But Gulf countries are now bringing a combination of financial resources and political will to shape the geopolitics.

- Some of the Gulf countries like the UAE are eager to collaborate with India on development assistance.

- They show interests in the construction of strategic infrastructure in the Indian Ocean littoral.

- So it is essential that India makes the best out of this opportunity.

- India thus needs an integrated regional strategy to secure its ever-rising stakes in the Middle East and the Western Indian Ocean.


**Source: Indian Express**

---

**IAS PARLIAMENT**

*Information is a Blessing*

A Shankar IAS Academy Initiative