**The faltering Gulf-India security collaboration? Part-1**

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Given the impact of the crosscurrents of the Gulf-India security alliance, it seems a veritable truth that such security cooperation– born out of unnatural bonds –undergoes a faltering status. The recent visit by the Indian Army chief to Saudi Arabia (in December, 2020) has marked not only a major step in the countries’ military dialogue – but at the same time, it has sent a divisive message to the Muslim Ummah. Riyadh’s politics bear undeniable signs of prompting change vis-à-vis Saudis’ relations with India and Pakistan. The Saudi- devised trajectory seems to have been developing some profound impact on both the South Asian and the Middle Eastern strategic culture –chracterinsing new makes and breaks. For Riyadh and its narrow-sighted policy framers, to recalibrate its ties with both India and Israel seems a paradox policy option than to foster the former policy choices.

India, in the recent past, has demonstrated an enhanced appetite to forge security partnerships with the Gulf States. This is evident in the recent Joint Statements between India and the UAE as well as India and Saudi Arabia where the respective leaders have vowed to enhance anti-terror cooperation with India, including combating the growing presence of ISIS. Another impetus to security cooperation between India and the Gulf is the numerous bilateral defence exercises. General Manoj Mukund Naravane the Indian army chief visited the UAE and Saudi Arabia in December last year. The discussions largely revolved around ramping up defence cooperation in strategic areas. General Naravane’s visit to the Gulf hashighlighted a potential sale of the Brahmos missile. Both, Abu Dhabi and Riyadh have reportedly shown interest in buying the Indo-Russian missile system. A number of other proposals are also on the table such as joint military exercises. The Arab coalition which is fighting to secure the strategic Yemeni port of Hodeidah seems to be reaching out to India for its support, a leading Arab diplomat said.

A defence cooperation agreement was signed between India and Saudi Arabia in February 2014 during Prince Salman’s visit to New Delhi. The MoU sought to promote cooperation in the defence sector through the exchange of defence-related expertise and training, as well as in the fields of 25 science and technology. From the Indian perspective, a stronger partnership with a key regional player like Saudi Arabia balances against Islamabad’s influence in the region. While India’s relations with the Gulf were constrained in the post-Partition era, Pakistan mobilised Gulf support in its conflicts with India, much of which has endured to date.

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A year ago, Riyadh agreed to double its oil exports to India, helping New Delhi reduce its reliance on Iran. Most of India’s defence outreach to the Gulf recently has been led by the Navy, with high level visits by the service peppered across 2017, 2018 and 2019. Earlier in 2015, a contingent of the Indian Air Force which included Sukhoi 30MKI fighters, C-17 and C-130J transport aircraft, IL-78 tankers and 110 personnel conducted the first staging visit at Saudi’s King Fahd air base in Taif while on route to the United Kingdom. The same year, then IAF chief Arup Raha had visited UAE and Oman and in 2016 the air forces of India and the UAE conducted bilateral exercises.

These institutions have since developed over the years at a steady pace. India is also eager to provide a space to cash in from the likes of Saudi and UAE getting more comfortable in taking control of their own security and hedging an over-reliance on the US-provided security blanket. It appears that in the current scenario, India-US-Israel-GCC security partnership may increase thereby pressurizing Iran. The critical Indian interests concerning the diaspora, energy and security have required India to gravitate towards the Gulf States. As per DPIIT from April 2000 to Dec 2019): Saudi Arabia is the 39th largest investor in India with investments amounting to US $315 Million. Major investment groups include ARAMCO, SABIC, ZAMIL, E-holidays, Al Batterjee Group. The Saudi Sovereign Wealth Fund backed Soft Bank’s ‘Vision Fund’ has invested several billion dollars in the Indian Start-ups such as Delhivery, FirstCry, Grofers, Ola, OYO, Paytm and PolicyBazaar.

In recent years, the Indian navy has held drills with UAE and Saudi Arabia. In March 2018, India and the UAE conducted their maiden naval exercise “Gulf star 1” and in 2019, India and Saudi Arabia announced their first joint naval drills – which were delayed to the coronavirus pandemic. General Naravane’s visit could lead to a rescheduling of these drills. “The closer relationship between the Saudi and Pak militaries also makes it important for India to forge a closer relationship,” Sameer Patil, Mumbai-based international security analyst told Anadolu Agency.

In his second visit to Saudi Arabia in October 2019 after three-and-a-half years, PM Narendra Modi and The Saudi Prince Mohammad bin Salman signed a pact for the establishment of a Strategic Partnership Council (SPC). India is the fourth country with which Saudi Arabia has formed such a strategic partnership, after the UK, France and China. “I am happy that our cooperation, particularly in the field of counterterrorism, security and strategic issues, is progressing very well. My national security adviser just visited Riyadh for a very productive visit,” Modi said, referring to the visit. Saudi Arabia is a long-time, reliable partner in catering to India’s energy needs. The Kingdom has been a leading supplier of crude oil for decades, and India imported 18 percent of its energy needs from Saudi Arabia in 2018/19. A steady supply of crude to India was maintained despite the attacks on oil installations in the Kingdom in September 2019.

On the other hand, Saudi Arabia has emerged as a new arena for India-China competition. In addition to competing for energy resources, India’s regional policy is influenced by China’s growing security profile in the Gulf. Professor Harsh Pant from King’s College writes that “China’s growing dependence on maritime space and resources is reflected in the Chinese aspiration to expand its influence and to ultimately 11 dominate the strategic environment of the Indian Ocean region.” Saudi Arabia has tried to offset shifts in the regional balance of power by promoting efforts towards greater integration of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Michelle Dunne of the Carnegie Middle East Centre has noted that “[i]n every arena-in Syria, Iraq, Gaza, Libya, even what happened in Egypt-this regional polarization, with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates…on one side and Qatar and Turkey on the other, has proved to be a gigantic 23 impediment to international efforts to resolve any of these crises.”

To be continued

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