



Diaspora diplomacy in India-UAE relations: The strategic role of Indian expatriates in shaping bilateral ties

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Abstract

This paper explores the evolving concept of diaspora diplomacy through a case study of the Indian expatriate community in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and its growing influence on bilateral relations. With over 3.5 million Indian expatriates, constituting approximately 30% of the UAE's population, this diaspora has become a significant non-state actor in international relations, challenging traditional paradigms of foreign policy. The study traces the historical roots of India-UAE connectivity, which date back to centuries-old trade routes and labour migration patterns. It then examines how these historical ties have transformed into instruments of modern statecraft.

Focusing on the post-2014 period under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's administration, the paper investigates how India has strategically leveraged diaspora capital. This is particularly evident in three key areas: economic statecraft, cultural diplomacy, and political mobilization. First, the paper analyses the impact of remittance flows, which average \$20 billion annually, and diaspora-driven investment channels that support the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA 2022). These economic contributions are critical in strengthening bilateral ties. Second, the paper evaluates India's use of soft power through cultural initiatives such as yoga diplomacy, Bollywood exports, and the construction of the BAPS Hindu Temple in Abu Dhabi. These initiatives have significantly enhanced India's cultural presence in the UAE. Lastly, the paper examines the institutionalization of diaspora engagement, particularly through events like the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas conventions and the Overseas Citizen of India (OCI) program.

The methodology of the paper combines a mixed-methods approach, utilizing quantitative analysis of remittance data and trade figures, as well as qualitative examination of policy documents and diplomatic statements. Additionally, the study includes case studies of prominent diaspora engagement initiatives. The findings suggest a paradigm shift from perceiving emigration as a "brain drain" to strategically leveraging it as a "diaspora dividend." This shift is evident in the UAE's emergence as India's third-largest trading partner, the normalization of high-level exchange visits, and collaborative infrastructure development projects.

The study concludes by evaluating the limitations of diaspora diplomacy, including challenges related to labor rights and the difficulty of maintaining political neutrality in host countries. It offers policy recommendations for optimizing this unique model of people-to-people connectivity, which currently contributes over \$90 billion annually to bilateral trade between India and the UAE.

Keywords: Diaspora diplomacy, Indian foreign policy, India-UAE relations, soft power, transnational communities, economic statecraft

Introduction

Defining Diaspora

The term 'diaspora' originates from the Greek words *dia* (through) and *speirein* (to scatter), reflecting its literal meaning of dispersion or spreading. Historically, it referred to the dispersion of the Jewish community following the Babylonian exile in 586 BC and the later settlements outside of Palestine (Panda, 2009) ^[11]. In contemporary terms, diaspora generally describes groups of migrants who live or have established themselves in foreign nations while maintaining ties to their cultural heritage and national identities. These connections vary in degree but are often characterized by a shared sense of origin and an awareness of heritage (Shamnad, 2011) ^[12]. Specifically, the term "Indian diaspora" encompasses individuals who have migrated from India and their descendants, including both Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) and People of Indian Origin (PIOs). NRIs are Indian citizens residing abroad, while PIOs have acquired citizenship in other countries (Mégret & Dutta, 2022) ^[4]. Together, they form a diverse and

widespread community, now estimated to exceed 20 million people across more than 50 countries (Naujoks, 2009) ^[13].

The evolution of the Indian diaspora spans centuries, driven by factors such as economic opportunities, educational pursuits, and personal relationships. Today, this diaspora represents a significant demographic with strong ties to its homeland, contributing to India's cultural, economic, and political influence globally.

Historical Context of India-UAE Relations and the Role of the Indian Diaspora

The relationship between India and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has deep historical roots, shaped by centuries of trade, migration, and cultural exchange. Long before the modern era, maritime trade routes connected India to the Gulf region, facilitating the exchange of goods such as spices, pearls, textiles, and dates. These interactions date back to antiquity, with evidence suggesting trade links between India and West Asia as early as the Indus Valley Civilization (Ahmad, 1969). The discovery of oil in the Gulf during the mid-20th century marked a transformative period

in the India-UAE relationship. The subsequent oil boom of the 1970s catalyzed massive migration from India to the Gulf, driven by the need for labor to support rapid economic growth and infrastructure development. Indian workers, particularly from states like Kerala, became an integral part of the Gulf workforce, contributing to the modernization of the region (Zachariah, 2002). By the late 1990s, migration patterns shifted due to restrictive immigration and localization policies aimed at limiting the non-Arab population. However, the early 2000s witnessed a resurgence in demand for Indian workers as rising oil prices spurred new economic activities. By 2007-08, the Indian expatriate population in the Gulf region had expanded to around six million individuals (Abraham, 2012) ^[5], with unskilled laborers forming the majority, followed by skilled professionals and entrepreneurs (Khadria, 2008) ^[14].

The establishment of formal diplomatic ties in 1972 further strengthened India-UAE relations. Over the decades, these relations expanded beyond labor and trade to encompass strategic cooperation in energy, defense, and investment. The Indian expatriate community, although without citizenship rights, became a crucial element in this relationship, acting as informal ambassadors and fostering socio-economic ties (Kapiszewski, 2006) ^[16]. From 2014 onwards, under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the Indian government has focused on building stronger relationships with the Gulf region, recognizing the diaspora as a vital bridge for advancing bilateral ties. Modi's landmark visit to the UAE in 2015, along with public diplomacy initiatives like the Pravasi Bharatiya Kendra, highlighted the significance of the diaspora in India's foreign policy. Modi's vision of transforming "brain drain" into "brain gain" underscored the diaspora's potential as a resource for enhancing India's global influence (PIB, 2016).

The Indian diaspora's role extends beyond economic contributions, serving as cultural ambassadors and facilitators of India's soft power. From promoting India's multicultural ethos to advocating for initiatives like International Yoga Day, the diaspora significantly influences how India is viewed around the world (Mohan, 2014). Regarding the relationship between India and the UAE, the Indian diaspora continues to be a cornerstone of engagement, fostering collaboration, and driving mutual growth. This enduring partnership, enriched by shared history and a dynamic expatriate community, highlights the transformative potential of diaspora diplomacy in the 21st century (M Lall, 2019) ^[6].

Role of the Indian Diaspora in Shaping India's Foreign Policy in the UAE

The Indian community in the UAE has become a key component in influencing India's foreign policy with the Gulf country. Their contributions span various sectors, including construction, healthcare, retail, and technology, underscoring their indispensable role in the UAE's economic and infrastructural development. From blue-collar workers to high-skilled professionals, the diaspora has been instrumental in fostering deeper bilateral ties and advancing mutual interests. Indian businesses and entrepreneurs in the UAE have played a pivotal role in strengthening economic relations between the two countries. With over 3,300 Indian companies operating in the UAE, including prominent names like the Lulu Group and the Jumbo Group, the

diaspora has significantly enhanced trade and investment flows. This robust economic collaboration reached a new milestone with the signing of the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) in 2022, further solidifying India-UAE trade relations.

Indian expatriates have not only contributed to the Gulf economy but have also leveraged their transnational social networks to stimulate trade and investment. These networks, as Lucas (2004) highlights, facilitate the transfer of knowledge, business opportunities, and investment, acting as catalysts for economic growth. Entrepreneurs within the diaspora have expanded into industries such as retail, hospitality, information technology, and joint ventures, showcasing their adaptability and entrepreneurial spirit. The Indian diaspora has also been instrumental in supporting India's strategic engagements in the Gulf. Their expertise and established networks in key sectors such as defense, green energy, and space exploration have facilitated the coordination of India's foreign policy objectives with the UAE's Vision 2030. This collaborative approach has not only helped strengthen India-Gulf relations but has also contributed to mutual growth and development, solidifying India's position as a key strategic partner in the region (Md. Muddassir Quamar, 2019).

India's growing strategic cooperation with Gulf countries marks a significant shift in its foreign policy, emphasizing security, defense, and regional stability. The strengthening of diplomatic and defense ties, coupled with the pivotal role of the Indian diaspora, has positioned India as a vital partner for Gulf nations in addressing common challenges.

The Role of the Indian Diaspora in the UAE in Advancing India's Global Influence

The Indian Diaspora in the UAE has significantly contributed to improving India's position on the global stage through their roles as cultural ambassadors, economic stakeholders, and informal diplomats. The integration of Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) and Persons of Indian Origin (PIOs) into Emirati society has enabled them to bridge cultural gaps while promoting mutual respect and understanding between the two nations.

As cultural ambassadors, Indian expatriates have actively promoted India's rich traditions, languages, and customs through social events, festivals, and outreach programs. Celebrations of Diwali, Holi, and Navratri attract participation from diverse communities across the UAE, reinforcing India's soft power. Cultural institutions such as the Indian Social and Cultural Centre in Abu Dhabi and the Indian Tamil Fine Arts Association in Dubai organize performances, exhibitions, and educational initiatives, fostering cross-cultural understanding and appreciation (Panda, 2009) ^[11]. Indian arts, cuisine, and media also contribute significantly to the region's cultural landscape, exemplified by events like Gulfood in Dubai, where Indian culinary traditions take center stage.

Economically, the Indian diaspora has made a remarkable impact through entrepreneurship and professional services. Over 3,300 Indian-owned businesses—including major entities like the Lulu Group and the Jumbo Group—operate in the UAE, enhancing bilateral trade and investment. Their contributions reached a new height with the signing of the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) in 2022, which further deepened trade relations between India and the UAE. Moreover, Indian expatriates remit

billions of dollars to India annually—over \$83 billion in 2020 alone—playing a vital role in reducing poverty, improving education, and supporting healthcare back home (S.K. Aryal, 2025)^[17].

However, as Mohieldin and Ratha (2014) have pointed out, remittances, while financially beneficial, remain an underutilized resource for sustainable development. They often boost consumption but can also fuel inflation and dependency. Therefore, India's strategic challenge lies in effectively channeling these funds into long-term investments and development projects.

The influence of the Indian diaspora also extends into media and language. In 2000, the Indian and UAE governments signed a Channel Carriage Agreement to facilitate content sharing between Doordarshan and Emirates Cable Television (E-Vision). Hindi-speaking communities in the Gulf have since established vibrant media outlets, such as Radio Mirchi (97.3 FM in Abu Dhabi) and Radio Voice (104.2 FM in Bahrain), which provide cultural and linguistic continuity for the diaspora (Renuka, 2011)^[18]. These platforms have helped sustain Indian identity abroad and enhance cultural diplomacy.

In the realm of education and healthcare, the Indian diaspora has again played a transformative role. There are 81 Indian curriculum-based schools in the Gulf, including 31 in the UAE, serving thousands of students (Khadria, 2008)^[14]. Institutions like Manipal University's Dubai campus offer training in fields such as engineering, management, and medicine. Discussions have also taken place regarding the potential establishment of an IIT Delhi campus in Abu Dhabi in collaboration with the Abu Dhabi Department of Education and Knowledge (ADEK). In healthcare, Indian professionals—around 20,000 doctors and 60,000 nurses—are central to service delivery. Indian hospital chains like Apollo have gained recognition, while India's medical tourism sector benefits from referrals and goodwill fostered in the Gulf (Adkoli, 2006)^[15].

Indian cultural and religious organizations maintain vibrant community life through regular forums and celebrations. Associations like the Indian Art Circle in Kuwait and the Gulf Coordination Committee of Indian Associations in Bahrain offer platforms for civic and cultural engagement. Celebrations of Indian Independence Day and Republic Day, along with Indo-Arab cultural seminars, underscore the diaspora's commitment to both heritage and integration. Temples, gurdwaras, and churches built by the Indian community also reflect the religious diversity and peaceful coexistence of Indians in the UAE (Government of India, 2001)^[35].

Despite not having citizenship rights, the Indian diaspora wields considerable influence through informal diplomatic channels. As noted by Kapiszewski (2006)^[16], members of the Indian community often act as intermediaries between Indian and Emirati governments, leveraging their socio-political networks to facilitate bilateral cooperation. Many Indian professionals are consulted by Emirati authorities on governance issues, showcasing the diaspora's credibility and trusted standing in UAE society. These informal diplomatic efforts align with India's broader foreign policy goals, helping advance strategic objectives through soft power and relationship-building.

The diaspora's strategic importance became especially clear during crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The Indian government's launch of the Vande Bharat Mission in April

2020—aimed at repatriating stranded nationals—highlighted the synergy between the two governments and the resilience of the Indian community (Ministry of Civil Aviation, 2020a; Ministry of External Affairs, 2020a). The mission successfully brought back thousands of Indians from the Gulf and underscored the importance of diaspora diplomacy in managing emergency situations.

India's growing security and strategic cooperation with Gulf nations, including the UAE, is another key facet of bilateral relations. Since the early 2000s, India has signed extradition treaties with countries like the UAE (1999), Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman (2004), Iran (2008), and Saudi Arabia (2010), emphasizing shared interests in counterterrorism and security (Ministry of External Affairs, 2021). Maritime security has also become a common concern, especially in safeguarding the Sea Lines of Communication (SLoC) in the Gulf of Aden and the western Indian Ocean (Vinay Kumar, 2012).

On July 28, a trilateral meeting between India, the UAE, and France was held in New Delhi to discuss shared strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific. Topics included maritime security, disaster relief, the blue economy, regional connectivity, energy and food security, innovation, supply chain resilience, and cultural engagement (Ministry of External Affairs, 2022). These developments show how diaspora diplomacy, economic partnerships, and shared security concerns are converging to build a robust and multifaceted India-UAE relationship.

Strengthening Bilateral Defense Ties

The 2010 Riyadh Declaration between India and Saudi Arabia marked the beginning of a new phase in strategic relations, including formal cooperation in defense and counter-terrorism (Ministry of External Affairs, 2010). Since then, India has significantly expanded its defense engagement with the Gulf region, particularly with the UAE. This growing partnership includes regular defense dialogues, joint military exercises, and collaborations in areas such as maritime security, counter-terrorism, and defense industry cooperation. These developments highlight the increasing importance of the Indian diaspora as a bridge in bolstering strategic and security ties between India and the Gulf nations.

Challenges

Labour Rights and Welfare

A significant portion of the Indian diaspora in the UAE comprises blue-collar workers employed in sectors such as construction, domestic work, and other low-income industries. These workers frequently face a host of challenges that adversely affect their rights and welfare. Labor regulations in GCC countries, including the UAE, have traditionally been focused on short-term labor importation under the sponsorship system (*kafala*), which has often been criticized for enabling labor exploitation, unsafe working environments, and limited legal recourse (Pant, 2010)^[36].

Legal and Consular Challenges

The size and diversity of the Indian expatriate community in the UAE present considerable challenges in delivering adequate legal and consular support. While the diaspora plays a significant role in advancing India's soft power and economic interests abroad, ensuring the protection of

vulnerable segments—particularly blue-collar workers—requires sensitive and sustained diplomatic efforts. Balancing these welfare concerns with respect for the UAE's legal and sovereign frameworks demands nuanced diplomacy (Ragazzi, 2014).

Crisis Response

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the logistical difficulties involved in crisis response for large expatriate populations. The Indian government faced significant hurdles in repatriating thousands of stranded nationals, revealing the need for better coordination between Indian and UAE authorities during emergencies. This situation emphasized the importance of proactive planning and robust consular infrastructure to support citizens abroad in times of crisis.

Integration Without Losing Identity

While integration into Emirati society enhances social cohesion and economic participation, it also poses the risk of cultural dilution. Maintaining Indian cultural identity is essential for the diaspora's sense of belonging and continuity. Chapman and Khanna (2004) argue that managing cultural diversity requires careful policy planning to prevent community tensions. Given the multicultural environment of the UAE, maintaining harmony among various ethnic groups, including the large Indian community, necessitates diplomatic approaches that balance integration with the preservation of cultural heritage (Dadush and Falcao, 2009).

Opportunities

1. Economic Collaboration

The Indian diaspora plays a key role in strengthening economic cooperation between India and the UAE. During bilateral meetings in November 2022, Emirati Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed and Indian External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar reviewed progress on the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) and discussed expanding trade and investment (Ministry of External Affairs, 2022). Bilateral trade grew from US\$72.88 billion in 2021–2022 to US\$84.84 billion in 2022–2023, with the UAE becoming India's seventh-largest source of FDI, contributing approximately US\$12.03 billion (DPIIT, 2022). Additionally, the 14th India–UAE Joint Commission Meeting and the 3rd Strategic Dialogue in September 2022 explored collaboration in food security, healthcare, and education—including joint initiatives in African nations like Kenya and Tanzania.

2. Cultural Diplomacy and Soft Power

India's cultural diplomacy is significantly reinforced by its vibrant diaspora in the UAE. In February 2022, both countries signed an MoU to establish the India–UAE Cultural Council, aimed at promoting collaboration in education, the arts, music, and dance. The Indian community actively organizes events celebrating Indian culture, yoga, and festivals, enhancing India's image and fostering cross-cultural understanding. The UAE has increasingly become a hub for Indian cultural and recreational activities, further amplifying India's soft power in the region (Embassy of India, Abu Dhabi, 2023)^[33].

3. Strategic Partnership Expansion

The Indian diaspora can contribute to expanding strategic ties in defense and security. India and the UAE have established a robust security alliance encompassing joint military drills, maritime collaboration, and defense industry initiatives. During a virtual summit in February and the JDCC meeting in May 2023, both nations reaffirmed their commitment to combat terrorism and develop joint ventures in defense production and R&D (Ministry of Defense, 2023). This strategic alignment benefits from the diaspora's support in building trust and facilitating knowledge transfer.

4. Renewable Energy, Sustainability, and Space Technology

Another promising avenue of cooperation lies in renewable energy and space exploration.

India's focus on sustainability aligns with the UAE's Vision 2030 goals. At the Abu Dhabi Space Debate in December 2023, Indian Minister Jitendra Singh emphasized India's commitment to using space research for the benefit of neighboring countries and the Global South (PIB, 2023)^[22]. With shared objectives in clean technology and innovation, the diaspora can help drive bilateral initiatives in emerging sectors.

5. Enhanced Consular Services and Engagement

To better serve the diaspora, improving consular services is crucial. This includes expanding digital platforms, welfare programs, and outreach efforts to build trust and ensure timely support. In October 2023, the 4th Joint Committee on Consular Affairs convened in Abu Dhabi to address issues concerning citizens of both countries. Additionally, the launch of the first India–UAE award for consulting firms supporting bilateral trade symbolizes a growing focus on community engagement and mutual benefit.

6. Leveraging Political Influence

Prominent Indian business leaders and professionals in the UAE serve as informal diplomats, playing a vital role in fostering dialogue and cooperation between India and the UAE. Through their expansive networks and social capital, these individuals provide India with a unique strategic advantage in shaping and strengthening bilateral relations.

On February 18, a virtual summit was held between Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the then de facto leader of the UAE, Mohammed bin Zayed. During his introductory remarks, Prime Minister Modi praised the UAE for its successful organization of Expo 2020, despite the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. He further underscored the shared commitment of both countries to deepen their economic, trade, and investment partnerships (Ministry of External Affairs, 2022).

India and the UAE enjoy deep-rooted civilizational and cultural ties. With approximately 3.5 million Indians residing in the UAE—accounting for about 25 percent of all Indian passport holders living abroad—the Indian community represents the largest expatriate group in the Emirates as of December 2022. Indian nationals have also made substantial economic contributions to the UAE, including investments in real estate totaling \$4.3 billion in 2022. Ongoing negotiations regarding a bilateral investment treaty have shown promising progress, with key priorities including the development of single-window systems and virtual trade corridors aimed at reducing both time and transaction costs.

In a joint statement issued by Prime Minister Modi and Sheikh Mohammed, both leaders emphasized the pivotal role of the Indian diaspora in reinforcing bilateral relations. The diaspora not only serves as a living bridge between the two nations but also as a catalyst for future cooperation. Recognizing this, both India and the UAE have committed to identifying new areas of collaboration across sectors such as trade, energy, and strategic development. As Krishn A. Goyal and Abdul Vajid (2017) ^[38] note, the Indian diaspora can be a powerful instrument for advancing the partnership beyond economic gains to include broader political and social dimensions.

This summit also coincided with two historic milestones: India's 75th Independence celebration, "Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav," and the UAE's 50th anniversary. Both events underscored the enduring friendship between the two nations and highlighted the shared vision for a future anchored in mutual respect, economic synergy, and strategic collaboration.

Conclusion

The Indian diaspora in the UAE plays a pivotal role in shaping India's foreign policy by reinforcing economic, cultural, and strategic ties between the two countries. Through active contributions across key sectors such as trade, healthcare, and technology, Indian expatriates have emerged as vital stakeholders in the bilateral relationship. A notable example is the establishment of the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) in 2022, which marked a significant milestone in economic collaboration and reflected the diaspora's influence in driving trade and investment (T. Jaffery, 2025) ^[8].

In addition to their economic impact, members of the Indian diaspora serve as cultural ambassadors, enhancing India's soft power by promoting Indian traditions through festivals, media, and educational initiatives. They also fulfill important diplomatic functions by acting as informal liaisons, bridging policy gaps and supporting crisis management efforts—most notably during the Vande Bharat Mission.

Despite these strengths, challenges persist, particularly in the areas of labor rights and social integration. Addressing these issues requires sustained diplomatic engagement and thoughtful policy interventions. Looking ahead, India's foreign policy can be further strengthened by deepening engagement with its diaspora community, leveraging their global networks to advance strategic partnerships in sectors like defense, renewable energy, and emerging technologies.

By recognizing and empowering its expatriate population, India not only enhances its international presence but also consolidates its position as a global economic and diplomatic force. The India-UAE relationship—rooted in shared history and invigorated by a vibrant diaspora—stands as a compelling model for effective diaspora diplomacy in the 21st century.

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