

India-Saudi Relations: The Modi-MBS “Political Friendship” Is All About Iran

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Global Research, December 01, 2018

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Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman (MBS) is literally trying to buy Indian Prime Minister Modi off by getting him to ditch his country’s energy imports from Iran in exchange for billions of dollars of Saudi investment, and there’s a plausible possibility that this subtly American-backed strategy could succeed.

Indian Prime Minister Modi and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman (MBS) met in Buenos Aires right before the beginning of the G20 Summit there, where the two world leaders discussed various forms of cooperation with one another. [Reuters](#) reported that MBS “would soon be finalizing an initial investment in India’s National Investment and Infrastructure Fund, a quasi-sovereign wealth fund, to help accelerate the building of ports, highways and other projects”, and the outlet also quoted Indian Foreign Secretary Vijay Gokhale as saying that

“The crown prince also referred to future projects for investments, in sectors such as tech, energy and farm.”

If the Crown Prince’s plans succeed, then they could catalyze far-reaching geopolitical consequences for India’s relations with Iran.

MBS is basically trying to buy Modi off by getting him to ditch his country’s energy imports from Iran in exchange for billions of dollars of Saudi investment, with the tech and agricultural spheres being extra strategic for sweetening the deal, especially at this specific moment in time. Modi is running for reelection in May 2019 so everything that he does up until then should be seen in this domestic political context. Accordingly, Saudi investments in India’s tech industry would promote Modi’s much-touted “Digital India” initiative, while analogous commitments to the country’s agricultural industry could ease some of the [growing grassroots resistance](#) to the ruling BJP by the ever-restless farmers’ 263 million voting bloc. Taken together, MBS could be the secret to Modi’s reelection.

None of this is coming without any strings attached or being pursued in the interests of advancing both countries’ vision of so-called “multi-alignment” because MBS would expect India to curtail and ultimately stop its imports of Iranian energy, replacing them with Saudi resources per a strategy subtly backed by the US. It should be remembered that the US [waived](#) anti-Iranian sanctions on India for purchasing these resources [and also](#) conducting trade along the [Chabahar Corridor](#) to Afghanistan and Central Asia, though knowing what just transpired between MBS and Modi, it can be interpreted in hindsight that America might have been buying time for its Saudi “[frenemies](#)” to make India a “deal that it can’t refuse”,

especially in the sensitive context of the South Asian state's upcoming elections.

There's a plausible possibility that India will go along with this scheme in order to advance its leadership's own self-interests, but also because of the masterful coordination between "bad cop" America and "good cop" Saudi Arabia, both of which have the shared goal of gradually weaning India off of Iranian energy imports without risking its domestic destabilization as a result of skyrocketing prices or other unintended consequences. The Kingdom's investment carrot perfectly complements Trump's sanctions stick, but the success of this tacitly anti-Iranian tag team maneuver could understandably raise suspicions of India's long-term strategic intent in Tehran. It's already disturbing enough for Iran that [India is now allied with "Israel"](#), but succumbing to the Wahhabi Kingdom's connivances might be the final straw.

Unlike Saudi Arabia's [promised investment](#) in CPEC which is premised on the win-win paradigm of simultaneously enhancing its relations with Iran's Chinese and Pakistani partners, its potential investments in India are basically a big bribe to Modi to get him to distance himself from the Islamic Republic, first in the energy sense and potentially even when it comes to [commercial connectivity with Central Asia](#) via the Chabahar Corridor. This latter objective might be at variance with the US' own, but it could possibly be pulled off if Iranian suspicions of Indian intent set off a chain reaction of developments that inadvertently strengthen the [Golden Ring of multipolar Great Powers](#) by making it politically impossible for Tehran to continue cooperating with New Delhi on this project.

Unexpectedly, Saudi Arabia's anti-Iranian bribe to India might therefore unwittingly end up being to its rival's geopolitical benefit, especially if Tehran intensifies its strategic partnership with Islamabad in response to Riyadh's relations with New Delhi prompting Modi to curtail his country's import of Iranian resources with a wink and a nod from Washington. With India possibly being kept out of the Golden Ring's Central Asian Heartland after Iran reconsiders the wisdom of facilitating its entry into this region through the Chabahar Corridor following New Delhi's possibly forthcoming decision to decrease its energy imports from the Islamic Republic, Eurasian stability could more solidly be assured, so in a sense, there are indeed some multipolar proponents who might silently hope that Modi accepts MBS' bribe and all that it entails.

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This article was originally published on [Eurasia Future](#).

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