



# The Saudi-India-Pakistan triangle

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## **New Delhi should not be overly optimistic about prying Riyadh away from Islamabad**

- 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.

### **Key reasons**

- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.

### **The Iran angle**

- 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
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.

### **Aid bailout**

- 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.
- 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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