

SAUDI INVOLVEMENT IN CPEC: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE REGION.

Author

MUHAMMAD SALIM

Ph.D Scholar

Department of Political Science University of Karachi

Email: salimsayedbaloch@gmail.com

IJSER

Abstract

The Saudi participation in CPEC as the third member has intensified the apprehensions of the regional powers like Iran & India. While bringing Pakistan & China even further closer, the Saudi participation is anticipated to urge India & Iran to form a nexus to counter the move which is more likely to deepen their rivalry for regional influence and power. Without any doubt, the Saudi participation will steer the dwindling economy of Pakistan & will captivate foreign investment as well while bringing China onboard for making an oil city in Gawadar which would catalyze the regional stability and integration. However, the Iranian growing apprehensions and its frustration coupled with the regional rivalry of Pakistan and China with India, the Saudi participation can also prove detrimental for regional stability and integration. In order to develop a more accurate analysis, a small scale quantitative research was also conducted to make the article more reliable which has been analyzed properly below.

Keywords

China, CPEC, Saudi Arabia, Nexus, Pakistan, Iran, Gawadar port, oil refinery, Corridor, regional integration, regional stability.

Declaration of interest statement

This article is motivated by the idea of the intensification of the regional rivalry between India and Pakistan and Iran and Saudi Arabia and it will bring more harm than good to South Asia, especially, for Pakistan despite the fact that the Saudi investments are going to drag the economy of Pakistan somewhat toward stability.

Introduction

The Saudi-Pak relations have been from the very outset strong and robust, but the regional political as well as economic dynamics have brought some fluctuations in the given bilateral ties. The regional strategic dynamics too define the ups and downs in the bilateral relations of these two countries as Pakistan is a key player in the South Asian regional rivalry; it is the bridging point of the Shi and the Sunni world and the junction of South Asia and West Asia.¹

Though the relations have remained quite affirmative and strong in the previous regimes, the prominence of Mohammad bin Salman to the stature of the crown prince has taken the relations with Pakistan to new heights.

Both these countries have ushered into a new era of cooperation and economic as well as strategic partnership. Since the CPEC project was successfully negotiated between Pakistani and China, the neighboring countries have had mixed views about the future prospects of the project whilst Pakistan and China continued to call it the game changer for the entire region.²

The speculations for the future prospects of the project took a new turn when Saudi Arabia revealed its wish to join the CPEC. After China and Pakistan, the former has become the third country to join the CPEC. This move is replete with enormous political, economic as well as strategic implications for the stability, prosperity and integration of the region.

The fact cannot be denied that there are two major stakeholders in this region, both contiguous to Pakistan, named India and Iran whose policy outlook toward the project and their interest oriented ambitions in the region do matter and their policies along with the

Saudi participation in the project have opened a new forum of debates over the challenges and prospects of regional integration and stability.³

China is pleased with the joining of Saudi Arabia mainly because of its energy starvation, which more elaborately is a foreign policy compulsion of China, therefore, it cannot rule out the Saudi partnership outright. The tensions between India and Pakistan due to the Kashmir issue and the tensions between China and India over the regional influence are prone to mount as a new stakeholder is stepping in the region with enormous influence and wealth.⁴

Both Iran and India realize the fact that the arrival of Saudi Arabia will tilt the balance of power in favor of Pakistan, thus, reducing the influence of India and the Saudi influence will counter the Iranian influence. In addition to that, the Indian investment in Chahbahar port of Iran and the Iranian dreams of laying the foundations of an oil refinery in Gawadar to link its oil trade with China directly have proved abortive.⁵

Therefore, a countervailing strategy from them is expected which is detrimental to the regional integration of South Asia. This article mainly focuses the future anticipations of the shifts in Iranian and Indian foreign policy moves and tries to determine the future scope of CPEC with the help of the results from the quantitative research.

Methodology

A mixed approach was used in this research method in which the qualitative portions as well as the quantitative portions were discussed. The main body of the article was mainly qualitative as it was taken from the books and articles, in other words, from the secondary sources whilst the results and discussion were based on the quantitative portion or the primary sources.

Furthermore, a small questionnaire with close ended questions containing 3 questions was distributed among 120 people out of whom 60 were male and 60 were female. Moreover, all the respondents were associated to CPEC or had deep insight on this issue in one way or the other. most of them were from the media outlets, from NGO's, from the academia and from the government officials and all of them were qualified enough or had enough experience to share their reasonable opinions on the issue in point.

Saudi crown prince visit to Pakistan and the economic agreements

The crown prince of Saudi Arabia was received warmly by the prime minister of Pakistan Imran Khan, Chief of the Army Staff General Qamar Javed Bajwa, along with many cabinet ministers and senior military and civilian officials at the Noor Khan airbase on 17th of February 2019. This visit took place after the prime minister of Pakistan officially invited the crown prince Mohammad bin Salman to visit Pakistan.⁶

The visit laid the foundations for a new cooperative environment and 3 major agreements were concluded between the two countries. The visit of the crown prince has been hailed by the intelligentsia in Pakistan as an event that embarked upon high levels of institutional framework in order to guide the future direction for different sectors like that of the economic sector, the investment sector, trade, robust diplomatic ties, people to people interaction, strengthening defense partnership and security and cultural exchange programs.⁷

The new trajectory of the bilateral ties between these two countries has been shaped in a new manner with the inauguration of the Supreme Coordination Council in Islamabad which will overlook all the above given areas of cooperation. The most important portion of the agreements was about the trade and investment sector which remained the primary focus of the two countries. Beside the agreements there were several MoUs also signed between them.⁸

Saudi Arabia pledged to invest around 20 billion dollars in trade and investment sector in Pakistan. A total of 5 Memorandums of Understanding and 3 agreements were signed. A joint statement was also released in which it was reaffirmed that the milestone agreement of the 20 billion dollars would be expanded further in the coming decade.⁹

The crown prince after finishing the tour in Pakistan also visited India and China respectively. The meeting with Chinese premier and president also ascertained the Saudi interests to join the CPEC which China also appreciated, thus, Saudi Arabia became the third country to join the CPEC project.

Implications for the regional stability and regional integration

From the beginning, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) has been a strictly bilateral project between Pakistan and China. Though, other countries have been invited to join in at various times, control of the project remained with the original partners. According to the contracts, other countries can join CPEC-related projects but the policymaking and implementation is to remain a bilateral arrangement between China and Pakistan.¹⁰

But the membership of Saudi Arabia, where it brings enormous investment along with it, has also strained the relations of Pakistan with Iran and India to the point of strategic maneuvers in spite of the fact that the main policy decisions are held by Pakistan and China. China also worries for the fact that the growing number of the stakeholders would weaken their decision making position weakening their control over the corridors.¹¹

Beside Saudi Arabia, Pakistan has invited many countries to join CPEC including Iran, Russia and United States, but the former is the first country to join it. It has shifted the balance of power in the Persian Gulf where Iran and Saudi Arabia are consistently engaging in a turf war over the economic and religiously ideological issues since 1979. With the passage of time this animosity has deepened and the apprehensions of each other over every policy move have only intensified.¹²

With the current move of Saudi Arabia, Iran also fears that the way too activism of the former will also push Iran out of the picture of Built and Road Initiative also as the Saudi vision for CPEC has earned the interest of China and China has gained the support of the biggest stakeholder the Persian Gulf could provide for the West Asian Corridor.

Iran is associating much of its interests for expanding its oil trade through this corridor, but apparently, Iran is boggled over the Saudi involvement in CPEC and fears the same for the West Asian Corridor as well.¹³

The other major factors associated to the regional integrity or regional stability in the wake of the Saudi involvement in CPEC are discussed in the main body of the research article at length where attempts have been made to cover all the major aspects of the topic.

(i) Why Iran wants to join the CPEC now?

The Saudi crown prince Mohammad bin Salman visited Pakistan on a two day trip on 17-18 February 2019, but this trip was more intended to usher into a new era of economic cooperation. The visit to Pakistan has been hailed as the new strategy of the Saudi Arabia to counter its rivals like Iran and to establish its strong footing in South Asia.¹⁴

Since Iran has been showing its desire to join the CPEC for quite some time, sudden Saudi announcement to join the CPEC and the warm appreciation from China and Pakistan have shown that how deeply they are willing to bring Saudi Arabia in instead of Iran to this corridor. It is absolutely certain that if Saudi Arabia joins the CPEC in its full vigor and spirit, Iran will hesitate to join it as both of them have never coordinated on matters on single forums.¹⁵

There is no denying the fact that even after the Saudi announcement and the signing of the deals, Iran is still willing to join the corridor, but now it is not purely for economic purposes, it is now a strategic move by Iran.

(ii) Indian stance on Saudi partnership in CPEC

India too is not pleased with it. Though, India has not declared any open foreign policy stance on this issue, the Indian designs have badly been hurt as India has invested 500 million dollars in upgrading the port of Chahbahar against the port of Gawadar.

The ambition of India was to establish an equilibrium of power and maintain an economic balance in South Asia by countering CPEC through the given port, but the arrival of CPEC has just tilted the balance of power in the favor of Pakistan and the ultimate winner in this is also China who even did not play its card, yet it would benefit heavily from the oil refinery to be set up by Saudi Arabia in Gawadar.¹⁶

The regional balance is upset, as a regional superpower from Middle East has not jumped into the economic affairs of South Asia. China, another supreme power was already in favor of Pakistan pushing India to the tight corner, now; Saudi Arabian investment in Pakistan coupled with the support of China will displease India.

There is no denying the fact that Saudi Arabia is a trade partner of India and both of them enjoy good diplomatic relations as well, but the former is the strategic partner of Pakistan and its anchoring of the Pakistani economy at the expense of Iranian economic ambitions is not something appreciated by India which will bring India and Iran closer to each other. Given the changing circumstances in South Asia, the political as well as the economic dynamics of South Asian relations are bound to change.¹⁷

(iii) Saudi vision for Gawadar; ambition for world's largest oil refinery in Gawadar

What made the situation worse for Iran's ambitions was the Saudi vision for Gawadar. Iran has been keenly interested in laying the foundations of an oil refinery at Gawadar¹⁸, but the new stakeholder Saudi Arabia has just dashed the Iranian ambitions on the ground with its announcement of the vision for Gawadar.¹⁹

This vision speaks volumes of the will of Saudi Arabia to drive Iran out of the South Asian region. In its long term plans for Gawadar, it has announced to install an oil refinery in the port city of Balochistan with a total cost of 10 billion dollars. This decision shows a remarkable change in the Saudi policies toward South Asia, especially Pakistan and Iran. This change in the foreign policy does invite large scale geopolitical implications.²⁰

With the increase in the stakeholders of the CPEC, the ground realities or the basic projects are bound to certain modifications as every stakeholder who joins the project brings forth its own national interest oriented targets and geo-economics goals which can have both the pros and cons for the original partners and for the region.

As a matter of fact, before the Saudi vision for Gawadar was revealed, Iran was preferred by China due to its regional contiguity to embark upon an oil refinery in the port city, but the Saudi announcement just nudged Iran off the radar.²¹

(iv) How China sees the Saudi partnership in CPEC?

The necessity of the oil refinery was mainly put forward by China on account of its growing energy needs as China is one of the most energy starved counties and amid the rapid industrialization and vast economic growth, the energy security was alarming mounting.

China, being an energy starved country with overriding demand for oil has to depend upon the oil rich countries of the Persian Gulf, whether willingly or reluctantly, China has embraced the Saudi vision for the port city.²²

Without any doubt, China can benefit from the given riches of the Saudi investment, but dragging too much Saudi investment can put China into complications caused by the perturbed Iran and other Gulf countries who too seek strategic interests in the port city.

In the future, Gwadar promises to become a “base station” for the Middle East as it can speed up the delivery of oil exports and imports across the region with consignments from the Middle East and Africa reaching China over a distance of just 3400 miles.²³ Adopting a more diverse and balanced role, the addition of more investors in Gwadar is exactly what it needs.

China is not willing to bring more stakeholders into the project because the greater the number of the stakeholders, the lesser the influence of China would be on decision making as it wants to keep all the cards with it. The leverage of China is bound to diminish because the Saudi strategic relations with USA are ever growing and getting stronger.

Saudi moves and investment in Pakistan are a set and established policy that seeks to better integrate Islamabad into Riyadh’s camp and align U.S. and Saudi policy with Pakistan as part of the larger picture of the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition.²⁴

(v) The positive aspects of the Saudi partnership in CPEC

There were rumors and debates about the CPEC being a part of the ancient ideology of China called the String of Pearls which implies the naval expansion of China along with its economy, therefore, the debates were turning serious that the port of Gawadar was going to be a future naval base of China through which it will dominate the Indian Ocean and beyond.

However, with the joining of Saudi Arabia, these rumors are fanned no more and the apprehensions of the port being a naval base are also dooming. Given the situation, the economic crisis of Pakistan, its dwindling export sector, the staggering value of the currency

and its local political instability were worrying China that whether Pakistan could coordinate with the former on the projects of CPEC or could help it function, but the Saudi partnership has given it a new life.²⁵

The heavy investment of Saudi Arabia is also crucial for the stability of the economy and the oil refinery which will be built on 35000 acres of land (the largest area wise in the world) in district Gawadar will save 3 billion dollars for Pakistan every year. The world attention has been diverted from the Chinese military expansion and its strategic ambitions and now the attention has shifted toward the rivalry of Saudi Arabia with Iran²⁶ and its immediate and long term implications on South Asia in general and on CPEC in particular.

Its partnership has increased the credibility of Gawadar being a regional hub of trade and a worthy port for foreign investment. Its image has significantly improved as a stable port for investment and trade. This can also help China to expand its network of the Built and Road Initiative as beside CPEC there is another corridor in the pipeline called the West Asia Corridor.²⁷

The alignment of Saudi Arabia and UAE can significantly dramatize the success of the West Asian Corridor inasmuch as the CPEC. The main ambition of China's flagship point for the port of Gawadar in the BRI (Built and Road Initiative) where China had aspired to build an 'oil city' has now come true in the shape of the 35000 acre vast oil refinery which would by no means be lesser than an oil city.²⁸

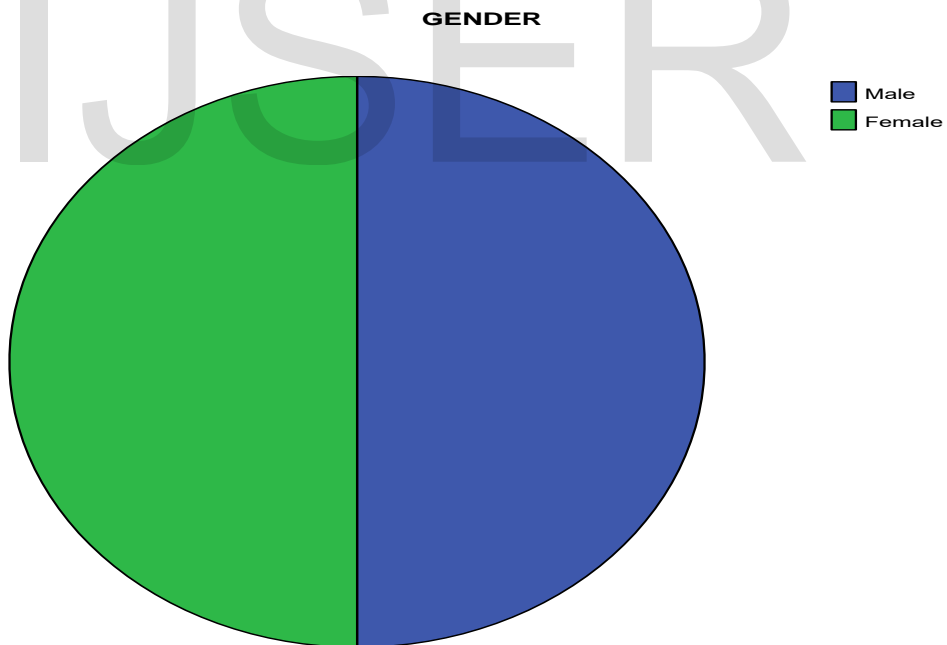
Thus, the Saudi partnership with the CPEC has certain positive aspects too which can prove fruitful for the regional integration. Like Saudi Arabia, UAE is also keen to be deeply involved in the project and the Saudi involvement along with UAE can also captivate more countries from Africa like Egypt or the Persian Gulf to partake in the expansion of the corridor. Beside Saudi Arabia, UAE is also planning to build an oil refinery which will cost it around 5 to 6 billion dollars and both of these oil refineries can prove fruitful for the Chinese ambitions for an oil city.²⁹

Results

The three main questions were put through the SPSS for accuracy of the results which are given below.

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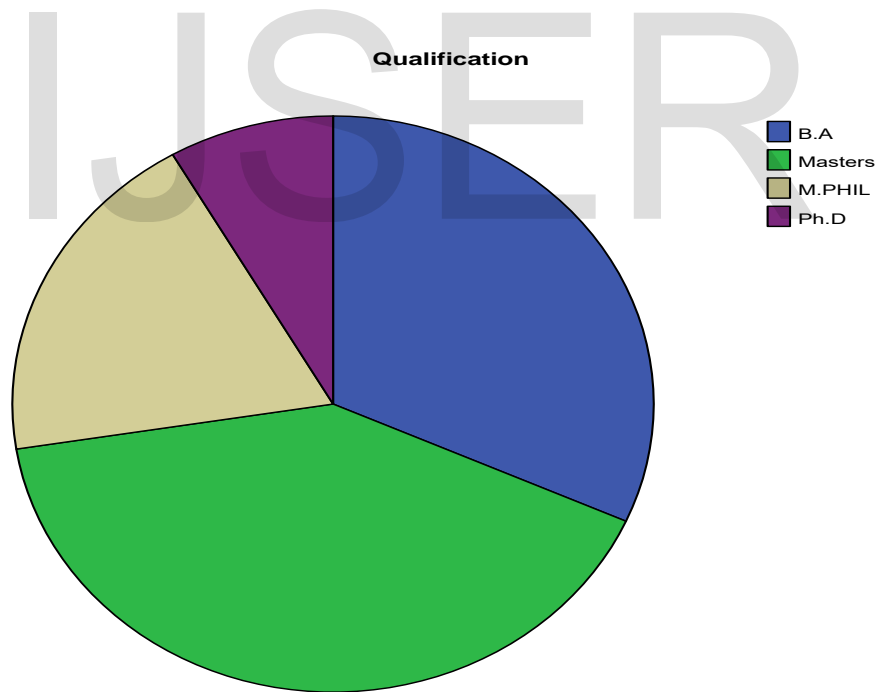
	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Male	60	50.0	50.0	50.0
Female	60	50.0	50.0	100.0
Total	120	100.0	100.0	



This table including the graph shows the gender ratio of the participants. Gender equality was incorporated in this research. 60 of them were male and 60 of them were female.

Qualification

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
B.A	38	31.7	31.7	31.7
Masters	49	40.8	40.8	72.5
M.PHIL	23	19.2	19.2	91.7
Ph.D	10	8.3	8.3	100.0
Total	120	100.0	100.0	

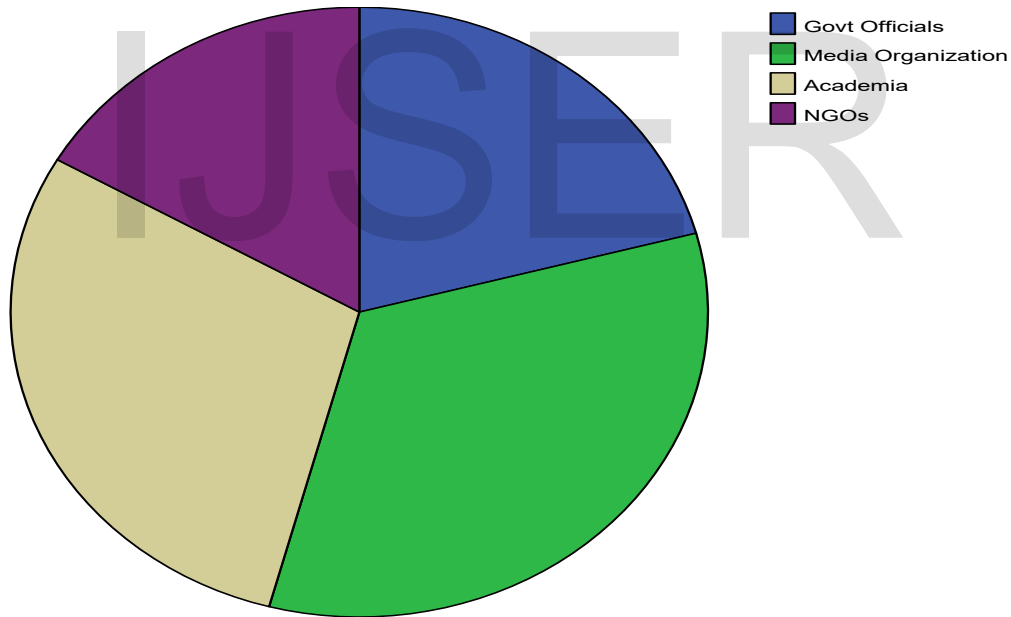


This table shows the qualification of the participants. This table was necessary to be included in the research to know that what was the qualification of the respondents. 38 of them had done B.A and 49 of them had done masters. 23 of them had done M.phil and 10 of them had done PhD.

Occupation

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Govt Officials	25	20.8	20.8	20.8
Media Organization	40	33.3	33.3	54.2
Academia	35	29.2	29.2	83.3
NGOs	20	16.7	16.7	100.0
Total	120	100.0	100.0	

Occupation

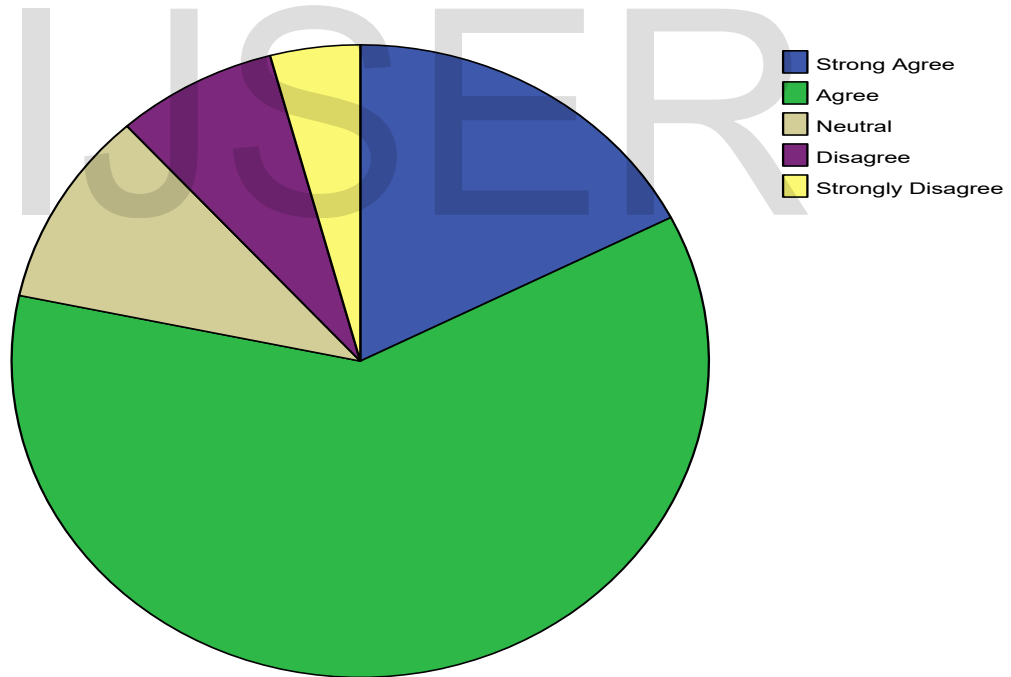


The qualification of the respondents is given in this table. 20 of the respondents were from NGO's and 35 of them belonged to the academia. 25 of the respondents were government servants and 40 of them were from the media organizations.

Q.1 Saudi investment in Gwadar has sharpened the Saudi-Iran rivalry.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	21	17.5	17.5
	Agree	73	60.8	78.3
	Neutral	12	10.0	88.3
	Disagree	9	7.5	95.8
	Strongly Disagree	5	4.2	100.0
	Total	120	100.0	100.0

Q.1 Saudi investment in Gwadar has sharpened the Saudi-Iran rivalry.



Saudi investment in Gawadar has sharpened the Saudi-Iran rivalry. On this question the responses were a follows. 21 of them strongly agreed while 73 of them had moderate agreement over the question. 12 of the respondents were neutral and 9 of them disagreed. 5 of them strongly disagreed.

Iran was willing even before Saudi Arabia to lay the foundations of an oil refinery, but the Saudi pledge has dashed the Iranian ambitions to the ground sharpening the decades old animosity.

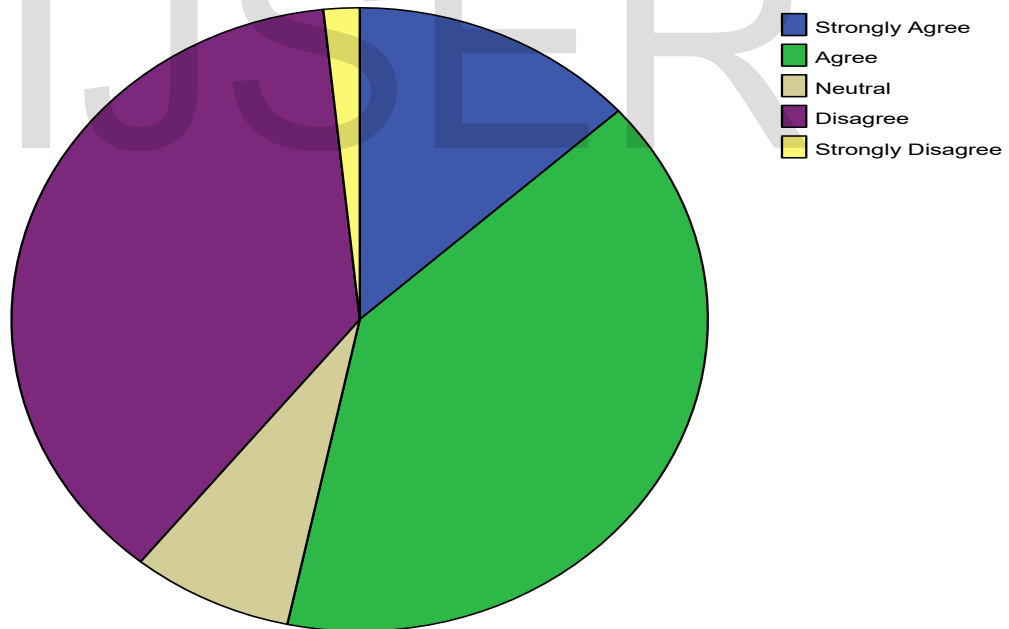
Furthermore, the presence of Saudi Arabia in South Asia so much near the Iranian ports of Chahbahar and Bandar Abbas is also seen by Iran as a countering move. Saudi arrival in Gawadar near the Iranian ports and pledging for heavy investment is taken by Iran as a challenge to country its own ports and trade. Thus, the Saudi-Iran relations have opened up new dimensions of animosity and hostility.

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Q.2 Saudi participation in CPEC will steer Pakistan toward regional economic stability.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly Agree	16	13.3	13.3	13.3
Agree	48	40.0	40.0	53.3
Neutral	9	7.5	7.5	60.8
Disagree	45	37.5	37.5	98.3
Strongly Disagree	2	1.7	1.7	100.0
Total	120	100.0	100.0	

Q.2 Saudi participation in CPEC will steer Pakistan toward regional economic stability.



Saudi participation in CPEC will steer Pakistan toward regional economic stability. On this question the responses were as follows. 16 of them strongly agreed while 48 of them had moderate agreement over the question. 2 of the respondents were neutral and 45 of them disagreed. 9 of them strongly disagreed.

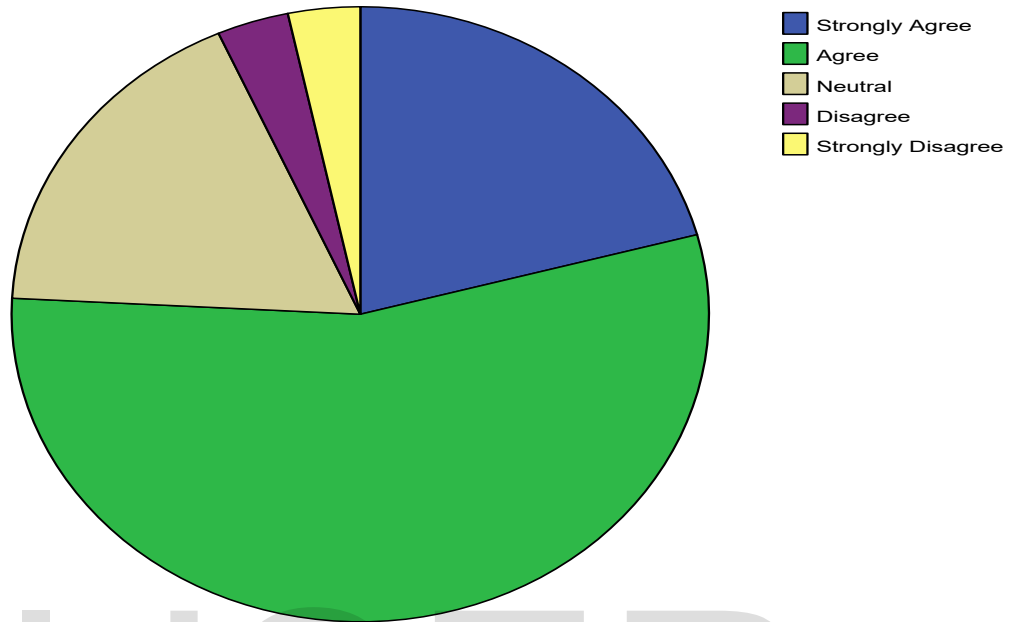
By all means, Pakistan is suffering from severe economic crisis, its currency is rapidly falling down, the foreign investment has disappeared and the IMF loans have squeezed it. Under certain circumstances, Saudi Arabia has emerged as a savior for Pakistani economy with a pledge of 20 billion dollars investment along with a 10 billion dollar oil refinery in the port city.

Its partnership has increased the credibility of Gawadar being a regional hub of trade and a worthy port for foreign investment. Its image has significantly improved as a stable port for investment and trade. Thus, Saudi participation can steer Pakistan toward economic stability to some extent.

Q.3 Saudi interests in CPEC and Gawadar port have resulted in an indo-Iran nexus.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly Agree	25	20.8	20.8	20.8
Agree	66	55.0	55.0	75.8
Neutral	21	17.5	17.5	93.3
Disagree	4	3.3	3.3	96.7
Strongly Disagree	4	3.3	3.3	100.0
Total	120	100.0	100.0	

Q.3 Saudi interests in CPEC and Gawadar port have resulted in an indo-Iran nexus.



Saudi interests in CPEC and Gawadar port have resulted in an Indo-Iranian nexus. On this question the responses were as follows. 25 of them strongly agreed while 66 of them had moderate agreement over the question. 21 of the respondents were neutral and 4 of them disagreed. 4 of them strongly disagreed.

There is no denying the fact that Iran is the arch rival of Saudi Arabia and their regional rivalry is on the zenith, on the other hand, India is the arch rival of Pakistan and their rivalry is on the zenith for regional supremacy as well.

Through the CPEC, Saudi Arabia is getting closer to Pakistan which naturally fabricates a new Indo-Iranian nexus against them. With the help of this nexus, both these countries will endeavor to their utmost to drive a wedge through the CPEC partners and sabotage it.

DISCUSSION

The Saudi and Iranian rivalry is religious as well as strategic and economic, but it is predominantly influenced by the differences in the religious ideology. The religious differences were somewhat present in the pre-1979 period as well as the Wahabbist influence in the Persian Gulf was on the rise, but the hostilities in the true sense developed in the wake of the Iranian Revolution.

The year of 1979 is very crucial for the history of the Middle East and Persian Gulf as this year proved to be the defining year of Shia-Sunni relations marking the end of the peace and tolerance between these two sects. In 1979, Iranian witnessed the Islamic revolution under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini, but Shia Islamic revolution, on the other hand, the same year the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan triggering the Sunni Jihad.

The militarization and radicalization of both these sects at the same time resulted in the beginning of an unending war opened at the sectarian fronts and the wave of hatred swept across the Middle East. Since then, both these countries have been in a tug of war over controlling the Persian Gulf, its trade and trying to tilt its strategic importance in their favor. Given the context of the current move of Saudi Arabia to join the CPEC, it has gained a strategic maneuver over Iran which Iran will retaliate with force or some other political maneuver.

Both of them are the arch rivals of each other in seeking influence over the Indian Ocean and South Asia, as South Asia serves as the corridor for regional connectivity with Central and East Asia. Therefore, both these countries want to improve their relations with the regional countries, but they at the same time endeavor to reduce the influence of the other.

Pakistan being a too weak economy in South Asia has always tilted toward Saudi Arabia for its riches and resources which have drawn Iran toward India for the same purpose. On the other hand, the project of CPEC has also pushed the Iranian ports into a tug of war with the future port of Gawadar which is likely to downgrade all regional ports once it turns fully functional.

The Saudi investment, as proven from the results of the SPSS (through the opinions of the media personnel, the government officials and the academia) will register significant improvement in the Pakistani economy and its local manufacturing sector, but overall, it will push Pakistan toward more competition with Iran and India. The success of CPEC is proportional to the failure of the port of Chahbahar and vice versa.

Therefore, India and Iran will endeavor to their utmost to derail the project by espionage activities or sabotage activities. India has already been blamed of promoting the resisting sentiments of the people of Gawadar and has been sponsoring the militants to target the CPEC related projects and target the Chinese engineers or those engineers who came and settled from other provinces in Gawadar.

Given these circumstances added by the acute frustration of Iran over the Saudi involvement in CPEC, a new nexus between these two desperate countries can usher the region into more instability or can result in sharpening of the insurgency in Balochistan. The Saudi investment and the establishment of the oil refinery in Gawadar, it will be the primary host of China in oil trade which was previously intended by China to be conducted with Iran.

Therefore, it is not a mere political or strategic loss for Iran, it is also an economic loss for Iran as now the oil trade in the region will mainly flow from Saudi Arabia. Pakistan too did not hesitate over embracing Saudi Arabia as it too was desperate for foreign investment and economic anchoring due to the sever crisis impending on the economy of Pakistan. Thus, the region is to witness new dimensions in the bilateral relations and these relations will define the future outlook of the regional stability.

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