

Pakistan-Saudi Arabia Relations

What is the issue?

- The long-time allies Pakistan and Saudi Arabia are drifting apart.
- Also, Saudi Arabia prefers to build ties with India rather than criticise it over Kashmir.

What are the developments in the Saudi-Pakistan ties?

- **1971 war** - The relationship between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan was most prominent during the 1971 Indo-Pakistan war.
- Saudi Arabia had denounced the Indian action as treacherous and contrary to all international covenants and human values.
- It also transferred arms and equipment including the loan of some 75 aircraft to Pakistan.
- **After the war** - Saudi Arabia consistently supported the call for the return of Pakistan's prisoners of war.
- Saudi Arabia gave loans to Pakistan enabling it to buy arms worth about \$1 million by 1977.
- **After nuclear tests** - Saudi oil and dollars have kept Pakistan's economy on its feet after sanctions following the nuclear tests.
- In 1990, Pakistan sent its ground forces to defend Saudi Arabia against Iraq's invasion of Kuwait.

What is Saudi's position in the Kashmir issue?

- The alignment over Kashmir at the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) crystallised since 1990, when insurgency in Jammu and Kashmir began.
- While the OIC has issued statements over the last three decades, it became a ritual of little significance to India.
- In 2019, after India revoked Article 370 in Kashmir, Pakistan lobbied with the OIC for its condemnation of India's move.
- To Pakistan's surprise, Saudi Arabia and the UAE issued statements that were nuanced rather than harshly critical of New Delhi.
- Over the last one year, Pakistan has tried to rouse the sentiments among the Islamic countries.
- But only Turkey and Malaysia publicly criticised India.

What is Saudi's perspective?

- Saudi Arabia's change in position has been a gradual process under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS).
- As Saudi seeks to diversify from its heavily oil-dependent economy, it sees India as a valuable partner in the region.
- India had worked the diplomatic levers through high-level visits and dangled opportunities for investment and business.
- MBS, who is looking to invest in India, has taken a realistic view, along with UAE's crown prince Mohammed bin Zayed.
- Saudi Arabia is India's fourth largest trade partner and a major source of energy.
- With India stopping oil imports from Iran due to threat of US sanctions, Saudi Arabia is key in this respect as well.

Why is there a tension between Saudi and Pakistan?

- **2015** - Pakistan's Parliament decided not to support the Saudi military effort to restore an internationally recognised government in Yemen.
- Later, Pakistan's then Army chief General led the Saudi-led Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism.
- **2019** - After the Pulwama terror attack, Saudi Arabia and the UAE pulled their weight to get Indian Wing Commander Abhinandan released, apart from the US.
- At that time, the Saudi Crown Prince visited Pakistan and India.
- He made it clear that he valued economic opportunities.
- **Accusation** - A year after Article 370 was revoked, Pakistan had said that Saudi Arabia had failed to deliver on the Kashmir cause.
- This was an indication of Pakistan's frustration that OIC had not played a leadership role in backing Pakistan against India.
- **Saudi's actions** - This accusation angered Saudi Arabia.
- In 2018, Saudi announced loan package for Pakistan that included \$3 billion in loans and an oil credit facility amounting to \$3.2 billion.
- Saudi Arabia demanded the return of the loan and refused to sell oil to Islamabad on deferred payment.
- **Pakistan's reaction** - It returned \$1 billion, displaying the rift.
- But, in the current economic situation, it is couldn't pay the next tranche.
- Pakistan Army chief Gen Qamar Javed Bajwa visited Saudi Arabia in a patch-up exercise, but was denied a meeting with MBS.
- **Other factors** - Pakistan has been trying to pander to Turkey and Malaysia, which has also angered Saudi Arabia.
- Turkey's President is trying to position himself as the new leader of Muslim

world, challenging Saudi Arabia's long-held position.

What is the China factor?

- Over the last one year, China has supported Pakistan on Kashmir.
- It has raised the issue at the UN Security Council thrice.
- It has also emerged as Pakistan's biggest benefactor through its funding of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).
- Pakistan Foreign Minister's recent strategic visit to China needs to be seen in this context.

What are the implications for India?

- Saudi's silence on Kashmir issue and CAA-NRC has emboldened the Indian government.
- Both India and Saudi see value in their relationship.
- At a time when India and China are locked in a border standoff, India would be wary of Pakistan and China teaming up.
- But with Saudi Arabia in its corner for now, it may have a leverage over Pakistan (Saudi would not want a conflict and regional instability).
- Pakistan-China and the Pakistan-Saudi axes are not fused together at the moment: It is not a Saudi-Pakistan-China triangle.
- The future of the region may be decided by how India leverages this.

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