**[Three to tango](https://www.dawn.com/news/1828150/three-to-tango)**

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IT takes three to tango in our part of the world. The US-Pakistan duo and the Saudi-Pakistan pair has become a threesome, choreographed by the US.

In 1950, prime minister Liaquat Ali Khan met US president Harry Truman in Washington, D.C. Three years later, in 1953, governor-general Ghulam Muhammad was hosted by King Ibn-e-Saud in Saudi Arabia. Since then, bilateral relationships between Pakistan and these countries, while shifting and erratic, have nevertheless maintained one golden vein of consistency: Pakistan has remained a poor supplicant and the richer two, patrons of the last resort.

US attitudes towards Pakistan have usually been determined by the policies of its presidents and by State Department mandarins. Occasionally, they would agree to disagree. The most notable occasion occur­red in the 1970s during the Richard Nixon vs William Rogers bouts over contacts with China.

Saudi monarchs as a whole have remained partial towards Pakistan. Among them, the most unconditionally generous was King Faisal bin Abdul Aziz. It is said that he funded the 1974 Second Islamic Summit held in Lahore. He conceded its stage management to PM Zulfikar Ali Bhutto who acknowledged that concession by renaming Charing Cross as Faisal Square.

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Few will be aware that in 1974 King Faisal gave $100 million to be disbursed to any projects of PM Bhutto’s choice. The money went straight into the projects, without deductions for middlemen. Half of that — $50m — was given to the Mirpur Mathelo fertiliser project, which, even though it was not a joint venture, was renamed Pak-Saudi Fertilisers Ltd.

Again, in January 1975, King Faisal gave $10m for Pakistan’s earthquake victims in the Karakorams. (The US pledged only $25,000.) Such generosity did not go unpunished. King Faisal was shot four months later by his US-educated nephew Faisal bin Musaid Al Saud.

More recently, the Bin Abdul Aziz dy­­na­s­­ty and Pakistan’s inextinguishable Sharif family have shown that they enjoy an almost umbilical relationship. Crown Prince Moh­ammed bin Salman has famously called Pakistan his second home. To the Sharif family, Saudi Arabia is their first haven.

In 2019, the Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman visited Pakistan during the tenure of PM Imran Khan. Their bromance appeared to yield the prospect of $20 billion in investments. Deals were signed, sealed but remained undelivered. As Napoleon once advised: “Promise everything, deliver nothing.”

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif has received fresh assurances of financial support — this time $5bn — from the same crown prince. During their recent meeting, the prince reaffirmed Saudi Arabia’s resolve never to leave Pakistan’s side and expressed his government’s boundless affection for the nation.

He sent a high-powered Saudi delegation led by Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan bin Abdullah to grout that commitment. The composition of the delegation underscored the seriousness of its mandate. It consisted of the Saudi ministers of water and agriculture, of industry and mineral resources, the deputy minister of investment, and senior officials from its ministry of energy and the Saudi Fund for General Investments. It visited Pakistan this week, in the absence of our finance minister.

The Saudis came just when Pakistan genuflects before the IMF for the 24th time.

In 2023, the IMF agreed to the Stand-by Arrangement of $3bn. to rescue PM Shehbaz Sharif’s government. The Saudis greased the rails with a reclaimable deposit of $2bn to window-dress Pakistan’s foreign exchange reserves.

This year, on March 13, ahead of the IMF mission’s visit to Pak­istan from March 14 to 18, the finance ministry cheerfully annou­nced that it had “met all targets for successful completion of the programme”.

Two days later, on the 15th, the IMF team expressed its displeasure over the ministry of finance’s announcement “that it had materialised all structural benchmarks, quantitative and indicative targets even prior to scrutinising and completion of the review by the Fund staff”.

According to one news report, the IMF review mission “grilled the finance ministry team in the maiden session of the review talks and everyone seemed clueless how to respond”. Finance Minister Aurangzeb assured the IMF that “such an episode would never be repeated in future”.

Shakespeare foresaw the IMF’s seemingly open-ended commitment to Pakistan: “’Tis not enough to help the feeble up, but to support them after”.

The fate of our application to the IMF will be known very soon, after April 20. The US will decide its next president at year end. Meanwhile, the US, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan continue to cavort in a three-party tango. To paraphrase the US singer Melody Gardot, Pakistan, on its own, may be “a bad walker [but] it can dance the tango”.

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