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India and Saudi Arabia: The Scope for Greater Security Cooperation

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Introduction

India's diplomatic outreach to Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE to secure the release of 46 nurses abducted by the Islamic State (IS) in July this year underscores the importance of enhancing, in particular, political and security cooperation with the Gulf. Security ties are essential to complement the existing framework, which supports India's energy and economic interests in the region. While India has had security agreements with Oman, Qatar and the UAE for some time, India-Saudi Arabia defence ties were only recently institutionalised during Saudi Defence Minister Prince Salman bin Abdulaziz's visit to New Delhi in February 2014.

Prince Salman's visit, the highest-level visit by a Saudi dignitary to India since 2006, brought into focus Riyadh's diplomatic initiative in seeking greater defence cooperation with India as part of its efforts to diversify its security partnerships.

Reciprocal high-level visits in recent years between New Delhi and Riyadh—including the visits of Saudi King Abdullah in 2006, former Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in 2010, former Indian External Affairs Minister S.M. Krishna in 2011 and former Indian Defence Minister A.K. Antony in 2012—have set the momentum for stronger bilateral relations between both countries.

As China and Pakistan, among other countries, deepen their engagement with Saudi Arabia, it is critical for India to look beyond economic imperatives to secure its wider interests in the region.

This Issue Brief examines the main contours of the India–Saudi Arabia security and defence partnership and the background against which it has evolved. The first section looks at the

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importance of Indo–Saudi relations from a geopolitical perspective, and why it is crucial for the two countries to diversify security partners given the political turmoil in West Asia. This section argues that geopolitical changes have necessitated greater cooperation between both countries; they are de-linking their partnership from individual policy imperatives, including their respective relations with Iran and Pakistan.

The second section outlines the trajectory of the Indo-Saudi bilateral partnership and the main takeaways from high-level visits and defence cooperation agreements between the two countries. The last section emphasises the symbiotic nature of India–Saudi Arabia relations and the increasing scope for greater cooperation.

Deconstructing India–Saudi Arabia Ties

India's energy and maritime security interests in the Indian Ocean littoral and the Gulf date back to the 19th century. The British government in India established “Exclusive Agreements” with the Gulf sheikhdoms and assumed responsibility for their foreign affairs and defence relations. The upheavals of the 20th century, including the Partition of India and the onset of the Cold War, severely constrained New Delhi's role in the Gulf region.

The Cold War led New Delhi to tilt towards Moscow and away from the US and its allies in the Gulf. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia, a close ally of the US, drifted closer to Pakistan against the backdrop of western pressure and fears of Soviet expansionism. India's relative decline as a commercially viable partner, post-independence, also limited its engagement with the Gulf and the Indian Ocean littoral.

The Iranian Revolution in 1979 and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan brought Pakistan and Saudi Arabia closer. Both countries shared concerns about Ayatollah Khomeini's anti-American posturing and the possibility of his religious rhetoric affecting their Shia populations. Pakistan also emerged as a frontline state in supporting the US against the Soviets; the Pakistani military cooperated with Saudi Arabia, which in turn bankrolled Islamabad's military programmes.¹

The end of the Cold War and India's economic liberalisation in the 1990s led to India's greater engagement and economic integration with the Gulf. The Gulf countries, too, recognised the importance of India's economic potential and its defence capabilities as critical to the region. Riyadh began to de-hyphenate its relations with India and Pakistan, particularly after the 9/11 attacks and American pressure to keep a distance from jihadist groups.

For India, resource security is one of the key agendas for improving political, economic and security partnerships in the region. Even though India's relations with Saudi Arabia have been constrained due to a number of factors enumerated below, Riyadh has emerged as India's largest supplier of crude oil, fourth largest trade partner and is host to a sizeable Indian expatriate community—the

largest in Saudi Arabia. Thus, India's growing energy requirements, an expanding diaspora and concerns of religious extremism are vital factors that influence New Delhi's strategic calculus towards the Kingdom.

Pakistan

Stronger ties with Saudi Arabia could help to bolster India's profile in the region and counter Pakistan's influence in the Islamic world. During Prince Salman bin Abdulaziz's visit to India, both countries signed a defence cooperation agreement. Prior to visiting New Delhi, Prince Salman also visited Islamabad and pledged increased bilateral cooperation “in the field of defence”.² This reportedly includes collaboration in defence production and training of Syrian rebels to overthrow President Assad's regime.³

During Prince Salman's visit, citing India's “vital stakes” in the Gulf, then Indian Foreign Minister Salman Khurshid asserted that Riyadh's ties with India can improve, as both India and Pakistan are opting to look “beyond their disagreements.” “Since Saudi Arabia has a close friendship with Pakistan, it was difficult for it to take sides in the India–Pakistan confrontation,” he stated.⁴

India–Saudi Arabia relations have also been affected by the traditionally close military ties between Islamabad and Riyadh. Pakistan helped the Royal Saudi Air Force (RSAF) build fighter jets in the 1960s, drive back a South Yemeni incursion in 1969 and stationed troops in the Kingdom in the 1970s and 1980s.⁵ Saudi Arabia, in turn, provided military support to Pakistan during the 1971 war with India. It also promised economic and diplomatic support to Islamabad when the latter conducted nuclear tests in 1998 in response to India's nuclear tests.⁶ Furthermore, Riyadh has been known to support organisations that sponsor militant groups in Kashmir.⁷

Riyadh now supports improvement in India–Pakistan relations. While in Islamabad, Prince Salman said that Riyadh “hoped” for a peaceful resolution to the Kashmir dispute in accordance with UN resolutions, adding that Saudi Arabia “welcomed peaceful developments in India-Pakistan relations.”⁸

Terrorism

India's vulnerability to cross-border terrorism, often sponsored by Pakistani groups whose funding can be traced back to Saudi Arabia, necessitates greater cooperation between both states on counter-terrorism. Given that jihadi terrorism threatens Saudi Arabia's stability as well as India's, both countries have inked a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on combating crime, which includes terrorism, transnational crime and extremism.

In 2012, Riyadh deported a terrorist, Sayed Ansari, accused of involvement in the Mumbai terrorist attacks of 2008 and allegedly linked to Pakistan's intelligence service, the ISI. This not only represented a high point in Indo-Saudi cooperation on counter-terrorism, but was also an example of Saudi efforts to balance relations between India and Pakistan. While the region is beginning to pursue separate policies towards India and Pakistan, building deep linkages with the Gulf can also help New Delhi moderate the Gulf's influence on Pakistan.⁹

Riyadh is also facing a domestic threat from the rise of the IS, which has hundreds of Saudi fighters among its ranks and has vowed to “conquer” the Land of the Two Holy Mosques. Given that some Indians have been radicalised by the IS over the internet, Indian and Saudi intelligence agencies are discussing ways to prevent their respective citizens from joining the IS.

Syed Asif Ibrahim, the Director of Indian Intelligence Bureau, left for Riyadh on September 29 to discuss avenues for cooperation over the IS threat. Saudi Arabia has also assured India that it will keep a close watch on Haj pilgrims to prevent them from entering Syria or Iraq.¹⁰

China

Saudi Arabia has emerged as a new arena for India–China competition. In addition to competing for energy resources, India's regional policy is influenced by China's growing security profile in the Gulf. Professor Harsh Pant from King's College writes that “China's growing dependence on maritime space and resources is reflected in the Chinese aspiration to expand its influence and to ultimately dominate the strategic environment of the Indian Ocean region.”¹¹

Prince Salman visited China in March 2014 and pledged to “strengthen the strategic partnership” with Beijing. Signalling greater Chinese political participation in the region, Prince Salman stated that “China [is] an international magnate with great political and economic weight to play a prominent role in achieving peace and security in the region....we look forward to more cooperation with China to achieve an urgent peaceful resolution for the Syrian crisis.”¹²

Over the years, Saudi Arabia and China have expanded their military and economic relations. In November 2010, China's naval escort flotilla made a “goodwill” call at the Jeddah port in Saudi Arabia. This was a clear signal of China's naval activism and bid to seek enhanced cooperation between the two militaries.¹³ Saudi Arabia is China's largest supplier of crude oil. In the 1980s, China sold nuclear-capable missiles to Riyadh.¹⁴ News reports also suggest that Riyadh is considering purchasing fighter jets produced by China and Pakistan.¹⁵

Iran

Prince Salman's visit to India overlapped with that of Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, who was in India to “revive ties”¹⁶ and discuss issues of critical importance to both countries, like developments in Afghanistan, regional extremism, and trade and economic ties, including Iran's crude oil exports to India.

Iran is an important source of oil and natural gas as well as a critical element in India's strategic calculus due to its geographical proximity to Pakistan and Afghanistan. Iran can provide a commercial corridor to Central Asia; furthermore, India and Iran have agreed to invest in the development of the Chabahar port that links Afghanistan with Central Asia. Even though the realities of the India–Iran relationship have been overstated,¹⁷ New Delhi's strategic partnership with Tehran will continue to be a cause of concern for Saudi Arabia.

Daniel Markey of the Council on Foreign Relations argues that while India is a vital commercial partner for Saudi Arabia, the strategic value of closer Indo-Saudi ties is elevated when viewed through the lens of Riyadh's rivalry with Tehran. Thus, Saudi Arabia has matched the Indo-Iranian partnership with diplomatic overtures of its own.¹⁸

US

Saudi Arabia's desire to diversify security partners stems from recent disagreements with US policy over the civil war in Syria and US failure to condemn the ouster of former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. US negotiations with Iran over its nuclear programme have also raised concern in Riyadh that Washington may accommodate some Iranian terms that could be inimical to Saudi interests.

While the US called for “an orderly transition to democracy”¹⁹ at the height of the protests in Egypt in 2011, the fall of Mubarak cost the Gulf its long-time ally in the US-led security framework in the region. The US–Russia deal on dismantling Syria's chemical weapons also signalled a lack of political will by Washington to engage militarily in the region. Budget cuts in military spending and a reduced dependence on West Asian hydrocarbon resources have intensified speculation about US engagement in the region.

Elucidating Riyadh's intention of adopting an assertive role in international affairs, Saudi Ambassador to Britain Mohammed bin Nawaf al Saud stated that the “West's policies on both Iran and Syria risk the stability and security of the Middle East.” “We [Riyadh] showed our preparedness to act independently with our decision to reject a [non-permanent] seat on the United Nations Security Council,” he added.²⁰

Secretary of State John Kerry, however, has dismissed the “disengagement myth”²¹ and announced that long-term security frameworks are in the pipeline with Gulf partners like Saudi Arabia and the UAE.²² Even though a US or NATO security umbrella in the Gulf may remain intact, Saudi Arabia fears a shift in power relations in the region due to the end of the US–Iran nuclear standoff.

The Saudi Perspective

Saudi Arabia has tried to offset shifts in the regional balance of power by promoting efforts towards greater integration of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). However, Oman's rejection of the GCC union proposal, as well as Riyadh's deteriorating relations with Doha, have undermined GCC unity. Saudi-Qatari disagreements have also exacerbated the political turmoil in the region.

Michelle Dunne of the Carnegie Middle East Centre has noted that “[i]n every arena—in Syria, Iraq, Gaza, Libya, even what happened in Egypt—this regional polarization, with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates...on one side and Qatar and Turkey on the other, has proved to be a gigantic impediment to international efforts to resolve any of these crises.”²³

Thus, a changed regional context characterised by shifting alliances, sectarian polarisation and a growing threat from Islamist insurgencies, like the Islamic State, have presented Saudi Arabia with a number of internal and regional challenges. The Arab uprisings that began in 2011 have aggravated unrest within Saudi Arabia's Shia community. The domestic security threat has traditionally been viewed by Riyadh through the prism of geostrategic competition with Iran. Furthermore, Tehran's support for Assad's regime in Syria, the Shia-led government in Baghdad, the Shia uprising in Bahrain and the Houthi insurgency in Yemen are challenges to Riyadh's sphere of influence in the region.

Given the geopolitical realities of a rising Iran, Saudi Arabia is cultivating ties with India to counter the influence of the Shia state. Moreover, India's growing economy and large Muslim population have created space for economic, cultural and strategic complementarities between both states. Regional changes have also facilitated a mutual desire in both countries to not let their bilateral relations be limited by their individual foreign policy imperatives.

In the past, Saudi Arabia may have been concerned about India's defence and economic ties with Israel. However, the political transformations taking place in the region, including the US–Iran nuclear negotiations, the collapse of the Mubarak government in Egypt and the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood,²⁴ have led to a convergence of interests between Saudi Arabia and Israel.

Saudi Arabia's muted response to the escalation of violence between Israel and Gaza in June 2014—with over 2,000 Palestinian casualties—is symptomatic of the shift in Saudi-Israeli relations.

Thus, India's posture towards the Arab-Israeli conflict no longer needs to be guided by zero-sum calculations.

Defence Cooperation

India and Saudi Arabia have deepened their engagement in the defence sphere. A number of high-level reciprocal visits between the military establishments of the two countries took place after King Abdullah's visit in 2006. There are ongoing talks to develop ties in the field of maritime cooperation by conducting joint naval and military exercises and training of defence personnel. In 2007, a five-ship Indian flotilla made a port call in the Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia.

A defence cooperation agreement was signed between India and Saudi Arabia in February 2014 during Prince Salman's visit to New Delhi. The MoU sought to promote cooperation in the defence sector through the exchange of defence-related expertise and training, as well as in the fields of science and technology.²⁵

Over time, defence cooperation has moved beyond the realm of anti-piracy operations to include training, technical assistance and exchange of military hardware. The Delhi Declaration, signed in 2006 during King Abdullah's visit to India, provided a framework for cooperation in all fields of mutual interest and expanded the scope to include counter-terrorism, money laundering, drugs and arms smuggling. The two sides “affirmed their commitment to...maintaining international peace and stability...and resolving outstanding conflicts in the world through peaceful means.”²⁶

The Declaration also marked the importance of King Abdullah's “Look–East policy,” particularly because he chose to visit India and China for his first trip outside West Asia after becoming the Saudi ruler.²⁷ News reports suggest that the policy signifies Riyadh's efforts to “step away from over dependence on America” and “engage with rising powers that are far less interested than Washington in what Saudi Arabia does within its borders.”²⁸

The Riyadh Declaration, signed during Manmohan Singh's visit in 2010, elevated the bilateral engagement to a strategic partnership²⁹ and reinforced efforts towards deeper cooperation in economic, political, security and defence fields. The Declaration represented a high point in Singh's “Look–West policy,”³⁰ which was unveiled in 2005 and aimed at raising New Delhi's economic and political profile in the Gulf region.

Then Defence Minister A.K. Antony's visit to Riyadh in 2012 laid the foundation for institutionalising a broad-based defence agreement between the two countries. His visit led to the formation of a joint committee on defence cooperation, which laid the roadmap for a bilateral agreement. The joint committee, mandated to develop areas of cooperation between both

countries' defence establishments, held its first meeting in New Delhi on 10 September 2012, and discussed proposals for exchange of high-level visits, training exchanges, ship visits and passage exercises during such visits.

Antony's proposals for greater cooperation in hydrography and India-Saudi Arabia cooperation in defence production were also accepted by Riyadh. Apart from joint training in counter-insurgency and mountain warfare technique, Antony also suggested an active Saudi role in the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS).³¹

Conclusion

Former Indian Foreign Minister Salman Khurshid, speaking at the fifth plenary session of the Manama Dialogue 2013, stated that the “vital security interests of the two sides are interlinked” and “defence is an emerging area of cooperation.” “The mutually beneficial engagement is based on an assessment of our national interests and our bilateral complementarities,” he added.³²

As US dependence on Gulf energy resources declines, India's relationship with the region is an increasingly symbiotic one. India will provide a dependable and long-term energy market to the Gulf, which could have greater potential to have its resources exploited through undersea and overland gas pipelines. India also has the capabilities and the will to not only safeguard its own coastline and island territories, but also contribute to keeping the region's sea lines open and flowing.³³

Saudi Arabia's outreach to India is a consequence of altered political and economic realities within the Gulf region and beyond. The possibility of receding US political will and economic necessity to invest in Gulf security and safeguard the interests of its allies is a leading factor.

Strengthening India–Saudi Arabia ties is also vital for both countries when viewed through the prism of their geopolitical considerations. From the Saudi perspective, the importance of steering New Delhi away from a closer relationship with Tehran has been reinforced in the post-2003 regional security environment.

The fall of Saddam Hussein was followed by a mobilisation of Shia communities across Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Bahrain and Lebanon. This was not only a domestic setback to Riyadh but also a political setback because it empowered Shia Iran. Iran's influence in the region also spread with the resilience of Assad in Syria, a Shia-led government in Baghdad and Hezbollah's victories in Lebanon. Riyadh sought to balance against Iran's regional ambitions through a US-led security framework in the region.

However, the nuclear negotiations between the US and Iran have changed this dynamic.

From the Indian perspective, a stronger partnership with a key regional player like Saudi Arabia balances against Islamabad's influence in the region. While India's relations with the Gulf were constrained in the post-Partition era, Pakistan mobilised Gulf support in its conflicts with India,³⁴ much of which has endured till date. India can leverage a deeper partnership with Saudi Arabia to moderate this support, particularly that of funds to jihadi extremists.

There is greater potential for the development of India–Saudi Arabia partnership because it is evolving independent of both countries' foreign policy imperatives. Pakistan, Israel and Iran are no longer the central focus of Indo–Saudi bilateral relations, thus widening the scope for political, economic and security cooperation. There is increasing recognition of the potential impact of this cooperation on the security dynamics of the Gulf and the Indian Ocean littoral. Geopolitical realities necessitate that India exploit this potential and increase defence participation in the Gulf region.

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IONS is an India-led initiative that seeks to increase maritime cooperation among navies of the littoral states of the Indian Ocean Region. For more information see Indian Ocean Naval Symposium at http://ions.gov.in/about_ions.

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