



Islamic Military Alliance (IMA) – and Pakistan

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Ghulam Qumber* Waseem Ishaque† Saqib Riaz‡

Abstract

Power politics is a recurring feature of the Middle East keeping it continuously in a state of transformation since the Iranian revolution of 1979. The United States has declared energy security since the oil crises of 1970s. 9/11 and generated a ferocious US response for regime change. This transition has proven to be uncertain and full of risks with catastrophic consequences and resultant rise of non- state (NSA) actors like ISIS and ISIL. This article unveils the basic contours and prime motives behind formation of the IMA, its aims and objectives, and its efficacy in countering violent extremism with potential implications for Pakistan as a major stake holder. It also suggests a way forward for Pakistan to convert this into opportunity by mitigating challenges. As an academic narrative, all views and comments are the authors' own.

Key Words: Islamic Military Alliance, Balance of Power, Counter- Terrorism

Introduction

Military alliances serve as a deterrent against opponents because of various threats common to states or group of states. Alliances may also serve economic, political, or strategic interests and are one of the most significant phenomena in security studies. Alliances, however, took new shape after WW-II especially during the cold war period for putting up synchronized response against opponent alliance's threats. It is also appreciated that alliances have been an important determinant of the outbreak, spread and results of militarized conflicts (2018). In the pursuit of common security architecture, Muslim world formed Arab League in 1945 and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in 1982. The evolving Middle East is currently embroiled in multi layered conflicts with intrastate and interstate conflicts superimposed by the phenomena of terrorism. Therefore, on the initiative of Saudi

* Deputy Director, ISSRA, National Defence University, Islamabad, Pakistan.

Email: ghulam_qumber@yahoo.com

† Assistant Professor, Department of IR, National Defence University, Islamabad, Pakistan.

‡ Chairman, Department of Mass Communication, Allama Iqbal Open University, Islamabad, Pakistan.

Arabia, Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman Al Saud formally announced the formation of Islamic Military Alliance on 15th December 2015 aimed at enhancing military cooperation among the Muslim states for presenting a united front against the menace of terrorism. It is an alliance of 41 Muslim countries for military response against growing influence of ISIL and multidimensional terrorist activities (Saudi Arabia, 2019). The announcement of IMAFT by Saudi Arabia in 2015 cited: *“a duty to protect the Islamic nations from the evils of all terrorist groups and organizations whatever their sect and name which wreak death and corruption on earth and aim to terrorize the innocent.(Dawn, 2018)”* However, the international environment at the time of its creation and its makeup does not appear to coincide with this aim. A need was felt by Saudi Arabia to form a broad-based military alliance after the US and Iranian nuclear deal. This deal made Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) as well as Israel extremely uneasy. The traditional Saudi-Iranian scrimmage also embroiled Yemen in a Shia-Sunni mesh. Arab Spring though has died down, yet it seems temporarily morphed capable of unsettling the monarchies and alter the status quo.

The phenomenon of ISIS and ISIL has given new dimension to the global focus on terrorism and global coalition is fighting to eliminate this menace, which is a threat to the security of the entire Muslim world. Over supply of oil has also caused a sharp decline in oil prices, which in turn has resulted in a slowdown of many OPEC economies which is also a source of potential unrest in the region. The primary objective of the alliance is to present united and indiscriminate response against terrorist groups. It has committed to carry out its activities in accordance with United Nations and OIC (Organization of Islamic Cooperation) Charter. The member states form 60% of all OIC members, though some members have not pledged to involve themselves militarily and others are still in discussion about the possible roles that they could play. Is the alliance really Islamic, does it represent a wide range of Muslim states in the absence of Iran, Syria, Libya and Iraq, was the alliance a necessity in the presence of an already established organization as OIC are some of the research questions which need further considerations and reflections. Pakistan joined the Islamic Military Alliance in January 2016 without any defined terms of references, therefore, attracted mixed reaction. This article unveils the conceptual aspects related to alliance partnership, presents analytical debate on the factors leading to formation of IMAFT with potential implication for Pakistan and presents viable recommendations to diversify our relations with all gulf and wider Middle Eastern Muslim countries avoiding zero-sum game.

Conceptual Dimensions of Alliance Partnerships

Alliances have been instrumental in international relations throughout the history and are seen to be an integral part of statecraft (Dwivedi, 2012). Weak states enter

into alliance when they need protection against strong states. Strong states enter into alliances to counter other strong states and to maintain balance of power. Likewise, coalitions are formed during crisis/wars and are short term in nature against the alliances which are long term and are formed during peace time. Threat of terrorism has strengthened new alliances and altered the old alliances (Tertrais, 2004). Various coalitions have also been seen in the past two decades especially after 1st Gulf War. Toady's important coalitions include ISAF in Afghanistan and 68 countries in Syrian crisis. Before discussing types of alliances and coalitions, it is important to define both terms i.e. alliance and coalition for better comprehension of the later part of the conceptual aspects.

Alliance

An alliance is a strategically inclusive formation of parties that enjoin by formal agreement to maximize the ability of achieving a specific mutually beneficial aim and through the resultant association acquire collective responsibility to develop certain economic, political and/or military policies for joint planning, action and sustainability.

An explicit agreement among states in the realm of national security in which the partners promise mutual assistance in the form of a substantial contribution of resources in the case of a certain contingency the arising of which is uncertain (Dwivedi, 2012).

Coalition

The simple explanation of coalition is “A grouping of like-minded states that agree on the need for joint action on a specific problem at a particular time with no commitment to a durable relationship” (Bergsmann,2001).

Categories / Types of Alliances. Review of the theoretical literature in political science, international relations and concept of alliances, presents three different types of alliances: *collective defence alliance, collective security alliance and multilateral alliance.*

Collective Defence. The member states commit to each other's defence against external threats (Larsen,1997). Most military alliances today fall in the category of collective defence alliance. NATO, Warsaw Pact, CEATO and CENTO can be quoted as major examples.

Collective Security. The members agree to abide by norms, including non-aggression against one another. The significant aspects of collective security and

a collective defence is that its members commit to fully implement the rules and norms that they create for themselves (Larsen, 1997). This includes abstaining from aggressing against their partner nations unless in self-defence. United Nations (UN) is the example of collective security alliance.

Multilateral Alliance. The purposes of this type of alliance vary from promoting security to addressing issues confronting the environment. Multilateral alliances (with military components) often conduct intelligence sharing, training, acquisition support and other military activities – but stop short of pledged mutual defence (Larsen, 1997). Hence, the presence of a unifying threat is not fundamental to the existence of a multilateral alliance.

Analytical Debate on the Formation of IMA

The Middle East's geo strategic landscape has been transforming sharply since US led invasion of Iraq in 2003. The policy of regime change by different formats has resulted into destruction of state institutions, fragile economy, increased human sufferings and rise of violent Non-State Actors (NSAs) posing existential threat by unconventional means due to depleted state capacity to respond effectively. Other contributory factors necessitating formation of IMA on war footings was the declining US support for Saudi Arabia, increased criticism to act against terrorism, encircled by rising Iranian influence in its neighborhood and rising threat from terrorist organizations like ISIS and Al-Qaeda, the Saudi Arabia and its Muslim allies felt marginalized to face these challenges. Idea of rallying friendly countries to form an alliance was perhaps the best considered option by Saudi Arabia. Detailed discussion on factors leading to formation of IMA are presented in subsequent paragraphs;

US Military Retrenchment in Middle East

US has been a key military ally of Saudi Arabia to look after Saudi security interests in the region. In 2009, President Obama started a global retrenchment policy, in stark contrast to President George Bush's over-extended interventionism. Under the policy, Obama administration reduced United States' military and political footprint in the Middle East. US desired to stand behind their Allies but didn't lead them in their military pursuits. Lack of US support in Yemen War is one example.

Rise of ISIS

Rise of ISIS and its sudden expansion to Iraq, Syria and Libya was considered an emerging threat. Its audacity to claim part of Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Libya, Algeria and Egypt as part of its caliphate and attacks in various Middle East countries

including Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Kuwait further complicated the security matrix of the region.

GCC and Terrorism Debate

In the backdrop of an upsurge in anti-Islamic sentiment in US congress, Obama administration resurfaced complaints about Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States for not having done enough to thwart their wealthy citizens from financially supporting terrorist groups, including al-Qa'ida. The Saudis were blamed for their long time support of hard line Wahhabi Islam and its spread to Muslim communities across the world. On various accounts, President Obama upset the Saudis on this issue. When asked whether Saudi Arabia was America's friend, Obama replied, "It's complicated." (Mitchell,2016). In September 2016, The Saudis also felt humiliated by Obama's failure to stop the passage of legislation designed to help families of the victims of 9/11 sue the Saudi government, thereby, directly linking Saudi Arabia with terrorism (Smith, 2016).

Strained US – Saudi Relations.

US – Saudi relations became "deeply strained" under second tenure of Obama Administration, while improved with Iran after election of Hassan Rouhani in 2013. However, Iranian nuclear deal was not received favourably in Saudi Arabia, which created tensions in Saudi –US bilateral relations, where GCC countries felt abandoned with these developments. However, with current Trump Administration, the trajectory of relations in moving upwards

Saudi – Iran Relations.

Death of Iranian pilgrims in a stampede in Saudi Arabia in September 2015 and execution of Shiite cleric Nimr Al-Nimr in January 2016, resulted into complete breakdown of diplomatic relations. Post nuclear deal Iran, felt more confident and radiated threatening overture.

Declining Saudi Influence.

Visible gains against ISIS by forces largely aligned with Russia & Iran, failure to oust Bashar-ul-Asad in Syria and inconclusive war in Yemen (ongoing since 26 March 2015) posed serious blow to Saudi influence in the region. For their part, Saudi Arabia felt marginalized, being left alone to face increasingly powerful rival Iran and its proxies, Hizbullah in Lebanon, Houthis in Yemen and Shi'ite Militias in Iraq and Syria, with Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, using Yemen to threat attacks in its own South.

Arab Spring

Middle East engulfed in turbulent political crisis during 2011 Arab Spring, manifesting regime change in Tunisia, rise of Muslim Brotherhood to power in Egypt, fall of Qaddafi in Libya and riots in Bahrain, eventually created sense of grave insecurity in the region, especially among the monarchies.

Analysis on the Contours of IMAFT

Purpose of the Alliance. Declaratory objective of the alliance is “to protect Muslim countries from all terrorist groups and terrorist organizations, irrespective of their sect and name”. It has been projected as an entente to combat global terrorism by largely Muslim States (Riedel, 2017). The alliance is not limited to confronting ISIS or Daesh rather would take on terrorism in any form, anywhere in the Muslim World. Crown Prince and Defense Minister Mohammed bin Salman on 15 December 2015, the day he unveiled the alliance, explained the need and purpose of the alliance in these words. “Today, every Islamic country is fighting terrorism individually. The new alliance, emanates from the keenness of the Muslim World to fight this disease, which affected the Islamic world first, before the international community as a whole.” (DeYoung, 2015). He stated that Alliance’s efforts would not be limited to only countering ISIS or Daesh and it intends to confront any terrorist organization, with priority to "coordinate" efforts to fight terrorism in Iraq, Syria, Libya, Egypt and Afghanistan (2015).

Scope of the Alliance. During the first coalition meeting at Riyadh on 27 March 2016, Brigadier General Ahmad Al Assiri, the Saudi military spokesperson, also defined the scope of alliance being not limited to Daesh, but to confront terrorism in general. Al Assiri, said that the representatives from member countries mainly focused on the ideological, financial, military and media aspects to combat terrorism (Toumi, 2016).

Organization / Membership. The members include most Arab League states, a number of mainly Muslim states from Africa and Asian countries including Pakistan, Bangladesh and Malaysia. More than 10 other Islamic countries, including Indonesia, have expressed support. One notable inclusion in the list is Qatar, whose relations with Saudi Arabia were strained even at the time of announcement of the alliance. Notable omissions are Iran, Iraq, Syria, Algeria and Eritrea.

Force Contribution. The troop contribution and other military assistance for the alliance would be on voluntary basis. Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir, while explaining modalities of the coalition said,

Each government would have to make its own decision about requesting or offering assistance. In terms of the operation of this coalition nothing is off the table. It depends on the requests that come, depends on the need, and it depends on the willingness of countries to provide the support that is necessary, including military training or equipment or . . . technical assistance in terms of messaging . . . to counter the ideology of violent extremism....if countries need help, they can come and request that assistance, and countries . . . can provide that assistance on the spot....case to case basis.... stopping the flow of funds....confronting the ideology of extremism that promotes killing of the innocent, which is contrary to every religion, particularly the Islamic faith (DeYoung, 2015).

Collaboration with Contemporary Alliances. The alliance is not intended to supersede or interfere with U.S.-led military operations against the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. It intends to follow United Nations and Organization of Islamic Cooperation provisions on terrorism, and act under international legitimacy by coordinating with international powers and organizations. Arrangements would be made for "coordination with friendly peace-loving nations and international bodies for the sake of supporting international efforts to combat terrorism and to save international peace and security,

Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman explained. "There will be international coordination with major powers and international organizations ... in terms of operations in Syria and Iraq. We can't undertake these operations without coordinating with legitimacy in this place and the international community (Geo News, 2017).

White House press secretary Josh Earnest further elaborated that Islamic Military Alliance is not a substitute or a replacement for the 65-member anti-ISIL coalition that was built and is being led by the United States of America. Earnest said that in addition to other activities, the new alliance would focus on "countering ISIL's online radicalization efforts (DeYoung, 2015).

The alliance does not intend to interfere in any of its member states unless it is upon its requests and according to international agreements (Toumi, 2016).

Leadership. Currently General Raheel Sharif former COAS of Pakistan has been appointed as first head of the alliance which has got full support of alliance countries.

Funding. NATO even today is facing the issues of funding and how much contributions have to be made by each member state. As far, IMAFT is concerned, there are no definite arrangements. Who will contribute what, how and what arrangements will be made to share the burden and how contributions will be institutionalized is yet a question to be answered by the founding father of the alliance.

Analysis on the Other Significant Aspects of IMA

How exactly IMA will create a framework to build up counter terrorism capacities and align members' shared long-term goals in fight against terror, remains to be seen. In its current construct, this initiative offers some benefits but has negative undertones too. The same has been analyzed in geo-political and functional/operational domains.

Pan-Islamism and IMAFT. Pan-Islamic solidarity is a notion that is romanticized in the Muslim world, albeit, it remains a historic fact that no state within the Ummah is willing to actually invest in the concept. The nearly 50-year history of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) underscores how the nation-state trumps religious solidarity. The checkered history of other alliances in middle east tells no different story. Baghdad Pact (1955), Arab League (1945), Non- Aligned Movement (1961) and the Gulf Cooperation Council (1981) did little to impact the conflicts in the regions. Will Islamic Military Alliance be able to manifest itself as a pan-Muslim alliance and deliver on its stated objectives, leaves much to doubt, especially with wide and deep divisions among its member states, while keeping few Muslim countries at arm's length. IMAFT cannot be seen as an effort towards Pan-Islamism, again for the fact that while some of the bigger Muslim countries like Iran, Iraq and Syria are outside the alliance.

Geo-Political Aspects. While most of the member countries may have convergence on the stated objective of the alliance, it is not an alliance of all willing, owing to competing and often divergent national interests. The Arab states feared that Iran would export its revolution to those states of the region where sizeable Shiite community lived. Regional conflicts such as in Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Qatar, have also impacted bilateral and diplomatic relations. The rift has been fueled and exploited along the sectarian lines by external players to create a security dilemma in the region, alleging both Saudi Arabia and Iran to create their respective blocs across the Muslim world and supporting proxies in the region. This leaves many Muslim states including Pakistan in a quagmire to balance their relations with each. Involvement of global and regional players further complicate the issue.

The alliance's military exercise Operation North Thunder conducted during February and March 2016 in northeast Saudi Arabia was perceived to thwart a hypothetical Iranian aggression against Saudi Arabia (Riedel,2017). "The military alliance could face pushback from some of the Middle East's most powerful players", as narrated by Hasan Askari Rizvi in sharing his assessment with Newsweek magazine (Silva,2017). At the moment, Iran views IMAFT negatively against its regional interests. Such perception may drive Iran towards formation of a rival Shia alliance. That would have destructive consequences, as already witnessed in Yemen(Silva,2017). The alliance had US endorsement during both Obama and Trump administrations but with differences in expectations. From the Obama administration perspective, as long as the Islamic Military Alliance fights the ISIS and Al-Qaeda, it was helpful to American national interests, which was under pressure to act against ISIS due to bulk of recruitment and number of terrorist incidents in Europe linked to the organization. Former US defence secretary Ash Carter acclaimed the alliance by stating, "The coalition is essential and fulfils a function the US could never fulfill. It has a stature and capability, particularly in the economic, political and ideological spheres that outsiders couldn't possibly have" (Khan,2017). Trump administrations, however, expects this alliance to act against terrorist organizations like ISIS and Al-Qaeda, as well as Iran. Saudi Arabia called Arab-Muslim-US Summit a 'turning point' after 'period of divergence' (World tribune,2017). President Trump endorsement of IMAFT by insisting Muslim countries to form an alliance to fight terrorism vis-à-vis linking Iran with terrorism, promotes an impression of US overseeing the alliance affairs and attempt to add a sectarian colour to the alliance. Russia views the alliance with skepticism being actively involved in Syria under RSII coalition framework(2015). While, China has taken a balanced stance by appreciating the initiative and willingness to cooperate without embroiling itself in the Middle East affairs(2015). Israel is actively projecting IMAFT as an anti-Iran alliance comprising 'Sunni Arab' states, led by the US. It is also talking of improving ties with Saudi Arabia and other Arab states to fight against Iran. Such stance is apparently aimed at reducing legitimacy of the Alliance and to further deepen the sectarian divide among Muslim nations.

Implications for Pakistan

Any engagement of Pakistan with IMAFT would entail number of significant opportunities. At the same time, it would present several challenges as well. These implications are laid down in the ensuing paragraphs.

Opportunities for Pakistan

Being the only nuclear power among the member countries of the Alliance, and having a vast experience of combating terrorism with sterling success, albeit at a

very high human and capital cost, Pakistan is an enviable position within such an alliance. It has the necessary weight to ensure that its interests are rightly protected and that its advice and opinion is given due place while finalizing the TORs/mandate of the alliance and subsequent activities of diplomatic and military nature. Some of the opportunities could be identified as follows:

Projecting Pakistan's Anti-terrorism Resolve. Pakistan continues to face pressures from several quarters to 'do more' for fighting terrorism despite large human and capital sacrifices made by Pakistan. Its engagement with IMAFT provides it an opportunity to reiterate and demonstrate Pakistan's unflinching resolve to eradicate terrorism to the larger world in a more appropriate manner.

Solidifying Strategic Relations with Saudi Arabia and UAE. Pakistan's engagement with IMAFT provides it an opportunity to mend fences with Saudi Arabia and UAE and further solidify its strategic linkages, which are perceived to be clouded after Pakistan's decision to stay neutral in Yemen crisis. This would satisfy greater majority of Pakistani population, which have particular sentiments for Saudi Arabia for various reasons including religious affinity. Presence of a large Pakistani expatriate community in these countries also demands special considerations by Pakistan while evolving any course of action involving these two countries.

Improved Space for Pakistani Diaspora in Middle East. The Gulf countries, particularly Saudi Arabia and UAE, have been host to millions of Pakistanis for the last several decades. These Pakistanis are source of valuable remittances for Pakistan. Any engagement with IMAFT would open up further space for Pakistani manpower to be absorbed in these countries. It would also bring more harmony and goodwill among the Pakistanis and the people of these countries.

Active Diplomatic Support from GCC Countries. Could be one opportunity which may come Pakistan's way, particularly with regard to normalization of relations with US, support for Kashmir issue, coordinated position for resolution of Afghan conundrum and resumption of Comprehensive dialogue with India.

Increased Leverage in Middle East Affairs. Pakistan's engagement could provide it more active diplomatic role in Middle Eastern affairs, as well as to influence Saudi leadership's decision-making particularly in order to moderate anti-Iran positions. Such overtones have the potential to improve Pakistan – Iran relations.

Pakistan's better Bargaining Position to Resolve Bilateral Irritants with Iran. Pakistan's engagement in IMAFT has the potential to allow it to go to negotiating table with Iran with a bargaining position to resolve pending issues with Iran in a

better manner, as it gives an added weightage to Pakistan having a larger support of IMAFT member countries. This may allow the two countries to interact with each other in a more constructive manner.

Hedge Against Indian Efforts to Isolate Pakistan. Pakistan's involvement in IMAFT and consequent better relationship with Gulf countries would allow Pakistan to hedge against the Indian efforts to create hurdles for Pakistan and isolate it from the Middle Eastern countries. This would also provide Pakistan to improve its leverage to resume bilateral comprehensive dialogue with India.

Enhanced Economic Cooperation with GCC. Currently, Pakistan's trade with Saudi Arabia and UAE is sizeable and has the potential to be enhanced. Enhanced Investments from the GCC particularly in energy and infrastructure sector as well as in manufacturing and services sectors is an important opportunity.

Enhanced Military Cooperation with GCC. Major military gains are envisaged, subject to operationalization of alliance in the domains of Military training, sharing of defence technology, enhanced counter-terrorism experience under Multi-National environment in intelligence sharing and de-radicalization etc. Possibility of trained and professional manpower apt for being inducted into IMAFT's various organs and entities is also envisaged.

Challenges for Pakistan

Some of the significant challenges which Pakistan might face by actively participating in IMAFT are given below:-

Impact on Pak-Iran Relations. In view of the rivalry existing between Saudi Arabia and Iran, any engagement of Pakistan with IMAFT could lead to Iran taking offence of the development. This may increase tensions between Pakistan and Iran, despite Pakistan repeated declarations that its involvement would in no way be against Iran. Sectarian angle and already existing irritants may further exacerbate the situation. Possibility of proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia on Pakistan's soil cannot be excluded either. Added to these factors are the posture taken by India and Afghanistan against Pakistan which could negatively impact the relations. Iran nevertheless remains a potential supplier of energy for Pakistan and the two countries have a gas pipeline agreement under implementation, though delayed for different reasons. Balancing out relations with Iran while having a deeper relationship with Saudi Arabia through IMAFT would be a significant challenge for Pakistan.

Potential for Unrest and Divide. Potential unrest within the country on sectarian basis may also be sparked. Pakistan has the second largest Shia population in the world. This population is well integrated in Pakistan's polity and decision-making levels. There are some areas where one finds a large concentration of Shia population, and such areas have the potential to become trouble hotspots. Pakistan's demographic mix clearly demands extreme care. So as not to provoke any unrest on sectarian lines at a moment when the country is engaged in a serious fight against extremism and terrorism. There also remains a potential for political divide due to substantial presence of Saudi or Iranian lobbyist groups in different decision-making tiers in Pakistan.

Surge in activities of RAW and other Hostile Intelligence Agencies. There remains a major possibility of destabilization of Balochistan, especially CPEC related activities, through hostile intelligence agencies such as RAW utilizing neighbouring country as springboard.

Backlash of ISIS There is a strong possibility that any action against terrorist organizations, like ISIS, elsewhere would have a backlash by the latter inside Pakistan. It must be ready to counter such an eventuality.

Proposed Way Forward for Pakistan

Facilitate Political Reconciliation between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Pakistan has traditionally maintained a stance of neutrality and non-intervention among Muslim countries that is 'a balancing act'. Pakistan must not commit itself to either side of the sectarian divide. This stance provides Pakistan the stature to bring rival countries together rather than being anyone's advocate. Persian-Arab rivalry goes far back in history which has now become more a matter of regional influence and power politics. Pakistan can ill-afford to do anything other than deft diplomacy to facilitate political reconciliation between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Relationship with Saudi Arabia.

Pakistan must continue to maintain strategic relations with Saudi Arabia being a close, time-tested ally and custodian of two holiest cities of Islam. Pakistan allowing General Raheel Sharif to assume its command were steps towards the same direction. As a responsible friend, Pakistan must not be afraid to speak the principled truth with Saudi Arabia by making them realize that the Alliance can only deliver if it is actually aimed at achieving its stated purpose, rather than being conceived as an anti-Iran effort. In the medium to long term, Pakistani assistance to the alliance should come in form of cooperation in non-kinetic counter terrorism

domain. This may include sharing intelligence on terrorist groups, capacity building of member countries by provision of training to troops, help combating financial terrorism, covering ideological domain, domination of information domain and helping member states create counter-radicalization initiatives.

Pakistan - Iran Relations.

Iran is an important neighbour, and a country which has enjoyed warm relations with Pakistan. Both countries must circumvent the apprehensions of the alliance being anti-Iran, and must devise ways to maintain bilateral working relations and ensure continued constructive engagement. Efforts to remove bilateral irritants like border management, control on extremist groups, check on recruitment of Pakistani nationals for Syrian war effort and assurances of not allowing their land against each other's interest can help towards developing mutual trust. Pakistan's commitment of not acting against Iranian interests should be a sufficient assurance in this regard.

Ensuring a Coherent Inner Front

Building national consensus on an important and sensitive issue like joining a military alliance must have the approval of Parliament. A Parliamentary decision will set a better course for defining our role in the alliance and grant legality to the decision. Undertake mainstream and social media campaign to dispel any sectarian undertones regarding our decision to join the alliance. Parliamentary committee on Foreign Affairs must be taken into confidence for ensuring political ownership

Managing Backlash from Terrorist Organizations

If the alliance operations are able to effectively hurt terrorists' interests particularly in case of kinetic operations, possible reaction may take place within Pakistan. Implementation of National Action Plan in letter and spirit is therefore essential to counter such reaction. Effective border management is a sine qua non in achieving the same.

Conclusion

Ever since its inception the Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism (IMAFT) has been a source of controversy because of the disjoint in its stated and implicit objectives. This alliance was formed in haste without taking all the member states on board. United States, under President Trump's administration, has now again become part of the equation by engaging strategically with Saudi Arabia. This has appreciably diminished efficacy and justification of the alliance. For the Islamic

Alliance to remain relevant it must take all the requisite measures which the panel have put forth, including but not limited to, operational, logistics and intelligence capabilities as well as ensuring crisis management. There may be many strands to the latest crisis engulfing the Middle East, but there is only one conclusion for us: Pakistan cannot afford to get embroiled in any conflict in the Middle East.

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