



Avoiding Zero-Sum between Iran and Saudi Arabia: Pragmatism in Pakistan's Gulf Policy

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Abstract *Foreign policy formulation and management is quite sensitive. No country can either desire or afford to remain isolated internationally. Furthermore, a state is always concerned with its security and survival and cannot afford to sacrifice national interests. As a member of the international community, states, apart from ensuring their national interests are also expected to play their due role for international peace and stability. Pakistan has always followed a pragmatic foreign policy and demonstrated exceptional skills in balancing her relations with major powers and regional players. Pakistan has also maintained a finely balanced policy towards Middle East and Gulf. The crises in Yemen, transformation in the Middle East and transitional balance of power demand a re-evaluation of our foreign policy which avoids a zero-sum game between Iran and Saudi Arabia so that Pakistan can also remain relevant to the regional and international players.*

Introduction

Dr Hassan Askari Rizvi opines that “In order for a country to be relevant to the international system, it needs to have: (a) internal stability and a viable sustainable system; (b) economic viability and the ability to attract investment from outside; and, (c) knowledge, academics and technology”: *Dr. Hassan Askari Rizvi* (Rizvi,1993)

Pakistani foreign policy has been defined by its security issues, especially the threat emanating from eastern borders. However, despite all the disadvantages

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which the country has inherited at the time of its inception, its performance as an actor in international forums deserve appreciation and understanding. Being strategically important country for great global players, Pakistani leadership have demonstrated skillful diplomacy in the conduct of foreign policy. Balancing relations between USA and China is one apt example of success story, and reorientation of relations with Russia while maintaining relevant to USA is another milestone achieved by Pakistan's successful diplomacy. At the regional level, both Iran and Saudi Arabia are very important from Pakistan's perspective, therefore, need pragmatic reevaluation of options for remaining relevant to both the regional powers. While Iran and Saudi Arabia have long been involved in their regional tug-of-war for maintaining regional balance of power, while Pakistan has maintained cordial relations with both countries due to cultural, historical and religious linkages. The transformation across Middle East and the gulf in the shape of regime change, intra state conflicts and dwindling Arab Spring, all have had profound impact of the security and political architecture of this region with serious consequences in terms of human losses and infrastructure damages, while on the regional and global balance of power, both Iran and Saudi Arabia are asserting their influence on gaining maximum power in the shape of alliance partners and physical involvement in the conflicts, most significantly Syria and Yemen. Saudi request for troops participation to Pakistan for war in Yemen and Iranian request to Pakistan to stay away created serious challenges to Pakistan in adopting foreign policy which is out of zero –sum and pragmatically futuristic and in line with popular public aspirations no to become physically involved in any future conflict in Middle East. The complex security situation in Yemen besides aggravating the conflict and increased turf war between Iran and Saudi Arabia has also generated challenging situations for Pakistan's foreign policy towards both Tehran and Riyadh, especially once both of them are of significant importance to Pakistan. Pakistan's leading role and command of newly established Islamic Military Alliance for countering terrorism has also created suspicions in Iranian policy planners with respect to Pakistan's future alignment in the region.

This article unveils the tug of war between Iran and Saudi Arabia through historic lens to establish the nature of friction between the two; identify main features of Pakistan's foreign policy in maintaining and promoting regional and international peace and stability and suggesting foreign policy options for Pakistan.

Saudi-Iran Rivalry

Genesis of Prevailing Conflict

The account of Saudi – Iranian rivalry can be well understood by analyzing the strategic architecture of the region, political comportment of both Iran and Saudi

Arabia in regional and international arena, and major power's interests in the regional politics.

Strategic Architecture of the Persian Gulf

The Persian Gulf region is an extension of the Indian Ocean through Strait of Hormuz. It is identifiable within the limits of Middle East, lies between Iran to its North and Arab Peninsula to its South (Mojtahed-Zadeh, 2013). The littoral states in the area includes – narrating anti-clockwise from North – Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Bahrain. In order to pursue their trades through sea, a vast majority of Arabs have migrated to the coastal areas of the regions over the past two centuries, hence creating a multi-ethnic and multi-culture population. The area spread over in less than one thousand kilometers holds immense geostrategic significance from two perspectives: Firstly, approximately 27 percent of the world oil supply and 22 percent of the US import is met by the countries surrounded by the Gulf (Edwards,1997). The region contains world largest oil and moderate gas reserves. The coastal area of the Persian Gulf contains more than thirty oil fields which makes the Gulf as “oil highway” of the world (Hussein, 2012). Iran is believed to possess the world second largest gas reserves. Secondly, the trade routes of the old world pass through it due to which the region has always been attached to great powers interests. Whether it been the Portuguese, the Dutch, the French, the British or the Russian, each considered the Persian Gulf as dominating factor in formulating their colonial policies in the East (Mojtahed-Zadeh, 2013). The Strait of Hormuz – the world most important choke point – adds extra dimensions to the political and security canvas of the Gulf. Iran has already given a strategic signal to the great powers that it has the capability and will to block the Strait of Hormuz in case its strategic interests are jeopardized (Hussein, 2012).

Iranian outlook as a Political Actor

The Iranian character in the modern world political landscape can be divided in various phases. The first phase encompasses the pre-1953 era which starts with the rise of Raza Khan, later Raza Shah Pahlavi in Persia from 1921-1924 (bin Salman Al-Saud,2003). It was the time when the British and other colonial masters – submitting to the will of the people – were busy in granting independence to their colonies. The British after leaving the Indian subcontinent in 1947 and subsequently Palestine in 1948 had no justification in staying in the region. But they kept ruling areas which today are known as the United Arab Emirates for the sole reason of extracting economic benefits from the regional oil industries. The British government had purchased 50 percent of oil share of Anglo-Iranian

Company when its navy decided to switch over to oil from coal in 1913(Al-Saud, 2003).

During this era Iran's character as a unitary actor in the international system remained restricted to strengthening its territorial integrity without making any claim across the Gulf except for Bahrain which they had to eventually drop due to strong British stance against the claim. The claim to Bahrain, nonetheless, remained alive, though not actively pursued by Iran until 1960 (Al-Saud,2003). The main characteristic of Iran's role in international politics during this era was its strong pro-British policies due to domestic economic weaknesses and political disorder. This claim can be verified with the historic fact that Iran is the second Muslim country – after Turkey – which recognized Israel following the British steering (Teller, 2018).

The second phase commenced in 1953 with the fall of democratically elected Iranian Premier Muhammad Mossadegh through a US and UK supported coup d'état (Bone, (Ed.). 2005). In late 60s and subsequently during 70s, Iran enjoyed balance of power in its favour. During this era under Muhammad Raza Shah Pahlavi remained pro-British but at the same time contributed a lot in development of the state's economy. Shah also remained committed in country's military buildup by converting national resource into state's political influence. Its military power was sufficient to deter its rival Iraq and Saudi Arabia both militarily and economically.

There were, however, no visible signs of Iranian intentions in playing a dominant role in the regional politics as its interests were well looked after by Britain.

The third phase covering the period from 1971 to 1979 proved decisive in generating a race among the Gulf States for regional dominance. The roots of the Saudi-Iran rivalry could also be traced back in this period. The story begins with the British government decision of January 16, 1968 to withdraw its forces from Persian Gulf by 1971. The British retreat in December 1971, besides marking an end to their one and half century supremacy in the Gulf, had two strategic implications towards the regional politics: (1) The Gulf states had to assume the responsibility for the regional security against any foreign intervention; and (2) Internal differences between states surfaced for tilting regional balance of power in their favor (bin Salman Al-Saud, 2003). Though Iran remained the British closest ally, but in the regional political landscape Iran started emerging as the dominant actor.

In the post-1979 scenario Iran emerged altogether a different actor in all tiers i.e. national, regional and international political fronts. The 1979 Iranian revolution was not only crucial in totally changing the domestic fiber of the country, but also detrimental in writing a new chapter of Iranian history towards its relations with rest of the world. Iran – the closest ally of the West before the fall 1979 – transformed into anti-West. Perceiving Tehran's ambition for spreading its

revolution in whole of the Middle East, the White House administration started considering Iran as a threat to the US interest. The US support to Saddam Hussain in Iran-Iraq War – initiated by Iraq in 1980 – confirms that the US objectives was not less than a regime change to a government in Iran more in line with the US interests (Blight, Banai, Byrne, & Tirman, 2012).

Since then the regional tussle between Iran and other Gulf countries especially Saudi Arabia has dominated the politics of the Persian Gulf and Middle East.

Saudi Arabia's Comportment as Political Actor

The role of Arabian Peninsula in emerged in internationally back in 6th century with the dawn of Islam. It was indeed the rise of Islam that played important role in shaping the character of modern-day Saudi Arabia (Cordesman, 2003). The roots of the today's Kingdom of Saudi Arabia can be traced back in early 20th century when Abd al-Aziz al-Saud established the third Saudi state by attacking Riyadh after return from exile. By the start of First World War al-Saud was in control of large area including central Arabia, however, western Arabia remained with Ottoman Empire (Cordesman, 2003). After many ups and downs and interplay of conspiracy theories – sponsored by the West – on September 23, 1932, Abd al-Aziz al-Saud created Kingdom of Saudi Arabia – a country in its modern form (Cordesman, 2003).

Riyadh's journey in international politics started with important meeting of King Abd al-Aziz with President Roosevelt on February 14, 1945. In the time-honoured version of event, the young Saudi Arabia and powerful US contracted a marriage of convenience, whereby Riyadh opened its oil fields to Washington and Washington undertook to protect Riyadh from external and internal attack (Ménoret, 2005). After the death of King Abd al-Aziz in 1953 the Kingdom remained victim of internal family differences for power and mismanagement of the government affairs. However, King Faisal – after becoming king in 1964 – effectively dealt domestic and international issues. Besides playing role in Arab-Israel War-1967 & 1973, resolving issues with Egypt on Yemen, Faisal used “oil as weapon” policy which led to massive increase in oil prices, Saudi oil wealth and its political influence (Cordesman, 2003). All such developments in Saudi Arabia were tangent to the US interests in Middle East.

King Faisal was murdered in 1975 by his own nephew. Since then the Saudi character in regional and international relations has remained pro-US. Whether it be the Gulf Wars of 1991 & 2003, or other US objectives in Middle East, Riyadh policies do have tincture of Washington's foreign policy.

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia enjoys a special place in the Islamic world due to Muslim holiest places (the King is often referred as *Khadim-e-Harahrain-Sharifain*). Its oil wealth – holding the world largest oil reserves – has always been source for attraction for the great powers especially the US. Despite all this, the

Saudi leadership feels that their country is encircled with enemies (Ramady, 2010). This perception of encirclement has been an overriding factor of its alliance with the US. Starting from the creation of Israel in the heart of Middle East in 1948, rise of Ba'athists in Syria and Iraq, strategic interests of former-Soviet Union and now Iran in Yemen, are all deterrents existing in Saudi foreign policy perception (Hussein, 2012).

Iran-Saudi Contentious Bilateral Issues

The regional politics of Middle East revolves around its geostrategic architecture, the oil wealth, internal differences between states – especially Iran and Saudi Arabia for quest of power. Although both the countries have not confronted each other in a military clash but a state of cold war do prevail between them ever since British departure from the Gulf in 1971.

The initial signs of gaps between the two surfaced in 1970 when Iran sought Saudi cooperation in organizing regional security. Saudi reluctance indicated that their sphere of interests were not identical and, although the Gulf was important for both of them, it was not the only area of mutual interests (Chubin, & Tripp, 2014). Later, the Iranian revolution of 1979 totally transformed its character in international politics to which Saudi Arabia was not an exception to react. At regional front Saudi Arabia chose Iraq as its close ally, considering it as a potent deterrent to Iranian ambitions against Iran.

The Iran-Iraq War (1980-89) further widen the gap between the two as Iran considered it as an attempt by Iraq and its allies – Saudi Arabia and the West – to snuff out the revolution (Chubin, & Tripp, 2014). The other important event which led to even deterioration of bilateral relations was creation of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Saudi Arabia took advantage of the Iran-Iraq War and predominant fear in the smaller regional states against spill-over of Iranian revolution beyond the limits of their frontiers. In May 1981, Saudi Arabia created GCC which included all the regional states except Iran and Iraq. Iran saw the Council as a vehicle for Saudi domination of the Arabian Peninsula (Chubin, & Tripp, 2014). The creation of GCC and absence of Iran and Iran had two significant implications. Firstly, the Saudi government became successful in establishing its influence in smaller Gulf state, hence, tilting the balance of power in its favor. Secondly, it paved the way for the US to play direct role in the regional politics.

Since, then there has been hardly any respite in the tense environment between the two. Killing of 402 pilgrims – 275 of them Iranian – during clashes in the holy city of Mecca in 1987 and the use of Iraqi and Syrian lands as proxy battle ground are the major events contributing towards further polluting the regional security environment.

Sectarian texture of the Conflict

Most of the Western writers have always been biased in their assessment towards the prevailing tension in the Gulf and viewed Iran-Saudi relations with sectarian lens. As a matter of fact, the Iran-Saudi rivalry has never been sectarian in nature – until late 2010 when Arab Spring changed the dynamics of the whole Middle East region.

Both Iran and Saudi Arabia lived peacefully under British rule up to 1971. Their interstate tussle commenced on single point agent i.e. domination of the Persian Gulf as both considered themselves as legal heir of British legacy.

The Iran-Saudi tug-of-war assumed (or internationally presumed) sectarian texture precisely after the outbreak of Arab Spring in 2010. Again, Arab Spring was purely an indigenous movement against the authoritarian Arab regimes. Ignited in Tunisia it all of a sudden engulfed whole of the Middle East and uprooted many tall idols. The rise of emancipatory forces like ISIS and al-Qaida not only changed the entire security and political landscape of the region but also evoked sectarian element in the Muslim Arab countries. The leadership of both Iran and Saudi Arabia could not keep their countries non-aligned from supporting their respective factions in regional / neighbouring countries.

The Recent Episode of Crisis in Yemen

The recent developments in Yemen have given a new dimension to the political and security dynamics of the whole of the Middle East. Sharing about 1800 km Saudi Arabian southern border, Yemen is the second largest country in Arab peninsula. In its population of 24.4 million, 60-65% follow Sunni sect whereas 30-35% belong to Shiite faction of Islam. Most importantly, Shiite majority areas are close to the Saudi border which is serious concern from Saudi perspective.

For much of the 20th century Yemen existed as two separate countries – Yemen Arab Republic (YAR) in the north and People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) in the south – before their unification in 1990. Historically the country is prone to civil wars. In 1960s, North Yemen plunged into a civil war between royalist partisans of Mutawakkilite Kingdom and the supporters of YAR. After unification, the Southerners complaining of political and economic marginalization by the government in Sana'a pushed the country into second civil war in 1994. The roots of present unrest in Yemen can be traced back in Houthi insurgency since 2004, south Yemen insurgency since 2009 and Yemeni revolutionary movement since 2011.

In the prevailing fluid situation in Yemen a number of factions are engaged fighting with each other. The known fighting groups include: (1) forces loyal to President, Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi fighting against all odds; (2) Zaidi Shia rebels known as Houthis mostly controlling north and west Yemen; (3) al-Qaida Arab

Peninsula (AQAP) in South and South East fighting both Hadi and Houthis` and, (4) newly emerged Islamic State (ISIS) against Hadi, AQAP and Houthi. ISIS has also claimed responsibility for conducting suicide bombings in Sanaa in March 2015.

In September 2014, Houthis after capturing capital city Sanaa became main power brokers, later forcing Mr Hadi to flee the capital Sanaa in February 2015 (Ghobari, & Mukhashaf, 2015). Moreover, there have been reportedly deflections in loyalties in Yemeni Army in favour of Houthis. In late March 2015, Houthis were close to Aden – the city from where President had been controlling the state's affairs – again forcing Hadi to flee to Saudi Arabia and seek its intervention (Yemen leader Hadi gets Saudi refuge, 2019).

Impact of Iran-Saudi Rivalry on Pakistan's Foreign Policy

The ongoing rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia especially the outgoing situation in Yemen has created a challenging situation for Pakistani leadership as whether to involve itself in the crisis or remain neutral in the whole scenario. The decision is even difficult as both the staunch rivals are at one hand Muslim states and on the other hand are equally strategically important for Pakistan.

The Saudi demand to Pakistan for physical support to the Yemeni crisis has further complicated the issue for Pakistan government in deciding a clear line of action in Middle Eastern emerging picture. On the contrary Iran expects Pakistan to remain neutral in the ongoing Yemeni crisis.

In order to follow the correct line of action, it is foremost imperative to first have a cursory look over Pakistan's foreign policy behavior with specific reference to maintaining international and regional peace.

Pakistan's Character in Regional and International Stability

Article 40 of constitution of Pakistan pledges that for preservation and strengthening fraternal relations among Muslim countries and global community for promotion of international peace and settlement of disputes through peaceful means (Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, 1973).

In the post-independence period Pakistan started pursuing cordial relations with its neighbors, Muslim World, and other members of world society. Pakistan heritage shows that Pakistan has always played pivotal role in promoting and maintaining the world security. After independence this became a permanent and regular aspect of Pakistan's foreign policy.

One important character of Pakistan's past foreign policy behavior has been its role towards balancing relations among rival states. By virtue of its strategic location and the attachment of great powers vital interests with Pakistan, the leadership of Pakistan has historically endeavored to bridge gap between states.

This is more specific in relations to Sino-US ties where Pakistan played key role in defusing tensions and bringing the both nations closer to each other. In 1970-71 Pakistan facilitated President Nixon's historic visit to People Republic of China which wrote a new chapter in international relations.

Pakistan's role balancing relations for peaceful resolution of conflicts is the best model which it can play as a purposeful actor of international community.

Iran-Saudi Rivalry and Available Alternatives for Pakistan

The prevailing situation in Yemen and consistent unrest in bilateral ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia is not a sole concern of Persian Gulf or the Middle East region but a direct threat to Pakistan domestic and security dynamics. Whether or not participating in the conflict is in our best national interest, is a hundred-million-dollar question which needs to be evaluated from various angles. It is, however, imperative that Pakistan's foreign policy makers must play their cards well in order to secure their best national interests.

States being "rational" actors in the anarchic world system always conduct cost-benefit analysis in respect of their long-term national interest before following a particular alternative. Principally speaking Pakistan should play its "Active role" in the crisis. But what kind of role? We need to first access options to Pakistan.

Although the joint session of parliament has passed a resolution to remain neutral in the whole scenario, but it is not binding on the government to follow the resolution in its true spirits as it has to link various bilateral and international obligations while formulating its long term foreign policy. Hence, evaluation of all domestic, regional and international variables is imperative before taking the final decision. This is even important as the government of Pakistan while following the principal of ambiguity has not given any clear-cut policy outline.

While taking advantage of Yemen crisis Pakistan can play important in bridging gaps between Iran and Saudi Arabia and contribute positively in ending their decades old tussle for balance of power. Apparently, Pakistan has three alternatives: (1) remain neutral; (2) show a tilt toward either Iran or Saudi Arabia; or (3) follow a pro-active diplomatic action.

Option-1: Remain Neutral

There is a general perception in the masses that Pakistan should remain neutral as regards to bilateral relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia and Yemen conflict, and concentrate on its domestic issues. The main arguments in support of the option include the following.

- Yemen conflict is not our war. It is a conflict between two Arab states (Saudi Arab and Yemen) or a legacy of proxy warfare between Iran and Saudi Arabia for power maximization for their regional dominance.

- Pakistan has never indulged in any Intra-Arab or Arab-Ajam conflict, e.g. Iran-Iraq war (1980-88), the ongoing conflicts in Syria, and other Arab country after Arab Spring.
- Pakistan has always followed the principal of non-interference in other states' affairs. Yemen crisis being internal / domestic issue of Yemen should be resolved through internal laws of non- interference/state sovereignty.
- Pakistan has a number of security issues of its own. It has not come out of the security crisis emerged as a result of its involvement in the Global War on Terror (GWOT). So, Pakistan's focus should remain on fighting the GWOT and ensure its internal peace and stability.
- The ongoing conflict in Yemen and Iran-Saudi rivalry has acquired sectarianism color. The very fiber of Pakistani society is non-sectarian. Furthermore, sectarianism is not structural in Pakistani politics/domestic issues. By joining the war Pakistan is going to show its tilt towards Saudi faction of sects and would create serious security issues at home. Its society would be polarized on the basis of sects as 20 million Shiites live in Pakistan peaceful (this number is nearly double the Shiites (Houthis) fighting in Yemen).
- The history of country reveals that we have already paid a very price while fighting the wars for others. For instance, in 1979 and 2001 Pakistan fought for the US interests in the region and resultantly the very social fiber of the country has transformed completely. We were not in a position to avoid 1979 and 2001 but at least in case of Yemen we can afford to remain away from the theater of war.
- There are no two factions fighting in Yemen, rather four groups have been fighting against each other since past a decade. These include: a) Houthis in the north and south west; b) al-Quaida; c) ISIS; and d) President Hadi's states forces. It would be difficult for Pakistani forces to identify their clear-cut goals and objectives as regards to the enemy situation in Yemen.
- Saudi integrity has not been threatened. It's Saudi Arabia who has attacked Yemen. Sending our forces in Yemen on the pledge of safeguarding Saudi territorial integrity it is not logical.

Though Pakistan can afford to remain neutral, but the option is not recommended.

Option-2: Show Tilt toward either Iran or Saudi Arabia

Although Pakistani parliament has passed a resolution on staying neutral, but voices are being heard for sending troops in support for Saudi Arabia. These voices are merely from the religious groups who have been getting funds from Saudi Arabia since long and some political forces having personal interests / investments in Saudi Arabia. A segment of Shiite population believes that Pakistan should show whole hearted support to Iran being neighbouring Islamic country. The voices of those in favour of Saudi Arabia are rather louder. The main arguments in favour and counter arguments include the following.

- Saudi Arabia is our historic and time-tested friend and should be helped in the time of need. Moreover, Saudi Arabia has always helped Pakistan economically, financially and morally during the hour of our need. So, this is our time to pay it back. The school of thoughts opposing this ideology believes that in international politics there are no “free lunches”. States help others in exchange of safeguarding their interests. They also argue that Saudi Arabia’s last year’s aid of \$ 1.5 billion was an investment which is being cashed today.
- The supporters of sending troops to Saudi Arabia attach religious affiliation with the issue by arguing that the holy places are to be protected. However, the holy places are not in danger due to the ongoing crisis in Yemen. In view of serious implications for Pakistan at domestic security dynamics, sending of troops is not recommended.

Option-3: Pro-active Diplomatic Initiative – Balancing of Relations

The most appropriate role that Pakistan can play in the whole issue - while remaining neutral - is to follow a pro-active diplomatic initiative so as to bridge gap between Iran and Saudi Arabia and ensure perpetual peace in ME and bring harmony in Muslim Ummah. Following arguments would support the suggested courses of action.

- Historically speaking Pakistan has been playing vital role in bridging gaps between states. Pakistan – utilizing its geo-strategic significance – played vital role in affecting Sino-US rapprochement. In 1970’s, Pakistani leadership convinced the US that Chinese may not be taken as communist in lines as they consider Soviet Union. Rather, they should be taken as nationalists and hence vital to US interest. In 1972 president Nixon paid historic visit to china which was made possible by Pakistan’s efforts and wrote a new chapter in international history of politics.

- Pakistan enjoys equally good and long-term relations with both Saudi Arabia and Iran. Saudi Arabia has always rendered its support for Pakistani cause. Its financial assistance during crisis moments cannot be ignored. Historically, Pakistan has always supported the Saudi cause. In 1990 Pakistan sent its forces to join the coalition against Iraq. Earlier in 1980s, a dedicated Pakistani military contingent remained deputed in Saudi Arabia on security duties. So, their interstate relations are based on long term religious and mutual interests. Moreover, a Pakistani workforce of about two million is a bonding factor between the two. At one end Saudis are looking after their financial needs and Pakistan is receiving huge remittance in its national treasury and on the other, the Pakistani Diaspora in Saudi Arabia has been contributing in their nation building. It's a two-way traffic. The best way that Pakistan can pay back to Saudi Arabia now, is not short-term assistance in the form of military contingent but contribute towards a perpetual peace and stability of Saudi Arabia and the ME. It can only be done if Saudis use Pakistan's influence over Iran in resolving their long-term issues.
- Pakistan and Iran are not only two neighboring states but two important/core states of the region. Both have a history of cordial friendly relations and convergence of interests on various bilateral, regional and international issues. Despite being a Shiite dominated country, the inter-state relations between Pakistan and Iran have not been written on the basis of sectarianism. Numerous incidents of killing of Shiites in Pakistan, especially Hazarvis in Quetta has not generated any support from Iranian side in favor of a particular sect. This shows that the relationship between the two is institutionalized.
- Further, Pakistan and Iran have mutual economic interests. They have already concluded historic Iran-Pakistan Gas Pipeline Project (IP). In order to make the project feasible peace and security is pre-dominant factor on both the countries.
- The recently concluded historic visit of Chinese President (20-21 April 2015) to Pakistan can also be viewed in the same pretext. The commencement of economic corridor initiative and IP; does not merit any deployment of Pakistani forces on Iran's border. So, China is also in favour of diplomatic solution of Yemen crisis.

Keeping Pakistan's geo-strategic location, Pakistan's relations with both Iran and Saudi Arabia are in the country's vital national interests. Hence, the best option for Pakistani leadership in the current scenario is to play a pro-active diplomatic role.

Recommendations

Recommended option: Option-3.

Salient of the Option / Course of Action

The important contours of the said alternative include the following.

Direct Dialogue with Stake Holders: Pakistan should accelerate its diplomatic efforts in having direct talks with both the stake holders i.e. Saudi Arabia and Iran. The point of emphasis should be following a solutions-oriented agenda. At the moment both the sides are not willing to negotiate. Pakistan's first effort should be to bring both the players on negotiating table. Iran has already given a four-point formula for resolving the issue which includes: immediate ceasefire; humanitarian assistance to suffering Yemenis; intra-group Yemeni dialogue; and formation of a broad based government.

Pakistan should endeavor to get Saudis point of view on it and endeavor to further develop the formula so as to make them reach to a common regional agenda.

Incorporating Regional / Global Players in Peace Process: Turkey has already been playing an active role in the issue. Pakistan and Turkey, being historically good friends with unanimity of ideas on the prevailing situation can play together a decisive role in resolving the issue. In other global players, China does have its interests linked with Pakistan relatives to Iran and Saudi Arabia. As Chinese leadership is also in favor of political solution of the issue, its influence and role in bridging gap between Iran and KSA can be sought.

Russian interests also converge with Chinese interests and hence involvement of the Russian government can help resolving the Yemeni issue. Furthermore, the US has, though, been helping Riyadh through logistics and intelligence support but would never like to prolong the issue, as it would seriously damage its interests in ME. Pakistan by initiating a diplomatic movement towards the great powers (US, Russia and China) can bring out a workable formula for establishment of a legitimate government in Yemen, as well resolving issue between Iran and Saudi Arabia in Persian Gulf.

Role of OIC: The present secretary general of OIC – being Saudi – has complicated the organizational role by issuing pro-Saudi statement. However, the other member countries can play positive role in resolving the issue. The important aspect to this regard is to first convince the OIC meeting. Pakistan then can present a proposed formula which could be adopted after discussion.

Role of United Nation (UN): In the prevailing anarching system, the UN task is the most important. Being member of the UN, Pakistan can play its constrictive role. Even participation of Pakistani forces under UN Flag would never give its involvement a sectarian color.

Conclusion

Pakistani leadership must realize that it is not our war. We have already paid a very heavy toll while fighting for others. However, it does not mean that Pakistan should not involve itself in the issue especially once it has the capability to play a constructive role in resolving the issue. Pakistan must involve itself in the Yemeni crisis as well as Iran-Saudi tussle and play a constructive role in ensuring lasting stability in the region.

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