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Gulf Cooperation Council and India

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Why in News

Recently, India had a virtual meeting with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), a leading regional organisation comprising almost all Arab countries.

Key Points

- **Indian Workers Want to Return to Arab Countries:** India has asked the members of the GCC to facilitate the return of Indians who want to resume work with the relaxing of **Covid-19**-related restrictions. This can happen through sustainable **travel bubble arrangements**.
 - **More than eight million Indians** live and work in **West Asia**, with a **majority of them within the region covered by the GCC**, which includes **Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE**.
 - **‘Transport Bubbles’ or ‘Air Travel Arrangements’** are **temporary arrangements** between two countries aimed at restarting commercial passenger services when regular international flights are suspended as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. They are **reciprocal in nature**, meaning airlines from both countries enjoy similar benefits.
- **Cooperation:** Both sides affirmed their commitment to **reform multilateral institutions** to reflect the realities of the 21st century and work together to **address contemporary challenges** such as the Covid-19 pandemic, climate change, sustainable development and terrorism.
 - The **GCC welcomed India's inclusion in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) as a non-permanent member** from January 2021.
 - **India** assured continuing the **flow of food, medicines and essential items** to the Gulf region. Supply chains from India to the Gulf were not disrupted despite the lockdowns during the pandemic.

Gulf Cooperation Council

- GCC was **established by an agreement** concluded in 1981 among **Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and UAE** in view of their special relations, geographic proximity, similar political systems based on Islamic beliefs, joint destiny and common objectives.
- The **structure** of the GCC consists of the Supreme Council (the highest authority), the Ministerial Council and the Secretariat General. The **Secretariat** is located in **Riyadh**, Saudi Arabia.
- It is a **political, economic, social, and regional organisation** according to its charter.



India's Relations with the GCC

- **Political:** The governments of the GCC members are **India-friendly** and **Indian-friendly**.
 - The Prime Minister of India has received the **'Order of Zayed'**, the highest civilian order of the UAE and the **'King Hamad Order of the Renaissance'**, the third-highest civilian order of Bahrain.
 - In the recent past, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have **not adopted hostile posture** to India's domestic developments such as **removing the special status for Jammu & Kashmir under Article 370.**

- **Economic:** The GCC states are among **India’s key suppliers of energy**, and **annual remittances** from Indians in these countries are worth an estimated USD 4.8 billion.
 - The **United Arab Emirates (UAE)** and **Saudi Arabia** are **India’s third and fourth-largest trading partners** respectively and the **total bilateral trade** of the GCC countries with India for the year **2018-19** stood at USD 121.34 billion.
 - UAE also features in the **top 10 sources of FDI inflows** into India.
- **Security:**
 - Both India and the GCC are members of the **Financial Action Task Force (FATF)**.
 - Apart from the participation of Saudi Arabia, Oman, Kuwait, and others in **India’s mega multilateral Milan Exercise**, India also has **bilateral exercises** with most of them.
 - **India and Oman hold annual bilateral exercises** across all three wings of the armed forces (Army Exercise ‘**Al Najah**’, Air Force Exercise ‘**Eastern Bridge**’, Naval Exercise ‘**Naseem al Bahr**’). Further, Oman has provided the Indian Navy access to the **Port of Duqm SEZ** which is one of Indian Ocean’s largest deep-sea ports.
 - India has a bilateral **naval (In-UAE BILAT)** as well as an **air force exercise (Desert Eagle-II)** with the **UAE**.

Way Forward

- The Gulf region has historical, political, economic, strategic and cultural significance for India. **India-GCC Free Trade Agreement (FTA)** can provide a boost to the relations.
- Presently, the **GCC region is volatile**, thus, India needs to safeguard its large economic, political and demographic stakes in the region.

Source: IE