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**Pakistan and Saudi Arabia:
How Special are the “Special Relations”?**

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Over the course of January 2016, a series of meetings took place between the Saudi and Pakistani political and security leaderships. In these meetings, the Pakistanis stressed their commitment to preserve the security and sovereignty of Saudi Arabia. Had these meetings not taken place shortly before the storming of the Saudi Arabian embassy in Iran, followed by the severing of diplomatic relations between Riyadh and Tehran, those meetings might not have earned significant media attention. Saudi Arabia hopes that this series of reciprocal visits brings to an end a period of cool relations between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan that began when the Pakistani parliament opposed the participation of Pakistani forces in the military operation in Yemen led by Saudi Arabia. There are still, however, considerable challenges to closer strategic cooperation between the two countries.

A Longstanding Alliance

Over the years, Pakistan has proven willing to come to Saudi Arabia’s aid. Notable in this context are the help given in freeing the Grand Mosque in Mecca in 1979 and the stationing of military forces on the kingdom’s territory during the Iran-Iraq War. The two countries also cooperated in supporting the Afghani mujahidin in their fight against the Soviet occupation. Saudi forces received military training from the Pakistan military, and in return, Saudi Arabia granted Pakistan direct financial aid and supplies it with oil either for free or at a reduced price.

In addition, the Saudi leadership has good personal ties with the Pakistani military and political leadership. For example, when Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif was overthrown in 1999, he was given shelter and comfortable terms of exile in Saudi Arabia, until he was allowed to return to Pakistan in 2007. Pakistan’s nuclear development has made relations between the two countries even tighter, with Saudi Arabia granting financial aid to Pakistan for the development of an “Islamic bomb.” The United States imposed sanctions against Pakistan following its nuclear tests, but Riyadh came to

Pakistan’s rescue; in order to help it overcome the resulting economic distress, Saudi Arabia began to supply it with crude oil. The Saudi support for Pakistan’s nuclear development was a basis for the common belief that if Saudi Arabia asks Pakistan to use its nuclear capabilities to help Saudi Arabia, such help will be forthcoming.

The relations between the two countries also reflect widespread and developing economic ties. Trade between them has grown in recent years, currently reaching \$5 billion. In addition, the number of Pakistani workers in the kingdom has increased and now stands at over 1.5 million workers, who remit about \$3 billion a year to their families in Pakistan.

Moreover, Saudi Arabia regards Pakistan, which shares a 909-kilometer border with Iran, as an important asset in restraining Iranian influence. Saudi Arabia boasts religious legitimacy, deep pockets, and access to the Gulf economy. Saudi Arabia, home to the most important Islamic holy sites, enjoys considerable religious influence in Pakistan. Over the years, Saudi Arabia has succeeded in promoting the Wahhabi strain of Islam through generous contributions to mosques and madrassas (Islamic religious schools) in Pakistan, which has the world’s second largest Muslim population (after Indonesia). For its part, Pakistan has the world’s largest Muslim army and is the only Muslim nuclear power, which Saudi Arabia regards as a force multiplier and a support in times of crisis.

Despite the historic alliance, however, Pakistan decided not to join the Arab coalition fighting in Yemen since the spring of 2015 against the Iran-supported Shiite Houthis. This refusal sparked friction between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia (and the United Arab Emirates), and damaged the trust Pakistan had won in the Gulf. Among the reasons for Islamabad’s decision was its concern about rising sectarian tension in Pakistan, which has the world’s largest Shiite population outside of Iran. This population is subject to Iranian influence, and many Shiite Pakistanis took to the streets to protest the execution of Saudi Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr in early January 2016. It was also reported that Iran had succeeded in recruiting more than a few Shiite Pakistanis to fight in the war in Syria on the side of the Assad regime, together with the Iranian Revolutionary Guards.

Islamabad wants to maintain correct relations with Iran, in part due to weighty economic interests relating to its growing energy distress. Pakistan has expressed a great desire to complete the laying of the pipeline for transporting Iranian gas to its territory – a project that China has agreed to finance. In addition, the Pakistani army is preoccupied on its borders with India and Afghanistan, and has no wish to open another front. Pakistan and Iran likewise have a joint interest in suppressing the Balochistan separatist movement operating in both countries, and are eager for cooperation in Afghanistan, where they both have increasing investments.

The Strategic Aspect

A key question is whether Islamabad's refusal to take part in Riyadh's regional wars – its "adventures," to some – is evidence of unwillingness to help the Kingdom on strategic issues. In the past, the possibility has been raised that in a scenario of an Iranian breakout to nuclear weapons, Pakistan's commitment to the kingdom's security could be manifested by stationing Pakistani nuclear weapons on Saudi soil, or by helping transfer the technology needed by Saudi Arabia to launch its own nuclear program. Pakistan has a very problematic record with respect to the proliferation of nuclear technology, and the possibility of the regime in Islamabad closing its eye to Pakistani scientists helping to establish a nuclear infrastructure in Saudi Arabia cannot be entirely ruled out. Another possibility is openly granting "nuclear umbrella," in other words, a commitment to respond to a foreign force posing an existential threat to the Saudi dynasty and the Islamic holy places. It is possible that this is what Pakistan Chief of Staff Raheel Sharif intended in a January 2016 meeting with the Saudi Arabian leadership, when he declared, "Any threat to Saudi Arabia's territorial integrity would evoke a strong response from Pakistan."

It appears that Saudi Arabia believes that in the event of an Iranian breakout to nuclear weapons, Pakistan will come to its aid in one way or another, even if perhaps the two sides interpret the understandings between them differently. However, Pakistan will also have to consider its other interests, along with the price of such aid to Saudi Arabia. Transferring nuclear weapons or technology to Saudi Arabia would very likely incur not only condemnation by the international community, but also severe sanctions; in addition to the need to cope with significant economic and political damage, Pakistan would become one of Iran's bitter enemies, and the deterrence regime between Pakistan and India would be upset.

The effectiveness of providing the Saudis with some sort of "nuclear umbrella," however, is limited. A more concrete danger than a nuclear Iran is Iran's image as a nuclear power, which can increase its influence in the region in general, and among the Shiites in Saudi Arabia in particular. In any case, the Saudi regime, which faces substantial challenges at home and abroad, is more likely to fall because of internal factors than as a result of intervention by an external force. In the event of a severe internal crisis, it is doubtful whether a Pakistani nuclear guarantee could be of any help whatsoever.

Pakistan has its own doubts about the stability of Saudi Arabia and the judgment of the new Saudi Arabian leadership, including the growing authority of Mohammad bin Salman, the young Minister of Defense and Deputy Crown Prince. Pakistan will presumably do everything it can to avoid having to choose between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and in the current crisis between those countries, Pakistan has volunteered once

again to take the role of the “honest broker.” When in December 2015 bin Salman announced the formation of a 34-state Islamic military coalition to combat terrorism, many in the Pakistani security hierarchy were surprised to discover that Pakistan was one of its members. Islamabad later made it clear that Pakistan would not participate actively in the fighting.

Thus Pakistan’s unconditional defense of Saudi interests, as Riyadh understands them, cannot be taken for granted and requires validation. As the tension between Saudi Arabia and Iran rises, Pakistan will find it difficult to steer a course that preserves its relations with both of them. Saudi Arabia and Pakistan will remain close allies, but the task of balancing their respective interests will become more difficult. The two countries will go far to remain involved in each other’s security – as indicated by the importance that each attached to containing the crisis between them and preventing disagreements from causing real damage to the strategic relationship between them. Pakistan’s refusal to join the Saudi Arabian initiative, however, is liable to prove an indication of a new geopolitical situation, and of new set of priorities among the Pakistani leadership.

