Espionage Charges on Indian Navy Veterans

Why in news?

A Qatari court sentenced 8 Indian Navy veterans to death on charges of spying for Israel, thus straining the bilateral relations between the two countries.

What is the bilateral relation between India-Qatar?

- **Political relations-** There has been regular exchange of high-level bilateral visits.
- Both countries build a forward-looking partnership by further broadening and deepening the bilateral engagement in various arenas.
- **Economic relations-** India's bilateral trade with Qatar in 2020-21 was US 9.21 billion dollars.
- Qatar is the *largest supplier of LNG* to India, accounting for over 50% of India's global LNG imports.
- **Investment-** Joint Task Force on Investment has been set-up between both the countries to facilitate investments by *Qatar Investment Authority* (QIA) into India, and also to explore Qatari investments in the entire energy value-chain in India.
- **Pandemic cooperation**- During COVID-19 *Qatar Fund for Development (QFFD)* sent medical relief material to India for combating second wave of pandemic.
- **Defence**- India regularly participates in the biennial *Doha International Maritime Defence Exhibition and Conference (DIMDEX)* in Qatar.
- *India-Qatar Defence Cooperation Agreement*, signed in 2008, was further extended for a period of 5 years in 2018.
- **Cultural relations**- Cultural ties between India and Qatar are deep-rooted and actively nurtured by both sides.
- *Agreement on cultural cooperation* was signed in 2012.
- The year 2019 was celebrated as *India-Qatar Year of Culture*.
- Qatar is co-sponsor of declaring *June 21 as International Day of Yoga* in United Nations.
- **Diaspora-** There are over 700,000 Indian nationals residing in Qatar, the largest expatriate community in Qatar.

What is the issue about?

- **Issue** - 8 former Indian Navy officials working for a Doha-based company were sentenced to death by a Qatari court
- Initial reports suggest that the authorities apprehended the officials under *suspicion of engaging in espionage for Israel,* specifically regarding Qatar's military submarine program.
- India is exploring all legal options to save the Indians and has taken up the matter at various official and political levels with Qatar.

- **Expatriation** - Qatar is a friendly foreign country and there is an existing bilateral agreement to expatriate convicted citizens.
- However, *Article 4* of the agreement *excludes the death penalty.*

What are the options that India can explore?

- **Legal process**- The case is in '*The Court of First Instance*'. The Indian government can help the Indians challenge the death sentence in higher courts, and seek reprieve from the death penalty.
- **Mercy petition**- Indian government is helping the Indians to file a mercy plea before Emir of Qatar.
- **Strategic diplomacy-** India should use diplomatic channels, bilateral talks, and international platforms like *International Court of Justice* to secure the release of detained veterans.
- **Engagement-** India should engage with the Indian diaspora in Qatar and the US to leverage their influence.
- **Trust building**- India's response should be measured and phased, ensuring room for de-escalation and maintaining the balance in West Asia.
- **Diplomatic challenge-** India has to appeal to the Emir's clemency and balance its relations with Qatar and other regional actors.
- **Potential economic actions-** India can diversify its energy sources and expedite its renewable energy initiatives to reduce the dependency on Qatar for energy.

Quick facts

Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)
• It is a regional political and economic alliance of 6 countries in the Gulf region - Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman and Bahrain. • **Headquarter -** Riyadh, Saudi Arabia • **Aim** - To achieve ever closer union between the energy rich Gulf countries. • **Significance -** GCC has over 8.5 million non-resident Indians, constituting around 65% of total NRIs. • **Al-ula declaration**-During the 41st GCC summit, it was signed based on greater cooperation within the Council.

Related links – Kulbhushan Jadav Case, Italian Marines' Case

References

1. Indian Express- Options India could explore
2. The Hindu- Indian veterans in Qatar case

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