

Pakistan's Pivot

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Saudi Arabia is one of Pakistan's oldest allies. The two countries have pursued extensive commercial and political relations since Pakistan's establishment in 1947. However, Pakistan's hesitancy to support its historic ally after Saudi Arabia's recent execution of top Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr, marks a distinct shift in Pakistan's foreign policy.

This is not a partnership of equals — Pakistan's domestic order has remained vulnerable to Saudi Arabia's foreign policy moves, ranging from promoting Saudi Arabia's version of Islam to fanning sectarianism. Saudi Arabia's regional actions have caused sectarian tensions inside Pakistan to increase dramatically as Sunni and Shia forces wrestle for power in the region.

The latest row between Saudi Arabia and Iran has put Pakistan in a difficult position. After the execution Nimr al-Nimr, protesters in Iran attacked the Saudi Embassy in Tehran. Pakistani streets also filled with Shia protesters, while the government called for calm and restraint. Many states from the Gulf region and Africa have broken diplomatic ties with Iran in solidarity, but Pakistan has restricted itself to condemning the mob attack on the Saudi embassy in Tehran.

Shia Muslims make up nearly 20 percent of Pakistan's population, but have remained under constant threat from Sunni radical Islamist groups.

The Saudi-Iranian rivalry — triggered after the Iranian revolution — continues to fuel sectarian tensions in Pakistan. Since 1989, more than 5,000 Pakistani civilians have lost their lives in sectarian attacks. Moreover, a large number of terrorist attacks that took place last year had sectarian dimensions. More than 55 people died in the Sindh province when a Shia mosque was bombed. In another attack, a Shia mosque was bombed in Peshawar on Feb. 13 killing at least 19 people. However, the violence did not end there, as gunmen ambushed a bus in Karachi in May killing 43 Ismaili.

Dealing decisively with sectarian militant groups is an essential part of the National Action Plan (NAP), Pakistan's counter-terrorism initiative launched in 2015. The government's new madrassa (religious schools) regulation policy under NAP will concentrate on the registration, regulation, and supervision of religious schools. The government is planning to introduce modern curriculum into religious schools in order to bring madrassa education in line with Pakistan's mainstream educational system.

In 2015, the NAP achieved significant progress in curbing terrorism-related violence in the country. But while terrorism-related instability has declined, incidents related to sectarian violence have surged. Since the establishment of the NAP, Pakistan has been trying to distance itself from any regional conflicts which may be framed as sectarian. In the past, Pakistan's foreign policy choices have directly resulted in the proliferation of sectarian tensions in the country. The country's mobilization of radical Islamist groups as instruments of regional policies have provoked bloody sectarian clashes between the country's Shiite and Sunni populations.

A new calculus has started to emerge between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia as Islamabad tries to write new rules of engagement for bilateral dealings. Pakistan flexed its independent muscle last year when its

parliament passed a resolution to maintain “neutrality” in Yemen, instead of joining the Saudi-led coalition currently fighting against Shia Houthi rebels.

While Pakistan has reluctantly joined Saudi Arabia’s 34-nation anti-terror coalition, it has clearly stated that it will not support any coalition that destabilizes Syria or strains Islamabad’s relations with Tehran.

Pakistan has, by and large, remained neutral in the ongoing conflict in the Middle East, but in the Syrian theater it has taken a clear position. In December 2015, Pakistan’s foreign office stated that, “Pakistan is against foreign military intervention in Syria and fully supports the territorial integrity of the Syrian Arab republic.” Syrian President Bashar al-Assad is known to be a close ally of Shia Iran, meaning Saudi Arabia is adamantly opposed to him staying on as president. While Pakistan’s new policy of non-intervention falls in line with the U.N. Security Council Resolution 2254 of 2015 that does not insist on Assad’s removal, it is a clear break with the sectarian politics of its traditional ally Saudi Arabia.

Pakistan has long fallen in line with Saudi Arabia’s agenda because it depends on the Kingdom for financial assistance. That may not be the case anymore, as emerging domestic and regional economic prospects and aid packages have emboldened Pakistan to pursue a bold yet calculated foreign policy. China is investing a hefty \$46 billion in Pakistan to build an economic trade corridor, linking western China to the Persian Gulf through Pakistan. China has reportedly promised to stand by Pakistan if its ties with Saudi Arabia unravel. With greater economic independence, Pakistan has the opportunity to pursue its own interests.

Pakistan can no longer afford to adopt a foreign policy that appeases certain states and offends others at the cost of its domestic sectarian tensions. It is time for Pakistan to step out of Saudi Arabia’s shadow and determine its own future, one less affected by sectarian conflict.

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