

Attempts by Gulf Countries in Reducing India-Pakistan Tensions

 thegeopolitics.com/attempts-by-gulf-countries-in-reducing-india-pakistan-tensions

Tridivesh Singh Maini

February 6, 2023

Two Gulf Nations – the UAE and Saudi Arabia – which have historically been close to Pakistan, are supposed to have told Pakistan to mend ties with India, and to not harp on the Kashmir issue. After India's decision to revoke Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir, Islamabad expressed disappointment with Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), chaired by Saudi Arabia, for not calling a meeting of Foreign Ministers of OIC states to discuss the issue of Jammu and Kashmir.

Then Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi had in a media interview in August 2020 (which marked the first anniversary of the abrogation of Article 370) said that if the OIC did not call a meeting, Pakistan would ask other Islamic countries to call such a meeting. Pakistan had also given indicators of setting up a parallel organisation along with countries like Malaysia and Turkey – though it did not go ahead with such a plan due to pressure from Saudi Arabia and UAE.

Qureshi's veiled criticism of Saudi Arabia led to the deterioration of ties between the two countries, with Saudi Arabia promptly asking for repayment of \$1 billion which had been provided as part of a \$6.2 billion assistance package. In 2021, Saudi Arabia revived financial assistance to Pakistan. It would be pertinent to point out that in recent years India's economic and strategic ties with GCC – especially UAE and Saudi Arabia – have strengthened significantly, owing to geopolitical and economic factors – and the relationship is no longer driven merely by oil imports from the Gulf.

The UAE and Saudi Arabia have also been trying to reduce tensions between India and Pakistan. The UAE brokered a ceasefire agreement between India and Pakistan in March 2021. Both Gulf countries have also been playing a key role in helping Pakistan deal with its current financial crisis. Shehbaz Sharif has visited Saudi Arabia and UAE days after taking over as Pakistan PM, and his visit last month to UAE was his third ever since taking over as PM. In an interview with AlArabiya, on Jan. 17, 2023 Sharif sought a better relationship with India, and also said that the UAE could play a role in reducing tensions between both countries.

Only recently, India has extended an invite to Pakistan Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto to attend the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) Ministers meeting to be held in Goa in May 2023. Pakistan so far has not given a clear response to India's invite.

While it is true that in recent years Gulf countries have played an important role in reducing tensions between both countries, there are multiple factors which dictate the India-Pakistan relationship – especially the domestic narrative. While a number of analysts in Pakistan, and even political leaders have hinted at focusing on improving

economic ties with India, it is tough to de-hyphenate economics from political issues when it comes to the India-Pakistan relationship. A strong reiteration of this point is April 2021, when Former Prime Minister Imran Khan himself had given a go ahead to resume imports of essential commodities from India, this was opposed by his other cabinet colleagues who said that such a step would not be possible without India reversing its decision on Article 370. There has been some progress between both countries in the sphere of people to people links – a clear example being the opening of the Kartarpur Religious Corridor in 2019 (even after the re-opening of the religious corridor in 2021 bonhomie between citizens on both sides of the divide has been visible). The current economic crisis in Pakistan may also be an opportunity for the political leadership in Pakistan to bell the cat and state that rather than depending upon external assistance, it should focus on stronger economic ties with India and other neighbours. The former Pakistan Army Chief, Qamar Javed Bajwa had repeatedly called for the need for Pakistan to face on geo-economics. A prominent Pakistani strategic and political commentator Shahzad Chaudhry in an article for Express Tribune also argued that Pakistan needs to focus on ‘geo-economics’ in the context

Former Pakistan PM, Nawaz Sharif – brother of present Pakistan PM Shehbaz Sharif – has been a strong votary of trade relations, with other countries, and spoken in favour of ‘trade not aid’.

On the Indian side, there should be less intransigence to the resumption of bilateral trade through the Wagah-Attari land crossing since bilateral trade is already going on through third destinations such as Singapore and Dubai. In August 2022, India said that it was open to sending humanitarian aid and assistance to Pakistan, in the aftermath of the unprecedented floods, but not resuming normal trade. Interestingly, it has send consignments of wheat to Afghanistan, as part of humanitarian assistance, via the Wagah-Attari land crossing. The resumption of bilateral trade through the Wagah-Attari land crossing would be especially beneficial to Punjab (India) since the disruption of trade in 2019 has adversely impacted the economy of the state – especially the border belt and resulted in loss of jobs in the tertiary sector.

While a nudge from Gulf countries for peace in South Asia will do no harm, ultimately any big ticket decisions in India-Pakistan relations require statesmanship and the ability to think out of the box. Giving a push to people to people contacts between both countries, and bilateral trade could be a good beginning.

[Photo by Koshy, via Wikimedia Commons]

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author.

Tridivesh Singh Maini

Tridivesh Singh Maini is a New Delhi based analyst interested in Punjab-Punjab linkages as well as Partition Studies. Maini co-authored ‘Humanity Amidst Insanity: Hope During and After the Indo-Pak



Partition' (New Delhi: UBSPD, 2008) with Tahir Malik and Ali Farooq Malik. He can be reached at tridivesh80@hotmail.com.