

Indo-Saudi Relations in the Post-Cold War Era: A Reading

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Abstract:

The people of India and Arabia have an age old relations. During the Cold War period, while India followed Non-Alignment Saudi was at the US side. The end of Cold War marked a paradigm shift in the Indo-Saudi relations and both sides have declared their relationship as strategic partners. In this article, the Indo-Saudi relations in its width and length is examined to understand how their relations have turned to be a strategic one.

Keywords

Indo-Saudi relations; post-Cold War; Strategic partners; Energy security; Defense; Co-operation

Introduction

India and Saudi Arabia are the largest countries in their respective regions and had deep rooted relations between the people from ancient period onwards. Both of the people were influencing and influenced by one another. Heptulla noted that, “India was particularly impressed by, and indeed benefited from the Arabic sciences and learning which flourished from the eighth to the twelfth centuries A.D” (Heptulla, 1991, p. 1). The West-Asian region is often described as a link between East and West. The words of Riad is supportive when he observes that, “the Gulf is located on important crossroads of world civilizations, religions and trade” (Riad, 1986, p. 201). In this historic juncture both India and Saudi Arabia cannot rule out the significance of one another. In this article, Indo-Saudi relations in the post-Cold

War period is examined to analyze the depth of the relations between the two countries in the changing international, economic and political scenario.

The Indo-Saudi relations during the Cold War period were not so good because of several reasons. When Saudi Arabia found a close ally in USA, India maintained non-alignment. The Pakistan factor in Indo-Saudi relations was crucial because of the Saudi position of Islamic brotherhood. However, even before independence Indian leaders have expressed their fascination towards Saudi Arabia. For example, about the depression of 1930, praising King Saud, Nehru wrote, “despite serious difficulties being faced by the Kingdom he did not look for outside help” (Heptulla, 1991, p. 109). However, the years just after Indian independence were cordial mainly due to the Nehruvian influence in the Indian foreign policy and Indian support to Arab positions in the Question of Palestine. King Saud of Saudi Arabia visited India in 1955 which was reciprocated by PM Nehru to Saudi in 1956. Moreover, King Saud of Saudi was also friendly to India, while maintaining a close relations with Pakistan. The visit of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi to Riyadh in 1982 also contributed a lot of benefit in Indo-Saudi relations.

The story of Indo-Saudi relations marked a paradigm shift after the end of Cold War. The economic liberalization in India and realignment of international political spectrum due to the disintegration of Soviet Union has open new avenues in Indo-Saudi relations. The 9/11 attack on world trade Centre and war on terror created some uneasiness in Saudi-US relations. India could find an opportunity in the vacuum. The beginning of Gulf war marked the end of Iraq as a trusted ally of India and reliable supplier of oil to the fast developing nation. The spread of radicalism in the Islamic world has also prompted India to make closer relationship with comparatively moderate Saudi royal family. India also required a close friend from the Islamic world against the Pakistani propaganda also.

Political Contacts in the Post-Cold War Period

In the post-Cold War period after the Liberalisation of the Indian Economy Indo-Saudi high level political contacts have increased with a lot of confidence from both sides. The burgeoning of increased Indo-Saudi rapprochement was first from the Saudi side with the visit of King Abdullah in January 2006 as the chief guest of India's Republic Day celebrations and signing of the 'Delhi Declaration'. According to Alam & Ahmad, "this was a historical moment where it was for the first time that the king of Saudi Arabia had signed any agreement with any country" (Alam & Ahmad, 2015, p. 328). The reciprocal visit

from Indian side was from Prime Minister Dr. Man Mohan Singh in Feb-March 2010. During his visit, both New Delhi and Riyadh have agreed to upgrade their relationship into a strategic partnership and have signed the Riyadh declaration. The next important high level visit was from the Saudi side and the Crown Prince Salman Bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defence of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia visited India from February 26 – 28, 2014 and met with Indian leaders.

After the assumption of Sri Narendra Modi as the Prime Minister of India high level contacts between the two countries has increased vigorously to continue and expand the already agreed upon strategic partnership. PM Modi has taken certain personal initiative to foster closer ties with the Arabian oil giant. He met Crown Prince Salman at the sidelines of the Brisbane G-20 summit in November 2014 and had talks (Quamar, Indo-Saudi Relations Under the Modi Government, 2017). To take into the relations to the upward strategic partnership PM Modi paid a state visit to Saudi Arabia in April 2016. According to MEA website, "in a special gesture, King Salman honored Hon'ble Prime Minister Narendra Modi with the Sash of King Abdulaziz, the highest civilian decoration awarded by the Kingdom" (MEA, 2016). PM Modi held a bilateral meeting with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman on the sidelines of G20 meeting of September 2016 in which both sides have decided to strengthen and

diversifying bilateral engagements (MEA, 2016) (Embassy, 2019). In the 3rd of February 2019, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud visited New Delhi to strengthen the bilateral ties. Thus the high level contacts are continuing in search of a greater partnership between the two countries.

Strategic Partnership

In the last decade Indo-Saudi relations has reached its peak and have recognised their status among the community of nations as strategic partners. Earlier India was trying to find out Iran as a strategic partner, but due to the UN sanctions against Iran compelled India to be in back foot in this regard. Earlier, the Saudi position on Kashmir and their support to Pakistan were the hindrances before India to have a strategic partnership with Riyadh. However, the obstacle have been removed by Saudi Foreign Minister in 2001 during the visit of Jaswanth Singh, the Foreign Minister of India to Riyadh. In the statement redoubt by the Saudi Foreign Minister in the presence of visiting dignitary made it clear that, the Kashmir issue should be settled by India and Pakistan bilaterally and ‘the kingdom viewed relations with India as impotent in themselves, not to be influenced by it ties with any other country’ (Ahmad, The Gulf Region, 2015, p. 444). According to Dr. Man Mohan Singh, “the strategic partnership would cover economic issues, trade and investment issues, those relating to energy security, investments in each other’s country in upstream and downstream

energy activities and investments in renewable energy resources” (Kumar, 2010). The Prime Minister said, “The strategic partnership with Saudi Arabia would also cover issues relating to security, cooperation in dealing with terrorism and arrangements for information and intelligence sharing” (Kumar, 2010). According to The Hindu, “Riyadh is concerned about the rise of extremism in the region, including in Pakistan, notwithstanding their close ties” (Hindu, 2013). The growing Indo-Saudi partnership in all areas is evident when she was first among in condemning the ‘Uri terrorist attack’ in 2016 (Quamar, Indo-Saudi Relations Under the Modi Government, 2017) and ‘Pulwama attack in 2019’ (Times, 2019). As an evidence to the strategic partnership between the two countries Saudi has permitted India to use its airspace to operate an Air India flight between India and Israel (Keinon, 2018). It may be noted that, Saudi never permitted any flight to reach Israel via its Airspace. During the visit of Saudi Crown Prince to New Delhi in February 2019, both sides hailed again their relations as ‘strategic partnership’ (Pitambari, 2019).

The Indo-Saudi strategic partnership cannot be claimed to have overcome the Pakistani factor completely. Indian strategic analysts are of the opinion that, while Saudi Arabia shall continue her ‘rhetoric’ (Blarel, 2015, p. 356) on Kashmir and continue to Pakistan on the issue, she shall continue to provide oil to India on a long term basis due to

shrinking international oil market to Saudi Arabia. It is evident when the visiting Saudi foreign minister Al Jubeir 'India is a strategic partner, Pakistan is a strategic ally and will remain so' (Pradhan, 2016). As India possess a considerable Muslim population, she wants to communicate her position on a number of issues to the Islamic world through a trust worthy partner. To Indian strategic analyst "any ally that can act as a counterweight to Pakistan in the Islamic world is significant" (Pant, 2016). The Dubai-based Gulf News in its editorial acknowledged that, "The Gulf states are in the midst of a major strategic realignment towards India that recognizes that the South Asian giant has to be an essential part of any long term Gulf security strategy" (Ahmad, Removing the Riyadh Block Modi Visit Leverages Fundamental, 2016). Mallavarapu comments that, "India holds a unique position in the continent, and strategically she is so situated that she cannot be ignored in a consideration of any major problems relating to defense, trade, industry or economic policy, affecting any group of Asian countries" (Mallavarapu, 2015, p. 42).

Defense and Security

The improved defence cooperation has been identified as one of the important component of the strategic partnership between the two countries. The visit of PM Indira Gandhi in 1982 paved the way for the defence cooperation between India and Saudi and The joint communication issued after her visit

declared that, 'the security of South Asia and the Arabian Peninsula is interlinked' (Ahmad, The Gulf Region, 2015, p. 445). The 'Delhi Declaration' in 2006 and the 'Riyadh Declaration' in 2010 have declared their increased intension for security and defence cooperation. The visit of Indian defense minister A.K Antony to Riyadh in February 2012 set out the road map for bilateral cooperation in specific areas such as mountain warfare and joint exercise of the various wings of the armed forces (Ahmad, The Gulf Region, 2015, p. 444). Moreover, they had agreed to form a Joint Committee on Defence Cooperation in 2012 that held its meetings in regular intervals thereafter. The next important development in connection with defence happened during the visit of Crown Prince Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud in 2014, when both countries signed an MoU on Defence Cooperation which is considered to be a milestone in Indo-Saudi defence ties. Another important step forward in this direction was the signing of joint statement during the visit of PM Modi to Riyadh in 2016. Delhi and Riyadh also agreed on the need to intensify bilateral defence cooperation, through exchange of visits by military personnel and experts, conduct of joint military exercises, exchange of visits of ships and aircrafts and supply of arms and ammunition and their joint development (Chaudhury, 2016). As a follow up of PM Modi's visit to Riyadh it was decided to convene the second meeting of joint committee on Defence Cooperation also. The 4th Joint

Committee on Defense Co-operation held in January 2019 and during the visit of the Crown Prince of Saudi to New Delhi in February 2019, both sides welcomed the decisions in the meeting (Pitambari, 2019).

The New Delhi and Riyadh Declarations in 2006 and 2010 respectively declared their sincere intension to combat terrorism money laundering and illegal human trafficking. In the ‘Riyadh Declaration’ in 2010, the two leaders i.e. Dr. Man Mohan Singh and King Abdullah have affirmed that terrorism ‘is global and threatens all societies and is not linked to any race, colour or belief’ (Kumar, 2010) and they have condemned the phenomena of terrorism and violence. During the visit of Dr. Man Mohan Singh, an extradition treaty has been signed by both the countries to clean up the possible terrorist hide outs in Saudiⁱ. There was serious consultation between Indian and Saudi authorities on to curb the menace of terrorism and several terrorist were deported by Saudi Arabia to India in the years followed. During his visit in May 2013, Foreign Minister Salman Khurshid told that, “we discussed the menace of terrorism the world continues to face and agreed to further strengthen our counter-terrorism cooperation which is an essential element of the ‘Riyadh Declaration’ we signed in 2010” (Hindu, 2013).

Counter Terrorism

Understanding the fact that Pakistan is the terrorism hot spot for India both India and Saudi have signed five agreements during the

visit of PM Modi to Riyadh in 2016 including to ‘counter threat of cross border terror’ (Chaudhury, 2016). During Modi’s visit in a joint statement, both India and Saudi condemned all acts of terrorism and urged the states to refrain from all kinds of supports to terrorists (Chaudhury, 2016). Counter Terrorism figured important in the discussions between Indian Prime Minister and Saudi Crown Prince during the visit of Saudi Crown Prince to New Delhi in February 2019 and called upon “all states to reject the use of terrorism against other countries; dismantle terrorism infrastructures where they happen to exist and to cut off any kind of support and financing to the terrorists perpetrating terrorism from all territories against other states; and bring perpetrators of acts of terrorism to justice” (Pitambari, 2019).

Intelligence Sharing

To prevent the threat extremism both countries have decided to share intelligence from the ‘Riyadh Declaration’ onwards. For this purpose, agreements have been signed by both countries during Modi’s visit in 2016 for intelligence sharing on terror financing as a part of their strategic partnership (Pradhan, 2016). A memorandum of understanding was signed between the financial intelligence units of the two countries on cooperation in the exchange of intelligence related to money laundering, terrorism financing and related crimes (Chaudhury, 2016). Now, Riyadh has sufficient realization that, extremism is a threat to their on security and the countries who promote

extremism are no longer be a trusted partner to them. India's view on extremism and terrorism are well appreciated by Riyadh today. According Quamar, "the kingdom has some experience in counter-terror and de-radicalization efforts and also has reasons for cooperating as it sees India as playing a role in maintaining security and stability in the Gulf" (Quamar, A New Direction for India-Saudi Arabia Ties, 2016, p. 3). During his recent visit, Saudi Crown Prince assured India that, they are committed for 'intelligence sharing' (Today, 2019) in connection with counter terrorism.

Energy Security

At an Indian point of view, energy security is an important component of Indo-Saudi relations. Beyond any doubt it can be assumed that, Saudi Arabia is one of the best one that can assure energy security to India because of its geostrategic location in relation to India. Saudi Arabia is the largest oil supplier to the world and India is the 3rd largest consumer of oil (Quamar, Saudi Arabia, 2014, p. 205). In this juncture, India looks upon Saudi Arabia as a guarantor of energy security. It was in the Cold War period both Iran and Iraq were the largest suppliers of oil to India.

In the post-Cold War energy scenario, after economic liberalization India require stable supply of energy in a cheaper price. The UN sanction against Iran has reduced Indian sources of crude from the Middle East. The situation has been managed by India with the support of Saudi oil. Quamar says that, in 2012, "Saudi

Arabia came to India's rescue by increasing oil exports to compensate for the deficit caused by sanctions on the Iranian oil industry" (Quamar, A New Direction for India-Saudi Arabia Ties, 2016, p. 2). Saudi Arabia is the largest oil supplier for India. As per estimates, in 2014-15, Saudi supplied 34.49 million tons of crude oil to India. To Pradhan, "India is a long term assured market for its oil, India believes that the strategic energy partnership with Saudi Arabia will help address energy issues for its growing economy" (Pradhan, 2016). Even though, for a brief period, in late 2016, Iraq overtook Saudi Arabia as India's leading source for oil – the latter maintained the top position in the first three quarters of 2016-17 (Quamar, Indo-Saudi Relations Under the Modi Government, 2017). Azhar says, from these developments it is clear that, "India's energy relations with Saudi Arabia are fast moving from buyer-seller to partners in development" (Azhar, 2008, p. 331). In February 2019, during his visit to New Delhi, the Saudi Crown Prince agreed that, the kingdom shall provide oil to India in the exigency of shortage of supply of oil to India by any other supplier and PM Modi thanked Saudi for being a partner to the India's Strategic Petroleum Reserves (Pitambari, 2019).

Indian Expatriates

Indian expatriates in Saudi constitute the highest number of work force in that country and the matters related to them are considered to be one of the core agendas in the meetings of Indian and Saudi leaders. The Indian expatriates

amounting about '3 million' (Quamar, A New Direction for India-Saudi Arabia Ties, 2016, p. 2) in numbers mainly from the southern Indian states of Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Kerala (Kohli, 2017, p. 42). According to Weiner, "Indian migrants to Saudi Arabia mainly comprised of unskilled workers, employed in construction companies, municipalities, agricultural farms and as domestic workers; skilled and semi-skilled workers; professionals, such as doctors, engineers, accountants, nurses and paramedics, employed in government and private sectors; and businessmen/entrepreneurs" (Weiner, 1982, p. 8). Despite of the fact that, the future of Indian expatriates in Saudi is grim due to Nitaqatⁱⁱ when compared to their earlier position, still the country receives large remittances in the form of foreign exchange. According to Azhar, "the remittances that Indian expatriate workers send play an important role in compensating for the deficit in the balance of the trade, and substantially reduce the negative impact on India's balance of payments" (Azhar, 2008, p. 332). During the visit of PM Modi in 2016, "The external affairs ministry and the Saudi labour ministry signed an agreement on labour cooperation for recruitment of general category workers" (Chaudhury, 2016). The contribution made by Indian community to the development of Saudi Arabia is well acknowledged and according to Saudi Crown Prince, 'Indian people are part of building Saudi Arabia' (Today, 2019).

Trade and Commerce

In the post-Cold War period the Indo-Saudi trade increased dramatically. While the most important Saudi export to India remains oil and petrochemical products, the important Indian export to Saudi are Basmati rice, readymade garments, manmade yarn fabric made-ups, non-Basmati rice, meat, metals etc. Thus during 1995-2004 Indian exports to Saudi Arabia grew by 233 per cent, while India's total exports grew by 170 per cent, increasing from \$30,537 million in 1995 to \$82,404 million in 2004 (Azhar, 2008, p. 325). The above analysis shows that, there is a clear indication of growth in exports to Saudi Arabia rather than that of average national export increase during the period. Azhar confirms, "India has now become ninth most important supplier of Saudi imports, relegating Australia to the tenth place" (Azhar, 2008, p. 327). The trade and commercial relations have registered a rapid increase by 2012-13. Quamar says, "Saudi Arabia emerged as the seventh largest market for Indian exports comprising 3.25 per cent of total exports, which is a growth of 72 per cent compared to 2011-12". To him, in 2012-13, India became the 7th largest exporter and Indian market became 5th largest export market to Saudi Arabia (Quamar, Saudi Arabia, 2014, p. 203). To Alam & Ahmad, "there was a decline in the volume of trade in 2014-15 due to the lower oil prices in the international market, but still she was the fifth largest trading partner of India and to

Saudi, India was the seventh largest trading partner” (Alam & Ahmad, 2015, p. 330).

Investment

The increase in trade between the two countries also increases the question of balance of payment in favour of Saudi Arabia due to enormous import of oil from the kingdom. As Saudi has become the most important seller of crude to India, India suffers a great deficit in the balance of payment. Remittance from Indian expatriates working in the kingdom bridge the foreign exchange deficit in a large extent. Moreover, India tries to promote Saudi investments in the country as well. The possible Saudi investments can bridge the question of balance of payment and shall support the country in employment generation and economic growth. A continues trend of increase in Saudi investment in India is visible after the Delhi and Riyadh Declarations in 2006 and 2010 respectively. In the year 2012-13, a tenfold increase in Saudi investment has been recorded when compared to the previous year (Quamar, Saudi Arabia, 2014, p. 203). Meanwhile, eyeing Saudi funds for India's infra sector Invest India and Saudi Arabian General Investment Authority (SABIA) signed a framework agreement on investment promotion cooperation in 2016 (Chaudhury, 2016). This visit of PM Modi in 2016 opened new avenues of investments in India. Modi during his visit called for Saudi entrepreneurs to invest in India. Saudi Arabia plans to invest \$1 trillion in infrastructure development over the next five

years and Mr. Modi is likely to pitch for participation of Indian companies in the projects (Correspondant, 2016). Investment in Saudi Arabia by Indian companies has also in the trend of growth especially in the areas such as oil and petrochemical areas etc. A number of Indian companies both government and private sectors are trying to invest in Saudi Arabia to increase the volume of their business. According to Saudi Arabian General Investment Authority (SAGIA), “it has issued 426 licenses to Indian companies for joint ventures/100% owned entities till April 2015, which are expected to bring total investment of USD 1.6 billion in Saudi Arabia” (MEA, 2016). In the presence of visiting Crown Prince of Saudi in February 2019, PM welcomed “the investment from Saudi Arabia in the National Investment and Infrastructure Fund and other key sectors in India” (Pitambari, 2019).

Cultural Contacts

The people of India and Saudi Arabia are having cultural contacts even the centuries before postdated to emergence of Islam. The Arab settlers in India were given complete religious and administrative freedom and authority by some Indian rulers. According to Heptulla, Arab merchant visiting South India and the coastal regions were most cordially welcomed and given facilitates for trade and worship (Heptulla, 1991, p. 1). The spread of Islam in India boosted the cultural contacts between the two regions. In the post-Cold War period the cultural contacts got a new

dimension. In 2012, a group of 25 young people visited India to promote the understanding and friendship among the youth of two countries and 54 member cultural group visited Saudi to celebrate the Indian cultural week. State tourism officials and private tour operators have visited Saudi Arabia in 2013 under the leadership of the tourism secretary to participate in tourism road shows in Riyadh and Dammam (Quamar, Saudi Arabia, 2014, p. 208). During the visit of PM Modi in 2016 an agreement on the promotion of tourism has been signed between the two countries (Chaudhury, 2016). Yet, another important area of cultural contacts between the two people is the Hajj pilgrimage. Indian pilgrims used to visit Saudi Arabia in large numbers for Hajj and Umrah pilgrimage every year. Followed by the visit of Saudi Crown Prince in 2019 the Hajj quota for India has been enhanced into two lakhs pilgrims by Saudi authorities. In February 2018, India was the 'Guest of Honour' for the 32nd 'Janadriyah' (Embassy, 2019) the prestigious Saudi National Festival of Heritage and Culture in which the Indian pavilion was jointly inaugurated by Foreign Minister Sushama Swaraj and Saudi King Salman. In June 2018, the 4th International Day of Yoga was celebrated at Al-Madi Park of the King Abdulaziz Historical Centre and it was the first time in Saudi Arabia Yoga day celebrated in 'public domain' (Embassy, 2019). According to Pitambari, after the Indo-Saudi summit meeting in February 2019, both countries have expressed their desire "to

broaden people to people interactions and to increase two-way tourism by addressing challenges with regard to consular and immigration related issues" (Pitambari, 2019).

Conclusion

While concluding the above analysis certain simple findings are before us. Firstly, the globalized world emerged after the Cold War has created a major realignment in Indo-Saudi relations and made it into a strategic partnership. Secondly, the growing extremism in the world including in Pakistan has made Saudi Arabia to have intelligence and security cooperation with India to check its menace in the region and the world over. Thirdly, the Indo-Saudi strategic partnership provide Pakistan a message that she can no longer expect full hearted support from Saudi in her designs against India in the name of Islamic brotherhood. Fourthly, Saudi Arabia is 'no longer just a source of oil and destination for Indian labour; they have also become economic and political partners' (Blarel, 2015, p. 356). Fifthly, extremist and terrorist fighting against India may not look at Saudi Arabia as a safe hide out to them. Sixthly, Saudi Arabia shall be a constant supplier of oil to enhance India's energy security. Seventhly, the remittances of Indian expatriates from Saudi and Saudi investments in India can help India to bridge the deficit balance of payment in relation with Saudi Arabia. Eighthly, "the future success of India in establishing itself as a labour exporter, will depend on quality of the

manpower and the creation of effective manpower” (Naidu, 1991, p. 350).

According to Heptulla the former Deputy Chairman of Rajya Sabha and union minister, “the bonds of Indo-West Asian friendship and cooperation created in the modern times by Gandhi, Nehru and Maulana Azad have withstood the test of time and exist till today” (Heptulla, 1991, p. 200). The recent growth in Indo-Saudi relations reminds us the prophetic words of the first visit of any Saudi king to independent India. Commenting on his visit (in 1955) to India, His Majesty King Saud said, “I consider this a happy revival of the age old friendship and amity between India and the Arab countries and hope that, this friendship would grow greater and shall become unbreakable and unperishable. Saudi Arabia most sincerely means to make her best contribution in helping this friendship to grow” (Heptulla, 1991, p. 110). As a final word, Pitambari is probably correct when he says that, “close geographical proximity, civilizational links, cultural affinity, natural synergies, vibrant people to people contacts. Common challenges and opportunities have added momentum to this robust engagement” (Pitambari, 2019).

Notes

ⁱ For example, in June 2012, Saudi Arabia deported Zabiuddin Ansari (Abu Jundal), an accused terrorist wanted for his involvement in the Mumbai attacks (Quamar, A New Direction for India-Saudi Arabia Ties, 2016, p. 2).

ⁱⁱ Nitaqat is a Saudization programme introduced by the Saudi Ministry of Labour.

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