

Opinion – The Contours of the Saudi Arabia-Pakistan Relationship

Written by Nadeem Ahmed Moonakal

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NADEEM AHMED MOONAKAL, FEB 20 2020

Saudi Arabia was one of the first countries to acknowledge the unique position of Pakistan in the Islamic world. Four years after the formation of Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan signed the Treaty of Friendship. Saudi Arabia saw a partner in Pakistan which is militarily powerful and has no interest in meddling with the regional affairs of the Middle East and the Kingdom also had a fundamental base to accelerate the relationship because of the shared identity of a nation driven and formed by an Islamic character. The partnership between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan has grown over time and has remained to be one of the strongest alliances in the Islamic world; rightly defined by the late King Abdullah bin Abdelaziz al Saud as 'brothers'. The intent to further strengthen the engagement is evident from the statement released by Pakistan's Foreign Office after the recent conversation between Shah Mahmood Qureshi and his Saudi Arabian counterpart.

Since the 1960s, Pakistan has been contributing significantly to the security of Saudi Arabia and has secured its interests in the region. Pakistan's support for Saudi Arabia was vital because of the fact that Pakistan had an experienced military and the political class in Pakistan never threatened the legitimacy of the Saudi royal family unlike several other Arab neighbors in the region previously. By the late 1970s, Saudi Arabia had experienced an economic boom associated with its oil wealth that demanded a large labor force. Pakistan again catered to the requirements of Saudi Arabia since a large migration from Pakistan took place during this timeframe that helped the Kingdom to expand its economy. Saudi Arabia from the 1970s has also become an essential partner for the benefit of Pakistan's economy. The Kingdom, in the past five decades, has helped Pakistan economically by pumping money in the form of investments and other financial aid and in the recent past, this has helped Pakistan significantly to keep its economy afloat.

The strategic partnership between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan is another vital element in their bilateral relationship. Pakistan, being a nuclear power, has been seen as a powerful partner to address the strategic concerns of Saudi Arabia in the form of a possible nuclear threat from Iran. Although Pakistan conventionally has maintained a neutral position with respect to the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, several pieces of evidence suggest that Pakistan has leaned closer to the Kingdom possibly because of the transactional relationship between both the countries.

Wahhabism flourished in Pakistan over time and the role of Saudi Arabia in perpetuating the conservative Islamic thought in an innately diverse country like Pakistan affirms the socio-cultural paradigm of the relationship between both countries. Pakistani society initially saw Islam in Saudi Arabia as different from that of their own and a general consensus on Wahhabi Islam to be purer and unadulterated further helped Saudi Arabia to have a strong influence in Pakistan. The fact that the two holy mosques are situated in the Kingdom and Saudi Arabia is the birthplace of Islam further caters to that narrative. A large section of the Pakistani society now adheres to the Wahhabi thought and the reflection of that conformation and religious appropriation of Wahhabism is apparent in Pakistani society by and large. It is also a fact that people like Zia-ul-Haq have used the extreme derivations of Wahhabism and have perpetuated it to gain political legitimacy which during his tenure significantly impacted the manner in which Pakistani society was molded.

The fact that Saudi Arabia has significantly helped Pakistan in the recent past amid the economic crisis highlights the

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relationship between both the countries. Pakistan has helped Saudi Arabia despite the fact that the country refused to be a part of the alliance led by Saudi Arabia to fight the Houthi group in Yemen in 2015. Although Pakistan wanted to emphasize its strategic autonomy by doing so the fact that retired Pakistani Army General Raheel Sharif is leading IMAFT (Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism) affirms the argument that Pakistan certainly has limitations to portray itself as neutral in the regional rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Riyadh is keen on Islamabad's complete cooperation with respect to the regional conflicts in the Middle East like the war in Yemen.

Despite strong converging interests there certainly have been few reservations in the bilateral engagement. Pakistan has expressed its concern over the observer status given to India at the backdrop of Balakot strikes that India conducted after the Pulwama attacks. Saudi Arabia has engaged with India actively in the recent past and both the nations have diversified the cooperation to numerous sectors. Saudi Arabia sees an inevitable partner in India because of the economic potential and the regional power India encompasses. These potential paradigms of India are crucial for Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 agenda especially considering the fact that India is one of the premier customers of Saudi Arabian oil and close cooperation with India in securing Riyadh's interest in the Indian Ocean Region remains vital.

In short, the approach of Saudi Arabia towards Pakistan largely revolves around three key components in the present geopolitical context. The first is the military power and nuclear capabilities of Pakistan which addresses the strategic requirements for Saudi Arabia. The second is the economic limitations of Pakistan which can only be addressed by countries like Saudi Arabia since in the recent past Western powers have distanced themselves from Pakistan. The third is the factor of the Islamic identity of Pakistan which completely caters to the idea of working in partnership for the larger welfare of Muslim ummah which remains crucial for Saudi Arabia in the present regional dynamics. Although certain divergences and limitations in this strong alliance are evident especially with Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan pulling out from the Kuala Lumpur Summit reportedly because of the pressure from Saudi Arabia and Riyadh's accentuated engagement with India causing discomfort to Islamabad, the long-standing Islamic alliance will continue on the basis of strong strategic, political and economic convergences that are crucial for both countries now more than ever before as both Saudi Arabia and Pakistan keenly aspire to secure strong regional power postures in the Middle East and South Asia respectively.

About the author:

Nadeem Ahmed Moonakal is a researcher at the International Institute for Iranian Studies, Riyadh. He writes on the security and political developments in the Middle East and South Asia and his research focuses on the emerging geopolitics of the Middle East.