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## STANDING UP TO SAUDI: Pakistan's Unprecedented New Pragmatism

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The Pakistan parliament's recent "no" vote to the motion put forward by the Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif on whether to provide support to Saudi Arabia in its proxy war against Iran in Yemen was nothing short of groundbreaking in terms of historical geopolitical alignments. After all, the Prime Minister remains personally beholden to Saudi Arabia's rulers for his safety after the 1999 coup that deposed him, spending 12 years in exile there. And Pakistan has long benefitted from Saudi largesse. This unprecedented assertion of independence is especially troubling for Saudi Arabia, coming hard on the heels of the P5+1's preliminary nuclear deal with Iran, its rival for influence across the Gulf and the Levant.

Pakistan – sensibly – decided it could not afford to get involved in someone else's war, at a time when it still has not dealt with the domestic security threat from the Pakistani Taliban. Or so it was said. It is unlikely to be pure coincidence that the Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif paid a visit to Islamabad shortly before the vote. What is clear is that Islamabad is clearly trying to avoid taking sides, and to do so, is willing to risk the potentially considerable economic fallout from the reactions of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Cooperation Council states. The recent reactivation of the Iran-Pakistan relationship including the stalled IPI pipeline, and above all, the recent massive investment deal signed with China, may well have influenced this decision by providing an alternative economic buffer. Barely two days after the Chinese premier Xi Jinping visited Islamabad concluding a \$46 billion agreement, a five-year trade facilitation plan was signed between Pakistan and Iran which is expected to yield a \$5 billion growth in trade volumes between the two countries – something sure to appeal to Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's strong business background.

None the less, this decision means that Pakistan is dipping more than its toe into Gulf politics.

Pakistan's relations with Saudi Arabia and Iran involve both cooperation and conflicting interests. Iran has a long border with Pakistan, but Saudi Arabia, a long-standing (and generous) patron of the Pakistani state, is involved in a proxy war with Iran, which desires to play an internationally-acknowledged role in the region. Saudi Arabia in turn seeks to maintain and enhance its own leading role in the Sunni and Arab worlds. Pakistan in both demography and belief, is over-

whelmingly Sunni. Many of Pakistan's elites (including the military) have investments in the Gulf, and some have a strong affinity for Wahhabism. The Saudi-Sunni dimension has long been a feature of Pakistani attitudes towards its neighbours Afghanistan and Iran (as well as influencing attitudes towards sectarian violence domestically).

The Houthi rebellion in Yemen is in fact only tangentially a Sunni-Shi'a conflict. The Zaidi offshoot of mainstream Shi'ism is as far from the religion practiced in Iran as Quakerism is from Catholicism. Furthermore, Iran has never shown a propensity to intervene in Pakistan's own longstanding (and increasing) sectarian anti-Shi'a violence. Certainly, Iran has interests in Yemen. However, this involvement is almost certainly to a far lesser extent that a purely sectarian conflict might imply. The Houthis emerged as a Zaidi revivalist movement in response to Saudi-funded Salafist proselytizing in the 1990s. Thus, the Saudis not only tolerated, but supported the Houthis in Yemen in the 90s, in order to combat its own Salafist threat. In 2009, reports emerged of Iranian material assistance to the Houthis (but also of outreach to other liberal non-Houthi political figures). Notwithstanding, there is no real evidence that the Houthis now either take direction from Iran, nor – importantly – that Iran wants them to. However, as noted by Mohammad Ali Shabani recently in *Al Monitor*, *“an independent, inclusively-governed Yemen would remove another Arab state that could potentially line up against Iran”*.

The Yemen conflict is therefore driven not by sectarian dynamics per se, but rather, by geopolitical interests in the struggle for influence. Saudi Arabia finds itself fighting growing Iranian influence in the region, with a young and untested Minister of Defence running Saudi involvement in the Yemen war. Multiple fronts have been opened against Iran, both ideological (Salafi-Shi'a) and conflictual (Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen). Despite this, active diplomacy by Iran across the region and beyond, including in Pakistan, has dented the Saudi ambition to regionalise the conflict.

The vote in Pakistan's parliament, calling for neutrality and a mediating role, clearly shows no appetite for participation in a war that could affect the country's relationship with Iran, inflame sectarian tensions at home and – importantly – which could increase the menace of the “domestic” Taliban as well as the presence and activities of Da'esh (Islamic State) on Pakistani territory. It is none the less remarkable, and some would say heartening, to see this new level of pragmatism, despite harsh words from the Gulf, Pakistan's unmet energy needs and the important role played by remittances from Pakistanis working in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf in supporting Pakistan's flagging economy. Still, there is also the nuclear dimension to consider.

## **The Nuclear Dimension**

As Pakistani nuclear physicist Pervez Hoodboy pointed out recently in the *New York Times* (April 21 2015), this unprecedented new development undermines Saudi Arabia's longstanding nuclear strategy. In the 1970s, it began bankrolling Pakistan's nuclear programme and following India's nuclear tests in May 1998, the Saudi government pledged to give Pakistan 50,000 barrels of oil a day - free. Pakistan then tested six of its own bombs. Saudi Arabia has received Pakistani military assistance in the form of soldiers, expertise and ballistic missiles. Pakistani pilots flew Saudi combat jets against South Yemen in the late 1960s; Saudi air force pilots have been trained in Pakistan; and officers train in the country's national defense colleges. Many, including perhaps the Saudi government, have taken this relationship to imply a nuclear dimension as well. Pakistan, which has as many as 120 nuclear warheads, denies this. The new reluctance by Pakistan to provide combat support in Yemen calls into question this tacit assumption of nu-

clear support. Hedging its bets, as Hoodbhoy points out, “*small surprise then that some members of the Pakistani government have scurried to Riyadh to offer explanations. Or that some backpedaling has begun. Last week, the Pakistani military agreed to commit naval vessels to help enforce an arms embargo against the Houthis*”.

Despite this current back-peddalling, Pakistan appears to be steering an independent course, which will impact on geopolitical alliances across the region, as well as resonating domestically.