

**ESD: AIR: ALL UNITS****21.09.2021: TUESDAY****COMMENTARY****NEW VISTAS IN INDO-SAUDI TIES****Script: Dr. MOHAMMAD MUDDASSIR QUAMAR, Strategic Analyst on Middle East**

Saudi Arabia is one of India's most important partners in the Middle East. The India-Saudi bilateral relations have rapidly expanded to newer areas to acquire a strategic dimension. Conventionally, the bilateral ties were based on India's energy imports from Saudi Arabia and the large Indian community earning livelihood in the kingdom. In recent years, the surge in bilateral trade and two-way flow of investments added a new dynamism to the economic relations. The growing political engagements and security and defence convergence further strengthened the bilateral partnership began to realise its true potentials.

In October 2019, when Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Saudi Arabia, the two countries signed a Strategic Partnership Council Agreement with the objective to expanding bilateral cooperation in political, commercial and security domains. Earlier, in February 2019, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman visited India and committed to invest US\$ 100 billion in the flourishing Indian market. Not only was it a testimony of the Indo-Saudi friendship but recognition of the shifting nerve centre of global economy.

India and Saudi Arabia have continued their cooperation in the fight against Covid-19 pandemic. Although the outbreak affected the trade and commerce and delayed the realisation of Saudi investments, it strengthened the resolve of the two countries to develop bilateral cooperation. India supplied AstraZeneca vaccines manufactured in the Serum Institute of India in Pune, Maharashtra to Saudi Arabia in 2020, while Saudi Arabia came to India's help during the second wave in 2021 by supplying 140 tonnes of oxygen and other emergency medical supplies.

Since the outbreak of the pandemic, Prime Minister Modi held a number of telephonic conversations with King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed to take stalk of the bilateral relations and exchange views on joint efforts to fight the Covid-19.

The first official visit of Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal Bin Farhan to India, was the first by a Saudi dignitary to India after Covid-19, assumes significance. The agenda of the visit was exploring ways of bolstering India-Saudi bilateral relations in the commercial, strategic and security dimensions. The Saudi foreign minister held discussions with External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar and exchanged views on all bilateral, regional and international issues of mutual concern. He also called on Prime Minister Modi and also had a meeting with National Security Advisor AjitDoval during the visit.

During the meeting between the two ministers, discussions were held on implementation of the Strategic Partnership Council Agreement. "Both sides discussed further steps to

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strengthen their partnership in trade, investment, energy, defence, security, culture, consular issues, health care and human resources."

India “appreciated Saudi Arabia for the support provided to the Indian community during the Covid-19 pandemic and urged Saudi Arabia to further relax restrictions on travel from India” including resumption of direct flight between the two countries. Commenting on the meeting, Dr. Jaishakar tweeted that they had a “cordial and productive meeting” with discussions ranging on issues of “cooperation in the political, security and socio-cultural pillars of India-Saudi strategic partnership”.

Besides bilateral issues, the visit was also significant as it came at a time of changing regional and international geo-politics with far reaching ramifications for both India and Saudi Arabia. The most pressing issue at the moment is the upheaval in Afghanistan. With the exit of the US military and revival of Taliban regime, India is concerned about the security and stability of Afghanistan. The security threats due to Taliban’s history of sheltering terrorist groups including Al-Qaeda, Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed are a major concern for New Delhi. Saudi Arabia perceives Afghanistan’s instability as a security threat and considers stability of Afghanistan is paramount for regional security. Saudi Arabia was among the first countries to underline that the Taliban should strive to put up an inclusive government and provide good governance after it took over Kabul.

India and Saudi Arabia are two important members of the G-20; while India is one of the fastest growing economies in the world and is recognized as a rising power, Saudi Arabia is the largest economy in the Middle East. The two countries have expanded their bilateral relations to strategic partnership encompassing cooperation in the areas of trade, energy, investments, security, defence and regional security. Despite the disruption caused by Covid-19, the momentum in bilateral ties has increased and a new synergy has emerged in Indo-Saudi ties. Prince Faisal’s visit underlines that the two countries are exploring new avenues to expand the ties.