

# COMMENTARY

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## **Regional Leaders Need to Resolve Gulf Crisis**

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Owing to the air, sea and land blockade imposed on Qatar by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt which is now reaching its fourth month; the Emir of Qatar Sheikh Tamim bin Hamid al Thani spoke of the plight of his citizens at the UN General Assembly. He termed the blockade as ‘unjust’, which is seeking to destabilize the oil and gas rich Qatar. On his first foreign trip since the stand-off began this June, the Qatari Emir met with leaders of Turkey, Germany, France and United States seeking diplomatic support. Meanwhile, Qatar Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman al Thani also appealed to the global leaders for diplomatic support. France, Germany, Russia and Turkey have sympathized with Qatar’s situation and have advocated dialogue and negotiations between the two sides.

The diplomatic crisis began with several countries of the Gulf abruptly cutting off relations with Qatar on 5 June 2017. Severing of relations included withdrawing of Ambassadors, imposing trade and travel bans. Oman, Morocco, Somalia and Kuwait have chosen to remain neutral. Qatar’s alleged violation of the 2014 agreement amongst members of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is cited as the main reason by the bloc led by Saudi Arabia. On 22 June, Qatar was issued a list of 13 demands through Kuwait, which is acting as a mediator. Qatar strongly decried the demands as an insult and impingement to its independent foreign policy and sovereignty.

Diplomatically, Qatar has garnered support from many western countries including key partners such as Germany and United Kingdom, urging cooperation. Talks with the French President led to deployment of French envoys for mediation. Nevertheless, efforts towards a negotiation have failed with both sides unwilling to change their stance. The last breakthrough was attempted on 9 September during a brief conversation between the Emir Sheikh Tamim and Saudi crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman; but that did not hold up due to apparent lack of ‘protocol’.

India shares time-tested warm and friendly relations with all countries of the Gulf. The Indian External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj has consistently maintained that the crisis was a regional matter and hoped for a constructive dialogue leading to peace and security. There is a large Indian expatriate population in the region. Qatar hosts about 700,000 Indians- the largest number of expats in that country and twice its native population. Stable relations with Qatar are vital for India not only for the remittances, but also the US\$ 18 billion bilateral trade. India is the third highest importer of exports from the country. India imports 8.5 million tons of Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) every year. India also sources crude oil from Qatar and several Indian businesses such as Wipro and HCL own chains in Qatar. Such vital relations could be hampered if the Saudi led Gulf countries go forward with hard-hitting sanctions against Qatar. In fact, India receives more than 50 per cent of its oil imports from the Gulf.

New Delhi has maintained that there has been no change in its relations with any of the involved countries since the onset of the crisis. The Foreign Minister of Qatar had assured the safety of Indian expats during his recent visit to India. Though, India has set up 24/7 helplines at its embassy in Qatar, there has been no adverse reports regarding safety of Indian expatriates in Qatar. The Qatari Foreign minister held talks with India's National Security Advisor for cooperation on defence and security.

Doha has even waived visa requirements for Indians travelling to Qatar. The Qatar-India business ties have been robustly expanding even after the stand-off with Doha expressing interest in starting an airline in India and holding trade delegation level talks by India-Qatar business chambers.

The tense geopolitical situation needs to be handled maturely by the leadership of the Gulf countries. Nations across the globe find themselves in an uncomfortable situation, unwilling to entangle themselves in a region most depend on crucially for energy. The countries involved in the stand-off should give importance to their close centuries old interests and resolve the issue at the earliest.

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