

Geo Strategic Importance of Saudi Arabia

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Saudi Arabia is bounded by seven countries (Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, UAE, Qatar, Oman and Yemen) and three water bodies i.e. the Persian Gulf in the east, and the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aqaba in the west. With a total area of 1,960,582 sq km (approximately 62 per cent of the size of India), it covers 80 per cent of the Arabian Peninsula. It extends for 1,950 km from northwest to southeast and about 1,240 km from southwest to northeast. It has a coastline of 2,640 km of which more than 1,800 km lie on the Red Sea Coast.

The discovery of oil in 1938 in the eastern province of Saudi Arabia came just six years after the formation of the state. It reportedly has 260 billion barrels of proven oil reserves, which is the largest in the world and constitutes more than one-fourth of the estimated global reserves. It is also the largest exporter of oil and, therefore, plays a leading role in the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). Saudi Arabia maintains a crude oil production capability of around 10 million barrels a day (bbl/d) with a capacity to increase the same to 15 million bbl/d. This gives it a strong influence on international oil supplies and prices.

Although Saudi Arabia has around 80 oil and gas fields, more than 50 per cent of its oil reserves are contained in eight fields, which include Ghawar (world's largest oil field) and Safaniya (world's largest offshore oil field). Ghawar accounts for about half of Saudi Arabia's total production capability. Saudi Arabia also produces oil (more than 0.6 million bbl/day in 2003) in the Saudi-Kuwaiti neutral zone and jointly with Bahrain in the Abu Safah offshore oilfield (nearly 0.15 million bbl/day in 2003). Saudi Arabia donates all the income generated from this oil field to Bahrain.

Most of Saudi Arabia's oil exports are through the Persian Gulf. It is the key oil supplier to US (approximately 18 per cent of US oil imports). 40% of Saudi oil exports are taken up by China, Japan and South Korea. The main

processing facility near the Persian Gulf is located at Abqaiq, which handles nearly two-thirds of the country's oil output. The primary oil export terminals on the Persian Gulf coast are located at Ras Tanura and Ras al Juaymah. For oil exports through the Red Sea, Yanbu serves as the main terminal. Currently, the major oil pipeline that Saudi Arabia operates is the east-west crude oil pipeline (petroline, operated by Saudi Aramco) for exports to European markets via the Red Sea. This pipeline runs from Abqaiq in the east to Yanbu in the west.

A great deal of emphasis was laid in enhancing the capacity of this pipeline after the Gulf War (1991) as it provided a secure alternative for exports through the Persian Gulf. There is another pipeline i.e. Trans-Arabian Pipeline (Tapline) terminating in Lebanon (Az Zahrani on the Mediterranean Sea), which has been mothballed since 1970, owing to the Lebanese civil war. The Iraqi pipeline, which originates from the southern Iraqi border town of Az Zubayr to Saudi export terminals on the Red Sea, was closed indefinitely following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990. The Saudi authorities are also planning to construct an oil pipeline from Hadramaut in Yemen to the Arabian Sea.

Saudi Arabia's approximately 225 trillion cubic feet (tcf) proven gas reserves are the fourth highest in the world after Russia, Iran and Qatar. Most of the gas reserves coexist with oil fields located at Ghawar, Safaniya and Zuluf. Some experts are of the view that only 15 per cent of Saudi Arabia has been adequately explored for gas, and the Rub al Khali (Empty Quarter) may itself contain reserves to the tune of 300 tcf. The country has a direct geographical interface with some of the most volatile countries in the Middle East like Iraq with which it shares an 814 km land boundary; and the energy rich but insecure smaller sheikhdoms (GCC countries) located on the Persian Gulf coast, with whom its security is inextricably linked. It shares a 222 km land boundary with Kuwait, 672 km with Oman, 60 km with Qatar, 1,458 km with Yemen and 457 km with the UAE. Its relations with Jordan with which it shares a 744 km land boundary is important due to the latter's geographical interface with Israel. The stability of Saudi Arabia, therefore, is crucial for the stability of the entire Middle Eastern region and for global energy security. The other factors that enhance its strategic importance are:

- It contains the two holiest cities of Islam i.e. Mecca and Medina, which attract Muslim pilgrims from all over the world. It underwrites the Haj and finances other Arab initiatives. Consequently, it exercises a great deal of influence on most of the Muslim countries.

- It has not only been a regional leader traditionally but also is a key member of the Organisation of Islamic Countries (OIC) and the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC).
- Its status as a long time ally of the US lends added significance to its regional status.
- Its extensive coastlines on the Persian Gulf and Red Sea provide it great leverage on shipping (special crude oil) through Persian Gulf and Suez Canal.
- Being the repository of the largest oil reserves and fourth largest gas reserves in the world, it is in a position to influence global oil prices, an influence which it has exercised in the past.
- Saudi Arabia has also been making extensive business investments in the US and other western countries, which gives it an additional economic leverage in conduct of international relations.
- Given Saudi Arabia's economic and religious clout, its attitude to Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism is the key determinant to the success of the ongoing Global War against Terrorism.

Security concerns

Saudi Arabia's vast geographic expanse, lengthy coastlines, and small and scattered population present formidable problems for its defence. While Saudi Arabia forms the core of Muslim religious sentiments, there are also pulls exercised by the forces of modernisation, which have been unleashed primarily by its oil wealth. The Saudi authorities, therefore, may have to perpetually grapple with traditionalists and fundamentalists. The radicalisation of the Shias has serious economic overtones as the Eastern Province is a Shia majority area and contains a dense network of oil and gas pipelines.

Saudi Arabia's security is intertwined with the security of other Sheikdoms that dot the southern part of the Persian Gulf. The upstaging of any of the ruling families in these smaller states may have a cascading effect, which could finally threaten the Saudi ruling dispensation. Moreover, the oil industry and economic links between these countries that together form the GCC is strong and extensive. The physical violation of the territory of these countries cannot take place without impacting on the territorial integrity of one or more of the other states. Saudi Arabia is, therefore, the pivot upon which the security of the GCC countries swivels.

No personal rivalry or fissures within the royal family have come to the surface so far; however, schisms owing to policy differences over issues such as the closeness of ties with the US, or the extent and role of the religious establishment, may not be completely discounted. In the Saudi Royal Family, as is the case with many other monarchies in the region, intrigues are not without precedence. In March 1975, King Faisal was assassinated by his nephew. Curiously, this incident had followed the Arab-Israel War, which had triggered a three-fold rise in world oil prices due to Saudi led Arab boycott of countries supporting Israel.

Saudi Arabia has resolved various contentious boundary issues with most of its neighbours. In 1975, a demarcation agreement was hammered between Abu Dhabi, Oman and Saudi Arabia with regard to the Al Buryami Oasis, where the frontiers of these three states meet. The neutral zone that it shared with Iraq (7,000 sq km) and Kuwait (5,790 sq km) was equitably divided with each of these countries in 1981 and 1965 respectively. These neutral zones were created consequent to agreements between Saudi rulers and British officials in 1922 (representing Iraqi and Kuwaiti interests), with the purpose of safeguarding the water rights of the Bedouins of these countries. Saudi Arabia's relations with Yemen have been troubled in modern times. The border has witnessed periodic tribal clashes and boundary disputes.

The reunification of divided Yemen in May 1990, was a disconcerting development for Saudi Arabia as it felt that the more populous combined Yemen with leftist leanings might impact on the Islamic conservative dispensation of Saudi Arabia. Relations between the two countries worsened when Yemen came out in support of Iraq after the latter's invasion of Kuwait. In retaliation, Saudi Arabia had repatriated more than one million Yemeni workers. Long stretches of uninhabited desert, known as the 'Empty Quarter' or Rub al Khali form the disputed territory between Yemen and Saudi Arabia.

The two countries, however, signed a border agreement in June 2000, which delineated the sections of their common border, which had been in dispute since 1930. Nomadic groups on the border region with Yemen, however, continue to resist the boundary demarcation. Since the boundary demarcation with UAE has not been made public, the exact boundary alignment is still approximate. Saudi Arabia and Kuwait are yet to demarcate their long-contested maritime boundary with Iran despite prolonged negotiations.

In addition to the economic impact of the 1991 Gulf War, which cost the regional countries US \$ 676 billion and US \$ 60 billion to Saudi Arabia alone, there were also far reaching sociological and political manifestations. There emerged

a sizeable constituency within the kingdom that openly began to question the country's political and religious framework, which they considered regressive. It exposed the inherent inadequacies of the government in ensuring the sovereignty of the country, and security of its peoples, without western assistance. Moreover, it caused a polarisation between the traditionalists and modernists in a manner that was never so pronounced. Although Saudi Arabia does not have any common border with Israel, it could well be engulfed in a war, which may involve Israel, especially over the Palestinian issue. Such threats have reared up in the past. Saudi Arabia strongly maintains that Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism cannot be effectively curbed unless the Palestinian issue that provides the ideological ammunition to these activities is resolved.

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