

THE SAUDI-INDIA-PAKISTAN TRIANGLE

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There seems to be much exultation in New Delhi that the [visit by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman](#), or MBS, will lead to further strengthening of Saudi Arabia-Indian ties, a process that had begun with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Riyadh in 2016. Some of this jubilation is based on rational calculations 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.

However, much of the euphoria is based on wishful thinking and vague statements such as Riyadh's declaration that India is one of eight countries with which it wants to intensify its strategic partnership in various fields. The Indian self-delusion is demonstrated, above all, by the speculation in policy-making circles in New Delhi that the Saudi stance on Kashmir has now changed and its tilt toward Pakistan corrected.

Who is Mohammed bin Salman, the crown prince of Saudi Arabia?

The latter assumption is nothing more than a pipe dream. 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.

New Delhi should, therefore, not be overly optimistic that growing Saudi-Indian relations in the economic sphere will succeed in prying Riyadh away from Islamabad. There are various reasons that lead to this conclusion. First, Pakistan is far too important to Saudi Arabia for internal security reasons for Riyadh to sacrifice its stake in Islamabad in order to appease New Delhi. The Pakistan Army has more than once acted as the Saudi rulers' praetorian guard and given the uncertain hold of MBS on his country, despite impressions to the contrary, he may need the services of Pakistani mercenaries in the near future.

Breaking protocol, Modi receives Salman at airport

Second, Afghanistan has been a point of strategic convergence for Pakistan and Saudi Arabia going back to the 1980s when the Saudis used Pakistan as a conduit for material assistance to the Islamist forces fighting the Soviet Union and its proxy government in Kabul. With U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and the consequent expansion of Taliban influence very much on the cards, Pakistan's strategic value as the Taliban's patron has grown exponentially. Saudi Arabia is interested in curbing Iranian influence in Afghanistan and needs Pakistan to contain Tehran's ability to influence events in that country after the American withdrawal through its Tajik and Hazara allies.

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 sees Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan and Pakistan Army chief General Qamar Javed Bajwa as more amenable to Saudi persuasion. Pakistan on its part perceives MBS as a valuable interlocutor on its behalf with the U.S. because of his excellent rapport with U.S. President Donald Trump.

Islamabad deems this essential in light of the recent strains in U.S.-Pakistani relations over Pakistan's support to terrorist groups targeting U.S. forces in Afghanistan that led to stern rebukes from Mr. Trump and suspension of American military aid to Pakistan.

Moreover, Pakistan's relations with Iran, never easy, have hit a new low following the recent terrorist attack in the Sistan-Baluchistan Province that killed 27 Revolutionary Guards. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei pointed the finger at "the spying agencies of some regional and trans-regional countries", an obvious reference to Pakistan and the U.S. The commander of the IRGC said, "The government of Pakistan must pay the price of harbouring these terrorist groups and this price will undoubtedly be very high."

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.

Saudi economic largesse matters greatly to Pakistan, which is in dire economic straits and has been forced to turn to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for loans that are bound to come with strict conditionalities. Over and above the \$6 billion already promised by Saudi Arabia, MBS has promised a further \$20 billion in Saudi investment in Pakistan. A large part is earmarked for investment in the construction of an oil refinery in Gwadar on the Makran coast, which is being developed as a strategic port by China and features prominently in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) plan.

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 take advantage of any benefit that accrues from India's economic relations with Saudi Arabia but should not pin much hope on Riyadh in the political-strategic sphere.

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Pakistan's identity crisis, going back to the debates since its creation, remains unresolved

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