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Will Pakistan Draw Closer to Saudi Arabia to balance

Iran?

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SAMEER LALWANI

The dramatic escalation of the Saudi–Iran rift in early January has triggered renewed speculation that Pakistan will be forced to pick sides and join its longtime Saudi ally to militarily balance Iran. As much as some might welcome, even hope for this development, Pakistan has good reason to be wary of such an alignment against Iran due to an assortment of interests related to security, economics, and domestic public opinion.

Mounting Pressures and Expectations

Recent [joint military exercises](#), [reaffirmations](#) to defend Saudi territory, continuous [speculation](#) of a *de facto* extended deterrence relationship, and behind-the-scenes pressure have led some analysts to forecast or seriously [worry](#) that Pakistan may eventually be compelled to side with Saudi Arabia in its competition against Iran. Concern is evident in the number of recent questions [posed](#) on the issue by the National Assembly to Pakistan's Foreign Minister. A flurry of high-level diplomatic visits between the countries, including by [Deputy Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman](#) and [Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir](#) to Pakistan in early January, have added to speculation by media, analysts, and [diplomats](#) of a Saudi [full-court press](#) – raising [expectations](#) of deepening military cooperation. The reasons cited for this eventuality are familiar, including: [past military cooperation](#) in Afghanistan and Pakistani troop deployments to Saudi territory; shared ideological and economic interests based on years of funding from Saudi Arabia; [active Saudi involvement](#) in Pakistan's internal affairs; [personal relationships](#) between the Saudi royal family and Pakistani political leadership; and an actual history of the Saudis [delivering](#) on economic promises and Pakistan [caving in](#) to Saudi demands.

While Pakistan has indicated its desire to play more of a peace-broker role, strident voices [posit](#) that the Saudi–Iran divide is a [zero-sum choice](#) for all actors in the region. As Saudi–Iranian competition intensifies, Pakistan will find a meaningful balance [challenging](#). Certain analysts suggest Pakistan has already “[warned](#)” Iran, while others [forecast](#) “if push came to shove,” Pakistan would side with the Saudis since its military’s interests are “skewed” toward Saudi Arabia.” After all, Pakistan is already a “[strategic partner](#)” of the Gulf kingdom, and “is [not in a political position](#) to say ‘no’ to the Saudis.”

Evidence from the past few months, however, belies these predictions. Pakistan has continued to break with the Saudi narrative, starting with their [denial](#) that they had joined a Saudi-led military coalition against terrorism. In what appears to some as [another shift](#) in its stance on Syria, Islamabad has moved from supporting a transitional governing body, to firmly [opposing](#) the overthrow of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. An informal reader poll by *DAWN* found that roughly 79 percent of respondents (5,361 of 6,788) agreed with Pakistan’s stance on the issue. The alignment of the *DAWN*’s elite but generally liberal readership with official Pakistani foreign policy – an infrequent but noteworthy occurrence – may reflect some broader consensus for the position.

There are a number of reasons – strategic concerns, economic interests, and domestic audience opinions – why Pakistan is likely to resist Saudi pressure for alignment against Iran, and instead walk a tightrope balancing between the two Gulf powers.

Strategic Concerns

There are a number of strategic reasons for Pakistan to remain neutral in the Saudi–Iranian feud. First, picking sides could generate blowback effects rendering Pakistan vulnerable to the “[externalities of sectarian conflict and civil war](#)” as in the 1980s and ‘90s when Pakistan was rendered a [proxy sectarian battlefield](#) by competing states like Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Iran. Second, some [argue](#) that forgoing neutrality to side with the Saudis would only exacerbate conflicts by triggering “competing alliances,” intensifying “polarization,” and “strengthen[ing] the activities of rebel groups” in Yemen and Syria. Third, there is increasing skepticism of the Saudi alliance, and suspicion amongst strategic elite circles in Islamabad that Saudi Arabia is [fomenting](#) instability within Pakistan by [funding Sunni sectarian groups](#) and [contributing](#), directly or indirectly, to the rise of the Islamic State. This group threatens Pakistan’s external interests but also now threatens its internal security, as some in Pakistan’s intelligence community have [acknowledged](#).

Finally, and most importantly, making a direct enemy of Iran is a dangerous venture. Aligning against Iran could foil Pakistan’s strategic gains by opening a third hostile border for Pakistan, and testing the limits of an already overstretched military also contending with two significant insurgencies. Because Iran is skilled at [projecting power](#) through non-state proxies with a repertoire of experience rivaling Pakistan’s, Iran could also make life very difficult for Pakistan in Balochistan, Sindh, and the tribal areas. This is

why Pakistan has opted in the past to quickly [deescalate tensions](#) after border skirmishes. With its [manifold links](#) to [Taliban](#) commanders, it could potentially serve as a counter-terrorism partner or spoil reconciliation efforts in Afghanistan that would intensify blowback on Pakistan. Iran remains less exposed to Pakistani asymmetric counter-pressure as it has fewer politicized or vulnerable [ethnic cleavages](#) to exploit.

Economic Interests

The changing economic landscape favors a Pakistani balancing act, if not a tilt towards Iran, as Saudi economic leverage over Pakistan is not what it used to be. The Saudis remain a key source of economic support through financial “gifts” and hosting 2.2 million Pakistani foreign workers, but the economic calculus has changed over the past year. The prospects for energy deals and trade with Iran – [anticipated](#) to be “on the verge of an economic breakout” – are much more robust after the lifting of global sanctions on Iran. The fact that Pakistan’s biggest benefactor, China, wants to [integrate](#) Iran into its New Silk Road alongside the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) makes Pakistan more attuned to the opportunity costs of aligning against Iran. Some Pakistani scholars worry sectarian blowback from picking sides in the Saudi–Iran tiff could also [derail](#) the CPEC investment.

Certainly, the Saudis could try to coerce Pakistan with the threat of an economic cutoff, but depressed oil prices limit their coffers as Iran’s emergence from international isolation and China’s rise further reduces their clout. Even after Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) leaders threatened, and analysts anticipated, retaliation for Pakistan’s decision not to join the Yemen war in April 2015, [state bank data](#) shows remittances from the region to Pakistan between July and December 2015 grew by over 9 percent from the same period in 2014. Threats of evicting migrant workers are mitigated by the fact that the [financially plagued](#) Saudi state is already engaged in two wars. The process of kicking out 2.2 million workers would be difficult, costly to replace, disruptive, and exceedingly time-consuming. Based on past expulsion rates, deporting all of Pakistan’s migrant work force could take almost [three years](#), hardly a focused coercive threat.

A close scrutiny of [trade data](#) reveals an imbalanced economic relationship that limits Saudi leverage. In 2013, Pakistan ran a trade deficit of over \$3 billion with Saudi Arabia because the latter does not even fall within the top 10 importers of Pakistani goods. Rather than solidifying a robust link, the trade relationship is primarily confined to Pakistani imports of oil, something it can get from a host of other suppliers, including Iran, at a bargain rate on the open market.

In short, Saudi Arabia seeks fealty for past generosity, while Pakistan has good reason to anticipate future [economic opportunities](#) with Iran in raw materials exports, energy, and even labor migration. That China – Pakistan’s chief economic partner – just [signed](#) trade deals with Iran worth \$600 billion and committed to build a gas pipeline between Iran and Pakistan further incentivizes this tilt.

Strategic elites [note](#) improved relations and cooperation with Iran since 2002. Retired Air Commodore and former Assistant Chief of Air Force Staff Khalid Iqbal [argues](#) that Pakistan could “immensely benefit” economically from the end of sanctions through trade and Iran’s induction into CPEC. Additionally, India’s budding relationship with Saudi Arabia and Iran led one Pakistani think tank analyst to [opine](#) that Pakistan “can no longer take any country’s friendship for granted,” and needs to “make [itself] competitive internationally to retain old friendships and win new ones with influential international players.”

Domestic Constraints

The most surprising constraint on Pakistan might be the opinions of specific audiences and the broader public. While Saudi Arabia is certainly popular amongst Pakistanis, this is unlikely to compel the strategic establishment to fall in line with the Saudi agenda due to sanguine general public attitudes towards Iran and recognition of the strategic and economic costs by Pakistan’s strategic elite.

Popular sentiment for Saudi Arabia is also partly offset by a surprising amount of public support for Iran. Pakistan has been the only country of all those in the [Pew Global Attitudes survey](#) where a majority consistently expressed favorable views of Iran, and has felt unthreatened by Iran’s rise. This is striking for a question that has polarized other countries along [sectarian lines](#). In 2012, a majority even [favored](#) Iran acquiring nuclear weapons and expressed this as posing no threat at all, a position it [consistently held](#) since 2006. Favorable views toward Iran and lack of concern over a nuclear Iran were held by majorities even when disaggregating the latest available [raw data](#) by province, religion, ethnicity, and urbanization, and examining the most critical demographics. Sixty-nine percent of Sunnis, 69 percent of ethnic Punjabis, 76 percent of urban residents, and 70 percent of residents of Punjab province had favorable views of Iran. Fifty-two percent of Sunnis, 58 percent of ethnic Punjabis, 56 percent of urban residents, and 58 percent of Punjab province residents perceived Iran’s nuclear program as a minor or no threat (while much of the balance of respondents had no opinion). Pakistani pollsters also confirmed [high support](#) for Iran, while few hold it [accountable](#) for stirring up conflict in Yemen, which most blame on the machinations of outside powers like the United States and Israel.

Even if the broad public does not have a large voice in foreign affairs, powerful domestic political forces in Pakistan also remain wary of regional sectarian war exacerbating sectarian divides at home. The Pakistan state [stepped up efforts](#) to combat sectarianism as it threatens civil society, as well as the [military as an institution](#). It is also noteworthy that in April 2015 two major religious parties that one would expect to bandwagon with the Saudis – Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam-Fazlur Rehman (JUI-F) and Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) – actually joined other parties in [opposing](#) Pakistan’s participation in the Yemen conflict.

Splitting the Difference, Hedging the Future

Pakistan has a long history of [straddling two sides](#) of a rivalry: It provided indirect support to both sides of the Iran–Iraq war in the 1980s (including selling [stinger missiles](#) to Iran), fostered ties with Iran even at the [height of Pakistani–Saudi cooperation](#), and maintained alliances with the United States and China both before and after their normalization of relations. Pakistan also has a history of stubbornness when facing coercive threats. It has demonstrated this in its many standoffs with the United States over coalition support funds and its ties to militant groups, and recently [withstood](#) international pressure for a sanctions regime and potential military action against Iran. Islamabad navigates competing external pressures to further its perceived national interests more subtly and doggedly than many give it credit for. While some have [forecasted](#) an inevitable clash, Pakistan's openness to shifting dynamics and a new equilibrium with Iran is palpable enough for even [Indian observers](#) to have picked up on it. Remaining above the fray of the Saudi–Iran dispute may be the wisest move that affords strategic flexibility for Pakistan's internal challenges and external relations. Those forecasting or hoping that Pakistan sides with Saudi Arabia are therefore likely to be disappointed.

Sameer Lalwani is Deputy Director of the South Asia Program at the Stimson Center. Previously, he was a Stanton Nuclear Security Postdoctoral Fellow at the RAND Corporation. Follow him on twitter @splalwani.

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