

# WELL OILED — ON SAUDI CROWN PRINCE'S INDIA VISIT

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Saudi Crown Prince [Mohammed bin Salman visits India next week](#) at a time when both countries are seeking to deepen bilateral cooperation. For MBS, as he is widely known, the visit to India, Pakistan, China, Malaysia and Indonesia is an opportunity to re-assert Saudi Arabia's role as a major foreign policy player in Asia amid growing criticism over the Yemen war and the brutal assassination of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Istanbul. For the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the visit, with general elections approaching, is an opportunity to cap its pursuit of stronger ties with West Asian nations on a high note. High-level visits between India and Saudi Arabia have become the new normal since King Abdullah came to India in 2006, the first Saudi monarch to do so in five decades. Four years later, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh travelled to Riyadh. Mr. Modi visited Riyadh in 2016; last year, he met MBS in Argentina on the sidelines of the G-20 summit at a time when the Crown Prince had already come under sharp criticism in many Western countries. A number of factors have influenced the turnaround in ties between the two countries, which had been underwhelming during the Cold War. When India's economy started growing at a faster clip post-liberalisation, its dependence on energy-rich nations grew. And Saudi Arabia was a stable, trusted supplier of oil. Post-9/11, the two have expanded the scope of their partnership to economic issues and fighting terrorism.

MBS is expected to announce Saudi investments in both India and Pakistan. Saudi Arabia, which has traditionally exercised great influence over Pakistan, had recently offered a \$6 billion loan to Islamabad to stabilise the economy. In India, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have acquired a 50% stake in a refinery complex in Maharashtra. The project remains stalled amid protests against land acquisition, but it shows Saudi Arabia's interest to make long-term investments in India's energy sector. Another subject that that will come up in bilateral talks is Iran. MBS has made containment of Iran his top foreign policy priority, and has U.S. support in this pursuit. India is certain to come under U.S. pressure to cut oil imports from Iran: it has so far walked the tightrope between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Even as its ties with the Kingdom improved over the past decade, India deepened its engagement with Iran, be it on oil trade or the Chabahar port. This is driven by the conviction that while Saudi Arabia is vital for India's energy security, Iran is a gateway to Central Asia. New Delhi is sure to continue this balancing act even as it seeks to strengthen the Saudi pillar of India's West Asia policy.

The Meghalaya government must urgently ensure that all illegal mines are shut down

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