

Can Saudi Arabia play the intermediary between India and Pakistan?

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Saudi Arabia has been reorienting its foreign policy, and while maintaining its individual relationships with India and Pakistan, it could possibly play a role as an intermediary between both countries.



By Tridivesh Singh Maini Nov 11, 2022

Image

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Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif went on a three-day visit to Saudi Arabia on October 24, 2022. This was Sharif's second visit to Saudi Arabia this year, his earlier one being in April 2022, days after taking over as Pakistan's PM. It is important because the visit came days after Pakistan was removed from the FATF (Financial Action Task Force) greylist

Apart from participating in the FII (Future Investment Initiative) conference 2022, also referred to as 'Davos in the Desert', Shehbaz Sharif also held a bilateral meeting with Saudi Prime Minister and Crown Prince, Mohammed Bin Salman, the de facto ruler of the kingdom.

Significantly, the Crown Prince will also be visiting India later this month on his way to the G20 Summit in Indonesia. Earlier this month, Saudi Energy Minister Abdulaziz bin Salman had visited India.

Saudi Arabia-Pakistan-India trilateral

While for long Saudi Arabia was much closer to Pakistan, in recent years it is not just economic ties but even security ties between Saudi Arabia and India that have witnessed an upswing (Saudi Arabia remains one of the top suppliers of oil, but the relationship is multi-faceted) and the overall Saudi-India relationship is far more comprehensive as a result of the growing synergies between both countries in the economic and strategic spheres. Indians are the largest group within the expat community in Saudi Arabia.

Ties between Islamabad and Riyadh had deteriorated after former Pakistan Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi criticised the Saudi-led Organisation of Islamic Countries (OIC) in August 2020 for failing to convene a meeting after the revocation of Article 370 by India in Jammu and Kashmir in August 2019 (Saudi Arabia also asked Pakistan to pay back part of the assistance, it had provided in 2018, after Qureshi's statement). Pakistan had also expressed interest in an alternative to the OIC along with Turkey, Malaysia and Iran much to the chagrin of the Saudis. Pakistan did pull

out of a summit held in Kuala Lumpur in December 2019 due to pressure from Saudi Arabia. Then Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad had said that Muslim countries attending the summit would set up an alternative organisation for Islamic countries to the OIC, which according to him had failed to safeguard the interests of Muslims globally (though this proposal did not move)

In 2021, Saudi Arabia, along with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), played a role in the ceasefire along the Line of Control between India and Pakistan. A joint statement released after former Pakistan PM Imran Khan's meeting with MBS during his visit to Saudi Arabia in May 2021, said that MBS "welcomed the recent understanding reached between the military authorities of Pakistan and India regarding ceasefire at the Line of Control (LoC), which is based on a 2003 understanding between Pakistan and India".

Saudi Arabia has repeatedly offered to act as a mediator between India and Pakistan for reducing tensions between both countries.

Pakistan-Saudi ties

While the previous Imran Khan-led PTI government in Pakistan took steps to put ties with Riyadh back on track, as a result of which Saudi Arabia agreed to revive aid to Pakistan in October 2021. Shehbaz Sharif, ever since taking over as PM, has sought assistance not just from China, but also proactively engaged with Saudi Arabia for financial support in dealing with Pakistan's economic challenges. His recent visit to Saudi Arabia is a strong reiteration of the same.

Saudi Arabia on its part promised assistance to the tune of 8 billion USD during Sharif's April visit. Saudi Arabia's financial support to Pakistan is driven not just by the historical linkages between both countries and the ties between the Sharif family and the Saudi royals, but also the changing geopolitical dynamics in the Middle East and outside, whereby Riyadh wants to send out a message, that it is a key strategic player not just in the Middle East but other parts of the world including South Asia.

Saudi Arabia had also provided assistance to Pakistan during the recent floods. While pointing to the same, Shehbaz Sharif while speaking at FII 2022 said:

"We are extremely grateful to our brotherly countries and friendly countries, including the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and my very respected brother, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who created an air bridge between Saudi Arabia and Islamabad and Karachi, sending food items, tents and other very important items for flood-affected people," Shehbaz Sharif said in a tweet after his meeting that both sides agreed to take the bilateral relationship between both countries to a new level.

Saudi Arabia has been reorienting its foreign policy and, while maintaining its individual relationships with India and Pakistan, it could possibly play a role as an intermediary between both countries. It is among the few countries that possess a good relationship

with both New Delhi and Islamabad and is thus well placed to do so, a fact that has been acknowledged by both countries. Whether it is able depends upon a number of factors, specifically the geopolitical climate in South Asia as well as globally.

Hence, MBS's visit to New Delhi later this month for talks with Prime Minister Narendra Modi will be keenly watched.

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