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Saudi Arabia is a very influential and powerful monarchy in WestAsia. It is considered to be a regional hegemon. It is the world’s largestproducer and exporter of oil and has around 16 per cent of the world’s totaloil reserves. Saudi Arabia is the land of Mecca and Medina, thereby making it thecustodian of the two holy places in the Muslim world. On the other hand, People’sRepublic of China is one of the  world’sfastest growing economies. It believes in the five principles of  peaceful co – existence. China’s West Asiarelations is quiet evident from a historical perspective.

The major trade routethat connected the two was the Silk route. Islam as  a religion was well received in China andthere is  the presence of a sizeable Muslimpopulation in the country as well. A large per centage can be seen in theXinjiang province, which has a significant Uyghur population. China has maintained a  tri -dimensional policy with the West Asian region which revolves around oil, tradeand arms sale.

During the Cold War, Saudi Arabia was apprehensive about the’communist expansion’ in West Asia. However, China’s energy demands sowed theseeds for the bilateral relations between these two. China has also beenan  aid receiver from the region. Fore. g.

, In May 2008, Saudi Arabia provided 50 million dollars in cash and 10million dollars in goods to China’s South West Sichuan province after anearthquake hit the country. China allowed individual workers, and then groupsand companies, to provide labour, participate in construction projects andoffer consultation services in West Asian markets. At present, China is pursuing a policy of  maintaining friendly relations with all countriesin the region. In 2004, China – Arab States Cooperation Forum was set up tofurther these ties.

Relations between Saudi Arabia and China at the very informalbasis took place when Muslim Chinese pilgrims started visiting the Kingdom’sholy sites in mid-1950’s. Chinese Hajj pilgrims have travelled to Saudi Arabiaevery year since 1955. Their number exceeded regularly with 6, 000 in 1990 to10, 000 in 2003. A total of 11, 863 Chinese Muslims made organized pilgrimage toSaudi Arabia during the year 2013. According to the Kingdom’s CentralDepartment of Statistics and Information (CDSI), Saudi Arabia’s populationstood at 30. 8 million of which 33 per cent are expatriates in 2014.

Although, the official diplomatic relations began in 1990, the two had security cooperationsince 1985. Under the reign of Fahd binAbdulaziz Al Saud (1982 – 2005), Saudi Arabia purchased CH-4intermediate-range ballistic missiles from China for the first time in 1985. One of China’s intentions of its regional engagement is tomaintain a steady supply of oil for its economic expansion. Under the rule ofKing Fahd, Saudi Arabia began exporting oil to China since 1993, when the latterstarted running out of its energy resources.

It’s growing domestic energyconsumption led to the rapid depletion of its oil reserves. In order tosecure  long term energy security, today Chinahas made investments in oil and gas fields and has also diversified it’s oil supplysources. However, Saudi Arabia remains one of  the biggest oil suppliers to China.  Jiang Zemin was  the first Chinese head to visit the kingdom in1999 where both the parties signed the Strategic Oil Cooperation Agreement.

Under the reignof King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, the year 2012 is important for Saudi Arabia – China relations for a reason. An important development took placei. e. on January 15, 2012 China and Saudi Arabia signed a deal to enhancedcooperation in the development and use of atomic energy for peaceful purposes. The deal set the stage for strengthening scientific, technological, economiccooperation between these two countries along with maintenance and developmentof nuclear power plants, research reactors as well as supply of nuclear fuelcomponents. According to the Wall Street Journal, Saudi Arabia intends to spendmore than 100 billion dollars on 16 nuclear reactors to be built by 2030. The SaudiArabia – China relations cannot be seen in isolation and countries like US hasplayed a crucial role in moulding the relation between the former twocountries.

The 9/11 attacks shook the entire world and is seen as a major setbackfor the Saudi Arabia – US relations. This incident eroded the trust factorbetween the two countries and made Saudi Arabia adopt the ‘ Look East’ policywhich gave China an edge. Although, US and Saudi Arabia have shared objectivesof regional stability and repression of Iran, they differed over the Iraniannuclear deal with the Obama administration. Saudi Arabia was dismayed by thelack of US support in the Yemen war in 2015. US provided Saudi Arabia witharms, intelligence and aerial refueling to prosecute the war, but therewere underlying disagreements between the two. With such factors inconsideration, Saudi Arabia intended to look for other partners. It cannot besaid that Saudi Arabia would completely curtail its relations with US butfollowing the Arab awakening, it has shown deeper interest towards China.

The effects of  post – Arab Uprising  could also be seen in the Kingdom. SaudiArabia has taken these events as a warning call and has decided to pursue aliberal attitude in its governance. Subsequently, Crown Prince Muhammad BinSalman on  25th April, 2016 laid down anambitious plan ‘ Saudi Vision 2030’, intending to diversify and expand othersectors of revenue and specifically attract the investment of Chinese companiesin the Jazan economic city which lies in the South West  of the country. While China laid itsambitious  project of One Belt One Road (OBOR)in 2014 that will connect it to major centers of trade, West Asia is central toit. Thus the integrated policy of Vision 2030, National Transformation Program(NTP) 2020 and OBOR together proves to be a significant link where the twocountries can ensure development and prosperity. Since the OBOR initiative hasbeen taken, Chinese leadership  hasmaintained that OBOR is about free trade, nevertheless many countries see thiseffort on part of China as  a covert tryto broaden its geopolitical relevance. Saudi Arabia is aware of the fact thatit can cash in by being involved in the OBOR project as it serves as  a central hub connecting three continents – Asia, Africa and Europe.

In mid -2016, Saudi Arabia came up with the statement that it wanted to expandinvestments in China’s energy industry. Saudi Arabia saw it as an opportunityto boost cooperation with its top customer. It also wanted to enlarge itsmarket of hydrocarbon products  such aspetrochemicals. Both the countries share interest in crude oil storage, mining, renewable energy and industrial development.

Saudi Aramco and Saudi ArabianBasic Industrial Cooperation (SABIC) have joint venture businesses in China. Saudi Aramco and Chinese Petroleum and Chemical Corporation (SINOPEC) operate arefinery in the Fujian province of China. Joint efforts were also made to expand the Yanbu oil refinery. Apartfrom energy cooperation, Saudi Arabia is a significant market for Chinese goodswhich include electronics, textiles and food. Thus, the growth of bilateraltrade between Saudi Arabia has reached to  51. 7 billion dollars in 2015  under the reign of Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saudfollowing the death of King Abdullah.

To facilitate the expanding ties, Chinahas also opened a branch of Industrial and Commercial Bank of China in thecountry’s capital Riyadh in 2015. Thus, it isvividly clear that in the near future, relations between Saudi Arabia and Chinaare going to grow more rapidly, as the two have agreed to upgrade the bilateralrelations into a ‘ Comprehensive Strategic Partnership’.  Both the countries focus primarily on shortand long term economic gains.

China is interested in improving ties with Iranand has never explicitly picked any side whenever crisis struck the region. However, inspite of the positive developments, fault lines exist in thisrelation. For no reason, China is willing to sacrifice its economic growth byplaying the role of mediator in the volatile, sectarian war between SaudiArabia and Iran. However as all these concerns exist, the Saudi Arabia – Chinarelations will have to maneuver and grow beyond the sectarian and geostrategic  interests that are seen in the region.