



Saudi-Iran Rivalry: Pakistan's Role from Neutrality to Mediator

Abstract: *This study examines Pakistan's changing role amid Riyadh and Tehran's geopolitical and geoeconomic competition. It debunks the claim that Saudi Arabia and Iran's rivalry has long caused sectarian strife and economic and security problems in Pakistan. Pakistan's leadership has determined to prevent sectarian and supremacy tussles between the two Middle Eastern powers and to reduce tension diplomatically. Saudi Arabia and Iran's competition has affected not only Middle Eastern governments but also Pakistan, which faces internal and external issues. Pakistan's connections with Iran and Saudi Arabia are geopolitical and geoeconomic necessities. This conundrum has led Pakistan to act as an arbitrator between Saudi Arabia and Iran in its foreign policy. This research examines Middle East political tensions from 2015 to 2021 to determine Pakistan's evolving role from neutral to mediator. The study paper analyses how Pakistan, while protecting its national interests, helped reduce Tehran and Riyadh's animosity from 2016 onwards when tension escalated.*

Key Words: Saudi Arabia, Iran, Pakistan, Mediator, Rivalry, Middle East

Introduction

Pakistan has cordial relations with Middle Eastern Muslim states; it holds a significant position among Muslim countries (Zahid & Khurram, 2014). Islamabad has to play its role in any socio-political turmoil in the Middle East region because of the spillover effects (Irum & Aiysha:350). The relations between Riyadh and Tehran were cordial before the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979. However, the situation was different for Saudi Arabia during the 1950s due to the Pan-Arabism movement and Pakistan's incline towards the capitalist bloc. Pakistan joined Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) in September 1954 and Central

Treaty Organization (CENTO) in 1955 amid the Arab-Israel war which created a bad taste between the two. However, Pak-Saudi diplomatic relations were initiated in the 1960s when both inked a defence agreement. Saudi Arabia also supported Pakistan economically with petrodollars when the West forced sanctions on Pakistan for its covert activities for the acquisition of nuclear weapons. Additionally, during the rule of the Shah of Iran, Tehran was in close relations with Islamabad and Riyadh. Pakistan's relations with Iran were cordial and this was reaffirmed with the visit of the Shah of Iran to Pakistan. Shah of Iran had extended massive military, logistics, and monetary support in the 1965 and 1971 wars

* PhD Scholar, Department of International Relations, National University of Modern Languages (NUML), Islamabad, Pakistan. Email: zahraibrahimpak@gmail.com. (Corresponding Author)

† Associate Professor, Department of International Relations, National University of Modern Languages (NUML), Islamabad, Pakistan.

against India despite the imposed economic sanctions by the US (L. K Choudhary, 1974). So it is implied that Tehran and Riyadh were supporting Islamabad during the 1960s and 70s.

Saudi-Iran animosity transpired after the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979 because the formation of another Islamic Republic was a threat to the monarchic system of Saudi Arabia which was based on Islam. The Iranian revolution in 1979 not only marked the beginning of a new theocratic regime in Tehran but revolutionary thought reached its neighbours which were challenging for the authoritarian regimes in the Gulf States. With this, it became quite difficult for Pakistan to maintain a balanced relationship with Saudi Arabia and Iran at the same time because of their political, ideological, and religious differences and superiority complexes. In the Middle East, Saudi Arabia and Iran are embroiled in proxy conflicts, each state is supporting its faction too which serves their interests (Ahmed & Ravichandran:1). The Arab Spring added fuel to fire, as non-state actors received favourable environments to fight for their interests in the Middle East. In these circumstances, Islamabad tries to maintain balanced relations with Tehran and Riyadh. Various factors are pushing Pakistan to be either neutral or a mediator between the two. For instance, being a bordering state of Pakistan and attaching to the Shia population of Pakistan, Iran is influencing Pakistan's internal and external matters. In this setting, Islamabad needs to have good ties with Tehran so Islamabad cultivates it amicably. At the same time, Saudi Arabia supports Pakistan financially; it fulfils its oil needs too whereby Pakistan reciprocates. Given this difficult situation, maintaining a balance between Tehran and Riyadh is a hard task for Islamabad's foreign policy choices.

Nevertheless, Pakistan has been trying to avoid taking the side of either state; for instance, in 2016 the execution of a Shiite Cleric and in 2019 the assassination of General Sulemani (BBC:3rd January 2020) showcased Pakistan's role as a mediator between Iran and Saudi Arabia. In this puzzling situation, this study is designed to explore the new foreign policy choices of Pakistan toward the two dominant regional powers of the Middle East. For this purpose, a plethora of books, articles, and electronic and print news have been collected. Moreover, reliance was mostly made on published reports, some websites were frequently consulted to authenticate the information. The paper is divided into three parts; first, it provides a conceptual structure that helps to understand Pakistan's position amid the conflictual situation, second, a detailed account of Pakistan's relations with Saudi-Arabia and Iran in the history is given, and last part emphasizes the changing role of Islamabad for Tehran and Saudi Arabia.

Conceptual Framework

While examining the impact of the internal factors situation of a state and the international system on the foreign policy behaviour of Islamabad towards Tehran and Riyadh, the framework of neo-classical realism provides the best explanation. Conceptually it is clear that Pakistan's dealing with Saudi Arabia and Iran are linked with its domestic level trends. In retrospect, Islamabad's neutral role was linked with its neighbouring states' behaviour towards Tehran and Riyadh. Such imitating actions were a litmus test for Pakistan's ability to balance between the two. However, global power behaviours have also been influencing Pakistan's decision-makers in which their tilt toward a the single state was visible.

Since neoclassical realism explains the behaviour of the states, it indicates the external pressures/ international perception of other states (Ripsman, Norrin & Taliaferro, 2016). The influences of the US and Russia over the foreign policy behaviour of Islamabad, Riyadh, and Tehran resonates with the structure agency relationship. It reflects that once the US needed to use both Saudi Arabia and Iran as guardians of the Middle East but the changes in the political system, largely due to internal demand for a new Islamic system in Iran, turned around the entire phenomenon. This absolute structural examination of the great powers' influence over Saudi Arabia and Iran is not sufficient to dissect the nuances and multiple features of rivalry. Consequently, the genesis of the conflict needs to be examined through blended variables of the domestic situation and systemic environment. The neo-classical realism also considers the internal attributes responsible for the formation of states' foreign policy such as the ethnonational element, ruling ideology, political leadership and religious composition in a state (Ripsman: 79).

The Middle Eastern region and many other countries including Pakistan are incessant hostages to the disliking of Riyadh and Tehran for each other. While Saudi-Iran struggle to acquire political legitimacies of their ideology, it exacerbates Sunni-Shia sectarianism in Pakistan when it favours any one of these states. Each state uses the sectarian tool to support its political purpose and both have the power to thoroughly marginalize each other by getting the support of either U.S or Russia/ Iran in the region. This element affects Pakistan's political position in the world. In retrospect, Pakistan was trying to be neutral but now the increased complexity of world politics has compelled Pakistan to play a role in reducing regional tension.

Historical Background of Saudi-Iran Animosity

The chronology of events untangles the gradual involvement of Pakistan in the unwanted, baffling and displeasing animosity between Tehran and Riyadh. The Saudi-Iranian rift was constructed with a long-standing structural strain. Both struggles to lead Islamic countries with affiliation with different regional powers. Iran sees Saudi Arabia as an ally of the US and a hindrance in the Iranian hegemony over the Gulf region. On the contrary, Riyadh fears Iranian ambitions in the region and the pursuit of nuclear weapons. Above all, the Iranian challenging the legitimacy of the Al-Saud by causing problems on the domestic and regional front is the primary cause of the rift. Hence the turmoil in this region is based on the struggle for political supremacy on a sectarian fault line (Gregory F. Gause 2014). The relations between the Shah of Iran and the King of Al-Saud remained normal, and both signed a pact against Egypt's Pan-Arabism; convergence of interest in South Yemen also led both countries to join hands against Egypt. Under the Nixon doctrine, both served as policemen in the region to curtail the Soviet threat in the Middle East (Joe Stork & Martha Wenger, 1991). Therefore, in the pre-Islamic revolution period, although the ties witnessed a low ebb at some points, the relations remained cordial because of the convergence of interests and similar soviet threats.

Strangely, in 1979 when the USSR attacked Afghanistan, Islamic Revolution came to Iran, and during the same year, Saddam Hussain took control of Iraq which appeared as an anti-Iran regime. The Iranian export of revolution to the neighbouring states challenged the Saudi monarch's authority as illegitimate deteriorated the Saudi-Iran relations and eight years long war between Iran & Iraq started in 1980 in

which Iraq received Saudi support against Iran.

The mistrust between Saudi Arabia and Iran deepened, ultimately leading to the end of diplomatic ties. During the 9/11 incident, the US listed Iran, Afghanistan, and North Korea as the "Axis of Evil" (Heradstveit, Daniel, & Matthew G. Bonham, 2007). Resultantly, Saudi and American relations were further fortified. Another halt was the arrival of the Arab Spring in December 2010 (Asef Bayat, 2013), which changed the socio-political makeup of the region. Iran called the Arab Spring inspiration for the Iranian Islamic revolution. Thereafter, another disturbing episode started when Riyadh initiated an operation against the Houthis in Yemen in 2015 (StigStenslie: 1). During this time once again Iran and Saudi Arabia continued to use non-state actors against each other.

The Foreign Policy of Pakistan towards Saudi - Iran in the pre-1979 Era

Pakistan's foreign policy has been reflecting a clear tilt towards Saudi Arabia instead of neutrality (Zahid & Shahram: 558). However, Pakistan was not in anyone's camp before 1980 because it was Iran who accepted Pakistan's sovereignty and signed a friendship treaty thereafter in 1950. Moreover, In March 1950, the Shah of Iran was the first leader to pay a visit to Pakistan, and he supported Pakistan in achieving U.N. membership. (Tahir Kheli, 1977). The minor disagreement between Islamabad and Riyadh evolved over the signing of Pakistan's CENTO and SEATO. The prevailing anti-Western sentiments in Saudi Arabia made it unhappy as it took part in the anti-Arab campaign. However, Pakistan realized its mistake when the US remained aloof during the war between Pakistan and India in 1965. Pakistan was expecting US support even in the 1971 war but nothing showed up (Soherwordi, 2010). Pakistan sought Iranian help then as the tension was

running high between Pakistan and India. It would not be wrong to determine the Indian factor has always influenced Pakistan's ties with Saudi Arabia, sometimes bringing it closer to one another and sometimes to other states. Whereas Riyadh and Tehran backed Pakistan significantly to curtail Soviet expansionism in the region.

Pakistan's approach of solidarity toward Saudi Arabia started to appear in 1960 when a defence agreement was signed between the two. Saudi Arabia also served Pakistan through thick and thin (Marvin & Abdullah: 211).

Pakistan's Foreign Policy Dilemma

Pakistan witnessed its second military coup in 1977 when Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was dethroned. Zia ul-Haq, the Chief of Army Staff, imposed martial law in Pakistan and introduced drastic policies. This was the time when a clear tilt of Pakistan appeared toward Saudi Arabia. Meanwhile, Iran was also turned into a theological state after the Islamic Revolution in Iran. It was the first time that it became difficult for Pakistan to maintain a balanced relationship between Tehran and Riyadh. During this era, Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies extended their support to Iraq against Iran in the long war.

The situation in Afghanistan steered many changes in the region particularly Pakistan gained much importance as it was the best regional actor to serve the US cause against the Soviet Union as Iran was no more in the American camp. Pakistan due to its long shared border with Afghanistan and cultural affinity got more attention. It was now on the same page as the US and Saudi Arabia whereas Iran remained neutral in the initial years of the Soviet invasion. Saudi Arabia and the US were supporting the Afghan mujahideen financially and provided weapons and training through Pakistan (Stern, 2000). Over time, Pakistan's affinities grew with Saudi Arabia because it also acted as a psychological cushion against the fear of Indian hegemony for it ((Marvin

& Abdullah:211). Whereas for Saudi Arabia, Pakistan became important after 1960 because its military was beefing up Gulf security in general and Saudi security in particular.(Marvin & Abdullah: 211) Besides the help of Saudi Arabia, Pakistan continued to assist Iran militarily during the war against Iraq. Its geographical proximity to Iran is the crucial factor pushing Pakistan to get close to it. Pakistan has been cautious because of economic considerations too as it faces an acute shortage of oil and gas and fulfils its energy needs through the import of these two commodities from Saudi Arabia, Iran, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar. However, the Afghanistan factor raised concerns in Iran as militants from Afghanistan started to kill many Shiite officials in Pakistan during the late 1990s. Furthermore, Pakistan's recognition of the Taliban regime in 1996 caused friction between Iran and Pakistan (Omer:5). This move upturned the element of diversity in the foreign policy of Pakistan and complex challenges surfaced by the end of the 20th century.

The 9/11 incident put Iran in a difficult position because of its anti-American ambitions. Simultaneously, big demands were made from Pakistan particularly the US asked for its land to attack Afghanistan. The Bush administration accused Iran, North Korea, and Afghanistan of terrorism and called them an "axis of evil." The US had imposed sanctions upon Iran and North Korea, and the US-led coalition attacked Afghanistan. The foreign relations of Pakistan were like a pendulum going forth and back to Tehran and Riyadh in these years.

The United States along with the coalition invaded Iraq in March 2003 and accused Iraq of having Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) where its President, Saddam Hussein, backed terrorism. Twenty-six days of operation were conducted by the US-led coalition against the Baathist regime in Iraq. Saudi Arabia initially was not in favour of attacking Iraq

(Alfred & M. Blanchard), because it did not want Iraq to go under the Iranian sphere of influence. Later, Riyadh supported the US against Iraq. The dis-launch of Saddam Hussein and the US withdrawal from Iraq created a power vacuum that provided a favourable environment for Tehran to exert its influence on Baghdad.

The other factor souring the ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia was the Arab Spring which started in Tunisia and spread over the Middle East and North African regions. The toppling of the regime in Tunisia and Egypt threatened the authority of the Saudi King. Contrary, Iran termed the Arab spring as the extension of the Islamic Revolution and as the "Awakening of Islam." Hence a tug of war started between both giants to exert their influence on the region once again.

During this period, Pakistan's policy remained neutral in the Saudi-Iranian split. Further, it has supported Iran against Iraq for eight years long war despite the Saudi pressure not to do so. Pakistan cannot afford to offend its neighbouring state which has a shared border of almost 990km. So "Pakistan does not want to isolate Iran to the point of pushing it towards the India-Afghanistan axis (Omer:44)." Moreover, Iran and Pakistan are signatories of a defence pact which binds them together. Further, one of the other significant reasons is that Iran supports Pakistan over the Kashmir dispute and also raises its voice for Kashmir's cause on international fora regularly.

Pakistan's Position in the Contemporary Political Dynamics

Pakistan's balancing approach between Saudi-Iran animosity was a necessity, not a choice because of the domestic mounting pressures from Shia and Sunni communities and external limitations amid the great power competition. Recent events in the Middle East have affected the regional political dynamics, and the animosity

further deepened. The proxy war in Yemen turned into disastrous form in March 2015 when skirmishes started in the city of Aden. Houthis rebels supported by Iran attacked and occupied some areas of Al-Anda while the Saudi-led military pro-Saleh government started air strikes on the bases of Houthi rebels. Saudi Arabia asked Pakistan to join the coalition against Yemen. Further, Riyadh had also asked to provide military, air warfare, and soldier to fight against Yemen. The government of Pakistan took the matter to the Parliament and decided to remain neutral in the Saudi – Yemen conflict (Sial, [2015](#)). Nevertheless, the relations got better when the Pakistan military deployed troops in Saudi Arabia on the condition that its soldiers would not fight against any Muslim country but instead remained in Saudi Arabia's territory.

The situation was further strained when the Obama administration and P5+1 (U.S, U.K, Russia, China, Plus Germany) signed a nuclear agreement on July 14, 2015. This nuclear deal was welcomed by Pakistan but criticized by Saudi Arabia and Israel. At United Nations, where voting was conducted about the Iranian nuclear deal, Pakistan refrained, and in this way, Pakistan protected itself from the Saudi and Iranian wrath. Under the Trump administration, the nuclear deal was terminated, and sanctions were imposed on Iran; this led to a stressful situation in the Middle East. Pakistan's policy remained more or less neutral, but it did not admire the Trump withdrawal from the nuclear deal. Almost after five months into the same year, Saudi Arabia formed a coalition of Islamic countries to combat terrorism. This coalition consists of 41 Sunni-dominated Islamic countries (Bukhari, [2017](#)). Pakistan participated in not only the coalition but also the former Chief of Army Staff, General Raheel Sharif, who also headed the coalition (Qumber & Waseem, [2017](#)). Iran and Shia-majority countries were not invited to participate in

this alliance. Pakistan participated in the alliance because earlier Pakistani government refused to send troops to Riyadh against Yemen war, so Islamabad was not in a position to refuse again.

Nevertheless, before participating in this alliance, Pakistan communicated its concerns to Iran and asked them not to consider this anti-Iran alliance (M. Muzaffar, Robina, & Zahid Yaseen: 129). The purpose of this alliance was to counter terrorism in the times when the Islamic world faced terrorism allegations. Nevertheless, the main concern was the definition of terrorism adopted by the Saudi authority. As per their defined terrorism term, to voice against kings is also considered an act of terrorism, which Iran does more often.

There is unrest in the Eastern region of Saudi Arabia, the oil-rich area inhabited by most Shia Muslims. Saudi Arabia accused Iran of creating unrest in the Eastern province using the Shia card (M. Muzaffar, Robina, & Zahid Yaseen: 129). The civil unrest caused a threat to the Saudi kings to their rule. Sheikh Nimar-al Nimar was a Shia cleric who was executed by the Saudi government on January 2, 2016, along with 46 others on allegations of instigating violence and unrest in the Eastern region. The execution of the Shia cleric strained the relations between Riyadh and Tehran. The Saudi embassy in Tehran was hostage by crowded diplomatic ties cut. Pakistan took a mediatory position in defusing the tensions between the two. The deaths of Iranian pilgrims in a riot in Saudi Arabia in September 2015 and the assassination of Shia cleric Nimr Al-Nimr in January 2016 led to the complete rupture of diplomatic ties. The Pakistani Prime Minister, Muhammad Nawaz Sharif, and the Chief of Army Staff, General Raheel Sharif, travelled to Saudi Arabia and Iran to request the peaceful resolution of issues. Muslim countries like Turkey applauded the

mediation by Pakistan. Pakistan had played a positive role in the Saudi- Iran rift.

With the rapid transformation in the political dynamics of the Middle East region, another significant turn was the Qatar diplomatic crisis. Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies cut diplomatic ties with Qatar and, later on, economic ties. There were multiple reasons, but one of the significant reasons was the growing Qatar – Iran relations and Qatar’s reluctance to cut ties with Iran (Marc Lynch, [2017](#)). Qatar supported the Taliban and played a role in building the ties between the Taliban and Iran. The complete boycott of Qatar by Arab and the Gulf States further strengthened Qatar and Iran ties, and Turkey and Russia came to rescue Qatar from political and economic blocks. This diplomatic and economic block ended on January 5, 2021.

The Yemen issue again became focused in 2019 when a series of missiles attacked the Aramco oil field. Iran was accused of the attack by Saudi Arabia, US Iran rejected all allegations, and tension escalated in the region. The then Prime Minister Muhammad Nawaz Sharif visited Riyadh and Tehran to de-escalate the tension and played a mediatory role. In contemporary dynamics, Pakistan has played a vital constructive mediatory role in defusing the tension between the arch-rivals.

It is also evident that Saudi Arabia used its influence on Pakistan for its interests. The gas pipeline project from Pakistan – Iran seemed to be halted because of the US and Saudi factors. It is also believed that Pakistan did not join the Kuala Lumpur meeting due to Saudi influence. Saudi Arabia was afraid of creating a new group against or parallel to the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), which ultimately decreased the Saudi hegemony over the Islamic countries. On the anniversary of the provocation of articles 370 by the Indian government, the Foreign Minister of Pakistan requested to hold a

Foreign Ministerial level meeting of OIC. Saudi Arabia asked Pakistan not to participate in the Kuala Lumpur summit, and in return, Saudi Arabia will organize the OIC summit. So, Pakistan did not participate in the said summit. Later on, Riyadh showed reluctance to hold a summit. Upon this, former Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi criticized Saudi authorities. In reaction, the Saudi government asked to return the loan amount which they granted in 2019 (Wolf, [2021](#)). Thus, the relations between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan witnessed a sharp decline, shrinking its space as a mediator between the Middle Eastern rivals.

Saudi-Iran Rivalry: Implications for Pakistan

Certainly, Saudi-Iranian animosity impacted Pakistan’s foreign and domestic policy. Since Pakistan and Iran share a volatile border, through Baluchistan, any unrest in Iran could cause commotion in Baluchistan. In retrospect, the illegal trade and smuggling through this porous border was not a secret where extremist elements were actively using the border to mint money by using illegal means. So, getting the cooperation of Iran across the border to restrict the activities of terrorists is essentially required. The government of Pakistan found pieces of evidence of Indian-supported terrorists’ activities in Baluchistan. For instance, Kalbushan Yadav was caught in March 2016; he was involved in sponsoring extremist outfits in Baluchistan, according to Pakistani reports, reached Pakistan through the Iranian border (Umer Karim, [2017](#)). Such a scenario has made security a primary concern of Pakistan and intelligence sharing has become indispensable to avoid such instances in future. Pakistan fears that India will take advantage of certain impotence while increasing its relations with Iran. Certainly,

such a nexus would be detrimental to Pakistan's interests.

While separately analysing the case of Saudi Arabia, the economic dependence of Islamabad on Riyadh appears as one of the important factors of Pakistan's ties with Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia helped Pakistan through thick and thin; whenever Pakistan faced any imbalance in foreign reserves and balance of payment issues, it turned to Saudi aid. Besides, the overseas remittance sent by Pakistanis working abroad in Saudi Arabia is intended to bolster Pakistan's economy. Amid the covid pandemic, foreign remittances helped the foreign reserves to sustain a considerable number of Pakistani skilled and non-skilled labour serving in Saudi Arabia which sometimes restrict Pakistan's independent foreign policy and influence some internal policies too. Hence, security concerns and economic dependence are the factors somehow taking it to either side in different time frames. For instance, Pakistan decided not to attend the Kuala Lumpur Summit 2019 which included dozens of world leaders, intellectuals and scholars "to discuss and exchange ideas about the issues revolving in the Muslim world" because of Saudi pressure (Ashraf 2020).

Saudi-Iran rivalry is also considered a trigger for the sectarian divide in Pakistan. Around 20 per cent population in Pakistan consists of Shia Muslim population (Moonas:3); whereas Saudi Arabia has funded the madrasa and mosques in Pakistan. Interestingly, it is also found that Iran supports a fraction of the population (in Pakistan) serving their interests (Sohail:2016). Usually, it is seen that any escalation in hostility between Saudi Arabia and Iran also widens the fault lines in the society of Pakistan and leads to internal unrest and violence. The South Asia Terrorism Portal (STAP) report covering the time period from 1989 to 2014 indicates that 4734 persons lost their lives due to sectarian

conflicts (satp.org). It is evident from the data that during the Afghan war, sectarian violence in Pakistan has surged. Thus, Pakistan wants to be a mediator to stop sectarian violence which may spark due to any new Saudi-Iran brawl.

Since Pakistan assists Saudi Arabia in modernizing its military and organising training activities, it receives valuable financial support in return. So, any regression in the ties between Riyadh and Islamabad would steer undesirable effects for the latter. As per the analyst, the Saudi factor also played a vital role in diminishing civil-military animosity (Madiha:3). As per Wiki Leaks the Saudi Ambassador to the U.S., Adel al-Jubeir, in 2007, claimed Saudi Arabia's role in Pakistan's affairs as a participant, not as a mere observer (Guardian:2010).

In 2015, when Saudi Arabia asked Pakistan to support the Yemen war, the issue was highlighted in Parliament over which Pakistan's civil leadership decided not to send troops in this war, however, Riyadh's displeasure could easily be seen in the situation. Later, the military leadership of Pakistan sent troops without prior consultation with civilian leadership. The civilian leadership was informed through the media wing of Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR)(Wolf, 2021). Despite criticism from civil society, the former Commander-in-Chief, General Raheel Shareef was appointed as the first military chief of the Islamic Military anti-terrorism coalition (Ghulam, Waseem, & Saqib:129), which was a manifestation of military activism and a desire to have strong ties with Saudi Arabia.

To present the Kashmir case in front of the world, Pakistan needs support from Muslim countries including Saudi Arabia and Iran. Both states supported Pakistan's stance on Kashmir, but after the illegal Annexation of Jammu Kashmir into Indian Territory in 2019, the former Foreign

Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi asked Saudi Arabia to convene an OIC conference, Saudi Arabia hesitated to openly stand for Kashmir cause due to Delhi and Riyadh's growing ties. Despite its economic dependence on India, Iran supported the Kashmir cause (Amber Imtiaz, [2019](#)). Therefore, Pakistan needs to have cordial relations with Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Reflections on the Shift from Neutrality to Mediator

In the pre-Islamic revolutionary period, Saudi Arabia and Iran had cordial relations, and both supported Pakistan in the war against India. Both used Pakistan as a buffer state against the Soviet expansionist approach. Iran threatens to export its revolution in the Middle East. Islamic groups in Pakistan welcomed the revolution in Iran; Molana Mawdudi called it an Islamic revolution in true spirit. While the government was distressed, the revolution induced an increase in the export of sectarianism in the neighbouring states, especially in Pakistan, which threatened the liberal elites in Pakistan. For instance, the Zakat laws were changed during the Zia regime. The Shia population protested, and Iran extended financial support to mobilize the Shia population to voice against the Zakat laws. Such interference affected the bilateral ties.

The Iran-Iraq war was a litmus test for Pakistan's foreign policy to take sides. Initially, Pakistan decided not to participate in a war between two Muslim countries and stay neutral but later on, Pakistan supported Iran. It was also credited to Pakistan that due to the mediatory role of Pakistan, a side-line OIC meeting, Iranian and Iraqi leaders met, and the ice melted. The stance of Pakistan on the Syrian crisis also supported Syria's territorial integrity and discouraged violence. As per the statement of Foreign Secretary, Aizaz Chaudhary in February 2015, Pakistan is seeking a peaceful

resolution of the conflict via negotiations rather than military options (Mateen:2015).

Pakistan attended the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism summit because it refused to deploy troops to Yemen in 2015 upon the request of the Saudi King. Pakistan's stance on the Iranian nuclear deal was positive, but upon voting in the U.N., Pakistan refrained from casting a vote. Hence, this way, Pakistan neither earned the hatred of Saudis nor Iranians.

Pakistan added to its portfolio the role of mediators to its neutral or balanced relationship in the Saudi-Iran conflict. For instance, during the execution of the Shia cleric amid unrest in Saudi Arabia, the situation deteriorated. Sheikh Nimr-al Nimr, a prominent Shia cleric, was sentenced to death in 2016. Pakistan tried to act as Mediator and did not take any side. The then Prime Minister Muhammad Nawaz Sharif and the Chief of Army Staff General Raheel Sharif, on January 18-19, 2016, paid a visit to both states, i.e., Saudi Arabia and Iran, respectively, and communicated with their counterparts, requesting to resolve differences peacefully.

Moreover, such conflicts on a broad level will ultimately harm the interest of the Muslim ummah. Prime Minister Muhammad Nawaz Sharif, further stated that he considered resolving the conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia a sacred task, and Pakistan is proud to act as a mediator to resolve the conflict. Both sides admired the role of Pakistan as a mediator. Upon appointing a focal person in Pakistan to resolve the grievances of both sides, Saudi Arabia and Iran responded positively. Muslim countries, especially Turkey, highly appreciate the mediatory role of Pakistan.

In the case of the Yemen war, Pakistan is determined to arbitrate between Tehran and Riyadh to conclude the war in Yemen (Panda, [2019](#)). The Premier of Pakistan, Muhammad Nawaz Sharif, stated, "We are acting as a conciliator between the two

countries to end the war. In Yemen too, we will, if required, play a positive role to end this conflict" (BBC, 2015). In an interview for a Saudi newspaper in 2018, then Prime Minister of Pakistan, Imran Khan presented his views on the Saudi-Yemen clash and said, "I feel that every conflict has a political solution. I am not a believer in a military solution." Moreover, "I would like to ensure peace in the Middle East because it is very distressing for Muslims to see conflict among Muslim nations. Several conflicts are plaguing the Muslim world, starting from Libya to Somalia, Syria, and Afghanistan... Pakistan has [also] suffered a lot. Conflicts in the Muslim world are weakening us all. Pakistan would like to play a role in putting out these fires through reconciliation."

In mid-September 2019, the Yemen issue resurfaced with more intensity. A series of missiles and drones attacked Aramco, the most significant oil facilitation centre (Dawn:2018). The US and Saudi Arabia accused Iran of its involvement in the attack, which Tehran rejected. Several countries, especially Pakistan and Iraq, tried to mediate between the two arch-rivals to de-escalate the tension in the region. The then Prime Minister Imran Khan October 2019, visited Riyadh and Tehran to assist both countries in terminating the differences. It was reported by New York Times that Saudi Prince Muhammad bin Salman had requested Pakistan and Iraq to mediate and de-escalate the tension (Fassihi & Hubbard, 2015). Premier stated the mediator role of Pakistan prevented an upsurge of tension between Tehran and Riyadh. He added that Islamabad will continue its role to dilute the situation. Moreover, he confessed that despite slow progress in the mediation process, it would not stop, and we have made our efforts to prevent any escalation, and efforts are succeeded.

Conclusion

In the past, Pakistan played a neutral role in Saudi Arabia-Iran's rift to preserve its national interests. It is indispensable for Pakistan to cultivate its relations with Saudi Arabia and Iran simultaneously. Pakistan is the recipient of economic aid from Saudi Arabia and it is also receiving considerable remittances from overseas Pakistanis working in Saudi Arabia. Moreover, the military connections significantly forged Islamabad and Riyadh relations. Concurrently, Iran-Pakistan's volatile border needs cooperative measures of both states against destructive plans of non-state actors. Thus, tilting towards a single state, either Iran or Saudi Arabia, would not be in the interest of Pakistan. Further, both Saudi Arabia and Iran are strong regional powers and hold a favourable position for Pakistan in supporting Kashmir.

The India factor also compels Pakistan to have cordial relations with both Middle Eastern powers, the dependence of either state on India will be not in favour of Pakistan. Notwithstanding the neutral stance of Pakistan on Saudi-Iran hostility in history, Islamabad has been actively working for the diffusion of the strained relations since 2016. The role of Pakistan as the mediator is being appreciated by other Muslim countries and the West on different occasions. The weaknesses on the domestic front because of the sectarian divide in Pakistan have a bearing on its foreign policy. Hence, the realization of domestic implications is the main reason to bring a shift in Pakistan's foreign policy to adopt a mediatory role in the conflict between Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shia Iran. Pakistan should continue to adopt similar policies in the future as it is an important security provider to the Middle Eastern states. While having an edge in the region, Pakistan's role in diffusing tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran is anticipated in future too.

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