

The U.S. - Saudi agreement

The Hindu

Paper - II
(IR)

Over eight decades of eventful ties between the United States and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia have had their ups and downs — from the oil embargo of 1973 to the Jamal Khashoggi assassination in 2018. However, two images of this relationship remain iconic: the first is of the meeting between the U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt and the King of Saudi Arabia, Abdul Aziz Al-Saud on Valentine's Day 1945 aboard a U.S. cruiser beginning seven decades of an unbroken bilateral bromance. It was underpinned by an understated but seminal “oil-for-security” symbiosis. The second iconic frame is the fist-bump of July 15, 2022 in Riyadh between U.S. President Joe Biden and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MbS), symbolising a more equal and largely transactional partnership.

If the buzz around is to be believed, Riyadh and Washington are on the verge of a new and enhanced relationship, tentatively titled Strategic Alliance Agreement (SAA). This ‘Grand Bargain’ between them being negotiated for the past year is designed to match the domestic and regional ambitions of Al-Saud under MbS with the keenness of the White House to score a diplomatic success big enough to ensure Mr. Biden's re-election.

The layers to the agreement:

Reading between the lines of the U.S. media's episodic coverage, the SAA could have three interlinked components: bilateral, regional and global. At a bilateral level, it would codify the current implicit bilateral alliance into a strategic defence pact modelled on the U.S.-Japan treaty committing the Pentagon to come to the Kingdom's rescue in case of an attack. The U.S. would also equip Riyadh with means to defend itself which would include the state-of-art F-35 stealth fighters. More surprisingly, Washington, a non-proliferation hawk, seems to be agreeable to providing Saudi Arabia with nuclear technology for peaceful use. At a regional level, Riyadh wants a ceasefire in Gaza and some movement towards a two-state solution to the Israel-Palestine problem. As a quid pro quo for Riyadh's maximalist demands, Washington reportedly has put forth a daunting wish list of its own. It wants Riyadh to recognise Israel and have full normal diplomatic relations. It also wants the Kingdom to ring-fence its foreign policy to avoid getting too close to Washington's rivals, specifically, Beijing and Moscow.

While the precise economic underpinnings of the incipient SAA are not known, they are likely to be quite substantive. Although the U.S. is no longer dependent on Saudi oil supplies, the two sides are unlikely to abandon their long-standing coordination to balance the global market between the U.S. need for cheaper energy with a Saudi quest for higher oil revenue. The SAA is likely to ensure that the lion's share of the projects under MbS's Vision 2030 goes to American companies.

It was apparently China's President Xi Jinping's epochal State visit to Riyadh in December 2022, with triple summits, which forced Washington to revamp its ties with Saudi Arabia.

Slowly, a U.S. diplomatic counter-offensive to forestall “losing Saudi Arabia” began to take shape. To U.S. strategists, a decline in the oil-for-security paradigm notwithstanding, Saudi Arabia retains much of its importance. As the custodian of Islam’s two holy shrines, the Kingdom has been the most important determinant of the Ummah, the 1.4 billion Muslims all over the world. So, if Saudi Arabia agrees to become the fifth Abraham Accord Arab state to recognise Israel’s right to exist, this could geopolitically reconfigure not only West Asia but also push much of the Islamic world to follow Riyadh’s lead. Second, Saudi Arabia remains the largest economy in both the Arab and Islamic world and an ambitious Vision 2030 offered very lucrative pickings. Last but not least, during his decade at the helm, MbS has not only consolidated power but also taken bold and often controversial reforms. If any Grand Bargain is to be implemented, young and dynamic MbS would be the right person to carry it through.

The hurdles:

The SAA project faces two formidable odds on its way to realisation. First, the past decade has seen a rise in the bilateral trust deficit. In 1990-91, the U.S. deployed troops to evict Saddam Hussein’s forces from Kuwait poised to threaten Saudi Arabia. However, when Saudi Arabia’s largest oil processing facility at Abqaiq and Khurais was attacked in 2019, the U.S. did practically nothing. Moreover, the U.S. banned the supply of some weapons during the Yemeni war, citing their possible misuse. The U.S. perceived ambivalence towards Iran in general and the signing of the nuclear agreement (the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) in particular, was also seen as a sign of U.S. unreliability. On the other hand, the decline of the bilateral oil underpinning emboldened many U.S. politicians and opinion makers to criticise Saudi Arabia, which in turn, drifted closer to China and Russia over the last decade and even reconciled with Iran. Beijing became Riyadh’s top trading partner and Mr. Xi visited Riyadh. Saudi Arabia has been collaborating with Russia under the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries Plus (OPEC+) rubric to steer the global crude market.

The second major obstacle that the SAA faces is the ongoing Gaza conflict which has made it politically inopportune for Riyadh to agree to any reconciliation with Israel. This is also important from the Biden administration’s perspective as the SAA would require the U.S. Senate approval by two-thirds which can only follow a Riyadh-Tel Aviv détente. But if any progress is to be made in this direction, the wanton bloodletting of Palestinian Arabs and destruction in Gaza need to be stopped, and a two-state solution to the Israel-Palestine problem put back on the table. However, persistent U.S. efforts to end this conflict and move towards a semblance of normalcy in the region have been hitherto unsuccessful. Meanwhile, the clock ticks away towards the U.S. Presidential elections in November when ascendant Donald Trump faces Mr. Biden.

Incidentally, many of the recent regional events can be explained by looking through the SAA prism: Some analysts even believe that the October 7 surprise attack on Israel by Hamas was to forestall the SAA. Other signs include Saudi demurrals in joining BRICS, MbS not going to the China-Arab Forum last month despite a prior commitment, the Saudi Foreign Minister participating in Ukraine Peace Conference, Mr. Biden personally unveiling a Gaza Peace Plan and his administration’s piloting the UN Security Council resolution, increasingly strident American disapproval of Israeli attack on Rafah, fissures in Israeli war cabinet, a Republican-inspired invitation to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, a hardliner, to address a joint session of the U.S. Congress, looming Israel-Hezbollah conflict and Israeli national security adviser’s statement that the Gaza war could last till the end of 2024.

The quest for the SAA has become a time-bound contest between an irresistible force and an immovable object. We can only speculate on the likely impact of the likely scenarios. In case a fully formatted SAA is signed, it would reimpose unipolarity (Pax Americana) onto the Gulf and much of West Asia. Pro-West regimes will gain more confidence and the Palestinian cause would be given a facile burial. If the quest for the SAA fails, the region will stay in turmoil and the non-state actors promoted by Iran will keep disrupting the regional equilibrium. The region would remain a chessboard for outside powers. There is also a possibility that if Gaza

peace remains elusive, having come this far, Riyadh and Washington may reluctantly agree to a truncated piecemeal agreement, bringing in other friendly countries to fill it up.

India's stakes:

India, a large neighbour of the region with well-known stakes in the region, needs to watch the emerging Grand Bargain carefully. An SAA would be in India's overall interest as it would hopefully enhance regional stability, create economic opportunities, promote the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor and free the U.S. to follow its Indo-Pacific Strategy more vigorously. At the same time, India needs to pursue its own "Act West" policy without waiting for a third iconic image of Israeli and Saudi leaders shaking hands at Camp David.

Expected Question for Prelims

Que. Consider the following statements in the context of bilateral relations between America and Saudi Arabia:

1. These relations started from the time of American President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Saudi Arabia's King Abdul Aziz Al-Saud.
2. Currently both the countries are working for a strategic alliance agreement.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- | | |
|------------------|---------------------|
| (a) Only 1 | (b) Only 2 |
| (c) Both 1 and 2 | (d) Neither 1 nor 2 |

Answer : C

Mains Expected Question & Format

Que.: Why is the US and Saudi Arabia strategic alliance agreement important in the current circumstances? Discuss it also in the context of India's interests.

Answer's Approach:

- ❖ In the first part of the answer, discuss the US and Saudi Arabia strategic alliance agreement.
- ❖ In the second part, discuss the importance of this strategic alliance agreement and its interests in India.
- ❖ Finally give a conclusion giving suggestions.

Note: - The question of the main examination given for practice is designed keeping in mind the upcoming UPSC mains examination. Therefore, to get an answer to this question, you can take the help of this source as well as other sources related to this topic.