

INDIA HAS A LOT TO GAIN FROM PARTNERING WITH SAUDI ARABIA

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Middle East

Saudi Arabia's crown prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) is due to visit India on Tuesday. The visit comes at a time of crisis in the Indian subcontinent following the terrorist attack in Pulwama. MBS' trip to New Delhi will be preceded by his visit to Pakistan, where he pledged \$20 billion worth of investments. This is an interesting balancing act for both India and Saudi Arabia. Riyadh has already condemned the Pulwama attack and is quite aware of the fact that India is a much bigger commercial and strategic prize. India imports 20% of its crude requirements from Saudi Arabia. The overall bilateral trade exceeds \$25 billion.

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 refinery counts both Saudi Arabia's Aramco and the United Arab Emirates' Abu Dhabi National Oil Company as stakeholders. Saudi Arabia hosts more than three million Indians who remit roughly \$10 billion annually. Good relations with Riyadh and other West Asian capitals are 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.

The Narendra Modi government has done well to elevate the ties with West Asian countries. Both the UAE and Saudi Arabia have committed large investments. India has simultaneously made forward movement with their rivals in the region: Iran, Qatar and Israel. However, ties can suffer if we expect too much from them. 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 the 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. On the Afghanistan negotiations, Qatar has taken the lead for now. But it is unlikely that the Saudis will make an intervention against the Taliban. 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.

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