

The Saudi Factor in Pakistan-Iran Relations

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Abstract

National interest often forms the core of bilateral ties between states. No matter how much idealism is peddled to explain the unassailability of the State's bilateral relations, the national interests and related diplomatic preferences spawn abrasion in these ties. The change of leadership is a consequence of elections results in a national reassessment of foreign policy. This paper attempts to highlight Pakistan's foreign policy dilemma regarding the walking of a tightrope between Tehran and Riyadh. It is argued that the balancing act of Islamabad in this triad is further complicated in the aftermath of 2013 general elections in Pakistan. The new Nawaz Sharif administration's unveiled connection with the Saudi Kingdom, the current tides in the Saudi-Iran-U.S. triangle, and the impending and complex drawdown of international forces from Afghanistan further confounds the trajectory of Pakistan's foreign policy, especially in the zero sum dynamics of Saudi-Iran rivalry.

Keywords: Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Nawaz Administration, Iran's Nuclear Program

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Introduction

An inflexible approach in defining foreign policy does not help in understanding inter-state relations. If the actions/reactions of sovereign states to alter conditions in their external environment is defined as foreign policy (Wilkenfeld et al, 1980: 100), it brings about another strand of scholarship with emphasis on the inclusion of the ideas of the decision makers involved in foreign policy decision making. These decision makers seek change, and that change may be in the policy, behavior, or action/reactions of a state (Holsti, 1983: 9). In this context, the change of leadership has significant implications for the foreign policy of a state. One of the four agents recognized by Hermann (1990, 11) with respect to the change in foreign policy is “leader driven”. In this paper, the change of leadership (government) is not addressed in light of the personal traits of the leader – which are more abstract – (Doeser, 2013), rather in light of the leader’s attitude towards different domestic (not the subject of this paper) and international problems (Breuning, 2007:133; and Farnham, 2004). When I refer to international problems, the subject of this essay, specifically, I mean it in the context of the challenge of maintaining balance in triangular relations, or avoiding problems in that triangular policy. One such troubled triangle consists of Pakistan, Iran and Saudi Arabia in which Pakistan has to walk a tightrope between its strategically significant Shia neighbor Iran, and its Sunni patron Saudi Arabia which Pakistan has relied upon politically and financially.

The new Sharif administration, with its history of cordiality with the Taliban, his personal indebtedness to the Saudi royal family, and

his complicated ties with Pakistan's military, have the potential to effect the orientations of Pakistan's foreign policy. That is why, Foreign policy analysts will closely watch the foreign policy moves of the PMLN's government (Grare, 2013:989-90). The PMLN's election sloganeering included five promises: rectifying economic problems, dealing with energy scarcity within 3 (03) years, an end to the drone strikes on Pakistan's soil, tackling the Menace of terrorism, and the pursuit of amicable relations with neighboring states (including India (Qazi, 2013). The first two promises create problems for the fifth one, especially in the context of Pakistan-Iran-Saudi ties (Nasir, 2013).

The third time Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif outlined the broad features of his foreign policy. Stressing the need for strengthening relations with Middle Eastern states, Nawaz specially highlighted Iran and Saudi Arabia along with Turkey. He stated that "Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey are brotherly countries with whom we shall continue to pursue cooperative relations" (Malik, 2013). The test case for Nawaz Sharif's government is to balance its relations with Riyadh and Tehran. Some analysts opine Saudi Kingdom reluctance over Pakistan's march towards the realization of the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline (IPI). If it is the case, the outgoing PPP government has already complicated the situation for the Sharif government by defying international pressures on the question of the IPI. Although, a senior official of PMLN has stated that the Government of Pakistan could and would revise the gas deal with Iran in line with our national interest. This statement may be welcome in Riyadh, but it has had ramifications for Pakistan-Iran relations (The Economic times, May 13, 2013).

It is not just the IPI or its geostrategic dynamics that limit Islamabad's opportunity for simultaneously amicable ties with both Tehran and Riyadh. In effect, the troubled history of Saudi-Iran ties (especially after the Islamic Revolution), sectarian war (Shia-Sunni), Pakistan's place in the Middle East nuclear dilemma, strategies for coping with post 2014 Afghanistan, all present challenges to the

Nawaz government in maintaining balanced relations with both Riyadh and Tehran.

I. Historical Background

“Religious affinity, geographic proximity, and cultural ties” are the key terms that define Pakistan-Iran relations. However, when faced with the world of realism, changing demands of national interests in response to domestic changes, and transformations in their external environment questions the adequacy of the idealist prism in explaining Pakistan-Iran ties (Khan, 2013:1-9). The 66 years of bilateral ties have experienced gradual deterioration with every passing decade. Because of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, the situation was complicated with the emergence of a Shia state with the aim of exporting Revolution. Pakistan’s ties with Iran did not remain as productive as they were before the Revolution. Among the many factors, the deterioration of Riyadh’s Ties with Tehran and the former’s increasing strong relationship with Islamabad, played a significant role (Ibid:17-28). Official diplomatic relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia were established in 1928 when the Saud dynasty came to power, but the diplomatic exchanges began in mid-1960s. From the 1960s on till the Islamic Revolution, Iran-Saudi ties were normal. More importantly, there were neither Sunni-Shia divide nor the Arab-non-Arab friction dominated Middle Eastern politics; the only division was between the Conservatives and Radicals. Both the dynasties (Pahlavi in Iran and Saud in Saudi Arabia) cooperated over a number of domestic and international issues. Nonetheless, with the fall of the Shah, Iran-Saudi relations suffered severe setbacks because the Islamic Republic of Iran not only questioned the legitimacy of the Saudi regime, but also sought to change the status-que (Jaaner, 2012: 39). Saudi Arabia has been one of the major Arab competitors of Iran in the post-Revolutionary era. Among other things, it has been competing with Iran for leverage in Pakistan and Afghanistan (Hunter, 2010: 189).

It is worth noting that ties between Pakistani admirers of the Wahabi regime in Saudi Arabia date back to the days of the fundamentalist ideologist Sayiad Abul Ala Modudi who was sympathetic to the strict Islamic code established in the kingdom. However, the second OIC summit in Lahore enhances Pakistan's significance for Riyadh. The overthrow of Bhutto in 1977, the Islamization process of president Zia, the Islamic Revolution of Iran in February 1979, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan made Saudi Arabia a critical player in Pakistan and Afghanistan. On one hand, Riyadh played one side of the sectarian battle in Pakistan against Iranian interests, while on the other hand, provided full assistance to Afghan Mujahideen against the Soviet Union (Ahmad, 2011: 12-13). This Saudi assistance later became the major cause of tension between Islamabad and Tehran (Khan and Ahmad, 2009). Since then, Saudi Arabia is one of the most important factors in Pakistan-Iran relations.

The Saudi factor became more interesting in the wake of the PMLN's victory in the 2013 general elections, because Pakistan's ties with Saudi Kingdom lacked the traditional warmth during the Zardari led PPP government, when due to his Shia Sect, President Zardari was perceived to be tilted towards Iran. The return of Nawaz Sharif to power is certainly a cause of delight in Saudi Arabia. It was during the Afghan Jihad when the Saudi government was backing Pakistan's army to train mujahedeen groups to bleed the invading Soviet Union. In the meantime, Nawaz Sharif joined the Muslim League which was at that time considered as the "B team" of military. Nawaz's profound esteem for the Saudi Kingdom came to the fore during the Gulf crisis. When Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1991, the then Prime Minister of Pakistan Nawaz Sharif dispatched thousands of troops to defend the Saudi kingdom against possible Iraqi assault. Moreover, Nawaz is also close to Ahl-E-Hadith and is known for tolerating the militant groups like Lashkar-e-Tayba. During his second term he provided new dimensions to Pakistan-Saudi ties by giving Saudi Defense Minister (Prince Sultan) the opportunity to visit Pakistan's nuclear site at

Kahuta. He was rewarded by the Saudi government when they later forced President Musharraf not to execute him, but to send him into exile in Saudi Arabia. During the days of his exile, his industrial empire flourished and amidst the tense political environment marked by Benazir Bhutto's return to Pakistan as a consequence of pressure from Washington, it was the Saudi Kingdom that ensured Sharif's return by pressuring President Musharraf (Ahmed, 2013: 13; and Himen, 2013). Considering this background, the new government in Pakistan expects the Saudi government to "go slow" on the repatriation of 90000 Pakistani workers, the provision of oil on concessional terms, and to act as an intermediary to bridge the widening gulf in Islamabad-Washington ties (Parthasarathy, 2013). But I argue, for further improvement in the relations between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, and for any chance of repair in the ties between Islamabad and Washington, the issue of Iran, especially that of IPI cannot be overlooked.

Pakistan, Iran and Saudi Arabia make a complicated triangle. In this triangle, Iran-Pakistan-India gas pipeline (which is now Iran-Pakistan pipeline) is an interesting subject. Attracting the interest of regional and international players, the pipeline invites fury from US and its allies who expect Islamabad to dump the deal with Iran. The lukewarm response from Islamabad on the progress of IPI had frustrated Tehran till the recent past. Although Pakistan faces immense energy deficiency and the IPI is a natural answer to fulfill some of the energy requirements, the project suffers delays due to, among other reasons international pressure. Islamabad must realize that not only has its energy deficiency been aggravated, but the delay in IPI project has cost Pakistan-Iran goodwill (Defense.pk, July 30, 2013).

This pipeline was planned to start deliveries by 2014. The pipeline is almost functional on Iran's side and it has been constructed from South Pars to Iranshahr. Whereas, Pakistan's side is far from completion, but the construction only began in early 2013

(Jalilvand, 2013). The project will be completed without India. The 25 years contract between Pakistan and Iran was signed in 2009. According to this contract, Pakistan and Iran agreed upon the export of 8 BCM/Y starting in March 2014 (Ibid: 9). Economic and technical obstacles aside, various geopolitical considerations hindered the construction of the project (Khan, 2013: 60). In March 2013, President Asif Zardari and President Ahmadinejad celebrated the commencement of the construction of Pakistani section of the pipeline. IPI suffered from financial inadequacies because of the fragile economy of Pakistan. But Iran wanted to keep the project alive and that is why it had agreed to provide a loan of \$500 million out of the total cost of \$1.5 billion to Islamabad for the construction of pipeline on its side. For Pakistan, IPI is the most feasible of all the gas import projects from Iran. An interesting development since has been a news report projection by an Iranian news agency affiliated with Iran's oil ministry that says that Pakistan has hinted that it will increase the volume of imports to 30 BCM/y via IPI (Jalilvand, 2013: 9).

The fortunes of the IPI seemed to improve when Pakistan handed over the control of the Gawadar to China which was a positive development in the politics of the IPI. Although, Iran had pledged to provide \$500 million dollars for the construction of the pipeline, Islamabad with its fledgling economy was failing to provide the other \$1 billion for the construction. A Pakistani official in their Tehran embassy revealed that China has officially pledged to make available \$500 million dollars, which provided another leap to IPI dream (Bhutta, 2013).

Energy deficiency aside, the construction of pipeline on an immediate basis is important for Pakistan. If it fails to construct its share of it until 2014, it will have to pay 1 million dollar per day in penalty to Iran. The IPI is also the most economical of the three projects namely; IPI, TAPI, and LNG import that will cost 11, 13, and 17-18 per Million British thermal Unit (MMBTU) respectively

(Ahmad, 2012). Though IPI is an energy source as well as an economic imperative for Pakistan, yet it is consistently subjected to U.S pressures seeking to stop it from being constructed (Khan, 2013: 61).

Saudi Arabia also does not want Iran's pipelines growing in different directions. The Pipeline squabble has translated into funding proxies in a third country, just as reflected in the case of Syria. As the Assad government signed a memorandum on a pipeline plan worth \$10 billion from Iran to Syria via Iraq, it was a direct slap on Qatar's proposal of a pipeline and aroused Saudi exasperation with the deal as well. Since then, Riyadh has funded the opposition to Assad's regime with the hope that after the fall of Assad's regime, it will be in a position to scrap any deal between Syria and Iran. The war against Assad's government and Iranian interests in the region is not new. In fact the U.S intelligence agencies have long been engaged in strengthening the Wahabi-Salafi groups hostile to Iran in the region. Here, U.S-Saudi interest converged on the containment of Iran and on pipeline politics (Ahmed, 2013). Though common opposition to pipelines seem to be restricted to Syria only, U.S antagonism towards the IPI project has also indirectly served Saudi goals (Ibid).

In an interview with the Wall Street Journal, a day before his address to the UN General Assembly, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif declared that he would "proceed with a plan to build a gas pipeline from Iran, despite objections from the U.S." (Shah, 2013). Defying U.S pressure on IPI is not something remarkable on Nawaz Sharif's part in my opinion, because the previous governments have also demonstrated more or less the same trend. An interesting question in the IPI chapter of Islamabad's foreign policy is how Sharif is going to convince his Saudi benefactors regarding the benefits that the IPI holds for their nemesis Iran?

Presumably, the previous government in Islamabad had adopted a bold stance on the IPI not because of Pakistan's national interest, but to amass support in the 2013 general elections from the poor

population of the energy starving state. Although open opposition to IPI from Riyadh is unheard, Riyadh and Washington are unnerved at the progress of this pipeline. As one analyst notes in this context that in the summer of 2011, “Islamabad and Iran engaged in a flurry of diplomatic activity culminated in a pledge to dramatically increase bilateral trade”. On the other hand, for the sake of keeping bonds with Riyadh unaffected, Prime Minister Gilani, and President Zardari made separate visits to Saudi Arabia (Kugelman, 2013). Saudi Arabia is the most important ally of Pakistan, and Tehran’s chief regional rival. It is also the largest donor to Pakistan after US. Under these circumstances it is hard to believe that Pakistan can take Riyadh lightly if it vociferously opposes the IPI.

Let’s take the economic factor out of equation for a moment, and see the Pakistan-Saudi-Iran triangle in the light of the recent deployment of Pakistani personnel in Bahrain to protect Saudi interests there in the wake of Arab Spring (Ibid). It point towards Pakistan’s role in the sectarian war between Islamabad and Riyadh at the international level. The Arab awakening (uprisings) in Yemen, Egypt, and Tunisia resulted in the fall of Western backed dictatorships and electoral victory for Islamists with two significant impacts for regional politics. On one hand, these dictatorships were mostly backed by their Western patrons, and the downfall of these dictatorships benefit Iran. On the other hand, the “Arab Awakenings transformed the dynamics within many Arab states that brought to the fore erupting tensions on regional and international level. Significant among these is power struggle between the regional (Middle East and Persian Gulf) centers of power which culminated in the renewed Shia-Sunni rift but this time on international level. The Shia-Sunni Schism manifested itself in the form of conflict, with the “Shia Muslim leadership, with Iran at its helm, and the Salafi-Wahabi strand of Sunni Islam, led by Saudi Arabia, determined to contain Iran’s influence and regional ambitions” (Mousavian, 2013: 130). As Hossain Musavian posits, Iran is significant player in the stabilization

of Iraq, critical to any peace process in Lebanon, major supporter of Bahraini Shias, and holding one end of the betel in Syria (Ibid: 131-132). In all these battles both Iran and Saudi Arabia are either directly involved or pulling the strings of the actors on opposite sides of the spectrum.

Pakistan, when entering the international dynamics of Shia-Sunni schism, faces the dilemma of balancing between Iran and Saudi Arabia. It is worth noting that Pakistan has been one of the theaters for Iran-Saudi sectarian battle, where both the sides have funded their proxies that often jeopardize Islamabad's internal security dilemma (Ahmad, 2011: xxi-xxiv). And when Islamabad's tries to cushion its Sunni patron (Saudi Arabia) it irritates its Shia neighbor, Iran. For instance, in March 2011 Riyadh deployed its troops to Bahrain in support of the ruling Khalifa family, in order to quell the Shia uprisings. This deployment was in response to the allegations by the Government of Bahrain that Tehran is involved in accelerating Shia uprising against Sunni Khalifa family. Iran, not only denied these allegations in the beginning, after the GCC forces entered Bahrain but the tone of Iran changed altogether. President Ahmadinejad warned that those who deployed the troops must learn from the fate of Saddam in Iraq. The Iranian Supreme leader outlined Iran's policy on this matter. He stated that the "policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran is predicated on defending the people and their rights against all dictatorial and egotistical rulers without distinguishing between Sunnis and Shiites." The supreme leader further added that "Saudi Arabia committed a mistake by sending its forces into Bahrain because this enrages the Islamic nations." (Bassiouni and Rodley, 2011: 375-76). If I take the license of interpreting the words of Iranian Supreme Leader that "Saudi Arabia committed a mistake" by sending its troops to Bahrain, and "this enrages the Islamic nations" in the sense that Riyadh's deployment of troops to Bahrain has enraged the Islamic Republic of Iran, then it can be argued that Pakistan's decision to support Riyadh was also an error of Pakistan's policy with respect to

its neighbor Iran. When reports of Islamabad's involvement surfaced, Islamabad emphatically denied all the allegations of sending troops to Bahrain (But, 2011). However, the Government of Bahrain even testifies the presence of foreign troops including Pakistani military personnel. News reports indicate that around 2500 Pakistani soldiers were deployed to quell the Shia uprisings in 2011 (Zakaria, 2013). This policy of obliging the Saudi monarchy was not well received in Tehran.

Given the history of Pakistan's collaboration with its Saudi patron in Afghanistan, and Islamabad's military cooperation with Saudi Arabia, the involvement of Pakistani soldiers in quelling the Bahraini uprisings cannot be discounted. In the 1980s, Pakistan also contributed to the Saudi military on an unprecedented scale by deploying a force equivalent to two divisions that is about 20,000 personnel. Although Zia's government repeatedly denied this number of personnel, different press accounts invariably reported the deployment of two divisions. In 1988 a great number of Pakistani personnel left Saudi arm forces, due to the Saudi request that Shia officials should not be deployed, a request that Pakistan refused to comply with (Clarri and Karlin, 2012).

I contend, any such cooperation in the future with the Saudi monarchy will not be trouble-free for the Nawaz Sharif government if domestic public opinion is of any significance in foreign policy decisions. Iran's popularity in Pakistan is astoundingly high, where 76 percent of the sampled population gives a favorable opinion regarding Iran. This is in sharp contrast to the high rates of Shia killings that have become routine in Pakistan. This frequent killing of Pakistani Shia's in large numbers generates doubts over the government's intentions to stop Shia massacres. However I argue, if Iran is viewed positively in Pakistan, the rates of atrocities committed against Shias in Pakistan can be traced elsewhere (Fisher, 2013). Being host to the second largest Shia population in the world after Iran, Pakistan's security has also been jeopardized by sectarian strife. The trend of

sectarian violence began to increase as a consequence of the geopolitical changes in late 1970s. As the triumph of the Islamic Revolution transpired in Iran, the Shias across the world including in Pakistan felt empowered. The US and Saudi funding to the hardliner Sunni groups to fight the jihad in Afghanistan further aggravated the sectarian problem in Pakistan (Yusuf, 2012: 1-2).

However I argue that the story of Syrian Crisis with respect to Pakistan's policy is somewhat different than the story of Bahrain. The Syrian-Iranian alliance is one of the enduring alliances in the region (Middle East) and has a defensive nature. Major objectives behind this alliance are their common shared perception of Iraq, defense against US intervention and convergence of interest on various regional issues (Goodarzi, 2006: 18-19). If Iran stood behind the Assad government, Riyadh stood squarely behind the Syrian opposition. Riyadh's main focus has not been the political transition, but its bid to weaken Iran with the fall of the Assad government (Berdi and Guzanski, 2012: 1-2). Developments in the Syrian crisis, and Washington's retreat from its stance of militarily attacking Syria has not only frustrated Riyadh's strategic objective of isolating Iran in the region, it has also, in my opinion, enhanced Tehran's influence in the region. On the other hand, cracks in the Riyadh-Washington alliance became eminent with US decision to accept chemical weapons deal with Syria. Saudi royals, already upset over Washington's decision to work with Morsi's government in Egypt have chosen to adopt a deviating policy from Washington on the issue of providing Surface-to-air missiles to Syrian rebels. Despite their utmost efforts to convince Washington to taking action against the Assad government, Saudis felt betrayed by the soft Stance of the US on Syria. As argued earlier, Iran's influence increased ,although not substantially, with the developments in the Syrian crisis, Obama's "flirting" with Rohani and the prospects of rapprochement with Tehran amplified Riyadh's exasperation which was evident in the U.N general Assembly session. Saudi Foreign Minister, Prince Saud Al-Faisal, to inflict a diplomatic

slap on Washington's wrist has made no address at U.N General Assembly Session (Maclean and Macdonald, 2013). As Alexander Orlov notes, amid this "constructive chaos" Washington may be attempting to build trust with Iran over the expense of its Arab allies (Orlov, 2013). In this fascinating geopolitical drama, Islamabad will be more attractive for Riyadh.

So far as ties with Iran are concerned, Pakistan has stayed on the safe side by echoing peaceful solution to the Syrian problem (MOFA Islamabad, September 28, 2013). However, Tehran's growing influence in the region and its drive towards nuclear technology may result in a tough time for Islamabad as it continues to balancing between Riyadh and Tehran.

II. The Nuclear Issue

Saudi-Iranian rivalry, which is one of the defining features of Middle East politics, has intensified as a consequence of Iran's professed expansion of power from 2003 to 2009 and the sectarian temperament of the Arab Spring (Nader, 2013: 11). "Iran's advantageous regional position, Ahmadinejad's radicalism, and Tehran's nuclear progress were perceived as an existential threat to the Saudi monarchy and its Gulf partners" (Ibid: 13).

The debate over Iran's drives towards nuclear weapons is heated with the prospects of a nuclear race in Middle East, and further fueled with likely cooperation between Islamabad and Riyadh in the field of nuclear technology (Khan, 2013: 72-75). Some Western and even some Indian experts bring into play the sectarian shade in Iran's nuclear drive and the likely Saudi response. In this connection, they argue that Pakistan might be more willing to assist the Saudi's in acquisition of nuclear technology than Iran (Ibid). Although A.Q Khan had been a major helping hand to Tehran's nuclear program during the late 1980 and 1990s, some Iranian analysts contend that Pakistan is not particularly delighted over Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons (Javedanfar, 2011). Even some officials in Tehran (in the

previous administrations) have been openly suspicious of A.Q Khan's Pakistani and Sunni background, and suspected that the father of Pakistan's nuclear weapons program might have transferred more sophisticated technical knowhow to Riyadh (Khan, 2013:73).

Islamabad is also unwittingly pulled into the Middle East nuclear controversy (a point that I will shortly return to). "In fact, as far back as 2003, Saudi Arabia launched an internal strategic review to determine the feasibility of developing nuclear weapons". Although, Washington's guarantee of extended nuclear deterrence against a potential Iranian breakthrough convinced Riyadh not to acquire nuclear weapons, yet the strength of that guarantee might have been lost as a consequence of events in the wake of Arab Spring (Ladha, 2012:4), thereby, making Pakistan an attractive option for cooperation in Saudi Arabia's advancement towards nuclear weapons. Some experts, or as I would call them nonproliferation optimists, argue that Riyadh's adoption regarding the nuclear path after Iran or seeking nuclear guarantee from Pakistan is often exaggerated (Kahl et al, 2013: 9). Two significant voices that have spoken on this matter recently are important to note here.

Frederic Wehrey, Senior Associate, Middle East Program at Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, while discounting the proliferation cascade after Iran, has diligently built his case, and has provided justification for all Saudi actions that has been contextualized in the Middle East power politics. Be it the rhetoric of Saudi officials related to the acquisition of nuclear weapons, or Riyadh's refusal to sign the amended version of SPQ (2005), the fact that Riyadh has not signed the missile technology control regime, and the purchase of Chinese CSS-2 missiles all he states, is either face saving in the middle Eastern politics, or the show of force against its chief adversary Iran (Wehrey, 2012: 5-6).

Another group of experts, led by Colin H. Kahl, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for the Middle East also rejects the possibility of Riyadh's acquisition of nuclear weapons if Iran crosses

the threshold. They build this argument on the history of proliferation and the states acquiring nuclear weapons since 1945. They observe rightly that Pakistan's adoption of a nuclear weapons was not followed by any other South Asian state, nor North Korean nuclear tests were followed by South Korea or Japan's rush to breakthrough. However, they missed the point that Pakistan with its long standing rivalry with India had resolutely treaded the nuclear weapon's trajectory in the face of all economic and political difficulties (Kahl et al, 2013: 9-10). The Saudi case can be viewed in this context. Given the history of animosity between Tehran and Riyadh, the prospects of Saudi Arabia's pursuit of nuclear weapons, or nuclear guarantee from Pakistan are more than its nuclear restraint.

With regard to the Pakistani option for Riyadh, Frederic Wehrey argues, Though Riyadh's economic hand in the post Pakistan's nuclear test had been significant. Economic, political and personal ties might also facilitate the nuclear deal between Islamabad and Tehran, but the risk of such a transfer for Pakistan-Iran ties is very high. Pakistan has a history of cooperation with Saudi Arabia against Tehran's interests in Afghanistan. However, it cannot afford to embroil itself directly in the most sensitive aspect of Iran-Saudi cold war (Wehrey,2012). Though Pakistan's nuclear program does not present direct security threat to Iran, cooperation with Riyadh can make things tough for Iran (Khan, 2013:69-70). Islamabad already has a nuclear adversary with a history of protracted border tensions in the shape of India. And the Kargil crisis in 1999 demonstrated that asymmetric warfare can be employed even in the presence of nuclear deterrence (Wehrey, 2012: 6).

For instance, Sultan bin Abdulaziz's visit to Pakistan's nuclear test sites in 1999 and 2002 underscored the level of defense ties between Islamabad and Riyadh, but it does not suggest that Pakistan has sold nuclear weapons to Riyadh. As Mark Urban a senior editor (BBC News Night) notes Major General Feroz Hassan Khan in his "semi-official history" of the Pakistani nuclear program argued,

although the visits of Saudi foreign minister to Pakistan's atomic labs cannot be sited as a proof of an agreement between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, munificent Saudi financial assistance was indeed a critical factor in keeping Pakistan's nuclear program alive. Even if all (the visits of Saudi officials to Pakistan's nuclear sites, and Saudi financial assistance) of Saudi Arabia's understandings with Pakistan on nuclear transfer are trashed, it is comprehensible, because it was in effect in 2003 that regional environment necessitated a review of Riyadh's strategic thinking. From 2003 onwards, high ranking Saudi officials reiterated the need for a Saudi nuclear option in response to Tehran's nuclear weapons. Whatever the intention of the statements of Saudi officials, whether bluster aimed at compelling Washington to take a more hardline on Iran's nuclear program, or an actual announcement of Riyadh's own trajectory after Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons, these statements have broad meaning for both the believers and skeptics of Pakistan-Saudi nuclear deal (Urban, 2013).

Renewed conjectures regarding the transfer of nuclear weapons from Pakistan to Saudi Arabia at a time when Saudi-US ties have become cold over the developments in Syria and the ice between Tehran and Washington has begun to melt has broad implications for Pakistan-Iran-Saudi triad. Although the US secretary of state, Jon Kerry in his recent visit to Riyadh has attempted to paint the cracks that had appeared over the civil war in Syria, yet his diplomacy could not mollify the sense of betrayal that surfaced in Riyadh over the past two months. Saudi Arabia was invited to the Geneva conference over Syria (that is yet to be held), was regarded as a senior player in the region, and was even kept apprised of all the information about nuclear talks with Tehran. These overtures of Secretary Kerry in the year when Prince Saud in a joint press conference remarked that there are two kinds of differences between Washington and Riyadh, "some of the differences are in objectives, very few," where as "most of the differences are in tactics". Undoubtedly the most worrisome outcome of the developments in Syria for Riyadh is the growing role of Iran in

the region (Gordon, 2013). If the past is a guide to the future in any way, then Saudi tensions are not baseless. When U.S-Iran ties were at their lowest during the 1980s, the Saudi's were standing shoulder-to-shoulder with the U.S in supporting the Afghan jihad. Conversely, when the thaw between Tehran and Washington occurred immediately after 9/11, the Saudi-U.S relations nosedived. To put the thread in perspective, Both Iran and Saudi Arabia aspire to grab the attention of the soul super power, but both at the same time are distrustful of its embrace; Iran because of its Revolutionary character, and Riyadh because of its startling consequences of radicalism at the eve of this decade. As both have been locked in a cold war for the last 30 years and cannot embrace the other as an ally, each look towards a powerful state tip the balance against the other (Joffé, 2009: 61). Here not only the Middle East, but Afghanistan also hems into their competition. For this reason, Pakistan again becomes the center of attention and a critical player in the Saudi-Iran antagonism.

III. Afghanistan Issue

Afghanistan is viewed by the Kingdom as part of its immediate neighborhood, and the leadership had developed an interest in the country's future in the 1980s. Afghanistan derives its significance in the Saudi foreign policy calculus from the fact that what happens in Afghanistan affects Riyadh's ties with Pakistan and Iran. Iran is not only the main adversary of the Kingdom in the Middle East and Persian Gulf, it is also considered to be a threat to the continued existence of the regime. Pakistan, on the other hand, is arguably the most important ally of Saudi Arabia after the U.S. Now, when key leaders in Riyadh echo doubts regarding Washington's utility in protecting the survival of the regime against regional enemies, "Saudi Arabia supports Pakistan in its Afghan policy and – only partly in coordination with Islamabad – competes with Iran for influence in Afghanistan" Steinberg and Woermer, 2013: 2). Prior to the current phase of Riyadh's increasing role in Afghan politics (beginning in

2008), Saudi efforts in Afghanistan had all ended in Disappointment. The end of the 1980s phase of Washington-Islamabad-Riyadh nexus against the Soviet Union, the decision to side with Pakistan in recognizing Taliban after disillusionment from its Afghan allies (Gulbadin And Abdul rasul Sayyaf), and complete break with the Taliban after 9/11 after the rejection of the Saudi request to extradite Osama Bin Laden lead to Saudi failure in acquiring a foothold in Afghanistan (Ibid). Greg Bruno of the Council of Foreign Relations cites Steve Coll who noted 10 years ago that Saudi Arabia fears the strengthening of Iran's influence in Central Asia and Afghanistan. In this regard he writes that Saudi influence in Afghanistan has a history of around 3 decades. Moreover, Riyadh's hand in the rise of Taliban was "as much a strategy as ideology", as to achieve their strategic objectives, Saudi royals aimed at becoming the "unifiers of Sunni community in Afghanistan". This unification has no purpose other than countering Iran on the Afghan chessboard. Riyadh's first brokering of Talks between Taliban and Afghan officials in 2008, point towards the Saudi real objectives in Afghanistan (Bruno, 2008). Again in February 2010, the Saudi government began mediation between Taliban and the Afghan government, but the efforts were disrupted in November that year when Taliban refused to sever their ties to Al-Qaida (Kamrava, 2013: 156).

The current phase of Riyadh's policy towards Afghanistan, intensified in response to NATO's decision of withdrawal from Afghanistan in December 2014 has again brought Pakistan to the crossroads. Since 2012 Riyadh is explicitly projecting its influence against Iran in Afghanistan, as evident in the construction of a big mosque and Islamic center in Central Kabul as a Saudi reaction to Iranian built Khatm An-Nabiyin Mosque constructed in 2006. Though symbolic, these developments are signs of a new and ever intensified rivalry between Riyadh and Tehran in Afghanistan (Steinberg and Woermer, 2013: 2-4). This new phase of Saudi involvement in Afghan politics suffers from the distrust and

antagonism of the Shia groups who are averse to any Saudi role as a mediator. It is also reported that some senior leaders of the Taliban are also not ready to believe in the sincerity of Riyadh because of its cooperation with the Western forces (Ibid: 14).

A former Afghan Spy chief, Amrullah Al-Salleh, reportedly said, “Iran is pursuing different objectives in Afghanistan... (Iran) is the major threat to Afghan national security” (Kumar, 2013). Though Iran’s activities in Afghanistan are not new, Many Afghan analysts have become more vocal in disparaging Tehran’s role in manipulating the Afghan insurgency (Khan, 2013 online). The change of Iran’s Strategy in Afghanistan from reconstruction to undermining the US interests is associated with the Ahmaddinejad period. The election of President Rohani in Iran brings hopes that Afghanistan can prove to be a “spring-board” for engagement with the wider world. However as Bruce Koepke notes, “Having invested heavily in Afghanistan over the last 34 years, Iran will undoubtedly seeks to maintain, if not strengthen, its political, cultural, and social influence over its eastern neighbor in order to secure its own national security and geopolitical position” (Koepke, 2013).

The Shift in Tehran’s stance over reconciliation talks with Taliban is one of the major reflections of Iran’s pragmatism. Iran, who had stubbornly disapproved any kind of negotiations with the Taliban till 2009, has offered to play its role in mediating with the Taliban. In 2011, Iran invited members of the high peace conference (formed in October 2010) to the Islamic awakening conference in Tehran. Two leading Taliban figures, Tayyeb Agha (Spokesman for Mullah Muhammad Omar), and Nik Mohammad (Taliban’s deputy ministers for commerce) had also attended the conference which led to many questions regarding Iran’s emerging significance for the Taliban. The political face of Tehran-Taliban collaboration will undoubtedly be an unnerving reality on the Afghan chessboard and for many regional players. In early June 2013, the announcement of the Taliban that two members of their delegations had traveled from

Doha (Qatar) to Tehran to attend talks with Iranian officials point towards the fact that Iran is gearing to cope with the worst case scenario, the return of Taliban to Afghanistan (Ibid: 16-18).

If the Afghan problem is to be solved by regional players, then the key to Afghan stability rest with Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan itself. The first step on the road to peace in Afghanistan will be Tehran's exercise of influence over the Northern alliance and Pakistan's persuasion of Taliban to let a national government be formed. However, any settlement to the Afghan imbroglio is impaired by the multiplicity of external factors involved. Neither Pakistan, Iran, the West nor Saudi Arabia will like to see their huge strategic investments bearing no fruit (Khan, 2013). In addition, Islamabad's policies towards Afghanistan have long been served as a barrier in solving the Afghan puzzle. Apart from the strategic depth or much gripe over a double game with Washington, Riyadh's influence is also an undeniable factor that at times directs Pakistan's Afghan policy. A Pakistani expert on Pakistan's policy towards Afghanistan contends that Pakistan "is for long been firmly in the Saudi camp – with all its attendant economic benefits and ideological repercussions". This has now begun to undergo some correction for two reasons. In his view, "the ideological repercussions seem to have caught up with Pakistan and decision makers in Islamabad now seemed to be taking the Iranian option more seriously, despite Western opposition" (Yusaf a, 2013). Islamabad's intension of "inclusive" reconciliation for fixing the Afghan complex is gaining credibility, because of its own deteriorating security situation at the hands of the Pakistani Taliban. The current shift in Pakistan's Afghan policy is explained in its efforts to convince regional actors and the Afghan government that Pakistan no longer pursues strategic depth in Afghanistan. "It also began explaining its rationale for an inclusive reconciliation process. Pakistan made diplomatic efforts to win appreciation and support for its stance from countries like Iran" (Yusuf b, 2013: 17). Nevertheless, the situation in Afghanistan poses a serious challenge to Pakistan-Iran

ties in the post ISAF-NATO Afghanistan. Keeping in mind the history of Pakistani-Saudi nexus behind the Taliban in Afghanistan, Pakistan is expected to toss the Taliban coin especially when Iran's regional weight is increasing after the recent de-escalation of Iran-US hostilities in light of the election of President Rouhani and Geneva Accord (Shah, 2013).

Conclusion

Saudi-Iran rivalry is dominated not only by competition for energy markets, the nuclear challenge, the Middle East or Persian gulf, it also extends to Afghanistan. The zero sum dynamics of Saudi-Iran relations impinge on their ties with the third country in the areas (Tadgbakhsh, 2013: 18-21). Pakistan, on a number of subjects concerning Iran and Saudi Arabia, struggles to manage the balance in its ties with both Riyadh and Tehran. Afghanistan presents one of the most vivid examples. ISAF and its partners along with Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have pursued dialogue with the Taliban since 2006 without baring any tangible outcome (Saghafi-Ameri, 2011:8). Moreover, Iran's rise as an interlocutor in mediations with the Taliban has added another complex dimension to the problem (Koepke, 2013). The failure of these talks is either due to the lack of identifiable leadership amongst the Taliban, or the differing intents of states facilitating the mediation talks. The Pashtuns in Southern Afghanistan are also weary of the prospect of the rewards that international community might bestow upon the Non-Pashtun forces who fought alongside the NATO and ISAF. Northern alliance and some other non-Pashtun groups regard reconciliation with Taliban as returning Afghanistan to Pakistan's hegemony (Ameri, 2011: 8-9). For this reason, in my opinion, it is implausible to see a future Afghan government formed in coalition with Taliban components. The key challenge for the PMLN government, one which will become more daunting as the date for NATO/ISAF departure draws near, is to balance its relations with both Saudi Arabia and Iran without irritating

one for the sake of the other. Riyadh, as Tajbaqsh argues, has the policy of containing Iran in Afghanistan since the soviet withdrawal in 1989, and most of its financial aid to Taliban groups till 2010 has been channelled through Pakistan (Tadgbakhsh, 2013: 43). Any substantial change, at least with respect to Islamabad's Afghanistan policy that include Iran and Saudi Arabia is indiscernible.

Nawaz Sharif, the third time Prime Minister of Pakistan was impressive at least in his initial dispatch to Pakistani diplomats. Directing the focus towards the economic dimension of foreign policy, improvement of ties with India, and more cooperation with Afghanistan reflects the short sightedness of the new government, and its lack of awareness of the world's perspective on Pakistan (Short on Vision, Dawn, 2013). Even if his stress on the economic dimension of Pakistan's foreign policy is accepted, the challenges seem difficult for the administration to confront. For instance, there is no doubt that the IPI is an undeniable fix to Pakistan's huge gas shortages, but still, the current government is irritating Iran with its attitude towards the pipeline. If in the worst case scenario for the future of the IPI, the pipeline with Iran is not constructed, or Iran or Pakistan revise the deal, Pakistan's energy crisis will reach the point of no return. This is due to the fact that Iran has the potential to destabilize Afghanistan, which will impair any possibility of importing the gas from Turkmenistan via Afghanistan. As stated previously, the statement of Pakistani Prime Minister regarding IPI that was issued a day before his address to the U.N general Assembly was an encouraging development, yet the lack of enthusiasm that is evident regarding the Pakistani side of pipeline is discouraging for Pakistan-Iran bilateral ties.

Islamabad's neutrality on the Syrian question, regardless of the reasons, has prevented a possible dent in Pakistan-Iran ties that could have occurred after the current developments in the Syrian crisis. Nevertheless, the impending drawdown of ISAF and NATO forces from Afghanistan, along with the reinvigorated debate over Pakistan-



Saudi nuclear understanding, especially at the time when US-Saudi relations are getting tense and Tehran-Washington rapprochement is gaining ground, brought Islamabad again in the crossroads between Riyadh and Tehran. The current developments in the realm of Pakistan's foreign policy offer a litmus test of an eminent challenge for Islamabad's ability to balance its ties with Riyadh and Tehran.

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