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The Saudi-India-Pakistan Triangle

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(The editorial is based on the article “The Saudi-India-Pakistan Triangle” which appeared in The Hindu for 20th February 2019. In this article, we will discuss India-Saudi and Pakistan-Saudi relations.)

Saudi Arabia’s Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman’s (MBS) visit to India presents a “historic opportunity” to expand collaboration in all sectors. The visit comes at a time of crisis in the Indian subcontinent following the terrorist attack in Pulwama.

The recent visit will lead to further strengthening of Saudi Arabia-India ties, a process that had begun with Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s visit to Riyadh in 2016.

India-Saudi Relations

- **The geostrategic position of Saudi Arabia makes it an important country for India, with trade and cultural links dating back thousands of years.**
- There is a rational calculation regarding Saudi interest in expanding trade and investment in India and collaboration in the energy sector.
- Saudi Aramco is interested in partnering with the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company in developing an integrated refinery and petrochemicals complex at Ratnagiri in Maharashtra, a \$44 billion joint venture with Indian public sector involvement. **Saudi Arabia is already one of the three largest suppliers of oil to India.**
- That the two countries are moving beyond the traditional buyer-seller relationship is best exemplified by the joint venture for the \$44 billion worth **Ratnagiri refinery and petrochemical project.**
- **The assumption that Saudi Arabia is tilted towards India is nothing more than an unrealistic hope.**
- The Saudi Foreign Minister’s statement in Islamabad during MBS’s visit that Riyadh is committed to “de-escalating” tensions between India and Pakistan over Kashmir must not be read as an endorsement of the Indian stand but as an attempt to intervene in the dispute rather than accept its bilateral nature.

- Good relations with Riyadh and other West Asian capitals is **essential for the welfare of the expatriate Indian community and their emergency evacuation should there be such a need.** West Asia is also an important partner in the domains of counterterrorism and maritime security in the western Indian Ocean.
- **Indians in Saudi Arabia are the second-largest providers of remittances to their home country.** They are also an important aspect of our soft-power diplomacy in the region.

Pakistan-Saudi Relations

- **Both Saudi Arabia and the UAE will not go too far with India against Pakistan.** It is not just religion alone. Elite families in both countries share familial and other social connections in Pakistan.
- There have been reports that MBS is interested in Saudi Arabia getting its own nuclear deterrent. If that is the case, then Pakistan is the most logical source for technical expertise.
- **Saudi Arabia always played an important role to strengthen the economy of Pakistan.** The Saudi royal said his country would collaborate with Pakistan economically, politically and in terms of security.
- Pakistan and Saudi Arabia enjoy historic relations and these ties are very strong on the diplomatic level.
- **Saudi Arabia has strategic interests in Pakistan given its proximity to Iran, Riyadh's archrival in the region.** The Saudis are using aid packages and investment promises to buy the economically embattled Pakistani government's loyalty and convince it to turn a blind eye to their destructive actions within Pakistan's borders.
- **Not only has Saudi Arabia helped Pakistan avoid major economic crises, but it has also supported Pakistan's defense by providing logistic support and financial assistance.**

Iran's Angle

- **Iran is Saudi Arabia's chief adversary in West Asia.**
- The Saudi-Iranian rivalry is being played out across the region, from Syria to Yemen.
- Riyadh perceives Pakistan as a major asset it can use to check the spread of Iranian influence despite the Nawaz Sharif government's refusal to commit Pakistani troops in the Yemen war on behalf of the Saudi-led alliance.
- It currently sees Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan and Pakistan Army Chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa as more vulnerable to Saudi persuasion.
- Moreover, Pakistan's relations with Iran, which was never easy, have hit a new low following the recent terrorist attack in the Sistan-Baluchistan Province that killed Revolutionary Guards.

- As Pakistan's relations with Iran deteriorate, it is likely to move further into the Saudi orbit.
- **Increasing Sunni fundamentalism, bordering on Wahhabism, in Pakistan also makes it a natural ideological ally of Saudi Arabia and an ideological foe of Shia Iran.**

Way Forward

- **The India-Saudi Arabia relationship is important for a variety of reasons but New Delhi should be careful not to make convergence on Pakistan and Afghanistan a litmus test for making further progress.**
 - Additionally, the roles of both countries as power centers in their respective geographical regions mean that they share a number of other common interests, including the fight against terrorism, battling poverty, educational exchanges, and investment.
 - **In the context of this strategic and economic nexus between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, it will be unwise for New Delhi to seriously believe that it will be able to wean Saudi Arabia away from Pakistan.**
 - **India should instead take advantage of any benefit that accrues from India's economic relations with Saudi Arabia and should not pin much hope on Riyadh in the political-strategic sphere.**
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