



# **DAILY NEWSPAPER ANALYSIS**

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**Topic: GS2 : India-Saudi  
Relations**



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## The Saudi-India-Pakistan triangle

### Context:-

- Recent visits of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) to India is at a time when both countries are seeking to deepen bilateral cooperation.
- For MBS, the visit to India, Pakistan, China, Malaysia and Indonesia is an opportunity to re-assert Saudi Arabia's role as a major foreign policy player in Asia amid growing criticism over the Yemen war and the brutal assassination of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Istanbul.
- For the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the visit is an opportunity to cap its pursuit of stronger ties with West Asian nations on a high note.

### Evolution of India-Saudi Relations:-

- A number of factors have influenced the turnaround in ties between the two countries, which had been **underwhelming during the Cold War**.
- When India's economy started growing at a faster clip **post-liberalisation**, its dependence on energy-rich nations grew. And Saudi Arabia was a stable, trusted supplier of oil.
- Post-9/11, the two have expanded the scope of their partnership to economic issues and fighting terrorism.
- High-level visits between India and Saudi Arabia have become the new normal since **King Abdullah came to India in 2006, the first Saudi monarch to do so in five decades**.

- Four years later, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh travelled to Riyadh.
- Mr. Modi visited Riyadh in 2016; last year, he met MBS in Argentina on the sidelines of the G-20 at a time when the Crown Prince had already come under sharp criticism in many Western countries.

### **Importance of Saudi Arabia for India:-**

- **Energy Security:-** 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.**
- **Diaspora:-** Indians in Saudi Arabia are the largest community of expatriates in Saudi Arabia.

### **Issues with further strengthening of Saudi Arabia-Indian ties:-**

- **Strategic And Economic Nexus between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan:-** 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. The Pakistan Army has more than once acted as the Saudi rulers' praetorian guard and given the uncertain hold of MBS on his country, despite impressions to the contrary, he may need the services of Pakistani mercenaries in the near future.
  - **Strategic Importance of Pakistan in Afghanistan:-** 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 government in Kabul.
- With U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, **Pakistan's strategic value as the Taliban's patron has grown exponentially.** 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.
- **Aid to Pakistan:-** 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.
  - Over and above the \$6 billion already promised by Saudi Arabia, MBS has promised a further \$20 billion in Saudi investment in Pakistan.
  - A large part is earmarked for investment in the construction of an oil refinery in Gwadar on the Makran coast, which is being developed as a strategic port by China and features prominently in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) plan.
- **Iran-Saudi Arabia Conflict:-** Iran is Saudi Arabia's chief adversary in West Asia. MBS has made containment of Iran his top foreign policy priority.
  - Riyadh perceives Pakistan as a major asset it can use to check the spread of Iranian influence.

- 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.
- On the other hand, **India deepened its engagement with Iran**, be it on oil trade or the Chabahar port. Iran is important for India as it is a gateway to Central Asia.

### Way-Ahead:-

- 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 of Saudi-Pakistan ties.
- While **Saudi Arabia is vital for India's energy security, Iran is a gateway to Central Asia**. New Delhi is sure to continue this **balancing act** even as it seeks to **strengthen the Saudi pillar of India's West Asia policy**.