

Security Dynamics in South Asia: Impact of the Iran-Saudi Rapprochement on Pakistan's Foreign Policy

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Abstract

Pakistan's foreign policy is greatly influenced by both Iran and Saudi Arabia in various dimensions, but it is challenging for policymakers to maintain cordial relations with both countries simultaneously due to their intense rivalries and significant involvement in Middle Eastern politics. This research delves into the interplay of security dynamics in South Asia, specifically focusing on the repercussions of the recent Iran-Saudi rapprochement on Pakistan's foreign policy. The study employs a qualitative approach, utilizing argumentative analysis, to elucidate the evolving perspectives of Iran and Saudi Arabia and their influence on Pakistan's diplomatic, political, and economic decisions. Negotiating the complexities of maintaining favorable relations with both nations in the face of their entrenched regional rivalries presents a formidable challenge for Pakistani policymakers. By employing the complex interdependent theory, this study dissects the triangular relationship's nature, policies, and resulting effects on regional politics and economic dynamics. Through this study, valuable insights are offered, shedding light on the intricate implications of this triangular relationship and the varied outcomes it yields within this specific context of South Asia's security landscape.

Keywords: Foreign Policy, South Asia, Regional Politics, Security Studies and Policy making

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1. INTRODUCTION

Pakistan's foreign policy has always played an important role in regional and global politics. Establishing good relationships with Middle Eastern countries has been a significant part of Pakistan's foreign policy, particularly with Iran and Saudi Arabia, who hold prominent positions in regional politics and maintain diplomatic, commercial, and trade links with Pakistan. However, Pakistan's policies towards these countries vary depending on the regional situation. Although Pakistan seeks to maintain friendly relations with both Muslim nations, the differences in their religious approaches and the unstable political climate of the region sometimes lead to strained relations and a shift towards a negative outlook. The Arab region has divided into two major blocs which is creating further polarization in the Middle East. Iran and Saudi Arabia are facing serious security concerns for many decades now, resulting in severe tensions due to competition of every sort from ideological and economic in regional and international scenarios. In this context, Pakistan is attempting to maintain a coherent and constructive policy towards both countries.

The tense relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran have been a major concern for regional states such as Iraq, Lebanon, Bahrain, Syria, Yemen, and Qatar. Both countries have been driving neighboring states towards varying alliances, and this has significant implications for Pakistan, which maintains neutrality but finds it challenging to maintain a balance. The country has very important implications in the Saudi-Iran relationship, and the intensifying rivalry between the two vital Islamic states has often put Pakistan in a problematic spot.

Yet, recent attempts at rapprochement on both sides have shown that their dispute might be settled through only negotiations. Saudi and Iranian officials have held negotiations to normalize their relations under Iraq's aegis, and if they are successful, they might defuse a number of ongoing crises around the Middle East. There will probably be some progress in the Saudi-Iranian reconciliation process that will help Pakistan maintain diplomatic balance in the region. . The intricate tapestry of geopolitical dynamics has witnessed a profound transformation since the dawn of 2021, as underscored by the recent landmark agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia to restore diplomatic relations and foster economic ties. This significant development has sent ripples across the global geopolitical landscape, redefining the contours of power, cooperation, and rivalry in a region traditionally marked by tensions and discord. The renewed engagement between these two regional powerhouses not only reflects a paradigm shift in their bilateral relations but also holds the potential to reshape the broader geopolitical equilibrium of the Gulf. Against the backdrop of historical animosities and proxy conflicts that have long defined the Iran-Saudi Arabia relationship, this scholarly exploration delves into the nuanced intricacies of this recent diplomatic breakthrough and its implications for the evolving geopolitical shifts in the Gulf region and its implications on Pakistan.

It is crucial to remember that establishing peace is difficult due to the nuanced dynamics of the alliance between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Hence, rather than mediating conflicts, diplomatic efforts should be focused on de-escalating them. This paper analyzes the impacts of Saudi-Iran problematic ties on Pakistan and implications of the ongoing reconciliation attempts initiated by China in 2023, using qualitative method.

1.1. Theoretical Framework

The theory of complex interdependence was introduced by Keohane and Nye in their book "Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition." They argued that states and their fortunes are interwoven and interconnected. According to Keohane and Nye, the use of military force and balance of power has diminished, and transnational and complex interdependent links have increased among states and societies in pursuit of well-defined objectives on economic,

cultural, social, and political levels. The authors differentiate between interdependence and dependence while examining the role of power in politics and ties among global and regional actors. The state of dependence indicates that an actor or state is directly influenced by external forces. In contrast, interdependence refers to transnational actors who cooperate and compete with each other for common interests and goals. In the context of the theory of complex interdependence, the triangular relationship among Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan implies that changes in the policies of one country can have reflective effects on the policies and actions of the other two countries. Interdependence is not only mutual cooperation among these actors but also their interaction in different fields and areas, including political and economic conflicts. This study historically covers various events regarding Pakistan's policies and relations with Iran and KSA. Last but not least, the framework will also include the recent conciliation attempts between KSA and Iran, sponsored by China and how it can be a positive omen not only for the actors involved but for the region and ultimately for the world. The framework of complex interdependence will put a light to the fact that in the modern age of connectivity, the extended neighbor will be affected by the happenings in the region, so for that reason this issue gets more important in the modern scenario of regional and global interconnectivity.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodology for studying the Saudi-Iran conflict and its implications for Pakistan involves the use of qualitative research methods. The primary data sources include academic articles, reports, and news articles from reputable sources, such as scholarly journals and international news outlets. The analysis of these sources will provide a comprehensive overview of the nature of the conflict, its causes, and its impact on regional countries, including Pakistan. The data analysis process will involve the identification of key themes and patterns in the data, which will be used to develop a comprehensive understanding of the conflict and its implications for Pakistan.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1. Pakistan Relations with Iran and Saudi Arabia

The relationship of Pakistan with the two states; Iran and Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is complex and has a significant impact on its foreign policy. The rivalry between these regional powers has caused the Middle East to be divided into Arab and non-Arab blocks, creating challenges for Pakistan to maintain neutrality. While Pakistan seeks to reduce tensions in the region, it faces several obstacles, including miscreants on its border and the presence of Indian intelligence in Iran.

Maintaining a friendly relationship with Iran is strategically essential for Pakistan, particularly for trade and energy sectors. However, US-imposed sanctions and the strained relationship between the US and Iran have hindered economic ties between the two countries. Additionally, the Iran-Pakistan-India gas pipeline agreement faced problems in the past when the agreement was abandoned by India due to the foreign pressure of United States. Contrary to that, Saudi Arabia holds vital status and is essential for Pakistan primarily due to the religious affiliations of the Hijaz-e-Muqadas, historical and political relations, and financial assistance. Saudi Arabia has been a vital supporter of Pakistan during the times of crisis and is a significant source of remittances for Pakistani workers in GCC states. (Muzaffar, Robina, and Zahid. 2017, p.61)

Pakistan's domestic sectarian appeal and the potential for radicalized elements to exploit the Saudi-Iran conflict are also concerns. Sectarian violence between Shias and Sunni militants emerged in the past and was nourished by external players. The Afghanistan turmoil also had

spillover effects on Pakistan due to Iran-Saudi opposing foreign policies.

3.2. Saudi Iran Conflict and Pakistan Caught in the Web

Pakistan has endeavored to maintain steady relationships with Saudi Arabia and Iran, but it has faced difficulties due to the ongoing Saudi-Iran rivalry. Both countries have remained in conflict over almost every issue in the region, making it challenging for Pakistan to balance its relationships with them. Pakistan has found itself in a difficult position, walking a tightrope to maintain good relations with both important partners. Despite Pakistan's efforts, it has been caught in the crossfire of the Saudi-Iran rift in recent decades.

3.3. Sectarianism

Pakistan's unique position as the world's second-largest Islamic country, with a significant Shia minority, has created a dilemma for the nation, as it finds itself embroiled in a tug-of-war between Saudi Arabia and Iran. This tension has resulted in sectarian violence, with Shias constituting 15-20% of the population, providing a breeding ground for sectarianism. The violence began in the 1990s when militants attacked Shiite officials, including diplomats, engineers, and cadets. Pakistan's recognition of the regime of the Taliban in Kabul, Afghanistan in the year 1996 implicitly associated it with the military attacks of Taliban against the Iranian diplomats residing in Afghanistan in the following year 1998, which significantly disrupted the Pakistan-Iran relations.

The tension between Saudi Arabia and Iran over Pakistan came to a head in 2017, when a militant group Jaishul-Adl supported by the Saudi government killed ten border guards of the Iran, with territorial use of land of Pakistan as the gunshots were fired from the Pakistan side of border. The commander in chief of the Iranian military issued a warning against Pakistan and stated that the Iranian Government in Tehran would target the Pakistani bases if Pakistan failed to confront the militant group. This tension saw a repeated chapter in the history in 2013, 2014, and 2015 when the same militant group kidnapped and killed Iranian border guards. The sectarian violence in Pakistan has its roots in the Sunni-centric Islamization policies that the country adopted back in the decades of 1980s and 1990s, which ultimately led towards the creation of a Shia-Sunni identity crisis in the state. (Alam, 2004, p.543)

3.4. Afghanistan

The Duran line holds significant prospects for Pakistan due to its length and undefined nature. In addition to this, the differing foreign policy norms of Saudi Arabia and Iran with regards to regional security have also contributed to the complexity of the situation in Afghanistan. Iran was drawn into a variety of regional and international problems due to the Russian invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, which happened at the same time with the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979. Although Iran condemned the USSR and asked for its immediate withdrawal, it was careful not to provoke Moscow. (Weinbaum and Abdullah, 2014, p.222)

Iran and Saudi Arabia during cold war kept their support for Shi'ite groups and Pashtun groups respectively by giving them aid of every kind to keep them fighting with each other which resulted in more and more havoc. This created precarious conditions for the state of Pakistan, which was already home to more than five million Afghan refugees along with the displacement of refugees and several other proposing threats which included the rise of drugs, promotion of gun-culture, and smuggling across border.

In order to curtail and combat the losses, the Taliban movement with Wahhabi religious identity rose to power in 1996 with the backing of Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. This was seen as a huge success of Saudi Arabia and Iran's strategic defeat. However, Iran did not accept this defeat and started working on the promotion of the establishment of a coalition against the Taliban that

comprised of various factions.

The Saudi-Taliban relations quickly deteriorated post the 9/11 attacks due to the direct connection of the Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden with the Taliban group. In 2001, the removal of Taliban regime by the US-led alliance proved as a big relief for Iran as it served the Iranian foreign policy interests in the region. However, the Bush's doctrine where he termed Iran as an "axis of evil" proved to be a worrisome situation for Iran. Furthermore, the news of Iran's secret nuclear program that started to circulate in mid-2002 added more complexities towards the concerns regarding the regional security. (Keynoush, 2016, p.271).

3.5. Saudi Arabia and Iran's Perspectives on the Presence of United States in the Region and Pakistan:

United States has relied on military solutions to tackle political problems in the Middle East, increasing Saudi Arabia's military budget and arming its neighbors to contain Iran. Saudi Arabia fears being left solely responsible for containing Iran if the US were to withdraw from the region. Trump's visit to Saudi Arabia in 2017 worsened Sunni-Shia tensions by committing to an arms deal worth \$110 billion with Saudi Arabia and demonizing Iran as a state that "fueled the fires of sectarian conflict and terror." This policy of United States appeared to back the regional rivalry for domination as it disregarded the dangerous consequences of fueling sectarian violence by explicitly favoring Sunni states over Shia Islam.

Iran desired a regional order that excluded outside powers and established its leadership in the broader Middle East region including Caucasus, Persian Gulf, and parts of South Asia. Iranian leaders competed with Saudi Arabia for regional influence in a zero-sum game, seeking to reduce the US presence and influence in the region. However, the United States appeared more interested in taking sides than addressing the underlying issues, which potentially escalated the regional sectarian violence.

3.6. Expectations of Saudi Arabia from Pakistan on the Iranian Nuclear Program:

The Iranian nuclear issue became a highly sensitive topic due to the ongoing quest for regional hegemony and fluctuating political and security conditions in the Middle East. Tehran's nuclear program became an unprecedented threat for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia along with its Arab allies, they believed that it will further embolden Iran's ferocity in their ongoing proxy wars. The sectarian differences further strengthened the Saudi apprehensions regarding nuclear program of Iran since the post-2003 era. King Abdullah warned that if the Iranian nuclear program will lead towards the development of nuclear warheads, every other state in the region will be doing the same including Saudi Arabia as well. Even though Iran's stance on its nuclear program revolved around the aim of a peaceful purpose, International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) gathered sufficient evidence that Tehran's long-term aspirations were to create nuclear weapons. (Khan, Muzaffar, and Rahim, 2019, p. 58).

During the presidency of M. Khatimi, Iran agreed to voluntarily suspend uranium enrichment and allowed international inspection teams as a result of severe international pressure which worsened the economic conditions. Saudi Arabia concerned that the nuclear power in Iran could not only bring an evident change in the balance of power that would favor Iran's but at the same time it could trigger a never-ending nuclear arms race that will harm the stability in the region. Additionally, it may also give room to Iran to obstruct the sovereignty of smaller Arab states in the region in order to achieve its own foreign interests and could potentially incite the Shiite communities in the Sunni majority Arab monarchies to seek a violent regime change. The Iranian nuclear program garnered global attention due to Tehran's significant strategic location and extensive engrossment in the critical political affairs of the Middle Eastern region. The ongoing

conflicts between regional adversaries and the pursuit of regional dominance have intensified the sensitivity of the Iranian nuclear issue and brought it under significant international scrutiny.

3.7. Yemen

During and after the Arab Spring, Yemen became a battlefield between the two states Iran and Saudi Arabia in order to seek hegemony and supremacy in the Middle Eastern region. This struggle is indicative of the mutual suspicion and lack of trust between the two regional powers, constantly posed a crucial threat to each other's national interests. Saudi Arabia, which shares a 700-mile long border with Yemen, has been extremely protective of the land due to Iran's intentions towards the region, and also for having control over the Shiite crescent. Yemen holds great importance for the Saudi government as well as the country has maintained close ties with Yemen's President Ali Abdullah Saleh, who remained under its influence politically and financially for almost two decades. (Iqbal, 2015, p.67)

Iran is actively countering Saudi Arabia's influence in Yemen by military assistance and support of weapons, arms training, and as well as financial aid to the Houthi rebels, who are part of the Zaidi sect of Shia ideology. In the aftermath of Saudi led Arab coalition with US backing to support President Mansur Hadi's government, which took over after Ali Abdullah Saleh's resignation in 2012, the Houthis turned to violence, abandoning their peaceful struggle for civil rights against Saleh's regime in the 1990s. Therefore Yemen has been serving as a battlefield for both the regional powers Saudi Arabia and Iran to showcase their power and influence, prolonging the suffering of Yemen's people.

Despite the magnitude of the humanitarian crisis in Yemen, the rivalry between Riyadh and Tehran remains the main obstacle to resolving the conflict. Both nations view Islam as a means of legitimizing their respective regimes and enhancing their external legitimacy and influence. This rivalry has also led to a security dilemma, prompting Saudi Arabia to request Pakistan's support in the conflict. However, due to the volatile regional security situation, Pakistan is reluctant to send its troops to Yemen and risk destabilizing its relationship with Iran, with whom it shares long and insecure borders.

3.8. The Appointment of Pakistan's X-Army Chief's as the Head of IMAFT

The appointment of former Army Chief of Pakistan, Raheel Sharif, as the head of a coalition army consisting of 41 countries, led by Saudi Arabia, was met with disapproval by Iran. Pakistan clarified to Tehran that the coalition was not aimed at Iran and that neither Raheel Sharif nor Pakistan would be involved in any anti-Iran activities. Pakistan was aware that it could not afford to strain its relationship with Iran as it was already dealing with difficult and insecure borders with India and Afghanistan. However, the exclusion of Iran from IMAFT raised concerns about nature and objectives of the alliance, with some describing it as a sectarian coalition as it involved states having a majority of Sunni population. Even though Oman and Lebanon, have friendly relations with Iran, they also became a part of the alliance, therefore, the absence of Iraq which is directly under the influence of Iran and Iran itself raised several questions. This eventually has put severe foreign pressure on Pakistan, majorly due to the appointment of Raheel Sharif. Pakistan may face more scrutiny than other coalition partners and encounter significant obstacles if it takes any actions that could be perceived as against Iranian national interests.

3.9. Pakistan's Neutrality and Rapprochement Efforts

In 2015, Saudi Arabia requested Pakistan's support in establishing the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC), an alliance that would fight ISIS in Iraq and Syria, as well as militancy in North and West Africa. However, Iran perceived the coalition negatively, and the situation became more problematic when Saudi Arabia added Pakistan to a list as a coalition

member in its war against Yemen. Pakistan had assured Iran that the coalition was not against them, and it later agreed to join the alliance. Pakistan remained cautious and refrained from taking sides during the murder of a very famous Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr in 2016, despite Saudi diplomatic missions in Iran and Mashhad being ransacked by angry mobs, leading to the severance of diplomatic relations. Nonetheless, the Saudi Crown Prince and the US State Secretary have viewed the talks between Saudi Arabia and Iran as a positive development. (Ahmed and Akbarzadeh, 2020, p.339)

Pakistan has always maintained neutrality when the issue is about Iran and Saudi Arabia, and the country has been making efforts to mediate between the two rivals. In 2016, Nawaz Sahrif considered the negotiation between two countries a sacred mission, and again in 2021, Pakistan again attempted to negotiate between Iran and Saudi Arabia. In May 2021, Pakistan's Foreign Minister visited Iraq to seek rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran, positively impacting the Saudi-Iran peace efforts. (Weinbaum and Abdullah, 2014, p.228). After successful talks between Iran and Saudi Arabia, both sides agreed to practical measures to improve relations and laid the groundwork for future talks. An upcoming meeting in Oman was planned but later deferred due to Saudi Arabia's execution of Shiite activists in March 2022.

In conclusion, Pakistan's neutrality and rapprochement efforts have been significant in resolving differences between Iran and KSA. Despite its security and diplomatic challenges, Pakistan has been making efforts to mediate between the two rivals, and its recent efforts have shown a positive trajectory. The talks between Saudi Arabia and Iran have been viewed as a positive development by the Saudi Crown Prince and the US State Secretary, and Pakistan's role in seeking rapprochement between the two countries has been crucial.

3.10. Biden and Putin's Visit to Middle East (2022)

Recently, both the US President and Russian President visited the Middle East to advance their strategic interests in the region. President Biden attended the Jeddah summit with regional leaders to discuss the region's security and economic integration. While emphasizing the US commitment to Israel's security, he also pushed for further Israeli-Arab normalization. Although the US delegation stressed that the visit was not about oil, experts have argued that the energy crisis was a driving factor. However, President Biden's visit ended without Saudi Arabia making any promises to boost oil output, and the Crown Prince raised human rights concerns, citing US silence regarding a Palestinian American journalist's assassination. (Hoodbhoy, 2013, p.73)

Meanwhile, Russian President Putin visited Iran shortly after President Biden's visit to Israel and Saudi Arabia. He met with Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan and emphasized the need for long-term collaboration between Russia and Iran, while also cautioning against Western deception. Reports suggest that Russia also showed interest in Iranian drones. Putin's visit aimed to showcase Russia's significance in the region and to demonstrate that the US is not the only major force. However, President Biden faced criticism for promoting Iran phobia and failed to secure support from old allies during the Arab summit.

3.11. China's Rise as an Important Actor in this Conflict (2023)

China in the past expressed its willingness to mediate between Iran and Saudi Arabia to resolve their long-standing conflicts. China has been attempting to mediate the ongoing conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia in recent years. As one of the major global powers and an important economic partner for both Iran and Saudi Arabia, China has a vested interest in promoting stability in the Middle East and preventing any escalation of tensions that could negatively impact its economic and geopolitical interests in the region.

China's mediation efforts have taken a variety of forms. In 2016, China proposed a "four-point plan" for resolving the conflict, which called for a cessation of hostilities, the establishment of a dialogue mechanism between the two countries, the creation of a regional security framework, and the inclusion of all parties in the resolution process. While this proposal did not lead to any immediate breakthroughs, it did signal China's willingness to play a role in resolving the conflict and its support for a diplomatic solution.

In addition to its official proposals, China has also engaged in quiet diplomacy with both Iran and Saudi Arabia. Chinese officials have held numerous meetings with leaders from both countries, urging them to find a way to deescalate tensions and avoid any further military confrontation. China has also sought to use its economic leverage to encourage both sides to compromise. For example, in 2019, it reportedly offered to invest \$280 billion in Iran's oil and gas sector in exchange for a commitment to stability and non-aggression in the region.

In 2023, China finally forwarded their plan of negotiating peace between these two hostile nations. While the steps taken by China were met by suspicion from the west, it's a very important peaceful omen for the region. Overall, China's involvement in the Saudi- Iran conflict can be seen as a positive sign for several reasons. First and foremost, it demonstrates that there are alternative paths to conflict resolution beyond traditional Western-led approaches. China's approach emphasizes constructive engagement and dialogue rather than coercion or military intervention, which aligns with the growing global trend towards multilateralism and diplomacy.

Secondly, China's involvement in the conflict provides an opportunity to promote regional stability and reduce the risk of further escalation of tensions. As one of the few major powers with friendly relations with both Saudi Arabia and Iran, China is well-positioned to facilitate dialogue between the two countries and encourage both sides to compromise. Furthermore, China's involvement in the conflict reflects its growing role as a global mediator and its willingness to take an active role in promoting peace and stability in the world. This bodes well for the future of international relations, as it suggests that major powers are increasingly willing to cooperate and work together to address complex global challenges.

China's potential mediation between Iran and KSA could have significant implications for Pakistan. As a close ally of China and an important player in the region, Pakistan could benefit from a de-escalation of tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia, which would improve regional stability and reduce the risk of conflict spilling over into Pakistan. Additionally, a successful Chinese mediation effort could boost China's regional influence, which could benefit Pakistan as it seeks to balance its relationships with both China and the United States. However, if China is unable to successfully mediate the conflict, it could lead to a further deterioration of regional stability, which would negatively impact Pakistan.

3.11. The Restoration of Iran-Saudi Diplomatic Relations

The significant diplomatic milestone unfolded on the 10th of March 2023, as Iran and Saudi Arabia formally declared the restoration of their diplomatic relations, marking the culmination of an agreement meticulously mediated by China. This momentous development was officially announced through a Joint Trilateral Statement, indicating a comprehensive framework for the resumption of diplomatic ties. This diplomatic reengagement entails the reestablishment of embassies within a concise timeline of two months, accompanied by a commitment to foster bilateral cooperation spanning diverse domains. The backdrop against which this historic reconciliation unfolds is rooted in a complex history. The rupture in diplomatic relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia traces back to the year 2016, a consequence of the Saudi execution of Nimr Al-Nimr, a prominent Shia cleric. This event ignited widespread outrage and protests within Iran,

leading to the severing of diplomatic ties. The subsequent years were characterized by heightened tensions and regional rivalries, resulting in a strained geopolitical environment.

The recent diplomatic breakthrough holds profound significance, heralding a potentially transformative shift in the regional landscape. This development carries the promise of mitigating longstanding animosities and establishing a platform for constructive dialogue, paving the way for the peaceful resolution of persistent conflicts that have plagued the Middle East. By initiating the process of mending diplomatic relations, both Iran and Saudi Arabia signal their shared aspiration to transcend historical grievances and explore avenues for collaboration and reconciliation. The mediation of this diplomatic accord by China introduces an intriguing dimension to the narrative. As a key player in global geopolitics, China's role in facilitating this reconciliation underscores the multilateral dynamics at play. This mediation has not only exemplified China's growing diplomatic influence but has also showcased the international community's interest in fostering stability and cooperation in the Middle East. Therefore, the restoration of diplomatic ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia, as orchestrated by China and formalized through a Joint Trilateral Statement, epitomizes a significant stride toward defusing entrenched tensions and reshaping the regional trajectory. This pivotal development not only holds immediate implications for the bilateral relationship but also offers the promise of a broader ripple effect in the realm of regional stability and conflict resolution within the Middle Eastern region.

3.12. Implications of the Iran-Saudi deal for Pakistan

The implications of the Iran-Saudi deal for Pakistan are far-reaching and span across various dimensions of its foreign policy and regional dynamics. This landmark development holds the potential to significantly impact Pakistan's diplomatic, strategic, economic, and security interests. For Pakistan, a nation with historical ties to both Iran and Saudi Arabia, this breakthrough holds the potential to reshape its foreign policy considerations. Pakistan has long navigated a delicate balancing act between these two regional powerhouses, often finding itself caught in the crosscurrents of their rivalry. The détente between Iran and Saudi Arabia could provide Pakistan with an opportunity to recalibrate its approach, leveraging its unique position to promote dialogue, mediate conflicts, and contribute to regional stability. Furthermore, the restoration of diplomatic relations may yield tangible economic benefits for Pakistan. Enhanced cooperation between Iran and Saudi Arabia could open avenues for trade, investment, and energy partnerships, thereby bolstering Pakistan's economic prospects and addressing energy challenges. However, this development also poses challenges for Pakistan's foreign policy. Striking a delicate equilibrium between its historical ties with Saudi Arabia and the potential for closer engagement with Iran requires astute diplomatic maneuvering. Pakistan's nuanced approach to navigating this evolving landscape will test its diplomatic dexterity and strategic acumen. The implications extend beyond bilateral considerations, encompassing the broader regional context. As tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia ease, the potential for reduced proxy conflicts and improved regional stability could alleviate pressures on Pakistan's security environment. This, in turn, may positively impact its counterterrorism efforts and internal stability.

3.13. Policy Options for Pakistan

The Saudi-Iran rivalry has put Pakistan in a difficult position, as it cannot afford to take sides, and it needs to balance its relations with both countries. In this context, Pakistan has a few policy options that it can pursue.

3.13. Option 1: Neutrality

The first policy option for Pakistan is to remain neutral in the Saudi-Iran conflict. Pakistan can adopt a policy of non-alignment and avoid getting involved in the conflict. This option is

consistent with Pakistan's traditional foreign policy of maintaining friendly relations with all countries. However, this option may not be sustainable in the long term, as both Saudi Arabia and Iran are major players in the region, and their rivalry has the potential to destabilize the entire Middle East.

3.14. Option 2: Mediation

The second policy option for Pakistan is to act as a mediator between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Pakistan has good relations with both countries, and it can use its diplomatic channels to facilitate dialogue between the two sides. This option is consistent with Pakistan's role as a regional power, and it can enhance Pakistan's reputation as a peace-loving country. However, this option may not be feasible, as Saudi Arabia and Iran have shown little interest in resolving their differences through dialogue.

3.15. Option 3: Balancing

The third policy option for Pakistan is to balance its relations with Saudi Arabia and Iran. Pakistan can pursue a policy of balancing, which involves maintaining friendly relations with both countries while avoiding taking sides. This option is consistent with Pakistan's strategic interests, as it cannot afford to alienate either country. However, this option may be challenging, as both Saudi Arabia and Iran may demand more significant commitments from Pakistan.

3.16. Option 4: Alliance

The fourth strategic alternative for Pakistan is to forge an alliance with either Saudi Arabia or Iran, against the backdrop of the recent Iran-Saudi deal of March 2023. Pakistan could opt to align itself with Saudi Arabia, a nation that has historically extended substantial economic and military support to Pakistan. This alignment could be a continuation of previous cooperative efforts and could potentially capitalize on the existing rapport. On the other hand, Pakistan might consider aligning with Iran, a neighboring country with shared cultural affinities. This path would resonate with Pakistan's ambition to foster closer relations with a regional powerhouse.

4. Conclusion

Pakistan has long been balancing its relationships with Saudi Arabia and Iran due to domestic dynamics and external limitations. Despite the challenges, Pakistan views Saudi Arabia as a vital relationship, while Iran is a neighbor. In past crises, Pakistan has tried to carefully manage its relationships with all sides, including the Iran-Iraq War and the Iranian nuclear program. Pakistan's foreign policy continues to refuse to choose between KSA and Iran at the expense of either, as it has significant internal and external constraints. The restoration of diplomatic ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia, facilitated through China's mediation, marks a pivotal juncture in the evolving geopolitical landscape of the Middle East. This significant development holds profound implications for regional stability, conflict resolution, and international diplomacy. The reinstatement of diplomatic relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia after a seven-year hiatus reflects a willingness on both sides to transcend historical animosities and prioritize dialogue over confrontation. By opting for diplomatic reengagement, both nations signal their recognition of the potential benefits that cooperative engagement can bring to their bilateral relationship and the wider region.

Pakistan's gruesome economic conditions prevent it from annoying its influential Arab friends, in this case Saudi Arabia. KSA provides Pakistan with very much needed economic aids. In the previous years, the country has also provided bail out economic packages to Pakistan. This has helped Pakistan on many occasions. The economic aid also came in the form of oil, the material of which they have a lot of. Furthermore, KSA also provides Pakistan with another economic incentive, it is home to millions of Pakistanis in the Middle East. It is also an important

economic resource for Pakistan as the country is going through crunch economic times. The diaspora provides a source of stability for their families and is a backbone to Pakistan's economy.

In short, Pakistan cannot keep peaceful relation with one country while avoiding other. Pakistan's internal and external constraints, including its significant members of Shiapopulation and the trauma of having one more unstable neighbor, limit its options. Pakistan has a vivid historical background of getting confused between choosing and allying with two sides, because allying with either one side gives many serious repercussions than choosing both. Security dilemma on one hand and economic survival on the other. Pakistan is caught between devil and the blue, but unlike that scenario the situation is getting precarious for Pakistan with each passing day. Pakistan will likely continue to call for calm and mediate in crises, but it is unlikely to do anything radical that may rankle with one side or the other. Pakistan finds itself at a crucial juncture with the restoration of Iran-Saudi diplomatic ties. The geopolitical shifts in the Gulf region offer both opportunities and challenges that demand Pakistan's careful navigation. A proactive and pragmatic foreign policy approach can enable Pakistan to harness the positive implications of this breakthrough, contributing to regional peace, stability, and economic growth while safeguarding its own strategic interests. As events continue to unfold, Pakistan's role in this evolving dynamic will be closely watched, underscoring the critical role it plays in shaping the future trajectory of the Middle East and South Asia.

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