Retuning India's Relations with Gulf Countries

What is the issue?

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

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

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

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- India's political neglect of the Gulf has certainly ended during the last few years.
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- But India’s relations with the Gulf have been constrained by focus only on the bilateral relations.
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- India is paying too little attention to the growing weight of the Gulf in regional affairs.
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- It is also not attentive to the strategic possibilities that the Gulf's regional affairs open up for India.
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What are the recent developments in the Gulf?

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- **Saudi Arabia** - Saudi Arabia has long been a pivotal state in the Gulf region.
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- It is one of the world’s largest petroleum reserves and is capable of modulating its oil production.
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- By this, it has played a critical role in shaping the world energy markets since the 1970s.
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- Also, as the home to Mecca and Medina, Saudi Arabia has a unique place in the Islamic world.
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- Since the late 1960s, it has exercised significant political influence in the evolution of the Middle East.
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- **UAE** - The rise of the UAE, in contrast to Saudi Arabia, has been less noticed.
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- But UAE has turned into a strategic actor of consequence in the Middle East and beyond.
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- The events of 9/11 and the Arab Spring have convinced the UAE that it must act boldly.
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- It is now inclined to generate the capabilities to survive amidst the regional turbulence.
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- E.g. It's defence budget is reportedly around $22 billion - nearly 40% of India’s defence spending.
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- Notably, the UAE was the fourth-largest importer of weapons during 2013-17.
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- The UAE is also a major player in the global logistics market, with the development of Dubai as a major port and aviation hub.
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- It is now striving to emerge as a centre of art, higher education and technological innovation.
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- As the home to multiple nationalities from around the world, it has become a small but important cosmopolitan centre.
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What does this offer for India?

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- If India looks beyond the bilateral, it will find two very important axes of potential partnerships in the Middle East.
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- **“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.
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- It sees the construction of such a core around Egypt and Saudi Arabia.
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- So the UAE leadership has made the construction of a moderate bloc in the region its highest regional priority.
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- It also believes that certain values which helped the Emirates succeed can be extended to other parts of the Middle East.
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- These are cultural openness, religious tolerance, women's empowerment, and economic opportunities for younger people.
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- There are many obstacles to the realisation of this ambitious project, especially the deepening divisions within the Gulf.
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- But the idea of a moderate Arab centre should resonate deeply with India's natural ethos.
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- India's traditional empathy for modernising forces in the Arab world should favour this.
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- **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.
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- 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.
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- Alliances, military bases, interventions and peace-making have long been considered as the preserve of great powers.
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- But Gulf countries are now bringing a combination of financial resources and political will to shape the geopolitics.
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- Some of the Gulf countries like the UAE are eager to collaborate with India on development assistance.
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- They show interests in the construction of strategic infrastructure in the Indian Ocean littoral.
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- So it is essential that India makes the best out of this opportunity.
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- India thus needs an integrated regional strategy to secure its ever-rising stakes in the Middle East and the Western Indian Ocean.
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Source: Indian Express

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