

## India's Relations with GCC Countries: Sri Atal Bihari Bajpayee Era

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**Abstract:** *Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee is one of India's Prime Ministers who made a significant impact on the country's foreign policy during his brief tenure in office. Not only with superpowers, but also with neighbours and extended neighbours, he advocated for renewed and improved relations. On the one hand, the Gulf Cooperation Council countries are India's extended neighbours, on the other hand, the GCC countries are strategically important to India. As a result, Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee was focused on improving bilateral relations with GCC countries to serve the country's national interests. During his reign, bilateral visits took place to each other's countries. These visits had a favorable impact on not only one but multiple areas, including trade, investment, and defense cooperation, to name a few. Finally, after America and Japan, the GCC countries designated India as a "Dialogue Partner." The purpose of this paper is to look at Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee's foreign policy with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and how it has influenced India's foreign policy in general.*

**Key Words:** *GCC Countries, Bilateral Relations, Visits, Cooperation.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION:

Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee's period in the office made an indelible mark on India's foreign policy by assisting and defining the country's cause. He was the first non-Congress foreign minister and then Prime Minister of the country. He gave his first speech in Hindi at the United Nations General Assembly as a foreign minister, and as Prime Minister, he took various steps that characterized India's relations with major powers while keeping up with altering geopolitics. In 1998, Prime Minister Vajpayee took the lead in developing India's nuclear program by performing the Pokhran II tests. Even though these tests prompted penalties from the US and Japan, India's international image improved subsequently when the world took notice of India's dedicated and uncompromising non-proliferation record. The tests, as well as the fines that followed, spurred the three-year-long diplomatic dialogue between India and the US, which helped improve relations (Chaudhury, 2018). In terms of geography, India is the country closest to the Gulf. Delhi sees the Gulf and South Asia as strategically linked and interconnected regions, and as a result, it has increased its focus on the Gulf, particularly since 2000. In 2003, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government under Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee unveiled "a 20-year plan to transform India into a world power with influence throughout the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Gulf, and all of Asia." India's then-external affairs minister, Jaswant Singh, declared that the Gulf is important to India and falls within its sphere of influence (Pethiyagoda, 2017). In the early 2000s, a shift in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi's thinking began to emerge, coinciding with the much-publicized ascent of India's economy as Asia's primary growth story, alongside China. The visit to the UAE by then-Indian President A.P.J. Abdul Kalam in 2003 was intended to be a foundational journey on which modern commercial connections between the GCC countries and India would be formed. In the Gulf, India has grown into a huge economy that requires more oil, while supplies to the West are anticipated to drop. Saudi Arabia, UAE, and other GCC countries had to rethink not only their approach toward New Delhi, but also their influence in Pakistan, where Riyadh wielded considerable sway over the polity, religious institutions, and military. However, it is worth noting that, according to reports, neither the GCC countries nor their diplomats in New Delhi requested a briefing from the then-Indian government, which was also headed by the BJP under the leadership of late Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee during the 2002 riots. Despite the dearth of internet, social media, and modern communications at the time, previous instances of religious unrest in India, like the 1992 demolition of the Babri mosque in Uttar Pradesh, caused a considerably larger uproar in the Gulf region (Taneja, 2020).

## **2. HIGH-LEVEL DIPLOMATIC VISITS:**

It is clear that the international relations gears are churning once more. American hegemony is under challenge on all fronts: economically, militarily, diplomatically, and culturally. Without the necessity to impress Washington, India's foreign policy was conducted with enormous independence. India's ability to pursue its national interests on the international stage without becoming entangled in complex political coalitions or ideological squabbles has improved as a result of increased multipolarity. India has earlier performed a successful balancing act in a tripolar West Asia. Now that the geopolitical environment in the region has been reformed, India engages with West Asian governments with far less political maneuvering. By adopting a purely professional attitude, India has pursued its most attractive economic prospects without the burden of handling political ramifications (Wadhawan, 2019). His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al Said visited India in 1997. His Majesty is cordially invited to visit India, where he received the Jawaharlal Nehru International Understanding Award. Following his visit to Oman in 1998, Atal Bihari Vajpayee became the first Indian Prime Minister to visit the country. The talks covered a wide variety of themes, including bilateral cooperation, investment potential, and the role of the private sector in the development process, as well as providing Omani youth with training opportunities at Indian universities and vocational schools (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2021). In April 1999, Qatar's Emir, Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa Al Thani, paid a visit to India and signed important agreements such as the Double Taxation Avoidance Agreement, the Bilateral Investment Protection and Promotion Agreement, and a Memorandum of Understanding on cooperation between the National Small Industries Corporation of India and the Qatar Chamber of Commerce and Industry. In 2003, when Shri L. K. Advani was deputy prime minister, he traveled to Qatar to explore bilateral relations and regional development. He also met with Qatar's foreign minister and ministers of energy and industry to discuss bilateral energy, political, and sectarian issues (Anjum). During the 2002 riots, neither the Gulf capitals nor their embassies in New Delhi requested a briefing from the then-Indian government, which was also led by the BJP and led by the late Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. Despite the lack of the internet, social media, and modern communications at the time, past communal upheaval in India, notably the 1992 demolition of the Babri mosque in Uttar Pradesh, had aroused significantly more concern in the Gulf region (Taneja, Why Saudi Arabia and the UAE Aren't Bothered by India's Citizenship Amendment Act, 2020). Mohammed Nakhira Al Dhaheri, UAE Chief of Staff and Minister of Justice and Islamic Affairs, visited India in 1999. Three key accords dealing with extradition, mutual legal assistance in criminal cases, and judicial and judicial cooperation in civil and commercial matters were signed during the visit. In 2002, a high-level Indian tourist delegation led by Shah Nawaz Hussain, India's Minister of Civil Aviation, visited the UAE to boost bilateral relations. India's Minister for External Affairs, Jaswant Singh, visited in 1999 and 2001, India's Minister for Information and Broadcasting, Arun Jaitley, visited in 2000, and a high-level Indian tourist team led by India's Minister of Civil Aviation, Shahnawaz Hussain, visited in 2002 (Khaleej Times, 2007). In October 2001, Abu Dhabi declared that it was willing to offer information on the movement of terrorists and criminals in the UAE to Indian investigators. During his visit to the UAE in 2001, Home Minister Shri L.K. Advani brought up the issue of Abu Salem with the UAE's chief of staff, Sheikh Mohammed bin Nahyan. The CBI and the Intelligence Bureau are believed to have exchanged a list with their UAE counterparts of the most wanted Indian gangsters who visit the UAE. When the agreement was reviewed on September 21 by R.M. Abhyankar, secretary of the Ministry of External Affairs, and Indicated Saad, permanent secretary of the UAE Foreign Ministry in Abu Dhabi, Saad said his government favoured constant contact between the security services (Gupta, 2002). The talks began with Deputy Prime Minister Shri L.K. Advani's visit to the UAE in 2001, included forming a collaborative working group on transnational crime and establishing an omnibus defense cooperation pact. The former will allow security services to deal with criminal expulsion and extradition, which the UAE group discussed with Advani and officials from the Home Ministry. On the other hand, the defense deal will let India export defense assets such as the light combat helicopter and the Brahmos missile. The UAE's political signals are essential, with the first hint coming after the mostly Muslim Emirates provided a cremation ground for Hindu Indians (Bagchi, 2003). The UAE has long been thought to be a haven for Mumbai's mafia. That perception transformed after mafia head Aftab Ansari was extradited from Dubai to India in 2002 (Gupta, Gulf gets too hot for Indian gangsters on the run, 2002, accessed on May). Shaikh Khalifa Bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Abu Dhabi Crown Prince and Deputy Supreme Commander of the United Arab Emirates, and Lt General Shaikh Mohammad Bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Chief of Staff of the United Arab Emirates, greet Indian President Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam in 2003. They discussed how to strengthen cooperation in mutually beneficial areas (Staff Report, 2016). General Shaikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Deputy Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and Chief of Staff of the UAE Armed Forces, led a high-level delegation to India in 2004 that included UAE Minister for Information and Culture, Shaikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Head of the Abu Dhabi Economic Department, Shaikh Hamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, and other officials (Khaleej Times, 2007). Although Al-travel Nahyan's travel to India went unreported, it did signal a shift in UAE foreign policy when he sat down to talk with External Affairs Minister Yashwant Sinha in the UAE's first-ever strategic dialogue with India. Indian policymakers believe the new alliance will have a broader scope, implying a transformation in the Gulf region's security architecture or increasing Indian influence in the Gulf. This is

the first time India and the United Arab Emirates have held a strategic conversation. The goal of holding regular high-level meetings is to bridge a gap in cooperation. K.C. Singh, India's ambassador to the UAE (Bagchi, 2003).

### 3. TRADE AND ENERGY COOPERATION:

India continued to treat the GCC as a whole with respect, benefiting from the GCC's constantly strengthening bilateral ties with each member state. The GCC countries were India's second-largest trading partners, supplying the country with the greatest single source of imports and serving as the country's second-largest export destination. The entire trade between the GCC and India was around \$12.5 billion in 2002. (Chatterjee, 2019). India attempted to break independent from this bilateral relationship to some level under the first National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government, but these efforts were limited to the Persian Gulf sub-region of West Asia and just the Gulf's southern boundaries. The Gulf countries together account for 15% of India's total overseas commerce. There are an estimated 8.77 million Indians in the area, with \$35.9 billion in annual remittances to India. More crucially, the Persian Gulf countries produce around a quarter of the world's crude oil and hold about two-thirds of the world's proven oil reserves. According to the World Energy Outlook, India's reliance on oil imports would climb to 91.6 percent by 2020, given that imports from this region account for around two-thirds of the country's energy needs, it makes economic and strategic sense to maintain a regular conversation with the region. (Chatterjee, 2019). In February 2004, Mumbai hosted the first GCC-India Industrial Conference. A Framework Agreement has been signed between India and the Gulf Cooperation Council. The agreement's main goal was to increase economic cooperation between the two countries. There have been two rounds of talks to finalize matters such as tariff rules and origin rules. In the political realm, bilateral interaction has taken several forms. Through a series of political dialogues, India has maintained a close relationship with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in terms of diplomacy. India's strategic interests have been reflected in political discussions. Both parties recognized the significance of the meeting, which marked the start of a "new era" in India's relationship with the Gulf Cooperation Council. India has already begun to invest in countries in the Gulf Cooperation Council. Both parties have taken several steps forward. The GCC's vast oil and gas deposits are crucial for India's energy needs. Indian professionals have a large presence in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) (Nandy, 2020).

**Table No: 1**  
**India's Export to GCC Countries**  
 (1999-2000 to 2003-2004)

(Values in US\$ Million)

Year/ Country	Bahrain	Kuwait	Oman	Qatar	Saudi Arabia	United Arab Emirates	Total Export to GCC
<b>1999-2000</b>	60.22	154.30	132.77	35.56	742.50	2082.74	<b>3,208.08</b>
<b>2000-2001</b>	78.67	199.11	144.62	63.63	822.94	2597.52	<b>3,906.48</b>
<b>2001-2002</b>	75.59	206.25	148.99	49.00	826.43	2491.79	<b>3,798.06</b>
<b>2002-2003</b>	99.54	250.56	198.61	96.10	940.74	3327.48	<b>4,913.04</b>
<b>2003-2004</b>	111.63	319.09	258.99	128.44	1123.31	5125.58	<b>7,067.03</b>

Source: Data Bank, Ministry of Commerce Govt. of India, <https://tradestat.commerce.gov.in/eidb/default.asp>

Table No. 1 shows India's export to GCC countries from 1999-2000 to 2003-04 individually. The data indicates that India's biggest export partner is the United Arab Emirates and followed by Saudi Arabia and Kuwait during the above period. India's export has been increased with all GCC countries from 1999-2000 to 2003-04 except with the United Arab Emirates in 2001-02. The growth rate of export is highest in the United Arab Emirates and followed by Kuwait and Saudi Arabia among GCC countries. United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait have emerged as key export destinations of the country among GCC countries. India's lowest export with Oman and Qatar in 1999-2000 and 2000-01 respectively while in highest with the United Arab Emirates in the entire period. Overall, India's export to the United Arab Emirates is more than all other GCC countries collectively in the entire period.

**Table: 2**  
**India's Imports from GCC Countries**  
 (1999-2000 to 2003-2004)

(Values in US\$ Million)

Year/ Country	Bahrain	Kuwait	Oman	Qatar	Saudi Arabia	United Arab Emirates	Total Import from GCC
<b>1999-2000</b>	159.17	1310.69	62.24	209.77	2419.24	2003.24	<b>6,164.35</b>
<b>2000-2001</b>	202.53	112.66	6.34	79.04	621.12	658.98	<b>1,680.67</b>

<b>2001-2002</b>	134.01	73.69	8.48	91.69	463.99	915.09	<b>1,686.95</b>
<b>2002-2003</b>	121.13	79.50	13.84	113.07	504.72	956.99	<b>1,889.25</b>
<b>2003-2004</b>	74.52	142.48	50.88	187.05	737.77	2059.84	<b>3,252.53</b>

Source: Data Bank, Ministry of Commerce Govt. of India, <https://tradestat.commerce.gov.in/eidb/default.asp>

Table 2 shows the country's imports from GCC countries from 1999-2000 to 2003-04 individually. In 1999-2000, India's top import countries in the Gulf are Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, and Kuwait while Qatar and Oman were in the last position. In 2002-03, India's imports increased with all GCC countries except Bahrain and the highest growth rate with Kuwait. India's imports increased with all the above countries except Bahrain and Kuwait in 2003-04. India's imports increased tremendously with all GCC countries except Oman and the highest growth rate with Qatar followed by UAE, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain. Overall, India's imports increased tremendously with all GCC countries from the beginning to 2003-04, and UAE, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, and Bahrain become key destinations of import among GCC countries.

**Table: 3**  
**India's Trade with GCC Countries**  
 (2000-2001 to 2004-2005)

(Values in US\$ Million)

Year	Export	% of Share in Total Export	Import	% of Share in Total Import	Balance of Trade
<b>1999-2000</b>	3,208.08	8.7123	6,164.35	12.3936	-2,956.27
<b>2000-2001</b>	3,906.48	8.7667	1,680.67	3.3257	2,225.81
<b>2001-2002</b>	3,798.06	8.6661	1,686.95	3.2812	2,111.11
<b>2002-2003</b>	4,913.04	9.3192	1,889.25	3.0764	3,023.79
<b>2003-2004</b>	7,067.03	11.0695	3,252.53	4.1620	3,814.50

Source: Data Bank, Ministry of Commerce Govt. of India, <https://tradestat.commerce.gov.in/eidb/default.asp>

Table 3 indicates India's trade including export and import with all GCC countries from 1999-2000 to 2003-04 collectively. The data shows that the value and share of imports are more than as compared to the value and share of exports in 1999-2000. India's exports increased while imports decreased in 2000-01. The country's exports, as well as imports, are decreased and exports are more than imports in terms of value and share in 2001-02. India's trade with GCC countries has increased from 2002-03 to 2003-04 but every year exports were more than imports. Thus, the balance of trade has been positive from 2002-03 to the end of the period. The balance of trade is positive and highest in 2003-04 while lowest and negative in 1999-2000. Overall, India's export growth rate is much faster as compared to the imports from 1999-2000 to 2003-04.

India's dependency on Gulf oil is growing, and the Gulf region's insecurity is posing a greater threat than ever before. The Gulf Pax-Americana has significant implications for India. India's goal of energy security could be impeded in the future by the United States' monopoly on Gulf oil. As a result, India will need to take new steps to rekindle its ties with the Gulf states. India's economic links with these countries are unlikely to suffer any immediate consequences, but it should tread carefully in building greater ties with Israel until Arabs, notably Palestinians and Israelis, begin to heal. India should strike a balance between its long-standing close ties with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and its expanding ties with Israel (Pasha, 2010).

#### 4. TOWARDS PARTNERSHIP:

After the terrorist attacks in the United States of America on September 11, 2001, India's regional strategy, notably in the Gulf, took on a new strategic dimension, with counterterrorism at the forefront (Johny, 2017). The rapid expansion of the GCC countries produced a demand for goods and services, which India tapped into. India received more than \$30 billion in remittances from The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. They also made significant investments in the Indian government's new beginning India Bonds, which were issued to raise foreign exchange. In the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), India's exports are highly accepted. India's total trade with the GCC countries was \$7 billion from 1999-2000 (Pasha, 2010). The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) accepted India as a dialogue partner in 2003, after the United States and Japan. This gave New Delhi leverage in the area that it had never had previously. In February 2004, India and the GCC signed a landmark trade agreement at a meeting on "Opportunities and Challenges in the Twenty-First Century" (Chatterjee, 2019). The first GCC-India Industrial Conference was held in Mumbai in February 2004

with the participation of GCC Secretary-General Abdulrahman bin Hamad Al Attiyah and industry ministers from all GCC countries. The presidents talked about how to expand India's economic ties with the Gulf Cooperation Council. A 'Mumbai Declaration,' focusing on trade, investment, industrial, and technological partnership, was adopted at the meeting. India and the Gulf Cooperation Council signed a framework agreement on economic cooperation in August 2004 to look into the possibility of a free trade agreement. In November of the same year, a three-member GCC negotiating team conducted a visit to India and discussed a variety of issues, including the possibility of initiating FTA negotiations and non-tariff barriers that hampered Indian exports to the region (Prasanta Kumar Pradhan, 2010). India has taken a few initiatives to increase its political and strategic engagement with the GCC countries. The two sides reviewed the current state of India-GCC relations as well as the situation in West Asia, particularly the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and the situation in Iraq. The GCC countries have adopted a "Look East" policy to prioritize their Asian neighbours due to the turbulent security situation and hazardous strategic environment in the Gulf. The GCC countries are also looking to Asia since they are finding that conducting business in the West is becoming increasingly difficult due to the distrust and scrutiny that Arabs face. They are expanding their ties with Asian countries, and India is a big part of their new strategy (Prasanta Kumar Pradhan, 2010). UAE-based companies have bought similar shares in India. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries as a whole are a significant outbound investment destination for India. India approved 133 joint projects and 259 full subsidiaries between 2001 and 2005. Software development services, engineering services, tourism, readymade garments, chemical products, agriculture, and allied services were among the most popular investment industries in the GCC countries. Between 2000-01 and 2004-05, the GCC delivered 42.5 percent of the total value of contracts secured by Indian project exporters. (Pradhan, 2009).

## 5. CONCLUSION:

During the tenure of Prime Minister Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee, India's foreign relations with West Asia in general and the Gulf Cooperation Council countries in particular strengthened dramatically. PM Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee travelled to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries with his top officials to improve bilateral ties. His cabinet's top ministers, including those in charge of defense, home affairs, trade, and other areas, also paid a visit to strengthen ties on a broad scale. PM Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee also extended an invitation to numerous GCC leaders to visit India. And it was quite fruitful, with a beneficial impact on various areas of cooperation. In order to accomplish their national interests, India made a balancing act in the West Asian region. As a result, India gained investment from the GCC countries, as well as commercial permits from the GCC countries. As a result of the Indian government's strenuous efforts to enhance business relations with them, the GCC countries collectively named India a "Dialogue Partner." For the first time in India's relationship with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), India spoke with them as a strategic partner. In a nutshell, India's relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries have advanced to the next level, favourable influencing India's foreign policy with the GCC countries in the future.

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