

## Saudi–Russia–India: Is a Strategic Trilateral possible?

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### Executive Summary

As part of a broader **CNSS initiative** to create a fresh landscape in Indian foreign policy, this article ventures into the emerging possibility of a **strategic trilateral framework** between Saudi Arabia, Russia, and India, building on their evolving bilateral engagements in energy, connectivity, and diplomacy. At a time of shifting global alignments, this is a timely moment to explore alternative partnerships rooted in energy, multilateralism, and soft power (albeit informal at this stage) in order to promote and protect Indian interests. The article serves as an extension of the author's earlier analysis titled "[\*Bridging Giants: Russia's Economic Diplomacy with Saudi Arabia under Vision 2030.\*](#)"

### **Key Takeaways:**

- **Energy convergence** is the most important sector for trilateral collaboration since it uses Saudi Arabia's oil production capacity, Russia's technology, and India's refining capacity.
- **Geopolitical constraints**, especially strategic pressure by Washington and divergent foreign policy alignments, pose significant hurdles to institutionalising a formal trilateral arrangement.
- **Track-II diplomacy, education, and soft power** are low-risk options for confidence-building. This approach must move beyond elite institutions like IITs and IIMs to include private universities and regional think tanks, enabling a more decentralised and broad-based soft power architecture for trilateral cooperation.

*The article includes insights by Dr. Prem Anand Mishra, Assistant Professor, Nelson Mandela Centre for Peace & Conflict Resolution, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi. Dr Mishra holds PhD in West Asian studies from JNU, Delhi.*

## Saudi–Russia–India: Is a Strategic Trilateral possible?

In the new global geopolitics, the collaboration between Saudi Arabia, Russia, and India presents multifaceted opportunity. From a political and strategic perspective, each pair of India-Saudi, India-Russia and Russia-Saudis are making considerable progress. It brings to question the possibility of transforming these connections into a formal trilateral partnership. This article looks into the convergence of interests and the possible collaborative frameworks for collaboration in diplomacy, education, soft power, and Track-II engagements, against the backdrop of Western resistance.

**Current state of ties:** Post-1990s, the Saudi-India ties have peaked. Oil has been the epicentre of bilateral ties, with Saudis covering [18](#) percent of India's crude oil requirements. During the pandemic, the exports of textiles and machineries registered a northward trend in gold chemicals and hydrocarbons. The trade value reached [USD 33.09](#) billion dollars. There are also robust ties on a people-to-people level, which is further bolstered by the [two million](#) Indians living in the kingdom and with education and science, expanding through student exchange and collaboration in research over the last few years.

India's strategic plans guided by Make in India initiative alongside Mohamad Bin Salman's Vision 2030 are showcasing robust synergies. The GCC hosting the first ever India-GCC conference in [2024](#) highlighted the seriousness and depth of India-Saudi bilateral relations.

India's relationship with Russia, meanwhile, remains robust but increasingly transactional. Historical ties rooted in Cold War strategic cooperation have evolved as bilateral trade surged from USD 10 billion during the pandemic to over USD 68.7 billion in 2024-25, largely due to discounted Russian oil, fertilizers, and pharmaceutical imports. The defence relationship—once the cornerstone—still includes projects such as the S-400 air defence system and joint ventures like BrahMos missiles, even though India is gradually diversifying suppliers.

Diplomatically, India has taken a nuanced position on the Russia–Ukraine conflict, reflecting a preference for autonomy. India's presidency of the G20 and its careful language on the conflict demonstrated strategic restraint and emphasised the country's role as a mediator, not essentially an ally.

Russia and Saudi Arabia, though not historically close, have significantly improved ties through the OPEC+ framework. Since 2016, they have coordinated oil production to stabilize global markets, setting the tone for greater political and economic engagement. This rapprochement indicates both countries' desire to shape global energy narratives outside the traditional Western framework.

**Convergence of Interests:** Energy security remains the most immediate and powerful area of convergence. India's growing economy demands diversified energy imports, while Russia and Saudi Arabia are among the world's top oil exporters. A trilateral approach could align upstream Saudi production, Russian logistics, and India's downstream refining capacities into a strategic energy partnership. Joint ventures in petrochemical complexes, refineries, and fertilizer manufacturing are possible, with potential to pool Saudi capital, Russian technical know-how, and Indian market scale. Delhi-based academic and West Asia scholar Dr. Prem Anand Mishra believes that energy is "the most realistic starting point" for trilateral cooperation. He explains, "Russia and Saudi Arabia are two of the world's largest oil producers. India, as a heavy importer, fits well into the equation—especially with its refining capacity and ability to re-sell finished petroleum products."

Infrastructure connectivity offers another promising avenue. Projects like the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and the Chennai–Vladivostok maritime route already link India and Russia through Central Asia and the Far East. Saudi investment into such corridors could significantly improve logistics integration, create trade hubs, and open new Eurasian trade routes (Aneja, 2024).

Diplomatically, all three countries share an interest in multilateralism and reform of global governance. Russia champions expansion of BRICS and multipolarity, India supports rules-based inclusive institutions, and Saudi Arabia has accepted BRICS membership as a diversification strategy. This convergence could translate into cooperation on new financial instruments, including local currency settlements and alternative lending institutions.

In the domain of soft power, India's educational and IT infrastructure constitutes a key strategic asset. Saudi Arabia, under the ambit of Vision 2030, is investing substantially in human capital development, while Russia continues to maintain a robust academic and scientific tradition.

In areas of their respective strengths, Indian, Russian, and Saudi institutions can initiate joint academic and research programs as student exchange programs, conferences/seminars (online/offline), podcasts, and publications – areas which have traditionally been dominated by the West-institutions. In principle, the effectiveness of this approach mandates the inclusion of institutions beyond IITs, IIMs and central universities such as JNU. By involving collaborative mechanisms between private universities and regional thinktanks, beyond national capitals, will ensure a greater outreach of these knowledge partnerships and create a sustainable intellectual ecosystem. Additionally, joint cultural initiatives involving media and theatre, halal tourism and curated cross-cultural tourism experiences can be promoted for greater public familiarity and soft power penetration at ground level.

**Pathways for Trilateral Cooperation:** A pragmatic way forward lies in focusing on project-based cooperation and thematic forums. In the energy sector, the three countries could establish joint ventures in refining and petrochemicals. For example, Saudi crude and Russian technology could be utilised in Indian industrial zones under Make in India, creating jobs and reducing import dependence. Russian firms working as subsidiaries under Saudi-owned cooperations also offer a way to avoid primary sanctions.

India and Saudi Arabia can co-invest in fertilizer and ammonia plants with Russian inputs, while in renewable energy, all three could explore hydrogen development. Saudi Arabia's investment appetite, Russia's scientific capabilities, and India's energy needs form a natural synergy for green transition projects. Connectivity initiatives like the INSTC could be upgraded with Saudi capital and Russian logistics, improving port-to-port connectivity and customs integration. The Chennai–Vladivostok (Russia) Corridor, which became operational in 2024, could gain traction with Saudi maritime engagement.

Dr. Mishra points to soft engagement through “Track-II mechanisms” as a practical way forward. “Track-II is always possible,” he notes, “but the condition would be the resolution of the Ukraine crisis. As long as that persists, formal trilateralism remains unlikely.” On the diplomatic and Track-II fronts, public as well as privately-funded thinktanks across the three countries could launch trilateral dialogues to identify areas of convergence and inform policymaking. Business forums and

people-to-people exchanges, such as joint startup incubators or student leadership programs, can create constituencies for long-term cooperation. Soft power initiatives offer a promising low-risk entry point. Film co-productions, cultural festivals, and sport diplomacy can build familiarity and trust among publics. Joint scholarship programs and language training (Hindi, Arabic, Russian) in partner universities can also build institutional bridges.

**Challenges to Trilateralisation:** Despite these prospects, significant challenges remain. The foremost is managing U.S. sensitivities. India and Saudi Arabia are considered strategic partners of the U.S., and Washington is deeply wary of expanding Russian influence in Asia and the Middle East. India's procurement of Russian weapons systems like the S-400 has already raised the spectre of U.S. sanctions under the CAATSA framework. Similarly, Saudi Arabia's growing energy trade with Russia and consideration of Chinese yuan payments have sparked anxiety in Washington.

As American politician [Mike Lawler](#) (2025) noted recently, the U.S. must remain the security partner of choice for both India and Saudi Arabia—a sentiment echoed in American think tanks concerned about shifting alliances. A trilateral arrangement involving Russia risks being perceived as a geopolitical counterweight, which could complicate existing defence and investment partnerships with the U.S.

Dr. Mishra remains cautious about the institutional future of such an arrangement. “A tactical arrangement can be possible,” he states, “but a trilateral forum seems unlikely. The U.S. factor still dominates Saudi Arabia's strategic alliances, especially given its vulnerability in terms of sovereignty and defence.” Saudi's refusal to join BRICS is also a telling sign.

Another challenge lies in divergent strategic cultures. India pursues “strategic autonomy,” balancing between blocs; Saudi Arabia, though diversifying, remains closely tied to U.S. security guarantees; and Russia has been anti-West and leans increasingly toward China. Such asymmetries and adversarial alliances are a common denominator which all parties will have to navigate and balance.

Additionally, there are key challenges in operationalising this trilateral arrangement. New Delhi, Moscow, and Riyadh are not a part of any institutional platform (Such as QUAD or BRICS)

which can offer space for trilateral dialogue. Major infrastructure projects or energy investments would require taskforces and diplomatic committees to draft legal frameworks and conflict resolution mechanisms, which essentially entailing time, funds, and effort by the three countries. An ideal starting point would be closed-door discussions or informal, soft-power collaborative events as pilot projects to test the geopolitical waters and prepare the ground for long-term collaborative projects.

**Managing U.S. Relations While Engaging Russia:** The most complicated element in this envisioned trilateral partnership is Washington. For Delhi as well as Riyadh, USA is an important trade partner, defence partner and strategic ally, and antagonising Washington is a calculative risk both parties will have to take. However, it is also true that Washington engages very proactively with countries such as Pakistan, much to discomfort of India. There are similar sensitivities in Riyadh-Washington bilateral ties. For each party, it is a question of serving national interests, and balancing complex relations. On its part, Delhi will have to exercise tact and diplomatic finesse in communicating its respective commitment to ties with the US under existing arrangements, while assuring that the forum is not meant to challenge or counter ties with the US, but is a parallel diplomatic investment serving Indian national interests as a part of its diversified foreign policy. There is no zero-sum game here.

### **Conclusion:**

The time is ripe for a Delhi-Riyadh-Moscow trilateral agreement. A shared interest in building a multi-power world order alongside convergence in areas such as infrastructure, energy, and soft power areas (viz. education, culture, and tourism) offer ample space for the three allies to come together. All sides stand to gain from such a framework. But the question all sides need to ask is – Would the benefits of coming together exceed the cost of antagonising the USA, especially under its current leadership?

The road from bilateral ties to tri-lateralisation is certainly not an easy one, especially on account of Delhi and Riyadh's ties with Washington. An ideal starting point in the short-run would be to explore soft-power spaces such as education and culture which offer ample avenues to come together brainstorm and collaborate in an informal or semi-formal format. Based on the success of

such short-term initiatives, institutionalisation of a trilateral forum may be envisioned in the medium or long run. However, this idea must gain traction as a part of new India's foreign policy discourse.