



India-Saudi Arabia Partnership Getting Stronger

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Abstract

India-Saudi Arabia partnership has improved significantly in recent times and is expected to gain its momentum in the years to come. It is the common interests and the mutual desire that have been the main driving force behind this partnership. The economic complementarities are helping this relationship to grow stronger. Saudi Arabia is now an important part of India's foreign policy and vice-versa. With a changed global geo-political environment and increasing economic interdependence, Saudi Arabia today considers India not only a strategic economically, but also a potential 'bridging power' that can play a constructive role for regional peace and stability.

The paper argues that the relationship has the potential to not only serve the interests of both sides but on a large scale it can bring peace, security and prosperity in the region. This way the paper explores the future prospects of the partnership between India and Saudi Arabia. First, the paper highlights the strategic significance of the partnership. Then the common interests of both countries are discussed. This is followed by an analysis of the political, economic and defence relations between the two sides. In the final section, the paper makes an assessment of the long-term areas of cooperation between the two countries.

Keynotes: India, Saudi Arabia, Common Interests, Political, Economic and Defence.

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1. INTRODUCTION

India, today, stands at a threshold in leveraging its economic and military growth in consonant with its national security goals. This situation has not only earned a national identity but also an international status where both economy and military strength are major determinants. India, during this period of unilateralism and emerging multilateralism, has taken a number of steps that has attracted the international attention which can be corroborated by the high level visit of P-5 countries. India is being considered by many countries as the source of stability and security in the world in general and Asia in particular.

Geographical barriers do not matter in International Relations. India and Saudi Arabia without any concern about the past events, started developing an understanding on the need to improve the relations only after the end of cold war politics and the disintegration of erstwhile Soviet Union. However, by the dawn of the twenty-first century, the relationship has improved in a significant way that has never experienced before.

India's closer ties with Saudi Arabia have to be seen in the context of the former interests in Gulf Arab region. The Gulf is both the world's primary source of oil reserves and has an extremely favorable geographic location for bringing these reserves to India. While announcing the new policy, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has said, "The Gulf region, like South-East and South Asia, is part of our natural economic hinterland. We must pursue closer economic relations with all our neighbours in our wider Asian neighbourhood. India has successfully pursued a 'Look East' policy to come closer to the countries of South-East Asia. We must come closer to our western neighbors in the Gulf." With a changed global geo-political environment and increasing economic interdependence, Saudi Arabia today considers India not only a strategic economically, but also a potential 'bridging power' that can play a constructive role for regional peace and stability.

Partnership between India and Saudi Arabia are getting stronger in recent times and is expected to gain its momentum in the years to come. The economic complementarities are helping this relationship to grow stronger. The official visit of Indian former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to Saudi Arabia few years back was aimed at strengthening the economic and diplomatic ties between the two sides. India and Saudi Arabia stands at a threshold of significant gains out of this partnership. It is the common interests and the mutual desire that have been the main driving force behind this partnership.

The paper argues that the relationship has the potential to not only serve the interests of both sides but on a large scale it can bring peace, security and prosperity in the region. This way the paper explores the future prospects of the partnership between India and Saudi Arabia. First, the paper highlights the strategic significance of the partnership. Then the common interests of both countries are discussed. This is followed by an analysis of the political, economic and defence relations between the two sides. In the final section, the paper makes an assessment of the long-term areas of cooperation between the two countries.

2. STRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE OF INDIA-SAUDI ARABIA PARTNERSHIP

Strategically speaking, the ties between India and Saudi Arabia are very important for both countries and also for the Gulf Arab region as a whole. Today, both sides perceive each other as a strategic partner for promoting peace, stability and economic development. India and Saudi

Arabia have a lot to offer to each other. If on the one side, India has a stable polity and democratic framework, a well developed legal system and independent judiciary to safeguard the 'rule of law', a free press, a rapidly growing economy with a huge market and a strong tradition of entrepreneurship then Saudi Arabia is offering India with lot of opportunities in petroleum and petrochemicals, power, water, railways, roads, telecommunications, information technology (IT), banking and financial services.

Saudi Arabia's strategic location in the Middle East and the political and economic power that it leverages as the largest repository of global oil reserves and the largest supplier of global oil supplies makes it an important partner for India. While India on the other side has undergone significant transformation that today New Delhi is being considered by many countries as the source of stability and security in Asia and the World at large. India, traditionally a prominent leader of the South Asia, is transcending that role to play a larger global role, which is endorsed by the United States, the European Union, Russia and Britain in their respective strategic partnerships with India. The five major powers of the world seem to be reevaluating New Delhi's position in the changing world scenario.

3. INDIA-SAUDI ARABIA COMMON INTERESTS

The common interests that both India and Saudi Arabia share includes:

- **Supporting Peace and Promoting Stable Security in the Gulf Region:** India and Saudi Arabia share a same stake in supporting peace, security and prosperity in the Gulf Arab region. India and Saudi Arabia together can work to ensuring peace and security in the region. Gulf security environment continued to be influenced by developments within and its immediate neighbourhood where rising instability remains a matter of deep concern. And since India consider Gulf region to be its immediate neighbourhood, any insecurity in the region will have its repercussions to India. The security of this region is highly important for Asian Security in general and India in particular. This is based on the concept of 'Common Security'. Common security means state cannot seek security at the expense of the other. New Delhi cannot ignore the major security challenges facing Gulf States. Based on this concept, India's security lies in ensuring the security of Gulf States. India, therefore, has a vital interest in the stability, security and economic well-being of the Gulf.

For India, ensuring peace, security and stability in the region serves two purpose- one is the presence of large number of the Indian diaspora and secondly, the presence of abundant energy reserves in the region. Energy supplies from the region are threatened by instability, political unrest, military conflict, and overall uncertainty. For which the Indian Navy has developed an interest in being able to project its power into the Gulf, in cooperation with other countries such as the United States and Russia as a mechanism for securing and protecting 'Sea Lanes of Communication' (SLOCs) that transport oil from the Gulf region to our country.

- **Combating Terrorism and its Related Activities:** India and Saudi Arabia have developed a close understanding on the need to eradicating the menace of terrorism. Such understanding has developed only after 9/11 incidents. Like India, Saudi Arabia also faces the threat of terrorism which has a close linkage with Al Qaida. Given its experience in the fight against terrorism, Indian can assist Saudi Arabia to dealing with serious foreign threats at any time in

the foreseeable future. However, unlike Saudi Arabia, India has been a victim of terrorism for many decades.

In the Riyadh Declaration, the leaders of the two countries renewed condemnation of the phenomena of terrorism, extremism and violence affirming that it is global and threatens all societies and is not linked to any race, color or belief. The two sides agreed to not only enhance cooperation in exchange of information relating to terrorist activities, money laundering, narcotics, arms and human trafficking, but also develop joint strategies to combat these threats. They welcomed the signing of the Extradition Treaty and the Agreement for Transfer of Sentenced Persons. Besides, both sides also urged the international community to resolutely combat terrorism. Both sides also concluded the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on combating terrorism. This is a very good development to erase the past mutual misunderstanding of Saudi Arabia being bracketed with Pakistan and viewed as the main financier of Pakistan state-sponsored terrorism and proxy war against India.

4. POLITICAL RELATIONS

Political relations between India and Saudi Arabia still remain one area where both sides need to focus on. The end of cold war politics and the recent shift in Saudi Arabian approach toward India and Pakistan and in particular to Kashmir issue have given way to understanding between the two countries on the need to explore political opportunities. Today, Saudi Arabia calls for resolving the difference on the Kashmir issue bilaterally based on the existing Shimla and Lahore agreements, which confirms with New Delhi's stand.

Even after the end of cold war, high-level official visits from both sides have remained low profile. Had there been a frequent high-level official visits by leaders of both sides, the relationship today would have been very different. This is not to say that the political understandings between the two countries on various regional and global issues are not sound.

The visit of King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz to India in January 2006 as the Chief Guest of Republic Day celebrations was a landmark one in a way that it opened a new chapter in the post cold war India-Saudi Arabia relations. By inviting the kingdom, India wants to send a message of strategic importance New Delhi attach to this partnership. During this visit, King Abdullah referred to India as his 'second home' and signed the 'Delhi Declaration', one of the first such bilateral document ever signed by a Saudi King. The 'Delhi Declaration' provides a comprehensive road map on how the relationship should progress in the coming decades. Both sides signed several agreements/MOUs during the visit including MOU on Combating Crime, Bilateral Investment Protection Agreement and the Double Taxation Avoidance Agreement. This was followed by Foreign Minister Prince Saud Al Faisal visit to India in February 2006. Thereafter, he visited India twice in February 2008 and December 2008, and interacted with Indian leaders. The other ministerial visits from Saudi side included that of Justice Minister, Minister for Higher Education, Minister of Health, Minister of Commerce & Industry and Petroleum Minister. Intelligence Chief Prince Muqrin also paid two-day visit to India on January 15-16, 2009 and held discussions with the then National Security Advisor Mr. M. K. Narayanan. Saudi Commerce Minister Mr. Abdullah Zainal Alireza also visited India in August 2009 and met then Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh in New Delhi to deliver a personal message from King Abdullah. Mr. Alireza

also held meetings with External Affairs Minister Mr. S.M. Krishna, then Finance Minister Mr. Pranab Mukherjee and then Commerce and Industry Minister Mr. Anand Sharma.

From the Indian side, the first one to visit Saudi Arabia after the end of cold war was Dr. Manmohan Singh, the then Foreign Minister of India in December 1994 for the Indo-Saudi Joint Commission Meeting and the visit of then External Affairs Minister Mr. Jaswant Singh to Saudi Arabia in January 2001. Then after a long gap, then External Affairs Minister Mr. Pranab Mukherjee visited Kingdom in April 2008 and held discussions with King Abdullah and Finance Minister Prince Saud Al Faisal. The other visits from Indian side includes the visits of Speaker of Lok Sabha, Minister of Human Resources Development, Minister of Youth Affairs and Sports, Minister of Petroleum and Natural Gas, Minister of State for External Affairs, National Security Adviser. Ministry of State for External Affairs E. Ahamed held discussions with Saudi counterpart Mr. Nizar bin Obaid Madani in Riyadh on April 20, 2009.

The visit of Indian former Prime Minister to Saudi few years back marked the beginning of new era of strategic partnership when both sides signed the 'Riyadh Declaration'. The declaration outlines the roadmap for cooperation in security, defence, political and economic areas.¹ These visits signify the eagerness of both sides to have qualitatively stronger and more comprehensive partnership. India and Saudi Arabia have developed a common perception on various issues ranging from fight against terrorism to mutual economic boom to ensuring peace, security and stability in the Gulf region. Although India does not share a border with Gulf countries, but is equally concerned about the instability and insecurity in the region owing to its likely spill over impact it would have in our country.

5. ECONOMIC AND TRADE RELATIONS

India is an important trade and economic partner for Saudi Arabia. The Indian need for energy resources and Saudi Arabian search for highly skilled and trained human resources can be fulfilled by working closely together. Over the last one decade after the dawn of the twenty-first century, there has also been a significant increase in two way trade and investments. India-Saudi economic relations have shown remarkable growth with bilateral trade registering a many-fold increase in the last five years. The value of the two-way trade between the two countries has increased from more than 2,713 million in 2004-05 to more than 25 million in 2008-09 (Refer to Table 1 on next page). For Saudi Arabia, India is the fourth largest market for its exports, accounting for 4.84 per cent of its total exports. In terms of imports by Saudi Arabia, India ranks tenths and is source of around 2.73 per cent of Saudi Arabia's total imports. For Indian exports, Saudi Arabia is the fourteenth largest market in the world and is destination of more than 1.9 per cent of India's exports. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia is the source of 5.5 per cent of India's total imports.

The major items of export to Saudi Arabia by India include basmati/non-basmati rice, tea, man-made yarn, fabrics, made ups, cotton yarn, primary & semi-finished iron and steel, chemicals, plastic & linoleum products, machinery and instruments. While the major items imported by India, apart from crude oil, include organic chemicals, inorganic chemicals, artificial resin, plastic materials, sulphur, iron pyrites, pulp and waste paper, ores and metal scrap, coal, coke and briquettes, iron and steel, non-ferrous metals. However, there is lack of meaningful diversification

in the pattern of Indian exports and imports to and from Saudi Arabia. The minerals, fuel and crude oil still account for more than 80 per cent of imports from Saudi Arabia.

Table 1: Merchandise Trade Between India and Saudi Arabia: 2000-01 to 2010-11 (Apr-Sep) (in US \$ millions)

Year	India's Exports to Saudi Arabia	Growth Rate (%)	India's Imports from Saudi Arabia	Growth Rate (%)	Trade Turnover	Balance
2000-01	822.94	10.83	621.12	-74.33	1444.05	201.82
2001-02	826.43	0.42	463.99	-25.30	1290.42	362.44
2002-03	940.74	13.83	504.72	8.78	1445.46	436.02
2003-04	1,123.31	19.41	737.77	46.17	1861.08	385.54
2004-05	1,412.06	25.71	1,301.15	76.36	2713.21	110.91
2005-06	1,809.77	28.17	1,632.34	25.45	3442.11	177.43
2006-07	2,590.77	43.15	13,355.33	718.17	15,946.1	-10,764.56
2007-08	3,711.16	43.25	19,470.30	45.79	23,181.46	-15,759.14
2008-09	5,110.38	37.70	19,972.74	2.58	25,083.12	-14,862.36
2009-10	3,907.00	-23.55	17,097.57	-14.40	21,004.57	-13190.57
2010-11 (Apr-Sep)	2,222.92		9,755.11		11,978.03	-7532.19

Source: Department of Commerce, Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Government of India, available at <<http://commerce.nic.in/eidb/default.asp>>.

From the above table, we can say that there witnessed improvements in the trade volume only in the recent years. The growth rate clearly shows that consistency has been a matter of concern for both countries. The balance of trade is tilting in favour of Saudi Arabia, requiring Saudi Arabia to take more steps to open the way for imports from India.

Saudi Arabia is the largest supplier of crude oil to India. The public sector oil firms in India purchase about 10 Million Metric Tonnes (MMT) of crude per year. In addition, private Indian companies buy another 7 to 9 MMT of crude per annum from Saudi Aramco. During 2002-2003, India's imports of Crude Oil and petroleum products from Saudi Arabia amounted to 18.816 MMT worth approximately US \$ 3.6 billion, which was around 23 per cent of India's crude imports during the year. With gaining understanding and the change of time, India not only engages in energy trade with Saudi Arabia, but there also has been increasing trade and investment ties between these regions.

6. INVESTMENT RELATIONS

Investment cooperation is one area where India and Saudi Arabia has a lot to explore. Ever since the Saudi government has introduced a new investment law and its subsequent establishment of the Saudi Arabian General Investment Authority (SAGIA) in the mid of 2000, many Indian firms took advantage of the new Saudi laws allowing for setting up of 100 per cent foreign owned projects in the Kingdom. Despite of this, level of investment relations at present is not satisfactory given the huge scope of investment from both sides. No doubt, Indian companies have made investment in Saudi in the areas of IT, software development, designing, consultancy, financial services, etc.

While addressing the India-Saudi Arabia Joint Business Council meeting organised by Federation of Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry on 23 February 2011, Faisal Hassan Ahmed, Ambassador of Saudi Arabia to India invited Indian companies to invest in Saudi Arabia in areas like science & technology, education, IT, defence and security. While India on the other side, offers Saudi Arabia significant potential for investment in multi- sectors for mutual benefit. It can undertake investments in India's infrastructure sector, including airports and railways, which require investments in excess of US\$100 billion.

According to the Department of Industrial Policy and Promotion, during the period between April 2000 to October 2010, Saudi Arabia has invested US\$ 31.59 million, compared to UAE investments worth US\$ 1,815.29 million. While, total Indian Foreign Direct Investments into Saudi Arabia during the period between 1990 and 2008 is US\$ 2.07 billion.

7. DEFENCE AND SECURITY TIES

India's foreign policy seeks to promote an environment of peace and stability in its region and in the world, to enable India's accelerated socio-economic development and safeguarding its national security. In this context, strengthening of defence cooperation with friendly countries including Saudi Arabia remains an important objective and component of India's overall defence and foreign policies.

The emergence of international terrorism, as one of the primary threats to both India and Saudi Arabia, has ushered in greater convergence in security perceptions. This has prompted both sides to have closer security and defence related contacts, exchanges and cooperation and sharing of information, military exercises, military training, etc. There is a need for expanding the defence cooperation beyond exchange of courses and visits.

India and Saudi Arabia have in recent times developed an understanding on the need to expand the defence and security ties to deal with common security threats. Both sides face the same problems emanating from the issue of terrorism and other activities such as maritime piracy, money laundering, illegal arms trade, etc. India has signed defence cooperation agreements with the Saudi Arabia. The defence agreements between the two countries is aimed at providing military training, cooperation in military medical services, joint exercises, joint development and manufacture of sophisticated military hardware, cooperation in product support, services, defence science and technology etc and jointly combating pollution caused by the military at sea.

The Indian Navy has conducted exercises with the navies of Saudi Arabia. The Saudi Arabian can learn a lot from the Indian Navy given its expertise. Besides, the Indian Air Force has also come forward to conduct ariel exercises with their counterparts. With gaining understanding between the armed forces, such type of exercises will help improve regional security.

8. THE INDIAN DIASPORA IN SAUDI ARABIA

In recent years, the strength of the Indian community in Saudi Arabia has moved up to nearly 1.4 million. They accounts for 20 percent of the total 7 million expatriates. With the increase of population, they have made significant presence in various occupations in Saudi Arabia. They have left marks in the fields of entrepreneurs, doctors, lawyers, engineers, chartered accountants and managers. This Indian diaspora has a significant role to play in helping to strengthen the

bilateral ties between the two countries. Indian expatriates in Saudi Arabia can be categorized as under:

- Professionally qualified (5 percent) – it comprises of doctors, engineers, chartered accountants, managers etc.
- White collar staff (10 percent) – it comprises of clerks, accountants, store keepers, booking clerks, secretaries etc.
- Laborers/technicians (85 percent) – those working on project sites, industrial establishments and on operation and maintenance jobs.

Indian community is the 'most preferred community' due to their expertise, sense of discipline and their moderate and law abiding nature. Saudi leadership has appreciated the contribution made by Indian community to the development of Saudi Arabia. The Indian community is being regarded as playing a vital role in the development of the country. They helped in the proper operation and functioning of the infrastructure and its industrial and agricultural establishments.

9. OTHER AREAS OF STRATEGIC COOPERATION

In the Riyadh Declaration, both India and Saudi Arabia expressed mutual desire to develop a knowledge-based economies based on advances in the areas of information technology, space science and other frontier technologies. They welcomed the agreements signed between the two sides in the field of Research and Education, Information Technology and Services, Science and Technology, and Peaceful Uses of Outer Space. Today, Gulf countries including Saudi Arabia see India as a potential partner in the development of their knowledge economy by taking advantage of India's achievements in science and technology, particularly information technology, bio-technology, space and telecommunications. Other areas of strategic cooperation between the two countries are discussed below:

- **Educational Ties:** Educational ties are another area of significant importance for India and Saudi Arabia. India has also pledged to assist Saudi Arabia in setting up an Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Centre of Excellence as well as institutes of higher learning, involving both education and research in the field of technology. Both countries have signed a memorandum on higher education in the year 2006 which calls for exchange of teaching faculty and students, encourage direct scientific and educational communications among the institutions and exchange of delegations between the two countries.
- **Energy Cooperation:** Given India's growing energy requirements to meet its domestic demand, there are huge scopes for cooperation between the two countries in the area. India, the second largest population in the world known for its significant economic growth has been facing the challenges arising out of the growing energy demands to meet its population. At present India is the sixth largest energy consumer in the world and is projected to emerge as the fourth largest consumer after the United States, China and Japan in the coming decades. Its economy is projected to grow 7 per cent to 8 per cent over the next two decades. For India to sustain this projected economic growth and eradicating poverty would require solving energy problem. If India reduces the use of oil in its power and manufacturing sectors, the demand for oil in the transport sector shows no sign of abating. Due to stagnating domestic crude production, India imports approximately 70 per cent of its oil. Its dependence is growing rapidly. The World Energy Outlook, published by the International Energy

Agency (IEA), projects that India's dependence on oil imports will grow to 91.6 per cent by the year 2020.

India's commitment to sustain high economic growth rate would remain unfulfilled if there is a shortage of energy resources and its consequent infrastructure development. At this crucial juncture, Saudi Arabia is favorably positioned to benefit from burgeoning demand for energy in India. Saudi Arabia as such is the largest supplier of crude oil to India.

- **Science and Technology:** Ever since India and Saudi Arabia have established the Joint Commission for Economic, Trade, Scientific, Technical and Cultural Cooperation (JCM) in 1981, the two countries have been actively engaged in the fields of science and technology and agriculture. The Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) and the Saudi Arabian Standards Organization (SASO) has an ongoing programme of technical cooperation (POC) since June 1993. Under this programme, Indian experts in different scientific areas, particularly in measurement and calibration are deputed to Saudi Arabia on a regular basis. Besides, several Saudi experts have undergone advanced training in India. CSIR and the King Abdul Aziz City for Science and Technology (KACST) have signed a MoU for bilateral cooperation in 1997 and have an ongoing programme of cooperation in the areas of space science, remote sensing and installation of internet.
- **Health and its Related Pharmaceuticals Sector:** Health is another area which offers significant potential for cooperation between the two countries. Both sides by cooperating in this area will bring huge benefit. Saudi Arabia Health Minister Mr. Hamad bin Abdullah Al-Manie while speaking at a conference organised here by industry lobby Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry of India (ASSOCHAM) during his visit to India in 2006 has said, 'We hope to enhance cooperation in the field of health, especially in areas like telemedicine, training and doctors' exchange programmes.' In India, the market for healthcare was \$38 billion in 2007, expecting to reach \$140 billion by 2018 with a growth rate of 15 per cent per annum. What they need to do is extending healthcare services, building healthcare infrastructure and developing its related technologies. India is one of the largest manufacturers and exporters of pharmaceuticals. Given India's expertise in geno-type drug design and the presence of a large pool of trained doctors and cost effective research & development (R&D) activities, it becomes imperative for India and Saudi Arabia to think over it.

10. CONCLUSION

In the long run, India will continue to remain an important partner for Saudi Arabia and vice versa. The present level of cooperation between the two countries is beyond the actual potential. There are huge scope for improvement in every sectors including economic and trade ties, defence and security ties, etc. Both sides will need to work hard if they are to strengthen the present level of ties which is not comprehensive in nature, so as to gain strategic character. This partnership will enable both countries to harness the vast potential of bilateral relations, drawing upon complementarities and each other's intrinsic strengths, and work together to address regional and global challenges.



However, being an author I suggest that the following steps must be taken to express their desire for a comprehensive strategic partnership:

- The frequency of high-level official exchange must be improved so that the political understanding improves.
- High-level military exchanges, joint training of troops and use of training courses must be encouraged.
- Both sides should refrain from taking any steps that would harm the interests of the other sides.
- Both sides must show the eagerness to open and more and more areas for cooperation.
- Create a climate conducive for investments from both sides which are mutually beneficial.

I do hope that both the countries will definitely adopt all the aforesaid suggested steps for their future growth.

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