

Emerging dynamics between India and Saudi Arabia: Impact on Pakistan

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Abstract

Pakistan-Saudi Arabia relationship is defined by shared economic, religious and cultural beliefs, which has evolved over the period of time albeit with new set of challenges. On the other hand India's relationship with Saudi Arabia has traversed a difficult path which was in reaction to growing closeness between its neighbour Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. The other factors being India's strong ties with Soviet Union, and its recognition of Israel in 1950 which kept India away from developing strong ties with Saudi Arabia. Similarly, India does not enjoy very good relationship with Pakistan as the two neighbours have fought three wars over Kashmir issue, a territory claimed in its entirety by both the parties. However, over the period of time and because of the changing regional and global dynamics in the Post-Cold War period, India and Saudi Arabia have come closer to formulate ties with each other. The disintegration of USSR after the end of Cold War followed by domestic and economic compulsions forced India to vigorously pursue its goals towards the Gulf region. In this backdrop Modi government launched its 'Middle East Policy' and started its outreach towards the Gulf region, especially with three important countries, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Israel. The emerging dynamics between India and the Gulf countries provided them a chance to work on the bilateral relations and 'de-hyphenate' Pakistan. In this backdrop this paper will be an attempt to understand the growing rapprochement between India and Saudi Arabia and the subsequent effect of this relationship over Pakistan.

Introduction

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Contesting ideologies of India and Pakistan

The national imagination of Pakistan and India differed considerably owing to the circumstances they came into being with India priding itself in upholding ‘secularism’, while religious identity became an important part of Pakistan. This projection of religious identity by Pakistan helped it to grow its clout in the Muslim countries, including the Gulf region and thus impeded India’s outreach towards establishing ties with Muslim countries of the Gulf region.¹ The secular outlook of India’s first Prime Minister Jawahar Lal Nehru and his idea of leading Non-Alignment Movement did not help in pursuing India’s relationship with Saudi Arabia either. Furthermore, the prevailing Kashmir issue, Bangladesh liberation war and the perception that India, with second largest Muslim population in the world, discriminates against Muslim minorities prevented any ties from building with Saudi Arabia.² Later on the interplay of Cold War and the subsequent developments which further strengthened Pakistan’s ties with Saudi Arabia and the US, India could not make any headway towards the region which had the huge potential to meet its energy demands. On the flipside, India during Nehru showed more inclination towards Egypt because of the socialistic leanings of its leader Gamal Abdul Naseer. Saudi Arabia took this growing camaraderie between Nehru and Naseer as an endorsement for Naseer’s strong posturing against Arab monarchies and this did damage India’s fortunes vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia considerably.³

The equation have changed since India emerged as a regional power and Saudi Arabia became a head of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The liberalisation of the Indian economy has transformed it into a huge market which Saudi Arabia cannot resist building economic ties with. Saudi Arabia initiated a process of bringing in economic reforms when it applied for the membership of GATT in 1993. It was in 2005 that reforms carried by Saudi Arabia were deemed adequate to provide it the membership of the successor of GATT, WTO.⁴ The changing geopolitical realities, transformation of economies and growth of India and Saudi Arabia as two growing regional powers led to formulation of ties between them. Saudi Arabia holds significance for India by meeting its energy demands and over the period of time India has become its fourth largest trading partner, with current trade volume touching US\$ 34.03 billion.⁵ Because of the growing profile of Saudi Arabia, there is a renewed debate in India to look beyond oil and energy prospects while dealing with the Kingdom.

The establishment of diplomatic relations between India and Saudi Arabia had started in 1947 which was followed by the visit of heads of states with King Saud travelling to India in 1955 and Jawahar Lal Nehru reciprocating in 1956. It was in 2006 when Saudi Arabia unveiled its ‘Look East Policy’ that there was a visible improvement in the relationship. Saudi realised the importance of emerging Asian economies like China and India for both economic and strategic purposes.⁶ This was followed by the historic visit of King Abdullah to India in the same year and the subsequent signing of ‘Delhi Declaration’ that gave renewed push to the bilateral relationship between two countries. In 2010 Manmohan Singh visited Saudi Arabia and the two countries signed ‘Riyadh Declaration’ which was termed as ‘new era of strategic partnership’.⁷ In the Riyadh Declaration Saudi assured India of meeting its present and future oil needs and pledged to work for a comprehensive energy partnership. The high-level visits to each other’s country became a feature of growing ties between Saudi Arabia and India.

¹ Md. Mudassir Quamar, “The Changing Nature of the Pakistan in India- Gulf Relations: An Indian Perspective,” *Asian Affairs*, 2018, 625-44.

² Prasanta Kumar, op.cit.

³ P.R. Kumaraswamy, MD. Mudassir Quamar, op.cit. p.16-17.

⁴ Muhammad Azhar, “Economic Cooperation between India and Saudi Arabia: Performance and Prospects,” *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol.44, March, 2008, p.323-334.

⁵ “India- Saudi Bilateral Trade Relations,” *Embassy of India, Riyadh, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*, September, 23, 2019. (Accessed on September, 24, 2019) <http://eoiriyadh.gov.in/commercial/india-saudi-arabia-business-relations>

⁶ Prasanta Kumar Pradhan, op.cit., p.235-37.

⁷ Ibid.

Crown Prince Salman made a visit to India in 2014, reiterated the commitments made in Delhi and Riyadh Declarations and signed MoU on defence cooperation. The disintegration of USSR after the end of Cold War followed by domestic and economic compulsions forced India to vigorously pursue its goals towards the Gulf region.⁸ This mutuality of interests led to further strengthening of ties between India and Saudi Arabia. In this backdrop Modi government launched its 'Middle East Policy' and started its outreach towards the Gulf region, especially with three important countries, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Israel. The emerging dynamics between India and the Gulf countries provided them a chance to work on the bilateral relations and 'de-hyphenate' Pakistan.⁹ Since 9/11 incident Saudi Arabia began to face criticism for promoting terrorism and thus tying up with India was seen as a step towards doing some image makeover. It was during Modi's visit to Saudi Arabia in 2016, that they mutually agreed to develop a comprehensive mechanism to fight the menace of growing terrorism. It was on this visit that Modi was conferred with Saudi's highest civilian award- first Indian to receive such award from Saudi Arabia. In view of the reforms being carried out in Saudi Arabia under the ambitious Vision 2030 project, Crown Prince Muhamamed bin Salman understands the importance of growing market in India and made a two day visit to India on February 19-20, 2019. MBS announced a \$100 billion investment in energy, petrochemical, health and other sectors and thus provided further impetus to the growth of bilateral relations between the two countries.¹⁰ So, after initial hesitation India and Saudi Arabia relations are moving towards a strong direction and in the near future bilateral relations dominated by economic ties, will see other areas of strategic importance being explored.

Changing geopolitical realities and the increasing economic ties has shaped India's relationship with Saudi Arabia, whereas with Pakistan, Saudi ties have been more than economics driven and the two share a 'brotherly' relationship. It is because of the growing Saudi-India rapprochement that Saudi Arabia has tried to balance its equation with two arch rivals. The importance of Kashmir issue has weighed heavily in Pakistan's foreign policy making and it has always tried to garner support of the Muslim world of which Saudi Arabia constitutes an important part. While 'de-hyphenation' of Pakistan has been an important factor for building Saudi-India ties but Pakistan will want Saudi Arabia to side with its stance on Kashmir issue. The recent developments over reading down of Article 370 by India in Kashmir and depriving it of the semi-autonomous status, has riled up tensions between two South Asian neighbours. The response of Saudi Arabia was more of a balancing act than what Pakistan would have expected from its long term ally. After facing the disappointment that Muslim *ummah* has failed to stand up for Kashmiri people, the prime minister of Pakistan, Imran Khan, made a statement wherein he reiterated the importance of economic interests that Gulf countries have with India which prevents them from standing up for Kashmiri people.¹¹

Pakistan and Saudi ties has not prevented India from starting its outreach to the Gulf region and India has been vigorously pursuing its Middle East policy. The growing economic ties which has now shaped to be more strategic in nature has seen India's prime minister visiting Israel and UAE which has resulted in growing Indian clout in the region. However, this has not come at the cost of Pakistan's position in the region as being the only Muslim nuclear power, Pakistan continues to hold importance for the

⁸ Md. Mudassir Quamar, op.cit, p.626-27.

⁹ ibid

¹⁰ Prasanta Kumar Pradhan, "Muhammed bin Salman walks the India-Pakistan tightrope," *Institute of Defence Analysis*, Feb. 25, 2019. Accessed on September 23,2019 <https://idsa.in/idsacomments/saudi-india-pakistan-tightrope-pkpradhan-250219>

¹¹ "'Kashmir Ambassador' Imran Khan admits Muslim Nations not backing Pakistan," *Business Standard*, August 26, 2019. (Accessed on September 25, 2019)https://www.business-standard.com/article/pti-stories/will-raise-kashmir-issue-at-every-international-forum-pak-pm-imran-119082601012_1.html

countries in the region. The forums like Organisation of Islamic Countries (OIC) provides Pakistan an important platform to manoeuvre its policies within the Muslim countries. Pakistan has used this platform to raise Kashmir issue in the OIC especially after 1990 and has managed to put India on the back foot. Although because of growing rifts within OIC among member countries it has failed to deliver, but theoretically being the second largest intergovernmental body after UN it has the potential to deal with the issues of peace and security.

The Pakistan-Saudi-India Triangle and the OIC

Pakistan, because of its Muslim identity managed to forge ties with the Muslim countries, especially the Gulf ones, and till this point enjoys good relations with them. Compelled by geopolitical changes taking place in the region Pakistan tried to vigorously pursue its goals by using Islamic identity which helped it to build ties with the Islamic world. Leading up to the formation of OIC, Pakistan tried to serve as the spokesperson of the Muslim countries in the UN and put emphasis on forging the spirit of Islamic unity and solidarity.¹² Muslim countries had long felt the need to form a common platform to address the challenges facing Muslim world. The conference in Mogadishu in 1964, to discuss the problems faced by the Muslim *ummah* was attended by the representatives of many Muslim countries and later on in December 1965, King Faisal of Saudi Arabia reiterated the demand to hold Islamic Summit Conference. The 1967, Arab-Israeli War which led to the humiliating defeat of Arab world followed by the burning of Holy Al Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem on 21 August 1969 proved to a tipping point for Muslim countries to come together on a joint platform. It was on 22-25 September 1969 that first Islamic Summit in Rabat, Morocco took place which was attended by 24 Muslim countries. Yahya Khan, president of Pakistan objected to the presence of Indian delegation in the meeting following which they were barred from participating in the conference and this also marked the diplomatic victory of Pakistan over India. In the first summit, emphasis was laid on the resolve of Muslim countries “to work for the cooperation and mutual assistance in the economic, social, scientific, cultural, and spiritual fields.”¹³ After that Pakistan hosted a Second Islamic Conference on 26-28 December, 1970 of Foreign Ministers in which the President of Pakistan, Yahya Khan declared that “objective of peace with honour could be achieved with meaningful association among the Muslim peoples based on mutual cooperation and solidarity”.¹⁴ Finally, it was in Jeddah that a charter of the Organisation of Islamic Conference got approved in the Third Islamic Conference in 1972, as a result of which OIC formally came into being with Pakistan as its founding member. The OIC has been holding its summit every three years to discuss the issues of immediate concern to the Muslim world. The charter of the OIC aims to preserve ‘Islamic social and economic values; to promote greater cooperation in social, political, economic and cultural among member states’.¹⁵

With a present membership of 57, mostly Muslim majority countries, OIC has become a convenient diplomatic platform for Pakistan to cultivate a particular opinion about India with regard to latter’s position on Kashmir. India, despite having the second largest Muslim population has been denied a membership of the OIC because of the diplomatic efforts of Pakistan. Earlier the focus of OIC had been confined to the Palestine issue and promoting cultural ties, besides the issues related to war in Bosnia and Iraq have also taken a centre stage in OIC summits.¹⁶ However, during the past decade OIC

¹² S.S.Pirzada, “Pakistan and the OIC,” *Pakistan Horizon*, Vol.40, No.2 (Second Quarter 1987), p. 27.

¹³ Ibid. p.29

¹⁴ Ibid. p.29

¹⁵ “Organisation of Islamic Countries,” Accessed on September 25, 2019 https://web.archive.org/web/20131030064136/http://www.oicoci.org/oicv2/page/?p_id=52&p_ref=26&lan=en

¹⁶ Arwa Ibrahim, “All you need to know about the OIC,” *Aljazeera*, May 31, 2019. (Accessed on September 20, 2019) <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/05/oic-190531055450527.html>

has woken up to the new challenges and felt a need to undergo institutional reforms. In this backdrop, in 2005, 10-year plan was formulated to counter the growing Islamophobia, terrorism and poor governance and economic marginalisation for what are the contemporary challenges facing the Muslim world.

OIC had a mixed success in terms of resolving bilateral disputes by playing a role of a mediator. It did play a positive role in case of resolving the conflicts in Philippines, Thailand, Somalia, and also in case of war between its member states, in case of East-Pakistan and West-Pakistan, and between Iraq and Iran. In case of the former conflict, OIC did manage to broker peace between Pakistan and former East-Pakistan, now Bangladesh, but failed to do that in the latter case. The reason for the lack of success of OIC has been attributed to the growing tensions between the members. In the 1980s which saw the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the war between Iraq and Iran that lead to the sectarian differences and eventually to the rift between the Muslim countries.¹⁷ Labelled as ‘talkfest’ which was unified by the shared faith of Islam and the animosity towards the creation of Israel, over the period of time both the factors seem to have lost their relevance.¹⁸ The sectarian divide has openly played out and has become the hallmark of Middle Eastern politics because of Saudi- Iran rivalry and this has a bearing on all the Muslim world, thus further complicating the functioning of OIC. Although OIC does not recognise sectarianism but the ongoing conflicts in Syria and Yemen with strong sectarian overtones have undermined the importance of OIC and posed difficult challenges to its functioning. And also in case of Israel several member states have changed their position and established relationship with Israel beginning in the late 1970’s. Shah Akbarzadeh and Zahid Shahab Ahmed argue that it is because of the hegemonic attitude of Saudi Arabia that has created impediments to the working of OIC as Saudi always saw OIC through geopolitical lens and tried to attain the role of leadership.¹⁹ While Iran didn’t pay much attention to OIC in the initial stages so Saudi Arabia did not have to face someone who could match its strong economic clout and also its standing in the larger Muslim *ummah*.²⁰ They further argue that Saudi uses soft hegemonic tactics to influence the economically weaker states by providing funds to different institutions because of which they have been able to take the leadership role of these institutions.²¹ The resultant effect of Saudi funding has led these countries to show their support for Saudi, especially within the OIC, by inclining to Saudi’s foreign policy decisions. Another important ploy of Saudi Arabia by establishing IMCTC has drawn the member countries to a security organisation and thereby further increasing its stronghold over them.

The recent developments which saw spike in tensions between India and Pakistan shifted focus towards the position of OIC in view of the growing rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and India. Growing economic ties between India and Saudi Arabia gave rise to the perception that Saudi stance on Kashmir which was inclined towards Pakistan has now changed. However, the Saudi position on the unilateral move of scrapping semiautonomous status of Jammu and Kashmir was that of its commitment towards working for “deescalating “of tensions between India and Pakistan through dialogue.²² The fact that

¹⁷ Shah Akbarzadeh, Zahid Shahab Ahmed, “Impacts of Saudi Hegemony on the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), *Springer Science*, September 20, 2017. p.300.

¹⁸ Ibid. p.306

¹⁹ Ibid. p.302.

²⁰ Simon Mabon, *Saudi Arabia and Iran: soft power rivalry in the Middle East*, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013) pp.51-52

²¹ Shah Akbarzadeh, *op.cit.* p.303.

²² Guy Burton, “What Did the Middle East Think of India’s Kashmir Change?,” *The Diplomat*, August 10, 2019. (Accessed on September 15, 2019) <https://thediplomat.com/2019/08/what-did-the-middle-east-think-of-indias-kashmir-change/>

Pakistan continues to be of paramount importance to Saudi Arabia, especially with regard to its internal security purposes makes it hard to expect outright support for India. Moreover, the developments taking place in Afghanistan and Iran make it equally important for Saudi Arabia to hold on to Pakistan.²³

Conclusion

For what marked an important development in context of OIC was that India was invited as a “Guest of Honour” in the 46th OIC foreign ministers’ meet on March 1, 2019. That this happened for the first time in 50 years gave India a reason to celebrate it as a significant diplomatic victory and was subsequently hailed as “history made” by Sushma Swaraj, India’s external affairs minister.²⁴ Pakistan tried every possible way to rescind this decision of inviting India by appealing to a host country UAE but failed to do so, which led to Shah Mahmood Qureshi, external affairs minister of Pakistan, boycotting the plenary session. OIC, which has traditionally sided with Pakistan’s position on the disputed nature of Jammu and Kashmir has resisted the candidature of India because of the resentment shown by Pakistan and this move of inviting India came as a surprise for Pakistan. However, in the 14th OIC summit, the appointment of Saudi Arabia’s Yousef Aldobeay as special envoy of Jammu and Kashmir was approved evoking strong condemnation from India.²⁵ This shift from OIC which has a huge Saudi influence can be seen as the importance attached to Pakistan especially in view of the turn of events taking place in the region. It is in this backdrop that Foreign Ministers of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) Contact Group on Kashmir discussed the fallout of the abrogation of Article 370 by India in Jammu and Kashmir. The decision, supported by Saudi Arabia, taken was that India should ‘rescind’ its moves in Kashmir and abide by the UN Security Council resolutions.²⁶ These developments show that although OIC has shown growing openness towards India but at the same time it has not given up its position on the disputed nature of Jammu and Kashmir which goes on to show the importance of Pakistan. Although the invitation to India as a “Guest of Honour” was a historic event, but as long as India’s relationship with Pakistan does not improve, any hope of getting membership or observer status in OIC seems bleak. India understands the importance of OIC for establishing its foothold in the Muslim world and how that journey will pan out in the future is interesting to see keeping in sync with its huge marketing potential.

²³ Mohammed Ayoub, “The Saudi-India-Pakistan triangle,” *The Hindu*, February 20, 2019. (Accessed on September 15, 2019) <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/the-saudi-india-pakistan-triangle/article26314668.ece>

²⁴ Jayesh Khata, “India at the OIC: ‘Has History Been Made?’” *The Diplomat*, March 5, 2019. (Accessed on October 5, 2019) <https://thediplomat.com/2019/03/india-at-the-oic-has-history-been-made/>

²⁵ Dipanjan Roy Choudhary, “Pakistan’s West Asia role may have prompted OIC to appoint special Kashmir envoy,” *The Economic Times*, June 4, 2019. (Accessed on September 28, 2019) <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/pakistans-west-asia-role-may-have-prompted-oic-to-appoint-special-kashmir-envoy/articleshow/69639810.cms>

²⁶ Suhasini Haidar, “Kashmir issue: Rescind action on Article 370, Organisation of Islamic Cooperation tells India,” *The Hindu*, September 26, 2019. Accessed on September 30, 2019 <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/kashmir-issue-rescind-action-on-article-370-organisation-of-islamic-cooperation-tells-india/article29522112.ece>