

The gulf of sensitivity that India will have to cross

(GS Paper 2, International Relation)

Why in news?

- The strong and widespread targeting of India in the Islamic world over the past few days arose from a specific theological consideration.
- Recent comments made regarding Prophet Mohammed have cascaded into a multi-layered international incident.
- Islamic nations in the Middle East and beyond publicly condemned these views, and the Indian government distanced itself from the party functionaries in question.

The Gulf–India relations in recent years

The rush to control the situation in India was palpable

The Gulf and the extended West Asian region have gained significant strategic and economic importance in Indian foreign policy calculus over the past few years.

Ironically, some of the most significant strides made between the region and India has been during the tenure of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

During this period, India's interests in the Gulf have gone beyond diaspora and oil, with economics, counterterrorism, defence, technology, and other critical aspects of international cooperation witnessing an important boost.

This becomes even more impressive considering the significant political and ideological divides between the ruling Gulf monarchies and the Modi government.

However, both sides have navigated these fissures on a government-to-government level well, up until now.

Communal discrepancies:

- Communal discrepancies in Indian society and politics are not new. However, neither is democratic discourse, remains a critical pillar of India's national design.
- India's ties with the Islamic world, particularly in the Persian Gulf, have navigated tectonic events such as the demolition of the Ayodhya Mosque in 1992, the Godhra riots in Gujarat in 2002, and so on with deft diplomacy from both sides taking charge, disallowing relations to spiral and protecting mutually beneficial national interests despite the ideological and theological crevasses.
- Fast forward to the 2010s, a rapidly growing Indian economy helped in changing long-standing perceptions that drove Gulf's foreign policy towards India.
- This mutually beneficial reality would not have been possible, say in the 1990s, a time when counterterror cooperation was negligible, Gulf's affinity towards Pakistan, and its interests far superseded those of India, and persons of interest wanted in India for terrorism found refuge in the Gulf easily.

How pace of communication technologies in present time affects?

- The current diplomatic fallout over comments was not out of the blue. The rapid growth of the internet, social media and the pace of communication technologies have blurred lines between official governmental positioning on issues and events that are playing out on the ground.
- The diplomacy filter has limitations today, as control of official narratives and counter-narratives gets even more diluted as we move forward in a hyper-connected world. Government positioning means little if video and audio of events are directly available, and are shared via platforms, reaching thousands within minutes.

- In Gulf states, this is what happened, as the video of the spokespersons' comments on the Prophet spread rapidly with help of certain neighbouring states. India's response, via statements released by its embassies, eased diplomatic tensions, but a level of damage on a public level was already accomplished.

Status-quo breaking moment:

- Previous cases of anti-Muslim posts on social media, particularly by expats living in the region, had prompted sober yet notable responses from the Gulf states.
- Over the years, some Indians have even been deported from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) for posting hateful content online, and this was despite Indian embassies in the region asking its nationals working across this geography to be mindful of their online activities.
- However, Gulf nations did not escalate these beyond seeing them as aberrations, and not in light of their larger relations with India. However, this is an issue that needs attention, more so now than ever.
- The most damaging part here is that the status-quo breaking moment came from a party functionary, and not a member of the 'uninformed' public.
- The realisation that what is said domestically travels as much internationally, and the simple social arithmetic of words having consequences, should not have been ignored within the designs of the party's communication apparatus.
- Commentary on the Prophet represents a red line in most parts of West Asia, which usually invokes responses from various quarters of the Islamic world. Communal violence by itself has rarely been picked up as a matter of bilateral tension by Gulf states with India, similar to them not picking up the issue of Xinjiang and Uyghur Muslims with China.

Conclusion:

- The Gulf States by design are not accustomed to no-hold-barred debates on religion. Similar reactions have also come across following comments made in Europe and the US in the past as well. Much like examples from the past, this crisis as well is not expected to challenge the strong fundamentals of the civilizational foundations of India–Gulf relations.
- There is a mutuality of interests between the Arab states and India, and hence when the temperature cools, the flow of relations will go on. But India must take the obvious lessons from this entire episode, beginning with greater sensitivity to all faiths both for social harmony and promotions of India's external interests.