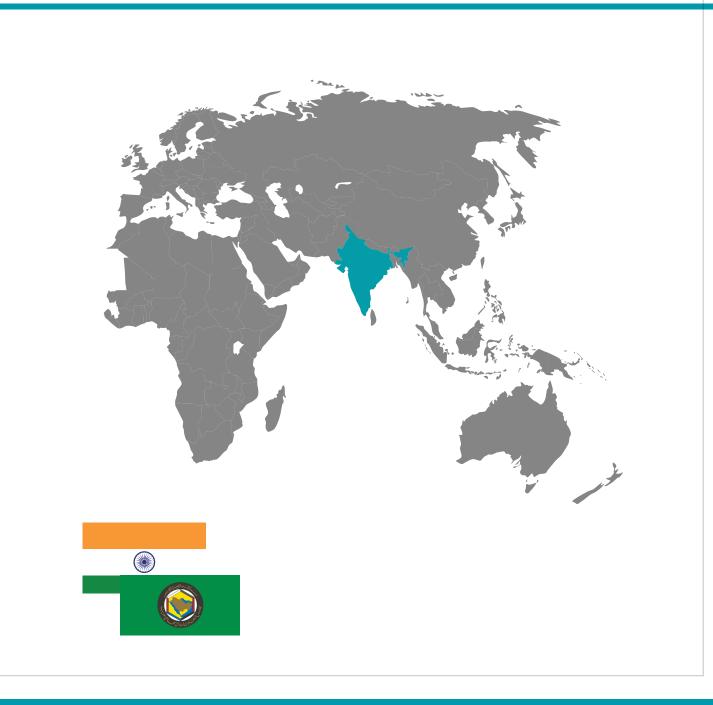


# India - GCC Relations





### **Key Domestic Developments**

India is a sovereign Democratic Republic and Union of States with a parliamentary form of government. It is formed out of three branches of government: the executive, legislative, and judicial branches. In addition, it also divides governance among a three-list schedule where the Union list covers foreign policy, defense, tax, and currency; the State list governs law and order and public health; and the Concurrent list covers criminal law, martial law, contracts, trade unions, education, and social security overseen by both the state and the union. The executive branch is run by a president, vice-president, and council of ministers. The legislature is bicameral, divided into an upper (House of State) called the Rajya Sabha and a lower (House of People) or the Lok Sabha.

While Prime Minister Modi secured another term, the 2024 general election marked a significant shift in India's political landscape. For the first time since coming to power in 2014, Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) fell short of an outright majority in the Lok Sabha, securing fewer than the 272 seats needed to govern alone. As a result, the BJP had to form a coalition government under the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), relying on key allies such as the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) and the Janata Dal (United) (JD-U) to retain power.

This outcome signals a more complex political environment where Modi's leadership, while still dominant, now requires greater negotiation and consensus-building within the coalition. It also suggests that while his policies on infrastructure, healthcare, and global diplomacy continue to resonate with many voters, the opposition managed to mobilize support against his government on issues such as unemployment, rural distress, and democratic concerns. This coalition-based governance will likely shape the implementation of his development vision in the coming years.

At the same time, India faces numerous domestic challenges. Throughout its history, India has struggled with maintaining employment and mitigating poverty levels due largely to its population size of 1.45 billion (2024), the largest in the world, having recently surpassed China. Although employment rates have fluctuated, there has been little influence in periods of low unemployment on the poverty levels because of the high number of low-wage jobs. Although many have a job, the salary is below living wages, doing little to mitigate the poverty crisis in the country. In addition, the younger generations boast a high level of education and choose to wait for better opportunities rather than settle for low-paying jobs.

Other challenges continue to place strain on India, including the ongoing ethnic conflict in Manipur between the Meitei majority and the Kuki minority communities. The northeastern Indian state of Manipur has conflict rooted in the colonial era when the British divided the region into two districts. Disputes over land and resources are exacerbated by the rapid population growth; political representation and ethnic identity are also factors of contention between the two groups, where the Meitei majority is accused of neglecting the Kuki community (the minority) and leaving the two groups vying for control of state government. Indian Prime Minister Modi was criticized due to his silence over the conflict in Manipur, mainly as violence has led to widespread displacement, death of citizens, and damage to infrastructure and economic activity.

Food security is another continuing challenge for India as the constantly growing population has brought about a debate over the economy's future. The country is the world's second-largest producer of rice, and in May 2023, the government implemented a ban on exporting the commodity to control rising food prices. Supporters of the ban argued that it would protect food security domestically and stabilize food prices. Opponents, however, remark that it hurts consumers, impacts farmers' incomes, encourages smuggling and black markets, and undermines the World Trade Organization's rules on food trade.



# **Key Economic and Social Data**

**GDP:** Approximately \$4.27 trillion for the fiscal year 2025

**GDP per capita:** \$2,940 (nominal; 2025 est.)

Annual Growth Rate: 6.5% (projected for 2025)

**Inflation:** 4.1% (forecasted for 2025)

**Population:** 1.428 billion (2024)

**Unemployment Rate:** 4.6% (2024)

Credit Rating: BBB long-term and A-3 shortterm unsolicited foreign and local currency sovereign credit ratings. The transfer and convertibility assessment remains 'BBB+' (2024)

# **India's Foreign Policy**

Under Prime Minister Modi, India's foreign policy has been characterized by a proactive and assertive approach to enhance its global influence and secure its strategic interests. This was prioritized by strengthening ties with neighboring countries through the "Neighborhood First" policy, which focuses on regional cooperation and stability. The prime minister's outreach to neighbors aims to settle long-standing disputes and promote stronger cultural and economic relationships. India also seeks to challenge China's sway in the region, especially with the Act East policy to strengthen ties with Southeast Asian countries. After being long fixated on Pakistan, New Delhi's South Asia policy now centers on the more productive maritime geography of the Bay of Bengal, facilitating a more natural connection between South and Southeast Asia. The government has significantly emphasized the Indo-Pacific region, advocating for a free, open, and inclusive maritime order and bolstering ties with critical players like Japan, Australia, and ASEAN countries. The "Act East" policy has further solidified India's role in Asian geopolitics, promoting economic and cultural linkages.

India is a member of several international organizations, including the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, the G20, and the BRICS group. India is also a member of regional organizations such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). It has maintained a tradition of non-alliance where it accepts that multiple alliances better serve its national interests. India has long held the stance that global power should have more multi-polarity. It has been a critical player in the BRICS group of countries, and it has partnered with Russia, China, Brazil, and South Africa to develop the influence of the Global South.

Economic diplomacy has also been a cornerstone, with efforts to attract foreign investment and boost trade through initiatives like "Make in India" and "Digital India." Modi's diplomatic outreach includes leveraging India's soft power, showcasing its cultural heritage, and promoting yoga and traditional medicine globally. This comprehensive and dynamic foreign policy approach reflects India's aspirations to be a leading global power, balancing its strategic autonomy with constructive international engagement.

India has maintained positive economic ties with Russia and has avoided directly condemning the war in Ukraine, even at the behest of its Western allies. This reflects the country's desire to remain neutral and unpersuaded by external influence. Regarding its adversaries, India rivals China in terms of global ambitions, being the two most populous nations in the world, as well as two of the most highly influential Asian countries and contenders for upcoming global powerhouses in the imminent shift in the global order. In addition, its ongoing conflict with neighboring Pakistan means that its borders are not free from conflict in the form of a territory dispute over Kashmir and cross-border violence.

India has intensified its diplomatic engagements in the Indo-Pacific, reaffirming strategic partnerships with ASEAN nations and the Quad (U.S., Japan, Australia, India). In February 2025, India hosted a summit for Indo-Pacific cooperation, emphasizing maritime security, trade connectivity, and supply chain resilience. Key agreements



from the summit included strengthening naval interoperability among Quad nations, deepening cybersecurity collaboration, and facilitating regional economic initiatives.

On regional security, India has expressed concern over escalating tensions between Iran and Israel and has called for de-escalation efforts. India has maintained backchannel diplomatic engagements with both countries, advocating for conflict resolution through multilateral forums. It has also remained neutral in the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict, continuing to purchase Russian oil despite Western pressure. India has increased engagement with European partners, particularly France and Germany, to balance its strategic autonomy while maintaining energy security.

Notably, India has enhanced ties with African nations under the "India-Africa Vision 2040," with investments in infrastructure and digital connectivity projects. India hosted the 2025 India-Africa Summit in New Delhi, focusing on trade, health-care partnerships, and technology transfers. Key outcomes included increased financial commitments to African development projects and expanded cooperation in renewable energy.

# **India Trade in Goods with GCC Countries** (USD billions)

Country	Exports	Imports	Total Trade
Bahrain	0.9 billion	0.83 billion	1.7
Kuwait	3.1 billion	8.3 billion	10.4
Oman	4.4 billion	4.5 billion	8.9
Qatar	1.7 billion	12.3 billion	14.0
Saudi Arabia	11.56 billion	31.4 billion	42.9
United Arab Emirates	35.6 billion	48.0 billion	83.6

# Establishment of Diplomatic Relationships

India - GCC Diplomatic Relations: Saudi Arabia (1947), UAE (1972), Qatar (1973), Kuwait (1962), Bahrain (1971), Oman (1955)

#### Key Research Centers and Think Tanks

- Observer Research Foundation (ORF)
- Institute of Economic Growth (IEG)
- Centre for Civil Society
- Centre for Policy Research (CPR)
- Vivekananda International Foundation (VIF)
- Institute For Social And Economic Change (ISEC)
- The Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies (IPCS)
- Research Foundation for Governance in India
- National Council of Applied Economic Research
- Institute for Studies in Industrial Development (ISID)
- Takshashila Institution

### Selected Key Regional Experts

- Samir Saran, President, Observer Research Foundation (ORF)
- Dr. Hasan Al-Hasan, Senior Fellow for Middle East Policy at the IISS Manama
- Dr. N. Janardhan, Director of Research and Analysis Department, Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy
- Amb. Talmiz Ahmed, Former Indian Diplomat
- Ranjit Gupta, Adjunct Faculty member in the International Strategic and Security Studies Programme at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bengaluru, and Distinguished Fellow of the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, New Delhi
- Samir Ranjan Pradhan
- P.R. Kumaraswamy, Centre/School/Special Centre, Centre for West Asian Studies, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University



# **Key Recent Literature**

- A Decade of Modi's Foreign Policy: India Shows the Way
- **India's Foreign Policy**
- Non-Allied Forever: India's Grand Strategy According to Subrahmanyam Jaishankar
- India's Foreign Affairs Strategy
- Continuity and Change in Indian Foreign Pol-
- Asia in the GCC, A New Strategic Partner?
- India's National Role Conception and Relations with GCC Countries under Modi: A Focus on Saudi Arabia
- Indian Relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council Countries: Reality and Future

# **Key Developments in India-GCC Relations**

Historically, the three main pillars of the India-Gulf relationship have been energy, trade, and protecting Indian expatriates. Since 8.8 million Indians live in the Gulf, India has a significant stake in its stability.

The largest economic grouping in the region for India is the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). In FY2023-2024, trade with the GCC accounted for 17.2% of India's overall trade, marking a steady increase from previous years. The UAE and Saudi Arabia remain India's third- and fourth-largest trading partners, respectively.

India-GCC relations have continued to strengthen across multiple sectors, reflecting growing economic, strategic, and diplomatic ties. One of the most significant developments was the resumption of negotiations for a long-awaited India-GCC Free Trade Agreement (FTA) in January 2025. The discussions, which focused on reducing tariffs in key sectors such as petrochemicals, pharmaceuticals, and information technology, are expected to culminate in a finalized deal by mid-2025. This agreement would further cement India's position as a key economic partner in the Gulf.

Energy cooperation remains a cornerstone of India-GCC relations, with India signing a long-term crude oil supply agreement with Saudi Aramco in November 2024 to ensure stable energy imports. Meanwhile, India and the UAE have deepened their collaboration in renewable energy, launching a joint initiative to develop solar power projects in Rajasthan. These efforts align with India's broader strategy to enhance energy security and transition toward sustainable energy solutions.

Defense and security cooperation has also seen significant progress. In February 2025, India and Oman conducted their largest-ever joint naval exercise, focusing on anti-piracy operations and maritime security in the Arabian Sea. Additionally, India has expanded counterterrorism cooperation with Bahrain through intelligence-sharing agreements, reinforcing security coordination in the region.

Investment and infrastructure partnerships have further strengthened economic ties. Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund (PIF) announced a new \$12 billion investment in India's infrastructure sector, covering smart cities, logistics, and green hydrogen projects. Qatar also pledged an additional \$3 billion investment in India's fintech and digital economy sectors, reflecting the growing confidence of Gulf investors in India's economic prospects.

Labor and migration issues continue to be a priority, with Kuwait and India signing an updated labor agreement in December 2024. The agreement enhances protections for Indian migrant workers and streamlines the visa process for skilled professionals, ensuring improved working conditions and legal safeguards for expatriates in the Gulf.

High-level diplomatic engagements have further solidified the strategic relationship between India and the GCC. In January 2025, the Kochi Dialogue 2025 was held in Kochi, Kerala, focusing on "India's Look West Policy in Action: People, Prosperity, and Progress" which was attended by GCC Secretary General HE Jasem Albudaiwi. These developments underscore the growing stra-



tegic importance of the India-GCC partnership, reflecting mutual interests in economic diversification, energy security, and regional stability.





A new framework for India-Gulf connections is focused on investment, political relations, and defense and security cooperation. This framework results from India's expanding strategic and commercial interests in the Gulf area. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have declared their aspirational investment goals of US\$100 billion and US\$75 billion, respectively, as India grows in appeal as an economic market. With US\$15.3 billion in foreign direct investment, the UAE ranks seventh among all sources in India. As of March 2022, Saudi Arabia had invested US\$3.2 billion, and Oatar had invested more than US\$1.5 billion the previous year. Among the major projects is the US\$44 billion Ratnagiri Refinery and Petrochemicals Limited project, which is being jointly developed in Maharashtra by Indian, Saudi, and Emirati oil corporations.

#### India-Bahrain

In December 2024, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar and Bahrain's Foreign Minister Abdullatif bin Rashid Alzayani co-chaired the 4th High Joint Commission (HJC) meeting in

Manama. The discussions encompassed various sectors, including trade, healthcare, energy, defense, and technology. Key outcomes included the establishment of a Joint Working Group on Trade and Investment and a commitment to expedite negotiations for a Bilateral Investment Treaty.

In September 2024, a delegation led by H.E. Noor bint Ali Alkhulaif, Minister of Sustainable Development and Chief Executive of Bahrain EDB, visited Mumbai, Bengaluru, and Chennai. The mission aimed to promote investment opportunities in Bahrain's manufacturing and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) sectors. The delegation secured investment commitments valued at nearly USD 33 million from leading Indian companies, reflecting Bahrain's appeal as a strategic investment destination.



#### India-Kuwait

- In December 2024, India and Kuwait elevated their bilateral relationship to a strategic partnership during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Kuwait. This marked the first visit by an Indian Prime Minister to Kuwait in 43 vears.
- The elevation to a strategic partnership underscores the commitment of both nations to deepen cooperation across various sectors, including defense, energy, trade, investment, and technology.

- A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on defense cooperation was signed, focusing on training, joint exercises, defense industry collaboration, and the supply of defense equipment.
- Discussions emphasized enhancing economic ties, with Kuwait expressing interest in exploring investment opportunities in India's energy, defense, medical devices, pharmaceuticals, and food parks sectors.
- In recognition of his efforts to strengthen bilateral ties, Prime Minister Modi was conferred with Kuwait's highest national award, 'The Order of Mubarak Al-Kabeer.'



#### India-Oman

- On February 16, 2025, India's External Affairs Minister, Dr. S. Jaishankar, attended the 8th Indian Ocean Conference in Muscat. He met with Oman's Foreign Minister, Sayyid Badr bin Hamad Al Busaidi, to discuss various aspects of bilateral cooperation, including political, security, defense, trade, energy, healthcare, education, culture, and people-to-people relations
- On January 27-28, 2025, Union Minister of Commerce & Industry, Shri Piyush Goyal, visited Oman. The discussions focused on advancing the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) between the two nations, aiming to enhance trade and investment. Bilateral trade was estimated at over \$8.94 billion in the 2023-2024 fiscal year.

From September 13 to 26, 2024, the Indian and Omani armies conducted the 5th edition of Exercise Al Najah at the Rabkoot Training Area in Salalah, Oman. The exercise aimed to enhance interoperability and mutual understanding between the forces, featuring tactical exercises, live-fire demonstrations, and advanced equipment displays.



# India-Qatar

- On February 17, 2025, Qatari Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani visited New Delhi. This visit aimed to enhance trade and economic relations between the two countries.
- The two nations set an ambitious goal to double their bilateral trade from \$14 billion to \$28 billion within the next five years.
- Discussions highlighted sectors such as infrastructure, ports, shipbuilding, energy (including renewable energy), smart cities, food security, startups, and emerging technologies like artificial intelligence, robotics, and machine learning as potential areas for increased Oatari investment.
- The Qatar Investment Authority (QIA) announced plans to open an office in India to facilitate investments and explore new opportunities, reflecting a strong commitment to enhancing economic ties.
- In mid-2024, QatarEnergy and India's Petronet signed a landmark agreement for the supply of liquefied natural gas (LNG). This \$78 billion deal is expected to save India approximately \$6 billion, reflecting the deepening energy ties between the nations.





#### India-Saudi Arabia

- Saudi Minister of Foreign Affairs Prince Faisal bin Farhan bin Abdullah met Indian Minister of External Affairs S. Jaishankar on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference in February 2024. The two leaders discussed ways to enhance bilateral relations and coordinated on regional and international issues, underscoring their shared commitment to strengthening India-Saudi Arabia ties.
- Secretary (CPV&OIA) Shri Muktesh K. Pardeshi concluded an official visit to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia from 4-7 May 2024 to strengthen the strategic partnership between India and Saudi Arabia. During his visit, the Secretary reviewed preparations for Hajj 2024 in Jeddah and Madinah. He met with Vice Haj Minister H.E. Dr. Abdul Fattah Mashat and discussed logistical arrangements and infrastructure developments to improve pilgrims' welfare and comfort. This year, 175,025 Indian pilgrims will visit Saudi Arabia under the 2024 Hajj quota.
- In September 2023, Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman extended his stay in New Delhi following the G20 summit to meet with Prime Minister Modi in a state visit to discuss enhancing the relationship's future between the two countries. The two leaders reviewed the work completed within the Strategic Partnership Council's framework. They conveyed their satisfaction with the results of the two Ministerial Committees, which have strength-

- ened the strategic partnership between the two nations in several areas: (a) the Committee on Political, Security, Social, and Cultural Cooperation and its subcommittees and (b) the Committee on Economy and Investments and its Joint Working Groups.
- In his address during a meeting of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) Contact Group on Kashmir, on the sidelines of the 78th session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister H.E. Prince Faisal bin Farhan stated that Saudi Arabia is "exerting unremitting effort to mediate between the parties of the [Jammu and Kashmir] conflict" and that the ongoing unrest between the two sides poses a pressing challenge to the security and stability of the region.
- The Saudi Ministry of Communications and Information Technology signed a cooperation agreement with India in August 2023 to strengthen their partnership in digital infrastructure, e-health, and e-learning and strengthen their cooperation in digital research and innovation.
- In June 2023, PM Modi thanked Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman for offering support during the emergency evacuation of Indian nationals from Sudan via Jeddah when violence struck in April 2023. Conversely, the Crown Prince offered PM Modi his full support in their presidency of the G20.
- On May 21-25, 2023, the Royal Saudi Air Force and the Indian Navy conducted a bilateral maritime exercise, "Al Mohed Al Hindi 23," in Jubail, Saudi Arabia. The exercise strengthened interoperability between the two forces through tactical maneuvers, search and rescue operations, and an electronic warfare drill.
- In March 2023, Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister, Prince Faisal bin Farhan, met with India's External Affairs Minister, Subrahmanyam



Jaishankar, to discuss bilateral coordination on various regional and international issues of mutual interest.



#### **India-UAE**

- PM Modi's visit to the UAE on February 13-14, 2024 marked his seventh visit since 2015. The Prime Minister held bilateral meetings with His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the President of the UAE. The two leaders discussed ways to further deepen, expand, and strengthen the strategic partnership between the countries and exchanged views on regional and international issues of mutual interest. During the visit, PM Modi inaugurated the BAPS Mandir, the first Hindu temple in Abu Dhabi, and addressed the Indian community in the UAE at an event in Zayed Sports City in Abu Dhabi.
- In July 2023, India and the UAE signed a Memorandum of Understanding on the Local Currency Settlement System. The agreement allows bilateral trade between the two countries to be made in Indian Rupees and UAE Dirhams. Traders can choose which currency they would like to exchange in, and the MoU is meant to enhance and strengthen cross-border transactions and economic cooperation between the two countries.
- In July 2023, Prime Minister Modi visited the UAE in a sign of reinforced commitment to

- strengthening bilateral cooperation. The two leaders discussed working together on renewable energy – including green hydrogen, solar power, and grid connectivity.
- In July 2023, Abu Dhabi Investment Authority (ADIA) announced its commitment to India's Gujarat International Finance Tec-City (GIFT City), which aims to facilitate investment opportunities for the UAE in India.
- In July 2023, the Abu Dhabi Department of Education and Knowledge (ADEK) signed an MoU with India's Ministry of Education in which the Indian Institute of Technology Delhi (IIT Delhi) would establish an overseas campus in Abu Dhabi, scheduled to begin offering courses in January 2024.
- On March 15, 2023, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) and the Central Bank of the United Arab Emirates (CBUAE) signed a Memorandum of Understanding to promote innovation in the finance sector. Under the MoU, both parties will be able to conduct proof-of-concept and pilots of bilateral Central Bank Digital Currencies to improve the process of cross-border transactions.



# **Supporting Documents**

- GRM Publication 2013: India and the Gulf: What Next? Abubaker Bagader, Ranjit Gupta, Talmiz Ahmad, and N. Janardhan
- Asia-Gulf Economic Relations in the 21st Century: The Local to Global Transformation, Tim Niblock and Monica Malik



- A New Gulf Security Architecture: Prospects and Challenges for an Asian Role, Ranjit Gupta, Abubaker Bagader, Talmiz Ahmad and N. Janardhan
- The Arab States of the Gulf and BRICS: New Strategic Partnerships in Politics and Economics, Tim Niblock, Alejandra Galindo and Degang Sun
- The Gulf States, Asia, and the Indian Ocean: Ensuring the Security of the Sea Lanes, Tim Niblock with Talmiz Ahmad and Degang Sun
- India, China and Globalization: The **Emerging Superpowers and the Future of Economic Development,** Piya Mahtaney
- GRC Publication 2013: GCC-India Relations, Ranjit Gupta, Christian Koch
- India's Growing Role in the Gulf: Implications for the Region and the United States, GRC & Stimson Center
- India, GCC and the Global Energy Regime: **Exploring Interdependence and Outlook** for Collaboration, Samir Ranjan Pradhan
- **Indian Labor Migration to the Gulf Coun**tries, Prakash C. Jain

- Gulf Research Meeting 2017: The GCC and the Indian Ocean; Economic Opportunities and Political Challenges
- Gulf Research Meeting 2012 Workshop: The India-Gulf Strategic Partnership in a Pan-**Asian Cooperative Paradigm**
- Gulf Research Meeting 2013: The Gulf and Asia Political Relations and Strategic Options in a Developing Scenario (China, India, South Korea, and Japan)
- Gulf Research Meeting 2011 Workshop: India and the Gulf: What Next?
- GRC Publication 2009: India's Growing Role in the Gulf: Implications for the Region and the United States
- GRC Publication 2009: India, GCC and the Global Energy Regime: Exploring Interdependence and Outlook for Collaboration
- GRC Publication 2009: India, China and **Globalization: The Emerging Superpowers** and the Future of Economic Development
- GRC Publication 2009: Indian Labor Migration to the Gulf Countries











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