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Weakening Pakistan-Saudi Arabia Relations

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Why in News

Recently, a delegation led by Pakistan Army Chief visited Saudi Arabia but were denied a meeting with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS).

It highlights the **rift between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia** in general and **specifically over the issue of Jammu and Kashmir**.

Key Points

- **Saudi's Changing Perspective on India:**
 - Saudi's **increasing friendly and supportive nature towards India** has been a **gradual process under Crown Prince MBS** because he wants to **diversify Saudi's heavily oil-dependent economy** and sees India as a valuable partner in the region.
 - **Saudi Arabia is India's fourth-largest trade partner** (after China, the USA and Japan) and a major source of energy.
 - India **imports around 18% of its crude oil** requirement from Saudi Arabia which is also a **major source of LPG** for India.
 - With **India stopping oil imports from Iran** due to the **threat of sanctions by the USA**, the importance of Saudi Arabia increases even more.

- **Increasing China Factor:**

- **Pakistan and China** call themselves “**all-weather allies**” and “**iron brothers**”.
- China has **supported Pakistan on the Kashmir issue**, raising it at the **United Nations Security Council** thrice, over the last year.
- China has also emerged as Pakistan’s biggest benefactor through its funding of the **China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)**.

Originally valued at USD 46 billion, China’s commitment to Pakistan now stands at USD 62 billion.

- **Saudi Arabia has also invested in CPEC projects**, to the tune of USD 10 billion but **Pakistan now seems more interested in Beijing** for both diplomatic and economic support.
- **Pakistani leaders’ visits to China** play an important role in further strengthening the Pakistan-China All-Weather Strategic Cooperative Partnership.

- **Implications for India:**

- India has **favoured and supported the Arab world** and has worked the diplomatic levers through high-level visits and open opportunities for investment and business.
- India has been **closely noticing the developments** between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia but **has not said anything publicly**.
- **Saudi’s silence on the issues of Jammu and Kashmir and the CAA-NRC** has also emboldened India.
- **Closer ties between China and Pakistan are worrying for India**, especially during the **ongoing standoff** but with Saudi Arabia’s support, India may have leverage over Pakistan.

Saudi Arabia and Pakistan Relations



- **History of Cooperation and Support:**

- The relationship was most prominent during the **1971 war between India and Pakistan** when Saudi Arabia is also reported to have transferred arms and equipment to Pakistan.

Saudi held that Indian actions were “treacherous and contrary to all international covenants and human values” and found no justification for the Indian aggression except “India’s desire to dismember Pakistan and tarnish its Islamic creed”.

- Post-war, **Saudi Arabia consistently supported the call for the return of Pakistan’s prisoners of war** and for dropping the **Dhaka Trial** against them. It also gave loans to Pakistan enabling it to buy arms worth about USD 1 million by 1977.
- **Saudi oil and dollars have kept Pakistan’s economy afloat** after sanctions following the nuclear tests.

Saudi has provided oil on deferred payments to Pakistan whenever it ran into economic difficulty.
- Saudi’s **funding of madrasas** has led to their growth and spread which in turn has **given rise to religious extremism**.
- In 1990, Pakistan sent its ground forces to defend Saudi Arabia against **Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait**.

- **Emerging Differences:**

- Pakistan lobbied with the **Organisation of Islamic Conference** (OIC) for criticising the Indian move of **revoking Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir** but statements by **Saudi Arabia and the UAE were not harshly critical** of India.
 - Pakistan has tried to rouse the sentiments among the Islamic countries, but **only Turkey and Malaysia have publicly criticised India.**
 - The alignment over Kashmir at the OIC crystallised since 1990 when the insurgency in Jammu and Kashmir began and since then, it has regularly issued statements on the issue.
 - Pakistan has **accused Saudi of failing to deliver on the Kashmir cause** and OIC for not playing a leadership role in backing Pakistan against India.
- In 2015, Pakistan's Parliament decided **not to support the Saudi military effort to restore an internationally recognised government in Yemen.**
- In February 2019 after the **Pulwama terror attack**, **Saudi Arabia and the UAE, along with the USA**, put in efforts on the release of the Indian Wing Commander Abhinandan who was captured by Pakistan.
- Saudi Arabia angered by Pakistan's accusations **demanding the return of the USD 3 billion loan and refused to sell oil on deferred payment.** Pakistan immediately returned USD 1 billion, displaying the rift.
 - In November 2018, Saudi announced a USD 6.2 billion loan package for Pakistan which included USD 3 billion in loans and an oil credit facility amounting to USD 3.2 billion.
 - Pakistan is **unable to pay the next tranche which seems difficult given the current economic situation** and to make things worse, Saudi has refused to take part in Pakistan's patch-up exercise.
- Pakistan's **efforts to please Turkey and Malaysia have also angered Saudi Arabia** because Turkey has been trying to position itself as the new leader of the Muslim world, challenging Saudi Arabia's long-held position.

Way Forward

- Saudi Arabia does not want conflict and regional instability and it has made it clear that it values economic opportunities, which is why it is not involving in the Kashmir issue in India or the terrorism issue in Pakistan.
- For India, it is important that the Pakistan-China and the Pakistan-Saudi axes are not fused together at the moment and it is not a Saudi-Pakistan-China triangle. Rest of it and the future of these layered relations depends on how India leverages the situation.

Source: IE