Saudi Arabia’s Strategic and Political Interests in Pakistan

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Cover Image Attribute: Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman received by Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan at PAF Nur Khan Air Base / Benazir Bhutto Int’l Airport (Feb 17, 2019).

The first visit of Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman as a part of his Asia Tour to Islamabad amid international condemnation against Pakistan affirms Saudi Arabia’s interest in supporting Pakistan. The oil-rich Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has had a strong bilateral relationship with Pakistan since the formation of the country and the recent geopolitical changes in the region further affirm the strength and depth of this relationship while highlighting the difficult position Pakistan has been pushed to.

Both Saudi Arabia and Pakistan are now going through tough times. While Pakistan is struggling with its economy, internal security and its perception in the international community Saudi Arabia has still not recovered from the tarnished image because of the
ongoing war in Yemen and the alleged link of Mohammed Bin Salman in the killing of Washington Post journalist Jamal Khashoggi. The rise of Mohammed Bin Salman in Saudi Arabia also consists of suspicion. Although he attempted to portray himself as a reformer, some of the events like the imprisonment and torture of women rights activists as reported by Amnesty International and several other cases of human rights abuses in the Kingdom has not gone well with the image of the Prince. Recently, the appointment of Turki Aldakhil as the new envoy to UAE who has been allegedly benefitting financially through multiple deals after the rise of Mohammed Bin Salman has further added to the skepticism around the Prince and the manner in which he maneuvers his powers. At a point in time where both the countries are being condemned and warned on various grounds on the global stage both need each other more than ever.

Saudi Arabia and Pakistan are strong poles in the Islamic world and play major roles in the changing dynamics of global geopolitics. Hence, any decision from either Riyadh or Islamabad would be keenly observed by the international community so as to assess its geopolitical implications. The relationship between both these countries in recent times have seen exponential growth with respect to trade and economic ties. Less than six months ago during Prime Minister Imran Khan’s visit to Riyadh, the Kingdom agreed 6 billion US dollars aid to Pakistan and during the very recent visit of Mohammed Bin Salman to Islamabad, several MoU’s were signed between both the countries. Saudi Arabia’s investment deals in the petrochemical, minerals, energy and other sectors that account to more than 20 billion US dollars is definitely a relief at the right time for Pakistan. The Crown Prince also agreed to release more than 2000 Pakistani prisoners in the Kingdom upon the request of Prime Minister Imran Khan. During the press conference as a response to Prime Minister Imran Khan’s request to treat the 2.5 million Pakistanis working in the Kingdom as the Prince’s own people, Mohammed Bin Salman responded by saying “consider me as Pakistan’s ambassador to Saudi Arabia”. While the visit of Mohammed Bin Salman is being celebrated in Islamabad the question is about the price Pakistan would have to pay in the near future for such a transactional relationship with Saudi Arabia? Pakistan has maintained its neutral position till now when it comes to the regional politics in the Middle East but the recent developments show that Pakistan is still very much under the influence of Saudi Arabia and the status quo position of Pakistan in the regional affairs could be at risk especially after the recent suicide bombing that took place in Iran causing a strain in Pakistan-Iran relationship.
The visit by Mohammed Bin Salman to Islamabad guaranteeing a huge financial backing makes it clear that Pakistan could be in a difficult position if Prime Minister Imran Khan fails to maintain the neutral position Pakistan has retained in the regional politics of the Middle East. Both the countries so far know that playing to each other's advantage would be the only way to constructively take this relationship ahead amid both domestic and international challenges faced by Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. Saudi Arabia needs labor for which Pakistan can cater to and Pakistan needs consistent investments and financial backing that Saudi Arabia could provide. Both the countries share a strong strategic relationship that encompasses joint military exercises, intelligence sharing, training of Royal Saudi Army and wide-ranging maritime cooperation.

Another concern for Pakistan is with respect to its internal security. The religious minorities in Pakistan, especially Shias have been targeted by numerous Sunni terror outfits and the attacks these minority groups have seen a rise in number in recent years. Increasing targeted killings have been observed in regions like Sindh and Karachi where the Shia population has adopted a kind of self-segregation. Whether Pakistan will be able to address the internal challenges would be a strong concern since the recent developments in Pakistan show that the internal stability is at risk and any wrong move with respect to the foreign policy could further deteriorate the security of the country because of possible repercussions.
One of the major aspects of the Kingdom’s interest in Pakistan is with respect to an unacknowledged nuclear deterrence that Pakistan could provide Saudi Arabia whenever needed. It is unlikely that Saudi Arabia, a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty would attempt to seek nuclear weapons because of the repudiation it could bring which the Kingdom cannot afford at this juncture. Any such attempt would result in a harsh response from the U.S. Congress which would restrict arms sales to the Kingdom consequentially affecting the security of the country. So, ascertaining the fact that their regional rival Iran is already ahead of Saudi Arabia with respect to the nuclear research and facilities it is imperative for Saudi Arabia to maintain a close relationship with the nuclear power of the Islamic world-Pakistan. However, in recent years, Saudi Arabia has expressed its interest in developing nuclear technology for civilian use. Riyadh had informed the International Atomic Energy Agency its interest to reduce the dependency on fossil fuels and develop nuclear power plants. Reducing the dependency on fossil fuels is also a part of the Vision 2030 agenda put forth by the Kingdom. With the present image of the Kingdom and the past records of the Saudi government, any such move by Saudi Arabia will be viewed with skepticism because of the enmity towards Iran and the secrecy with which the Kingdom operates. Hence, it is important for Riyadh to further strengthen the relationship with Islamabad because of the military power of Pakistan and its unique position in the Islamic world.
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Cite this Article:


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