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By Dr Subhash Kapila

Saudi Arabia Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman, the de facto ruler of Saudi Arabia visited Pakistan and India - February 2019 with a further follow-up visit to China. Saudi Arabia's underlying strategic objectives in clubbing these visits make an interesting analysis as the India visit stands out apart strategically in relation to Pakistan and China.

Pakistan has had historically a vassal-state relationship with Saudi Arabia in that Saudi Arabia for reasons more than one has repeatedly bailed out Pakistan from its 'state-failure propensities'. The predominating impulse of Saudi Arabia in doing so is not that Pakistan as a large theocratic Islamic Republic enjoys commonality of Islam as the State-religion with Saudi Arabia. It has a lot to do with the fact that Saudi Arabia has a call on Pakistan's military machine and its nuclear weapons arsenal for its security requirements as a quid pro quo for Pakistan's dependence on Saudi munificence in terms of financial doles and free oil to sustain Pakistan.

Saudi Arabia Crown Prince Salman during his recent visit to Pakistan expanded Pakistan's role in the Saudi Strategic Vision' as that of being what can be analytically called as the 'Eastern Sentinel' of the envisioned Greater Saudi Arabia configuration. This has strategic implications for India.

Over and above the above strategic aims the more pressing need for Saudi Arabia is to so position Pakistan firmly on its side in the ongoing Saudi Arabia regional power tussle with Iran, which besides also carries strains of the Sunni-Shia divide rivalries in the Islamic world. Pakistan with geographical contiguity on Iran's Eastern Flank emerges as a valuable cog in Saudi strategy.

While Pakistan PM Imran Khan went out of more than protocol way to extend ceremonial honours to underline the importance that Pakistan

accords to Saudi Arabia and bailing out Pak PM from seeking an IMF loan, there are differing voices within Pakistan on the significance of the Saudi Crown Prince visit to Pakistan.

Within Pakistan there were different voices commenting on the Saudi Crown Prince visit to Pakistan. In a column in the English Daily DAWN on February 21 a Columnist commented on the visit under the heading “\$20 Billion Glass Slipper” asserting that MOUs signed were essentially diplomatic holograms; it is not a binding offer of marriage.” And that coming to Gwadar any Saudi projected investments may take 7-10 years to actualise. Further. A lot depends on China’s willingness as they have a lease on the port till 2059

China made its first strategic foothold in the Middle East when it induced Saudi Arabia into a strategic dependence in the late 1980s by supplying Chinese IRBM CSS2 Missiles to reinforce Saudi Arabia’s military confidence against the Iranian military buildup. China thus can thus be accused of having initiated the long range missiles race in the Middle East and especially in the Gulf Region.

China had dual overall strategic aims in the above course, with the first being energy security for its expanding needs and more importantly enlisting Saudi Arabia as the ‘Custodian of the Holy Places of Islam’ as an insurance against China’s restive Muslim minorities. China in doing so was validating Samuel Huntington’s classics prophesy in his seminal work ‘The Clash of Civilisation’ that the world has to watch out for a Sinic-Islamic strategic combination.

Notably standing out was the fact that during Saudi Crown Prince’s visit to Beijing this month Saudi Arabia was officially silent on China’s large-scale persecution of its Muslim Majority province of Xinjiang. Surprising was the statement of the Crown Prince that China has a right to take strong counter-terrorist actions against terrorists. Obviously strategic considerations outweighed the religious compulsions.

Contextually, in light of the above analysis, the question that arises is as to how does India merit a visit of the Saudi de facto Ruler during his February 2019 strategic foray covering the Indian Subcontinent and China?

India in February 2019 figures in the strategic calculus of Saudi Arabia for multiple reasons and chiefly, because India can no longer be ignored strategically or economically on the strength of its emergence in global calculus as an ‘Emerging Power’. Also in play is the factor of the evolving proximate defence relationship with the United States as part of the overall US-India Strategic Partnership.

Saudi Arabia despite periodic strains in its relations with the United States cannot afford to strategically ignore the United States or its strategic partnerships which includes India in 2019 in a more significant way. Surely, if the United States accords a priority to India’s role in Asia, China notwithstanding, can Saudi Arabia ignore that reality?

In terms of comparative geopolitical weightage between Pakistan and India while Saudi preferences for Pakistan are understandable for reasons quoted earlier in the discussion, the other side of the coin dictates that India today carries more geopolitical weightage than

Pakistan. This is a truism that will continue to exist for many decades to come.

Economically, India offers a safe and stable destination for parking its long-range economic investments with good returns on its financial surpluses. Saudi Arabia economically engaged with India strongly obtains massive returns from India's technologically advanced industrial infrastructure. With India earmarked to emerge as the third largest global economy in the next five years the economic benefits that can accrue to Saudi Arabia from India are significant and extensive.

Saudi Arabia would also not be unaware that despite Pakistan's propaganda of persecution of Indian Muslims the reality that both in India and in the Middle East there are enough large Indian Muslim-owned business and industrial groups that negate this propaganda.

The next point of analytical discussion is the China-Pakistan Axis and the seeming convergence of strategic interests between Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and China. What implications does it carry for India's foreign policy and security dimensions?

Obviously, the first point of tackling has to be the China-Pakistan Axis and Saudi Arabia's thinking or perspectives on it? It is my assessment that while there may be a certain convergence between Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and China for varying political and geopolitical reasons, there does appear curiously a notable contradiction in the China-Pakistan Axis perspectives and those of Saudi Arabia on the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

Saudi Arabia's interest in investing a multi-billion dollars petro-chemical complex at Gwadar at the terminal end of CPEC on the North Arabian Sea littoral seems to rob China's exclusivity and ownership of the CPEC.

Does it signify that such a step by Saudi Arabia, analytically, at United States behest, pre-empts the China-Pakistan Axis of establishment of a Chinese Navy base at Gwadar? Or does it signify that Saudi Arabia is joining hands with Pakistan and China to facilitate a Chinese naval base at Gwadar to strategically embarrass the United States? Or yet another strategic question and that is whether Saudi Arabia wants its own foothold in Pakistan on Iran's Easter Flank?

Difficult questions to answer at the moment as the answers have to wait more unfolding of China's and Pakistan's follow-up moves in this direction. Whatever be the outcome the fact is that a Saudi Arabia investment in Gwadar robs China's exclusivity in ownership of the PEC.

While moving towards the conclusion of this analysis reference must also be made to the domestic political debate in India during the Saudi Crown Prince visit to India in February 2018. Unfortunately, this visit got mired in India's domestic political debates because of Pakistan-based JeM terrorist suicide attacks at Pulwama in Kashmir Valley on the eve of the Saudi visit to Pakistan and India. India's Opposition political parties at the height of the election campaigning for May 2019 Elections were tempted to draw political mileage from Crown Prince MSB statements being not strong in condemnation of Pakistan by name and that PM Modi should have pressed him for such. But then,

political compulsions of Saudi Arabia on Pakistan need to be understood and further criticism should wait for Saudi Arabia moves in months to come.

Within India it needs to be pondered that India's good relations with Saudi Arabia and vice versa may be preferable to put brakes on Pakistan than expectations of outright public condemnation of Pakistan by Saudi Arabia on Indian soil. Hopefully, such an approach by India may in some small way also equally apply some restraint on Pakistan's clasping embrace of China.

Concluding, it does need to be highlighted that especially after 2014 when PM Modi came into power in New Delhi a concerted effort was made to reset India's Middle East policies and the result has been a greater recognition of India and political reach-outs to India by Gulf Countries like Saudi Arabia and the UAE—a marked departure from previous mindsets.

This Indian policy approach of Modi Government has paid dividends in multiple ways and the more recent and significant one being India being invited as Guest for the first time at the forthcoming meet of the Organisation of Islamic Countries. But such moves by India also necessitate a fine-tuning and balancing of India's relations with Iran where many strategic convergences exist including that of a value-added Strategic Partnership.

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