

**50 YEARS OF INDIA-QATAR RELATIONS (1973-2022):
ACHIEVEMENTS, OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES**

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Abstract

The relationship between India and Qatar has reached its jubilee celebrations. The year 2022 marks the completion of glorious 50 years of ties between the two countries. The relation is stronger than ever before and has deepened and strengthened over the years. Although the ties begun in the form of diplomatic and political engagements it slowly expanded in the realm of socio-economic aspects of its relations. India has one of the largest diaspora in Qatar and it plays an important role in the countries development and growth. Qatar has invested heavily in India looking at a promising future in the years to come. The gas trade between the two is pivotal to its energy ties. There are some points of contestations between two but both the countries are trying to overcome such issues of disagreement and move forward. As both the countries have reached about half a century of relationship, it is the right time to reflect on their past accomplishments, upcoming opportunities and some of the challenges they face to their ties.

Keywords: Counter-terrorism, Diaspora, Diplomacy, Energy, Tourism

This paper will focus on the political and socio-economic engagements between India and Qatar. It will look into various facets of its relationship like the head of state visits, diplomatic ties, cultural and educational exchanges, counter-terrorism cooperation and analyse the agreements and contentions in their relations in these fifty years period.

To begin with, India and Qatar have many things in common, which brings them closer to each other. For instance, the British empire is one of the things which is common between the two. Although, Qatar was never officially part of the British empire but it was a British protectorate. Yet, this commonality between the two would go a long way in shaping their countries history and the way they interact with the outside world. Being subjected to a common sovereign power during the colonial times, India and Qatar came closer to each other through colonial trade and commerce. This colonial mark was left forever in their foreign policies which can be observed even today.

At this hour when India and Qatar celebrate their fifty years of alliance, it is imperative to take a closer look at how their journey up till this point has been. It is quite interesting that despite so many differences between the two countries, they have overcome all such trivial divergences and came together for a better future.

Historical background

The earliest archaeological evidence of contact between the lands of Qatar and India dates back to five thousand years. The earliest can be traced back to the 2500 BCE when the Indus valley civilisation had ties with the Mesopotamian

empire through its trading port in Lothal in Gujarat. According to P. N. Chopra, “Direct voyages were rare during those days. Indian and Arabian traders used to meet in half-way to exchange their products. The Indians used to sail from the western Indian sea ports along the coast and entered the Gulf and rested in Bahrain”. Dilmun was an important trading center located near Qatar which acted as a link between the maritime trade of Mesopotamia with that of India. The silk route also played an important role in linking the East Asian region to that of West Asian region via India. From Qatar dates, horses and pearls were exported to India. The pearl industry was the main economy of Qatar and Indians played a crucial role as bankers and financiers in the pearl trade. Thus, as a result Indian port cities like Bombay became important banking centers for Qatar. The Indian rupee was widely used in Qatar for centuries as a token of exchange in trade. It was so popular that even today the older generation of Qatari refers to their currency as the *rupaya*. In the modern period, the British empire closed the distance between India and Qatar. Many Indians were employed by the British at various administrative positions such as clerks and government officials. After the discovery of oil in Qatar in 1939, the presence of Indians in Qatar increased as workers in the oil industry.

India-Qatar Political Relations: India was one of the first few countries to recognise the State of Qatar after its independence in 1971. India had warm relations with all the Arab and Gulf countries. In fact, Egypt an Arab country was one of the closest friends of India during this time. The Nehruvian doctrine envisaged mutual co-operation and existence in the neighbourhood and thus, India had politically amicable relations with the countries in its immediate proximity. In the 20th century the political relations between India and Qatar were influenced by the cold war dynamics of that era. Qatar was a close ally of the US and the West while India although followed the Non-Aligned Movement, was close to the Soviet camp. Things changed rapidly after the fall of the USSR. Post-1990's India got more closer to the US and the West. It adopted the neo-liberal reforms and opened up its economy for the world. India as a result interacted with Qatar more frequently than in the past. In the 21st century, Qatar has become India's closest ally in the Gulf region.

Diplomatic relations and visits of Head of States: There has been a regular exchange of high-level bilateral visits in the recent past. The Emir of Qatar Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Al Thani was on a State visit to India in 2015. Earlier, Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani had visited India in the year 1999, 2005 and 2012. The two sides signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in 1998 for cooperation in the oil, gas, and industrial technology sectors. The MoU intends to work in this direction of co-operation, with the trade of LNG from Qatar as its core aspect. In 1998, Abdullah Bin Hamad Al-Attiyah, the Minister of Energy and Industry visited India to facilitate further advancement in trade in natural gas. India has agreed to buy 7.5 million tons of LNG per annum from Qatar and the first consignment was sent in 2004.

The Qatari Prime Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Nasser Al Thani was on an official visit to India in 2016. Prime Minister Narendra Modi had visited Qatar in 2016. The visit was fruitful and India gained tremendously from such diplomatic visits. The visit proved to be an historic moment as after Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh visit in 2008 there was a long gap in such high-level visits. Recently, Prime Minister met with the Emir of Qatar on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly in 2019. They took this opportunity to discuss issues concerning their shared interests.

Defence: Defence cooperation is an important pillar of the bilateral agenda. Qatar lacks a strong defence force due to its tiny population size. Thus, it depends on other countries like India to ensure the security of its sea routes. Qatar is quite vulnerable due to its geographic location, being placed amongst hostile neighbours and thus to ensure its territorial sovereignty in case of conflict, it depends on outside assistance. India has one of the worlds largest and efficient armed forces. The Indian Navy is one of the finest in the world and regularly trains and assists the neighbouring island countries. The security of Qatar is in the interest of the Indian government as it has made heavy investments in the countries gas industry. India offers training in its various defence institutions to a few of its allies, which also includes Qatar. India shows its presence in the biennial Doha International Maritime Defence Exhibition and Conference in Qatar. Indian Coast Guard ships frequently visit Doha for exercises and joint-cooperation. Qatar-India Defence Cooperation Agreement, signed during the Prime Ministership of Manmohan Singhs visit to Qatar in 2008, was extended for a period of five years in 2013, and further extended for five years in 2018.

Counterterrorism: The possibility of conducting joint operations in battling terrorism is also figured prominently in these diplomatic interactions. Counterterrorism cooperation is a priority for India, as, over the years, the country has suffered multiple terrorist attacks. The Emir of Qatar Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani and Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2019 held talks regarding the potential for anti-terror cooperation between the two countries. According to a report in *The Economic Times*, “The Prime Minister underscored that terrorism continues to pose a serious risk to peace and security in the region and beyond. He stressed the importance of demonstrable and immediate action by the concerned for putting an end to all forms of terrorism and ending all support to it. The Prime Minister mentioned that India attached great significance to further strengthening her relations with Qatar, which is our close friend and with which we share an extended neighbourhood”. In a few cases, the people behind such attacks have bankrolled their activities through illegal money transfers from abroad. Accordingly, India and Qatar have declared their interest in working together to combat terrorism funding.

Energy Trade: The gas trade between the two country forms the cornerstone of their economic relations. Qatar plays a crucial role in India’s energy security.

India's commitment to reduce its share of carbon footprint makes it necessary to look for alternatives to coal. Natural gas is one of the best alternative to coal in the current situation. The state of Qatar is located on an important strategic and energy rich part of the Arabian Peninsula. Both its land and waters contain highly valuable hydrocarbon sources, thus making Qatar one of the top most hydrocarbon producing and exporting country in the world. Its massive offshore North Field, which spans an area roughly equivalent to Qatar itself, is the world's largest non-associated, natural-gas field. Qatar has become the LNG capital of the world. Qatar has the third largest reserves of natural gas in the world after Russia and Iran. It started exporting gas to India in 2004 and has increased its flow substantially in the last few years. Qatar has invested directly in developing LNG infrastructure in India. India has signed long term contracts for importing LNG from Qatar. Along with natural gas India also imports various petrochemicals and fertilizers from Qatar. A deep-sea natural gas pipeline from Qatar to India through Oman has also been proposed. This pipeline is going to be 2,000 km sea-deep from Qatar via Oman to Indian states of Gujarat or Maharashtra. In 2008, Qatar invested about USD 5 billion in India's energy sector. Qatar plays a crucial role in India's energy security. Qatar now forms an important component of India's look west policy especially in the Gulf.

India-Qatar Cultural Ties: Apart from the hard-core aspects of political relations like diplomatic visits, trade agreements and defence cooperation, softcore aspects of bilateral relations like cultural exchanges will be discussed in this segment. It is often seen that soft power gets a secondary position to hard power issues in academia and foreign policy formulation in general. Soft power is associated with 'feminine' aspects of a nation-state and thus get neglected or considered inferior to the 'masculine' hard power issues like military and economic resources of a country. However, the trend is changing and soft power is now considered equally if not more important than hard power features of a country.

Indian Diaspora: Indian nationals totalling about 7,56,000 as of June 2019, comprise the largest expatriate community in Qatar and are engaged in a wide spectrum of professions including medicine; engineering; education, finance; banking; business; and media apart from a large number of blue-collared workers. They are known for their honesty, hard work, punctuality and contribution to the development and progress of Qatar. The Indian diaspora in Qatar has been instrumental in preparing the country for the FIFA World Cup to be held in the end of 2022. The large Indian diaspora in Qatar can be considered to be a cornerstone of India-Qatar relations. In the past Indian workers worked in the oil and gas industry of Qatar and today they are mostly employed in construction and infrastructure projects. The Indian government has set up a Labour and Community Welfare Wing that systematically registers and follow-up grievances concerning the Indian migrant workers in Qatar. New Delhi is quite actively monitoring the grievances of Indian workers and ensure

that it is addressed satisfactorily by the concerned authorities in Qatar. The Indian Community Benevolent Forum (ICBF), functioning under the aegis of Embassy of India, Doha - ICBF was awarded the prestigious Pravasi Bharatiya Samman in January, 2011. ICBF operates a helpdesk round the clock and also organises medical camps for low-income workers periodically in different cities of Qatar, in collaboration with the Indian Doctors Club and medical centres that are working in partnership with the Indian Embassy in this initiative. The Embassy also regularly organises consular camps in cities outside of Doha for the benefit of Indian nationals living there.

Education: In Doha an “Education City” was established which housed some well-known universities campuses like Virginia Commonwealth University, Georgetown University, North-western University and many more. The bilateral relationship between India and Qatar has strengthened by continued cooperation in the education sector. In recent years due to India’s rising prosperity, many Indian students are migrating to technologically advanced countries like Russia, China, the EU and North America for higher education. Educational degree from a foreign university enhances their prospects of employment in India and proves beneficial for their career growth.

Tourism: India is a popular tourist destination amongst Qataris, due to the cultural closeness and historical connections between the two countries. Prominent historical places such as Delhi, Agra, Jaipur, Jaisalmer, Udaipur; leisure destination such as Goa; hill stations in the Himalayas like Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand. There is also a rising trend of medical and wellness tourism in metropolitan cities like Hyderabad, Chennai and in Kerala, amongst the Qatari nationals. *Ayurveda* and *Yoga* is heavily promoted by the Indian government in Qatar and it has many practioners in the country. The Government of India has also extended the e-Visa (tourist, business and medical) facility to the Qatari nationals in 2018. Hundreds of Qatari citizens availed of this facility 2018 and thousands of regular visas were issued to Qatari nationals during 2018. A delegation from the India participated in the first edition of the Qatar Travel and Holidays Expo held in 2019 in Doha. Tourism ‘Know India’ seminar was organized by the Indian Embassy which was attended by influential business executives, travel companies and tour agencies in Qatar. About five lakh tourists visited Qatar from India during the year 2018 and also registered a 20 per cent growth over 2017. India was also one of the largest source of tourists for Qatar in 2018.

Framework

The study is based on both primary as well as secondary data. The data is obtained from various sources, which includes the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India and Ministry of Development Planning and Statistics of Qatari government. A realist method is applied to study the various facets of the bilateral ties between India and Qatar.

Findings

The study found out that the relationship between Indian and Qatar has moved beyond Track 1 diplomacy to Track 3 diplomacy with people to people engagements. The relations between the two are cordial and friendly. In the course of time the ties have become complex in characteristics and multidimensional encompassing various aspect of cultural life. A few difference of opinion exists between the two but they do not impact the relations in any significant way.

Conclusion

To conclude the paper, the political ties between India and Qatar in the last fifty years have strengthened and grown stronger. There were frequent visits of the Head of State and other ministers and officials from both sides to each other. Numerous MOUs and agreements had been signed in this period between the two. Both the countries were cooperating in the defence sector by conducting joint military and naval exercises and by ensuring the safety of sea lanes which are crucial for the energy trade. India and Qatar had also in this period initiated sharing intelligence regarding counter-terrorism and checking the sources of funding for any subversive activities.

On the cultural front too, India and Qatar have come a long way from where they had begun. Regular cultural exchanges and events were organised by both countries to showcase their rich art, cuisine and traditions. People to people contact has increased in this period between the two countries. It has given a boost to the tourism industry in both countries. There had been certain disagreements on certain issues between the two in this period but they were resolved by engaging in dialogue and heeding to each other's concerns. Such trivial differences of opinion did not cause any severe rupture in their relations and they continued to remain strong and healthy.

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