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India's Changing Foreign Policy Towards The Gulf: The Role of India Diaspora

Nazia Naweed & Anisur Rahman*

Abstract

Global and regional geopolitical transformations play an important role in influencing a nations foreign policy. The case of India is not new. After Independence, under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru, the country followed the policy of Non-Alignment. The political dynamics prevalent during the time compelled India to adopt such a policy. However, this policy of not aligning with any power or power blocs continued to guide its foreign policy in a multipolar world in the post-cold war period. Historically, India has had abiding ties with West Asia with significant maritime and trade linkages. However, various analysts hold that the region has been accorded comparatively low priority with limited interactions despite being a viable source of energy and significant remittances from the Indian diaspora numbering about 9.3 million. However, in recent years, especially with the coming of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to power, Indias policy towards the region has undergone a significant change. Indias Look West policy under his guidance has ushered in a multi-dimensional relationship with the West Asian countries, particularly the Arab Gulf, Iran, and Israel. India has also deepened its relationship with Israel with PM Modis visit to Israel in 2017. In this context, the paper attempts to look at the reorientation in Indias foreign policy from non-alignment to multi-alignment with particular reference to the Gulf region and study the emerging trends concerning the Indian diaspora employing a descriptive and analytical method based on both primary and secondary sources.

Introduction

It is true that no state can survive in isolation. A set of regulatory frameworks is needed to conduct its affairs. Thus, Foreign policy is the needed tool and "plan of action"[1] that guides a country's dealings with the wider world. In the

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words of Padelford and Lincoln "Foreign policy is the key element in the process by which a state translates its broadly conceived goals and interests into concrete course of action to attain these objectives and preserve interests".[2] For Modelski, foreign policy is "the system of activities evolved by communities for changing the behaviour of other states and for adjusting their own activities to the international environment".[3] Therefore, the development of foreign policy of any state is considered an important step in forging its relations with the world. Concerning India's foreign policy, there are certain basic principles that guides its foreign policy. They are:non-alignment, opposition to colonialism and imperialism, opposition to racialism, and pacific settlement of disputes. Similarly, geography, history and political tradition, economic development, national interests and international milieu are some of the determinants that guide the formulation of India's foreign policy.[4]

It has evolved since independence. In the words of Wadhawan, New Delhi's foreign policy priorities are guided by its "evolving needs and conditions of global politics".[5] During its journey, it has witnessed various ups and downs from the bipolar Cold War world until the 1990s through a unipolar world dominated by the US till the world economic crisis of 2008 to the present transformational moment under PM Modi.[6] However, to grasp the India's foreign policy towards the GCC, we must understand the ideological foundation that plays a critical founding stone for foreign policy formulation in India. Post-Independence, as the fastest growing economy, India wished to establish itself as a significant power globally. Its historical experience as well as the ideological orientation of the anti-colonial freedom movement based on non-violencedetermined its approach towards the world. India chose to have good relations with the colonial powers[7]zealously guarding its sovereignty, territorial integrity, and emphasising non-interference in its domestic policy.

Regarding India's relations with West Asia, the bond between Nehru and Nasser has been highlighted as a major determinant by many observers. It allowed India to support the Arab cause, as reflected in the Palestine and the Suez crises of 1956. However, in the post-cold war period, with the dissolution of the USSR and birth of unipolarity, India needed to recalibrate its west Asian policy. The Gulf crisis of 1990 is considered an important event in this regard. When Iraq invaded Kuwait, the then

coalition government led by VP Singh could not align itself with either Iraq or Kuwait, especially since Iraq, a natural ally, had supported India on different issues which included the Kashmir problem. India was in the dilemma as to whether it should follow the policy of non-alignment or intervene in the process of the making of the new world order. Instead, the government's stance was marked by uncertainty but it was constantly reminded of the safety and security of the 185,000 Indians in the region. India did not condemn Iraq for its actions in Kuwait. The reaction of New Delhi (the policy adopted by then foreign minister I. K.Gujral) towards the crisis led to India earning the title of "Weak Willed Democracy".[8]

Soon, realising that its ambivalence could hamper its relations with the Gulf countries and their allies. Subsequently, India supported the UN Resolution 768, which compelled the Iraqi army to withdraw its forces from Kuwait. The US used the gulf crisis as a "test of friendship"for India. In 1990, India's relationship with the GCC also underwent a transformation.[9] Globally, uni-polarity slowly gave way to multipolarity at the international level, with new players like India, Russia, China, Japan, Saudi Arabia, and Iran emerging as system-shaping powers. In this new multipolar environment, India could follow and pursue its policy without any need to appease the West. Similarly, during this time, the geopolitical structure of the West Asian region underwent a transformation, compelling India to engage itself in the regional affairs in terms of economic, and in the words of Wadhawan (2019), "without the burden of managing political ramifications". However, it is also a fact that India is critically dependent on the energy supply from the region, particularly the import of oil and hydrocarbon, as well as concerned with trade and security of the large expatriate population. Thus, the region's stability is paramount for India's foreign policy formulations towards West Asia.[10] In line with the argument, similarly, India is pursuing its policy with "great pragmatism"as it enjoys "strategic autonomy" with its dealings in international affairs and the commercial relations it shares with the world.[11] Therefore, one witnesses a change as well as a continuity in India's policy towards the region.

India's Link West Policy

India's Foreign policy is guided by one of its foremost concerns to "acquire an appropriate role for

India in the changing international environment" within the ambit of maintaining"peace, security and stability in the extended neighborhood" along with "national growth and development". It aims to "enhance India's economic and technological development by leveraging external linkages".[12] Situating it in an extremely complex neighbourhood, India considers the promotion of a politically stable and economically secure periphery very important for its security and growth.[13]

West Asian region in general, and Gulf in particular, holds a significant position in India's outreach programme. Historically, their relations are modelled around early trading links established by India with Bahrain and Oman, which slowly encompassed maritime relations, people-to-people contacts, pilgrimage relations with Saudi Arabia, and closer economic dealings since the oil boom of 1973. Today, India's trajectory with the GCC also shows that new considerations have been added to the list. The strategic dimension in India's foreign policy has started to dominate its policies. Under the strategic domain, India wished to incorporate the 'Indian Diaspora' as a catalytic tool in its efforts to increaseits global stature.

The Gulf has huge reservoir of crude oil and natural gas which has attracted energy-hungry nations of the world like India and China, which are dependent on the import of the same to meet the growing needs of their emerging economies. In case of India, particularly, energy security and trade occupy a central position of its multi-dimensional relationship with the region apart from the largest reserve of human resource that it lends to the countries of these region.Among all, Saudi Arabia holds significant oil reserves and is considered a leader in crude oil export. India imported 38 million tonnes of crude oil from Saudi Arabia and about 64 per cent of its total crude oil import from the region in 2020. Slowly and steadily, the economic relations,with the region in general and with Saudi Arabia in particular, have transcended into a robust 'strategic energy partnership'. Thus, the relations have been diversified, which is referenced in the Riyadh Deceleration signed in 2010. The signing of the declaration increased interactions in oil, natural gas, scientifically driven technology, trade and investment.[14] However, following India's diversification drive, India aimed to reduce its dependence on West Asian countries for meeting is oil requirement. According to reports,the move came

up "after the Kingdom supported the idea of cutting output from the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and allied producers".[15] Soon the crude oil supplies from Saudi Arabia declined by 42 per cent, while the supply from the US went up accounting for about 14 per cent of the total Indian import.[16] Thus, in 2021 the US occupied the second position while the Saudi Arabia's position fell to fourth as India's top oil suppliers.[17]

UAE is another important 'political and economic partner' for India.[18] India-UAE trade is valued today at US$ 59 billion making UAE, India's third largest trading partner for the year 2019-20 after China and US. In addition, UAE becamethe second largest export destination of India (after US) with an amount of nearly US$ 29 billion for the year 2019-20. For UAE, India was the second largest trading partner for the year 2019 with an amount of around US$ 41.43 billion (non-oil trade)".[19] However, the trading relations soon acquired a strategic dimension in the field of defence and energy. The two countries are also collaborating in tourism-related avenues, of which Indian diaspora is a crucial element that propagates its culture and tradition in the region through its soft power. India also sees Bahrain as an important trading partner in the region, as an oil-producing country. The industrial relations between the regions have diversified into economic cooperation, with the trade accounting for the US $ 1.5 billion in 2011.[20] In 2018 and 2019, the bilateral trade between India and Bahrain constituted US$ 720.45 million and US$ 607.95 million respectively.[21]

Oman is another important strategic partner for India. India is among Oman's top trading partners. India's export to Oman in FY 2019-20 was US $ 2,261.81 million. Oman was India's 35th largest export market for the FY 2019-20. India's imports from Oman in FY 2019-20 were US $ 3,669.33 million.[22] Similarly, India's presence in the region is visible in oil, gas, mining, manufacturing, IT and telecom and railways sectors, to name a few. Kuwait is another vital economy of the GCC from which India imports crude oil. The relations have diversified in recent years[23] and bilateral trade for FY 2020-2021 stood at US$ 6.27 billion, registering a contraction of 42.3% year-on-year basis on account of a sharp drop in the prices of petrol. Indian exports totalledUS$1.05bn and imports totalled US$5.21 billion.[24]

Commercial relations and people-to-people interactions have guided

India's connection with Qatar. Recently, the two countries have started to collaborate on strategic dimensions in areas like energy, trade, defence, security and Human resource.[25] India's bilateral trade with Qatar in 2020-21 account for US$ 9.21billion. India's export to Qatar during 2020-21 was US$ 1.28 billion and India's import from Qatar was US$ 7.93 billion.[26] However, in the Gulf, the region's large Indian diaspora acts as a conduit for increased economic movements.[27]

India's relations with Iraq are also significant to understand changes and continuity in India's foreign policy in the West Asian region. Historically, India shares civilizational links with region[28] but now the relations have been diversified into robust economic and commercial relations.[29] Iraq is India as the largest supplier of crude oil. However, statistics reveal that in since following the invasion of Iraq in 2003 the commercial relations between the two regions has slowed down.[30] But in 2010- 2011, the bilateral trade grew and accounted for about US $ 9.7 billion[31] due to rising crude oil imports.[32] However, due to the dip in global oil prices thereafter there has again been a dip in the trade. In terms of volume of bilateral trade, it went up and today it accounts for about US$ 15.78 billion in 2020- 2021. It holds 11th place in India's largest crude oil trading partners.[33]

Diversification to Security and Defence Cooperation

Long-established India's relation in the field of energy, economy and expatriates, at present, is slowly and steadily diversifying into a tighter security and defence, cooperation pact in the GCC region. The Indian stakes are guided by the existence of peace and stability in the region. As a result, "strategic collaborations" with Gulf nations on counter-terrorism, money laundering, cyber security, organized crime, human trafficking, and anti-piracy are in the works.[34]

Notable among many, on the counter-terrorism front, India and Saudi Arabia entered into a Joint focus group, under the banner of the "Delhi Declaration" signed in 2006, following the visit of Saudi Arabia King Abdullah. The 2009 Mumbai attack became the watershed event in transforming the" strategic energy relations" shared between India and Saudi Arabia to "strategic partnership".[35] Within a short period, the relations improved in 2010, when the two regions entered into "Strategic partnership and defence cooperation" following the signature

of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz to the "Riyadh Declaration". Similarly, the two nations are forging a coordinated counter-extremism strategy. Some more moves have been initiated, like signing the Saudi–Indian extradition treaty and an agreement for the transfer of sentenced persons. A further instance of this is the detention of 10 terrorists engaged in the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks at Delhi airport, in 2012, as a part of the global counter-terrorism strategy.[36]

Since 2014, after PM Narendra Modi came to power, there has been an incremental shift in India's foreign policy from Non- Alignment to Multi- Alignment especially concerning West Asia in general and the Gulf in particular.[37] India's foreign policy has taken a pragmatic turn in its external engagement with the world. The classic example is India's 'Link West' policy, which aims to establish a multi-dimensional relationship with the West Asian countries, particularly the Arab Gulf, Iran and Israel. Under PM Modi's stewardship, there have been many high-level visits to several West Asian countries including Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain. The Prime Minister has repeatedly emphasised the age-old ties between India and the West Asian countries. According to UAE – India Business Council (UIBC), both countries share "centuries-old ties of commerce, culture and kinship" and are progressively working toward realising"the vision of an Asian Century".[38] Further, India-Saudi Arabia issued a Joint Statement during the visit of the prime minister to Saudi Arabia in April 2016, which acknowledged "the close inter linkage of the stability and security of the Gulf region and that of the Indian sub-continent".[39] Later, in the joint statement issued during the State Visit of His Royal Highness, the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia to India, the latter welcomed the recent drive of "moderation and openness" followed by the King in his country. At the same time, the former appreciated India's ideals of "inclusiveness, pluralism and tolerance".[40]

Correspondingly, India and Oman, in their 2018 joint statement, recognised that both the regions share "historically close bilateral ties, involving vibrant maritime trade and cultural exchanges, which were expanded to build "a strategic partnership based on trust and mutual respect".[41]

The felicitation of Prime Minister Modi with award of the country's highest civilian honour, the Order of

Zayed medal by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in April 2019, is a prime example of the emergingstrategic partnership between India and UAE.[42]He has also been the recipient of Bahrain's highest civilian award, "The King Hamad Order of the Renaissance," and the Saudi Kingdom's highest award, "The King Abdulaziz Sash".[43] Important to note, the Zayed medal was awarded shortly after the amendment of the Article 370 of the Indian Constitution pertaining to Jammu and Kashmir, but it did not spark much criticism in the Arab world.The reason cited for such muted response was attributed to India's rising economic clout and trade relations with the region. According to Prasad, focusing solely on economic relations misses India's rising strategic relevance for GCC countries, notably opposing Iran's influence in South Asia.[44]

India's relations with the Gulf have been blossoming on various fronts, in defence and naval cooperation, together with joint exercises, regular Indian ship visits, and broad-based Memorandum of Understanding. Similarly, some of the Gulf armed forces personnel are receiving training in Indian defence and military schools. The Gulf Nations have all been participants of the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), started in 2008 as a biennial conference for Indian Ocean coastal naval leaders. Most importantly, Oman has been India's most significant (but also low-key) defence partner. On the security front, too, India's is credited with maintaining and securing stability in the Gulf region by constantly paroling in the Gulf seas for any incidence of piracy.[45] Correspondingly, the Indian Diaspora in the Gulf is another essential aspect that guides strengthening relations between the two regions apart from the aforementioned areas. Therefore, "the ties fostered during Modi's prime ministership have gone "beyond rhetoric to concrete deals" in infrastructure, energy and industrial sectors.[46] The shared historical, maritime and cultural contacts have transcended and developed into 3 E's, namely, 'energy, expatriates and economic' relations.[47]

Apart from the Gulf, India shares healthy relations with Iran, whereas Saudi Arabia has usually been, politically and militarily, anally of Pakistan among the other GCC countries (throughout the cold war era). During the Cold War, the Arab Gulf countries turned towards India when Prime Minister A.B. Vajpayee

was at the helm of affairs in India. The visit of the Indian external affairs minister to Riyadh in January 2001 marked the beginning of a series of political relations between the two regions.[48]

The contestation for political clout (as tensions escalated) between Iran and the GCC states resulted in the isolation of Iran in the region. India was forced to stop the Iranian oil import because of pressures from the US. The situation led both Saudi Arabia and the UAE to project themselves as replacement suppliers. India energy market was booming at the moment, and Saudi Arabia emerged as a long-term partner in the energy sector.

Irrespective of escalating Saudi-Iran rivalry, India's assumed importance in the region because of the two following reasons:

- increase in diplomatic and strategic outreach to the governments, and
- spreading their influence among India's Muslim population

These two layers add to the already existing robust economic relations determining their relations.[49]

Recently, the oil crisis in the Persian Gulf region began in 2018, following the US decision to withdraw itself from JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action). The US decision "reinstated sanctions against Iran due to unverified claims of non-compliance".[50] The crude oil from Iran constitutedabout 10 per cent of Indian total energy import.However, the US pressurised India to stop importing oil from Iran.With the danger of US sanctions on India, in May 2019, India ended the long-term partnership in oil import from Iran, complying with the American' request.Despite this, India, true to its claim of strategic autonomy, worked on its Chabahar project with Iran. It imported the deficit oil from other countries in the region and continued to import about 85 per cent of its oil from the Gulf regionin addition, to maintain peace and stability in the region, India has embarked on using diplomacy and mediation as a tool to achieve such outcomes rather than following the policy of maintaining isolation. Therefore, India's policy towards the West Asian region is motivated by economic opportunities in terms of energy security, trade, and Chabahar Port's development to felicitate such interactions.[51]

Diaspora andEmerging Trends

Migration leads to the formation of diaspora globally. It is the sentimental

link that the group shares with the homeland that marks the diaspora unlike the case with the migrants. The Indian diaspora is a generic term used to denote those Indian subjects that have migrated beyond Indian borders. They are usually classified as Non- Resident Indians (NRIs) and Persons of Indian Origins (PIOs). Today, the Indian Diaspora spread globally, number nearly 25 million, out of which 9.3 million reside in the Gulf region. The region remains an attractive destination among the migrant populations, especially from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka.[52] Likewise, these transnational populations are regarded as agents of soft power projection for the Indian government.

Indian Diaspora in the Gulf

At various stages, the inflow of labour to the six economies of the GCC has grown. It can be divided between pre- and post-oil discoveries phase.[53] People have been migrating to the Gulf region for much of known history. Still, it was primarily the oil boom of the 1970s that changed the demographic composition of the region in terms of inflow of labour from the Arab countries to meet the growing requirements of the region's infrastructural development. According to Winckler, the number of migrants in the Gulf economies doubled within five years, constituting roughly 1.4 million out of a total of 2.76 million.[54] The growing labour demand necessitated reliance on export of labour from the Asian countries due to their skills and ability to adapt to any environment and working conditions. So, the post-1970 years witnessed labour mobility from India, Pakistan, Nepal, and Bangladesh. The decline in oil prices during the second half of the 1980s temporarily reduced the inflow of migrant workers, however, the trend of flow of labour continued afterwards.[55] According to the World Bank estimates in 2019, India received more than US$ 82 billion in remittances from the Indian migrants and a major share of it (more than 50 per cent) came from the region.[56]

As per the International Labour Organisation (ILO) (2015) estimates, the GCC region hosts the largest share of international migrants constituting 27 per cent of the total population of 11.5 million.[57]

As per the data gathered by the Ministry of External Affairs (2018), Indian's expat constitutes more than 8.5 million in the Gulf out of the total 32 million globally.[58] Table 1 highlights the migration trend of Indian migrants to the Gulf from 2015 to 2019.

In terms of regional distribution of migration, the states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Punjab and Telangana, were the leading migrant out flow States (for percentage share see Figure 1).[59]

Over the years, the demographic composition of Indian migrants has changed, especially in the Gulf following the 2014 oil price shock. The trend has flipped, and the hosting of migrants in the region has declined significantly. The decline has been due to the wage differentials, the workforce nationalization policies, and the policies adopted by the Indian government to regulate overseas employment. The Indian government has also "set minimum referral wages (MRWs) to regulate the wages of Indian migrant workers employed in various capacities" in the six economies of the GCC as well ECR countries.[60]

Table 1: Trends in Migration: Number of Indian Workers migrated to the Gulf in 2015 - 2019 (Figures in Lakhs)

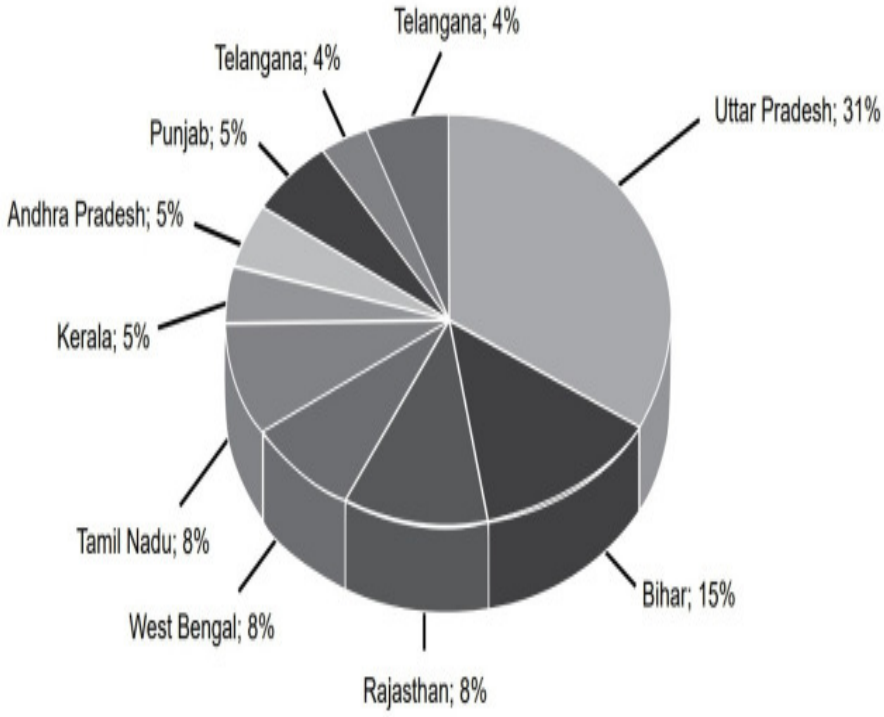
Country	2015	2016 (Figures till Decembe)	2017	2018 (Figures till November)	2019 (Figures till Novemb-er)	Total (5 years)
Saudi Arabia	3.06	1.62	0.73	0.66	1.43	7.50
UAE	2.25	1.59	1.41	1.03	0.72	7
Kuwait	Data Not Available	0.70	0.51	0.52	0.42	2.15
Oman	0.85	0.61	0.05	0.32	0.26	2.09
Qatar	0.59	0.29	0.22	0.32	0.28	1.7
Bahrain	Data Not available	Data Not available	0.10	0.09	0.09	0.28
Others	1.06	0.25	0.15	0.18	1.14	1.78
Total	7.81	5.06	3.17	3.12	3.34	22.5

Source: Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, Annual reports 2015 to 2019 and Calabrese, 2020

It is an undeniable fact that Indian diaspora is one factor in the Gulf that holds an indispensable position in the India-GCC economic relations; an example of this is remittances, apart from bilateral trade, investment and business links that have gained prominence recently.[61]The Indian diaspora in the Gulf have benefited the developmental activities of both the home and host countries, respectively.Recently, under the able leadership of Prime Minister Modi, India wished to harness the potential of Indian diaspora as a strategic asset in the region. As a soft power, the influence of the Indian diaspora is visible in the field of culture, language, tradition, customs, yoga, cuisines and entertainment industry.

Figure 1

Composition of Indian Workers by Sending State, 2019*



Source: Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs, Annual Report 2019-2020.

Therefore, the trends in India-Gulf relations are as follows;

Diaspora induced Development

Remittances sent by the overseas Indian communities from the Gulf are considered an important source of development and for the overall progress of the homeland. Thus, diaspora-induced development through remittances has influenced India in poverty alleviating programmes and moulded its policy toward the West Asian region.[62] More than "one-third of India's total foreign currency inflows" come from the region.[63] According to the Ministry of Overseas Affairs, the top 4 remittances sending countries to India are UAE, the US, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.[64] In 2018, India received a $ 79 billion remittances inflow from the Indian diaspora.[65] Regarding the region-wise breakup, India received $ 4.8 billion from Kuwait as remittances in 2018.[66] According to an estimate, Reserve Bank of India Survey 2018, "about 82 per cent of the total remittances received in India, originated from United Arab Emirates (UAE), the United States (US), Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, the United Kingdom (UK) and Oman".[67]

In addition, the 'State-wise Share in Inward Remittances' data reveals that Kerala received 19 per cent of remittance. In comparison, Maharashtra receives 16.7 per cent, Karnataka 15 per cent, Tamil Nadu 8 per cent and Delhi 5.9 per cent. These are the top five Indian states receiving remittance.[68]

However, irrespective of the pandemic in 2019, India maintained the top position as the largest recipient of foreign funds, accounting for about US $ 83 billion.In comparison, China received US $60 billion, Mexico US $ 43 billion, the Philippines US $ 35 billion and Egypt US $ 30 billion remittance inflow.[69] The inflow of remittances has increased irrespective of the lockdown restrictions imposed due to the COVID-19 outbreak. However, with regard to the Gulf region, the inward share of remittances from the UAE has declined. According to the World Bank estimates, there has been "a sharp 17 per cent decline in 2020 following the repatriation of more than a million expatriates due to pandemic induced job losses".[70]Apart from tangible flows of remittances, the contribution of Indian diaspora is also visible in the field of intangible flow, that is, 'social remittances'.[71]Social remittances are the "circulation of ideas, practices, skills, identities, and social capital between sending and receiving communities".[72]

Diaspora as a Strategic Asset

India considers its huge overseas population as a strategic asset in the host country. Indian diaspora formation worldwide occurred in three phases. The phase one started in the 1960s when STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) professionals migrated to the countries of the US, UK. The migration specialists termed migration a 'brain drain' of some of the best minds in the developed world.

The second phase, from the 1970's onward, witnessed migration to the Gulf countries following the rise in oil prices. The oil boom of 1973 in the GCC region attracted labourers from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. Therefore, the Indian presence in the region increased manifold.

The third phase included students and migrants to the US, UK, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand. Irrespective of the different migration phases, the Indian Diaspora maintained a sentimental link and contact with the homeland. The role of the Indian Diaspora is established in the field of remittance, investment etc. Therefore, the Indian government is conscious of this role in India's development trajectory. Thus, the government aims to harness the potential of the Indian Diaspora as a Strategic Asset. The shift in the policy is visible in terms of visits and engagement with the Indian diplomatic mission stationed in different GCC countries.[73] These missions are "diplomatic representation (more commonly referred to as embassy) of the sending State (accrediting State) with the host State (receiving State)", "headed by an ambassador, chargé d'affaires ad interim, or chargé d'affairesen pied".[74] Ranging from embassy,high commission, to permanent mission, consulate general,consulate and consulate headed by honorary consul, these missions are created forassisting its diaspora.[75]

Some of the duties of the Indian diplomatic missions are; a) homeland projection in the host land, b) to secure the rights of the home country and its people in the host land, c) to engage in negotiations with host governments, d) to assess and evaluate the emerging conditions in the commercial, economic, and social sectors in the country of destination, e) to facilitate friendly relations between the home and host countries, f) to maintain commercial, political, economic, and cultural relations, g) to issue passports, and h) to issue visas.[76] Thus, the

establishment of Indian Diplomatic Missions in the Gulf is an important step undertaken by India's government to protect and secure the rights of the Indian Diaspora in the region in times of distress. The importance of Diplomatic missions became noteworthy with the onset of COVID-19 and the massive repatriation drive undertaken concerning stranded Indians in the host territory.

The strategic shift in India's Foreign policy results from the Singhvi Committee (2002) recommendation of the potential role of Indian Diaspora for the homeland.[77] A High-Level Committee on the Indian Diaspora under the guidance of L.M. Singhvi was created to situate and analyse the potential role of diaspora {non-resident Indians (NRIs) and Persons of Indian Origin (PLoS)} in the developmental domain. The comprehensive report, also known as the Singhvi Report, was released in 2002 and proposed "a new policy framework for creating a more conducive-environment in India to leverage these invaluable human resources."[78]

Diaspora as a Soft Power

The concept of soft power, developed by Joseph Nye, is an approach in International Relations that is differentiated from hard power, use/threat of force or payment as against persuasion and attraction. In the words of Nye:

"Soft power" is the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments. It arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies. When our policies are seen as legitimate in the eyes of others, our soft power is enhanced.[79]

India is pursuing its soft power diplomacy in the Gulf through its largest Diaspora located in the region. India holds its soft power assets in terms of its culture, language, cuisine, democracy, Bollywood, which constantly place India on an attractive stature on the world stage.

However, the economic impact of soft power is important. Concerning India's soft power credentials, looking at India's enormous economic heft, engagements, and dealings with the global players, the Indian diaspora has become an important tool in building a positive image of India and receiving economic benefits in terms of remittances. Significantly, the Indian policymakers are tapping this growing economic leverage as an effective instrument in advancing India's overall soft power credentials.[80]

Human Rights Concerns

Apart from the trends mentioned above, one cannot side-line the fact the Indian migrants in the Gulf are often the victims of abuse and exploitation. They are abused, tortured, and deprived of necessities like provision of adequate health care and wage. Thus, they are unable to realise their full potential. It is an undeniable fact that "migrant domestic workers provide indispensable services to the countries where they go, contributing to the wealth of ageing societies and to the sustainability of these countries' welfare and employment systems".[81]Because of denial of legal status to the migrant workers, they have been exposed to abuse and exploitation at the hand of their employer, particularly women migrant workers. They are the victim of physical, mental and sexual torture. They also face the issue of deportation.[82]

In response to such situation, "India also uses the bilateral agreements and memorandums of understanding with the destination countries to mutually regulate the labour/ and migration conditions as a more flexible tool, although it is more of an ad hoc mechanism".[83] One of the recent initiatives taken by the Indian government is the draft proposal of a National Policy for Domestic Workers. According to the Ministry of Labour and Employment (2011) "the Policy aims at providing a direction for Central and State Governments to establish formal rights of domestic workers and ensure domestic workers can exercise their rights".[84] However, the policy caters for the Indian domestic workers in India. But one of the Substantive Provisions of the draft policy is 'protection of domestic workers who seek work abroad'.

The primary feature of this provision is that it argued for the rights and protection of overseas domestic workers from abuse and exploitation. It put forth the claim that "migrating domestic workers also include Indian workers who accompany their employers on overseas long-term assignments" (Ministry of Labour and Employment).[85] It also argues that the overseas migrant workers should be trained and educated about their rights and duties they enjoy in the host territory.[86]

Some of the measures undertaken by the Indian Government to safeguard the interests of Indian emigrants to the Gulf countries are: (i) Limit on the age (30 years) for women migrants to the Emigration Check Required nations excluding

nurse's recruitment; (ii) Indian Female workers are required to get Emigration clearance from the recruiting agencies; (iii) Conclusion of Domestic Service Workers (DSWs) Agreement for safety and security of migrant workers; (iv) Online consular grievances services through the MADAD portal; (v) Stationing of Diplomatic missions in the Gulf countries for the help of Indian workers; (vi) Indian Workers Resource Centres (IWRC) and Shelter homes have been created to help distressed migrants when in need.[87]

Irrespective of the measures in place, the migrants are still subjected to abuse and exploitation. Therefore, for protecting the rights of the Indian migrant workers, the Indian government has to be vigilant and respond to the plea of migrants trapped at the hand of their employers.More stringent laws are required to curb illegal recruiting agencies expanding their networks in India and mobilising migrants to choose an illegal pathway. Therefore, there is a need that all the labour sending countries like India should work in tandem with the host government and all other relevant stakeholders to work for migrant worker's rights, particularly for the women workforce collectively. Likewise, India's should reorient its emigration policy to empower the Indian migrant workers, simultaneously ensuring that "their right to mobility and protection from exploitation" are adequately met.[88]

COVID 19 and increased vulnerability

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the migrant workers globally have been left in a highly vulnerable situation in their countries of destination, with lockdown and denial of health care facilities. Along with there has been a curtailing of opportunities in the region due to the workforce nationalization policy. The case of Kuwait is vital in this respect. The Kuwaiti National Assembly decision, in June 2020, introduced an *Expat Quota bill* to reduce the overseas population from the region to 70 per cent to 30 per cent in the region will have a repercussion on the livelihood of the migrant workers. The bill also places a limit to the Indian population, not exceeding 15 per cent of the total national population. The move will limit the numbers of overseas human resources in the region and force them to leave back to their country of origin.[89] Similarly, in Oman, the administration aimed to curb 'foreign nationals in the private sector.[90]

All these restrictions result in the changing demographic composition of the Indian Diaspora in the region and severely impact India. For instance, Kuwait, "with a total population of about 4.3 million" and "has over 3 million migrant workers which include over a million Indians who remitted nearly US$ 5 billion in 2018".[91] Thus, the economic contributions of such migrants are significant. The Indian dates of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh send the most significant number of Indian labourers to the region; upon their return, they would be laid off leading to increased unemployment. Therefore, the onus lies on the Indian government to protect Indian migrant workers from the economic repercussions of the ongoing pandemic.[92] However, the Indian government played an important role in bringing back the stranded Indian migrants from the Gulf countries on the repatriation front. The Indian repatriation drive "*Vande Bharat Mission*" is an important step in this direction. The Indian missions ensured safe accommodation and adequate health facilities for migrants deprived of medical services.[93]

Today, the Indian Diaspora constitutes an important element in India's Foreign policy and especially towards the region. Similarly, in the wake of increased interconnection and globalization, India wished to harness the potential of the Indian Diaspora as a Strategic Asset. In contemporary times, the instances of this are visible in terms of the bilateral visits undertaken by Prime Minister Modi to the countries of West Asia like UAE, Saudi Arabia, to name a few. The economic contribution of the Indian Diaspora for the Gulf is also noteworthy; an instance of this is seen in the case of the UAE and Saudi Arabia. Some of the influential positions are held by Indians themselves. However, in the political sphere, the role of the Indian Diaspora is not visible as they lack voting power. Thus, it hampers their role in influencing India's policy towards the region.

Conclusion

A strategic shift is visible in the Modi government's engagement with the region. Today, the region holds a significant place for India as its vast population constitutes an integral part of their economy.

Among other important issues such as energy import and strengthening political and diplomatic relations, the twin issues of safety and security of the Indian diaspora havebecome an important factor in guiding relations between the two regions, as the

migrants play a significant role in building both the Indian and Gulf economies. In recent years, India has acquired a new image as a progressive democracy and a thriving economy, which has endeared itself to countries in the region. India's 'Look West' policy is likely to go a long way in cementing India's ties with important countries in the region and take the message of peace, prosperity and growth to the region and beyond.[3"]

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