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COVER STORY

Transforming Indo-Saudi relations will define unfolding Asian century

Amb Mahesh Sachdev (retd)

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Cover photo: Prime Minister Narendra Modi conferring with the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud, in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia on October 29, 2019. (Photo: PIB)

Defence: A new dimension of strategic ties

MD. MUDDASSIR
QUAMAR

India and Saudi Arabia are two of the world's largest defence importers and both are trying to develop their defence industries to reduce external dependence. The Indian and Saudi leaderships have emphasised on the need to develop cooperation in this area within the framework of Make in India and Saudi Vision 2030. However, to realise this potential will not be easy and will require sustained efforts and investments

Under the present leadership of both countries, Indo-Saudi Arabian relations have flourished to realise their true strategic potentials. The visit by Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Riyadh in April 2016 set the tone for this transformation and the February 2019 visit of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to New Delhi strengthened bilateral ties. The most important components of this strategic partnership are energy, counter-terrorism cooperation and the two-way flow of investments, though these are not the only components. A very important and often ignored aspect of this rapidly developing strategic partnership is defence cooperation. Though the MoU on defence cooperation was first signed in February 2014, the progress remained slow and it was only after 2016 that it gained momentum. Since then, the India-Saudi Joint Committee on Defence Cooperation (JCDC) has met thrice – most recently in Riyadh in January 2019 - with an agenda to bolster defence cooperation in areas such as joint exercises, manufacturing and training.

In December 2017, the first batch of five cadets from the Royal Saudi Armed Forces joined the three-year training course at the National Defence Academy, Pune. In May 2017, a delegation from the Saudi Staff and Command College visited India while another delegation from the Saudi National Defence College visited New Delhi earlier in 2016. More delegation-level visits between the two militaries took place in 2018, including one by India's then Chief of the Naval Staff, Admiral Sunil Lanba.

Significantly, maritime security is a key component of the defence cooperation. The two countries have made significant strides to enhance maritime security and have decided to "work together with other Indian Ocean Rim countries" to ensure security in the Indian Ocean region as well as collaborate for humanitarian assistance in cases of natural disaster or conflict situations. This was evident when the Indian Navy carried out Operation Rahat to evacuate Indian and foreign citizens from Yemen with cooperation from the Saudi armed forces.

The Indian navy and coast guards hold regular interactions with Saudi counterparts and Indian Naval Ships often undertake port calls to Saudi Arabia. In March 2018, the

Indian Coast Guard participated in the regional training in combating security in maritime domain hosted by Saudi Arabia.

The two sides have been working to start joint military exercises and this was discussed during the visit of Saudi Crown Prince to New Delhi in February. Accordingly, the first joint naval exercise between India and Saudi Arabia is expected to take place in December 2019 or January 2020. The two countries have also agreed to explore possibilities for cooperation in the area of defence industry. During the visit of Crown Prince Mohamed, New Delhi and Riyadh "agreed to cooperate and collaborate in joint defence production of spare parts for Naval and Land systems as well as supply chain development." Notably, a delegation of the Saudi General Authority of Military Industries (SAMI), formed in 2017 to reduce external reliance for defence procurement, visited India in 2019 and held talks with representatives of the fledgling Indian defence production industry. Indian defence companies too have shown interest in collaborating with Saudi counterparts and have visited the Kingdom.

India and Saudi Arabia are two of the world's largest defence importers and both are trying to develop their defence industries to reduce external dependence. The Indian and Saudi leaderships have emphasised on the need to develop cooperation in this area within the framework of Make in India and Saudi Vision 2030. However, to realise this potential will not be easy and will require sustained efforts and investments.

Looking ahead, there is immense scope for enhancing defence cooperation, especially to safeguard Indian and Saudi interests and fighting threats to their security. Both sides have been exploring the possibilities and working towards furthering defence ties. Nonetheless, there are some challenges, especially given the geopolitical situation in the Gulf and South Asia and Indian and Saudi interests. Over the last five years, India and Saudi Arabia have worked together to enhance bilateral ties, taking them to the level of a strategic partnership. The growing defence cooperation has emerged as an important component of this partnership and has added a new dimension to Indo-Saudi strategic relations.

(The writer is Associate Fellow, Institute for Defence Studies & Analysis, New Delhi)