

WORKING PAPER 26 - Pakistan-Saudi Arabia relations in flux: Is Islamabad realigning its foreign policy?

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Abstract

It seems that relations between Pakistan and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia lie in extraordinary flux. This SADF Working Paper starts by analysing the causes and consequences of that fact. The paper sheds light not only on possible dynamics in Pakistan's foreign policy in relation to Saudi Arabia but also on the repercussions of said foreign policy for the region. It is argued that Islamabad is currently realigning some foreign policy parameters, foremost so as to reduce its dependency on Riyadh and readjust some of its bilateral relations, particularly as regards Iran and Turkey. This Pakistani ambition is in line with Chinese interests and is thus supported by Beijing. The paper predicts a fundamental deterioration in the ties between Riyadh and Islamabad due to a substantial clash in interests; this deterioration is to be matched by new Pakistani initiatives aiming to engage collaboration with both Iran on Afghanistan.

Keywords

Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, China, Iran, India, Afghanistan, Foreign Policy, Civil-Military Relations, Shah Mahmood Qureshi, Imran Khan, MBS.

Introduction: Pakistan-Saudi Arabia relations at the edge?

Relations between Pakistan and the Kingdom of Saudi-Arabia (KSA) lie at a historical low ebb, and may further deteriorate this year. One of the main causes of the discontent is the refusal by Riyadh to support Islamabad's position on Kashmir vis-à-vis New Delhi – which is interpreted by some analysts as KSA siding with India. Concretely, Pakistan was expecting that the Council of Foreign Ministers (CFM) of the KSA-led Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) would convene a meeting on Kashmir so as to promote Islamabad's allegations against New Delhi. There are also differences in how to address the decision by India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi's on August 5, 2019, to revoke the Articles 370 and 35-A from the country's constitution, bringing the special autonomy status of the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir to an end. Moreover, there are Pakistani accusations of alleged human rights violations by Indian security forces in the region. Obviously, Islamabad hoped to promote a debate on this on a broader international level with OIC (and KSA) support.¹ However, Riyadh remained reluctant² regarding the request by Pakistan's government provoking Foreign Minister (FM) Shah Mahmood Qureshi to make a critical statement regarding the OIC: it should 'stop dilly-dallying' and raise the Kashmir issue beyond a bilateral level. Moreover, Qureshi threatened the KSA by announcing that he 'will be compelled to ask Prime Minister Imran Khan to call a meeting of the Islamic countries that are ready to stand with us on the issue of Kashmir and support the oppressed Kashmiris'. In other words, Pakistan would challenge the cohesiveness of the OIC by convening its own gathering of Muslim states were Riyadh to maintain its neglecting point of view. This marks an 'extraordinary and unprecedented' incident in Pakistan-KSA ties.

The first rifts in the traditionally firm economic, political, and military relations

¹ It is interesting to witness the outburst by FM Qureshi regarding KSA silence on the fate of Muslims in Kashmir but not recognising the Saudi silence on rapidly growing sectarianism, repression of or discrimination of Muslims inside Pakistan and areas under Pakistani administration. This could gain significance since Riyadh is still searching for a way how to adjust its approach towards the US under President Joe Biden. One should not expect the KSA to broach the Kashmir issue as a point in their bilateral dialogue. However, the growing sectarianism inside Pakistan, for example in the city of Karachi or the Balochistan province, could be considered by Mohammed bin Salman (MBS).

² Already at the OIC meeting on February 9, 2020, in Jeddah, the KSA [prevented a session](#) by the CFM on Kashmir.

between Riyadh and Islamabad appeared in April 2015. Pakistan's National Assembly refused to detach forces to support the KSA-led, multi-national coalition fighting against Iranian-allied Houthi rebels (Operation Decisive Storm). It was stated at the time that 'Pakistan should maintain neutrality in the Yemen conflict' (Parliamentary Resolution of 2015). This refusal to send combat troops into the war in Yemen determined a litmus-test for the KSA-Pakistan ties;³ however, it did not reach the severe level of tensions we are witnessing since last late summer. As such, the FM's diplomatic lapse not only drew on him harsh responses from the political opposition but also created some disgruntlement within the Prime Minister's Office (PMO).⁴ Although there was no public rebuke from the army, one should assume that the move was also not well-perceived among the military top brass in Rawalpindi. In any case, Qureshi's remarks resulted in a diplomatic spat⁵ and in economic-financial punitive measures by the KSA against Pakistan. More concretely, the KSA withdrew a substantial amount of money from Pakistan, further forcing the country to repay a tranche of a loan earlier than expected; a demand which Islamabad was not able to address.⁶ Consequently, China - which appears at the moment as the only option as regards financial support to Pakistan - once again bailed out Islamabad⁷.

The KSA-Pakistan spat - An additional window of opportunity for China

The turbulences within KSA-Pakistan ties provide Beijing additional leverage within Pakistan, not only in economic terms but in the political sphere as well. It

³ One needs to point out that the Pakistani military circumvented the parliamentary "neutrality resolution". For example, Pakistan '[still provided some naval assistance early in Saudi's Yemen operations](#)'.

⁴ Here one needs to note that it remains unclear how far FM Qureshi's remark on the OIC/KSA reflects the views held by Prime Minister (PM) Imran Khan. Rather it appears to indicate a certain rift between FM Qureshi and PM Khan (involving especially some members of the PMO such as the PM's Principal Secretary [Azam Khan](#)) as well as a lack of policy coordination between both. However, the apparent discontent between Qureshi and Khan over the KSA remarks focuses on the style of expression rather than on core content.

⁵ Actually, diplomatic relations between both countries were cooling down even earlier as the KSA apparently forced [Pakistan not to participate](#) in the 'Kuala Lumpur Summit' held in December 2019. The Malaysian capital was hosting over 400 Muslim leaders, intellectuals, scholars and thinkers from 52 countries, '[to explore new and workable solutions for problems afflicting the Muslim world](#)'. The KSA identified this gathering as a [challenge to its "own" OIC](#).

⁶ Moreover, the KAS '[refused to sell oil to Islamabad on deferred payment](#)'. '[The Saudi loan to Islamabad was originally due to be repaid in instalments later this year and in 2021](#)'. '[In October 2018, Saudi Arabia had agreed to provide \\$6.2 billion worth of financial package to Pakistan for three years. This included \\$3 billion in cash assistance and \\$3.2 billion worth of annual oil and gas supply on deferred payments. The Saudi oil facility was already running into trouble](#)'.

⁷ After providing [\\$1 billion in August 2020](#), Beijing provided another [\\$1.5 billion financing line](#) to Islamabad, enabling the Pakistani government to repay its Saudi debts.

does not come by surprise that in a joint press communique during the 2nd Round of the China-Pakistan Foreign Ministers' Strategic Dialogue on August 28th, 2020 Beijing expressed its will to support 'Pakistan in safeguarding its territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence, independently choosing a development path based on its national conditions, striving for a better external security environment and playing a more constructive role on international and regional affairs'.

On a 'slightly interpretative note', this can be seen as a hint that Pakistan should improve its cooperation with Iran. The Islamabad-Tehran linkage is gaining significance for China, especially since (in the same statement) both Islamabad and Beijing 'agreed to strengthen cooperation on the Afghan issue' and 'emphasised the importance of an inclusive, broad-based and comprehensive negotiated agreement for future political settlement in Afghanistan'. This is seen as essential for Beijing's vision to improve regional connectivity. Moreover, Beijing's unequivocal statement to patron Islamabad is interpreted by some observers as a message to the KSA and other Gulf Cooperation Countries (GCC) to respect Pakistan's sovereignty and independence, especially as concerns its desire 'to evolve policies suited to its national interests'. Additionally, Beijing signals that no one should push 'Islamabad to distance itself from China and forge closer ties with the US and its allies', which Beijing apparently describes as hurtful for Pakistan long-term interests. China's financial aid for Pakistan to repay Saudi loans can perhaps be seen as a logical consequence of this positioning, more concretely a reflection of the fact that Beijing sees Pakistan as part of its 'sphere of influence'. Perhaps Riyadh underestimated the determination by China to back Pakistan and extend its own influence in the country.

Basically, one can state that China has the following interests in mind when backing Pakistan vis-à-vis the KSA. Firstly, Beijing aims to support Pakistani attempts to reduce its dependency on Saudi financial aid. According to experts, until recently it was a familiar tool in Riyadh's portfolio of foreign policy measures to use coercive economic and political⁸ instruments so as to secure Islamabad's compliance with Saudi interests – which are not necessarily in line with Chinese

⁸ Here, it is reported that the KSA instrumentalised its influence over religious extremists and other right-wing elements within Pakistan's society so as to pressure Pakistan's political decision-makers.

ones.

Secondly, Beijing aims to foster an increased engagement between Pakistan and Iran, particularly within the framework of the CPEC/BRI. It is expected by Beijing that an increased Iran-Pakistan engagement will help improve the security situation in restive Baluchistan – a province essential for the success of the CPEC. China has a keen interest in Islamabad and Tehran finding a common ground or common interest in Afghanistan – a joined approach in working towards more stability in the country.

Thirdly, by strengthening its position as the major, most reliable source of financial aid, Beijing gains more influence not only over Pakistan’s economic sphere but also over domestic political dynamics relating to Chinese interests in the country and beyond, for example as concerns the status of Gilgit-Baltistan.

The civil-military dimension

Any drifting in KAS-Pakistan ties impacts on the problematic civil-military nexus within Pakistan. It is now the second time that the civilian government created a situation which could negatively affect the military-to-military relations between these countries – forcing the army to take a more active, intervening role and making unilateral decisions so as to maintain good ties with the Saudi kingdom. After the 2015 “incident” (when Pakistan’s lawmakers declined Riyadh’s call for armed support in its Yemen campaign), in 2018 the Army’s General Headquarters in Rawalpindi decided to deploy an additional 1,000 troops in the KSA⁹ so as to maintain the Pakistan-KSA bilateral security cooperation. The new troops detached to the KSA were described as ‘on a training and advise mission’, to be further used for ‘border and internal security purposes in Saudi Arabia—not for combat missions in Yemen’. It is crucial that the army’s top echelon made this decision without consulting the government and parliament. Instead, civilian powers were informed via a press statement by the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), the media wing of the armed forces. Another step taken by the Pakistan military to appease Riyadh was to ensure¹⁰ that former COAS Raheel Sharif was enabled to accept the post as

⁹ To supplement the then 1,600 Pakistani’s soldiers already stationed in the KSA and assigned the mission ‘[to secure Islamic holy sites and serve in other internal security roles](#)’.

¹⁰ Apparently, the army claimed that the government (more concretely, the ministry of defence) was ‘[relaxing the official rules](#)’ (like ignoring the two-years the mandatory gap after retirement – Raheel was already [appointed six months after retirement](#)) which only grants ‘permission for post-retirement re-employment of retired army officers’. Furthermore, Raheel started his new assignment in the KSA without the mandatory no-objection certificate (NoC) provided to government

the first commander in chief of the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition/IMCTC (an Islamic Military Alliance which is dubbed by Pakistani observers as a ‘Muslim NATO’) initiated and led by the KSA on 6 January 2017. This was done despite earlier criticisms by the government and opposition.

It is obvious that the army is taking a more active, direct control over the country’s relations with the KSA so as ‘to prevent further deterioration’¹¹. The COAS and DG ISI travelled to the gulf in an (unsuccessful) attempt to normalize bilateral relations. The appointment of former Corps Commander Lt-Gen (ret’d) Bilal Akbar as the Pakistani envoy to the KSA – thereby removing Ambassador Raha Ali Ejay from foreign services – aims to side-line civilians in the interactions with Riyadh. It is not the first time that a retired general is appointed to serve as ambassador to the KSA. However, considering the ‘sudden shuffling’ in a currently tense situation¹², it becomes obvious that the replacement of a career diplomat by a political appointee from the armed forces expresses the unease among the army’s top echelon regarding the ways in which civilian forces have been handling Pakistan’s relationship with the KSA. Military agents most likely share the dissatisfaction over Saudi inaction regarding Pakistan’s point of view on Kashmir as well as over MBS’ look towards New Delhi; however, they would not go so far as to risk a breach in overall relations with the KSA. For the Pakistani military this is crucial since the engagement with the KSA is not only perceived as highly prestigious but is also linked with its own cooperate and economic interests.¹³ The current Saudi ambassador to Pakistan, Nawaf bin Saeed Al-Maliki, has a military background¹⁴; he has also served as a defence and naval attaché in Islamabad. This enables the Pakistani military to extend its leverage within bilateral

officials/military personal for foreign employment by the federal cabinet. The NoC was only [granted in January 2019](#).

¹¹ Noteworthy, for years Pakistan’s military has persistently established its own, direct contacts and communication with leading Saudi politicians and diplomats – without government representation. For examples, see following Press Releases: [PR-606/2017-ISPR](#) and [PR-PN-147/2017-ISPR](#).

¹² It is an often-occurring phenomenon that retired Pakistani military officers be appointed to ambassadorial posts. [Other current examples](#) include ambassadors in Brunei, Jordan, Syria, Sri Lanka, Ukraine, the Maldives, Nigeria and Libya. Nevertheless, there is a common understanding among observers that the latest appointment of an armed forces officer as envoy in the mission to Riyadh constitutes an attempt by the Pakistani army to influence and rebuild ties with the KSA.

¹³ It is [reported](#) that Saudi Arabia was in 2016 the largest importer of Pakistani arms. Moreover, [according to experts](#), 70,000 Pakistani soldiers are in one way or the other serving in the KSA’s a security sector forces.

¹⁴ He retired as Rear Admiral of the Royal Saudi Navy.

ties; it also underlines that the military-to-military and defence component form the bedrock of said ties. This of course is realised at the expense of civilian decision-making powers – further eroding Pakistan’s unhealthy civil-military relations.

The India factor

It is interesting to note that former Director General (DG) of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), Asad Durrani – who also served as ambassador to the KSA – states that ‘the greatest threat to the country isn’t India. As far as external dangers are concerned, the retired general pointed towards Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey as new challenges.’ This statement is rejected by Pakistani authorities. There are severe concerns in Islamabad that Riyadh is getting closer to New Delhi. The fact that the KSA designated India (among seven other countries¹⁵ which did not include Pakistan) for forging a strategic partnership within the Vision 2030 (a strategy to diversify the country’s oil-based economy), and subsequently signed an agreement on the establishment of a Strategic Partnership Council (SPC)¹⁶ in October 2019, rightly worried Pakistani foreign policy and security circles. In brief, the India-KSA collaboration – which is becoming ever more ‘robust’ – is perceived as ‘hedging against Pakistan’, particularly after witnessing the increase defence and security area, including military-to military cooperation.¹⁷ Riyadh and New Delhi have formed a Joint Committee on Defence Cooperation (JCDC) with delegation-level visits since 2018.¹⁸ Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud (the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia and commonly known as MBS) visited India in February 2019 – and PM Modi made a reciprocal visit the same year. The Indian Chief of Army Staff (COAS), General Manoj Mukund Naravane, made a visit to the KSA (the first ever by an Indian COAS). In order to further strengthen bilateral defence cooperation as well as identify additional areas of collaboration, India's National Security Advisor Ajit Doval was sent to the KSA in December 2020.

¹⁵ China, the United Kingdom (UK), the United States, France, Germany, South Korea and Japan.

¹⁶ India is the [fourth country](#) after the UK, France, and China to sign such an SPC agreement with the KSA.

¹⁷ This [includes arrangements](#) such as the opportunity for Royal Saudi Armed Forces officers to receive training at [Indian armed forces institutes](#) such as the National Defence College, New Delhi; the College of Defense Management, Secunderabad; and the Defense Services Staff College, Wellington. Moreover, [joint naval exercises](#) are planned and ‘have commenced alongside port calls and plans for joint production of spare parts for naval and land systems.’

¹⁸ The [JCDC held four meetings](#) — in 2012, 2016, 2017 and 2019 — during which discussions took place ‘on training and capacity building, intelligence exchange, maritime security, and the promotion of defense industries.’

Currently, both countries are discussing an agreement in defence intelligence. It is hoped by the administration of PM Modi, especially through its flagship ‘Made in India’ initiative, that a reciprocal aid can be established which supports both Indian interests and Riyadh’s aim to diversify its economy according to its Vision 2030. N. Ram Prasad, the deputy chief of the Indian Embassy’s mission in Riyadh, expects that ‘cooperation in the research, development and manufacturing of weapon systems and equipment offers great potential’.¹⁹ On a “soft power note”, the kingdom has agreed to increase the Haj quota for Indian Muslims in 2019 from 1,750,025 to 2,000,000, released nearly 450 Indian prisoners, and has granted its highest civilian award to PM Modi ‘symbolising the eagerness on their part to do business with New Delhi’.²⁰

These increased high-level interactions are commonly interpreted as harbingers for the growing convergence of interests between the KSA and India; however, these do not come out of the blue. Rather they constitute a renewal and intensification of bilateral engagements, foremost the declarations by Delhi (2006) and Riyadh (2010) and a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Defence Cooperation in 2014.²¹ These agreements constituted the first major bilateral interaction between India and Saudi Arabia and form the cornerstone of relations ever more enhanced in both volume and composition. Today, the KSA is India’s fourth-largest trading partner after China, the United States and Japan. New Delhi imports around 18 per cent of its crude oil requirements from the kingdom, making it a (most likely the) leading source of energy supplies. Saudi Arabia also ensured its participation in the Indian Strategic Petroleum Reserves program. Additionally, 2.7 million Indians live in the KSA, forming an important factor in the KSA’s development.

It must be obvious for Riyadh that in economic terms India has much more to offer than Pakistan. Saudi authorities are convinced that ‘India is better placed to economically help them given its size, resources and industrial potential’. Also, from a historical perspective, the KSA’s relations with Pakistan were always rather

¹⁹ [In this context](#), ‘collaboration in the fields of shipbuilding, ammunition manufacturing, drone technology, cybersecurity, space, and emerging new technologies.’

²⁰ PM Modi got also [invited](#) to deliver the keynote address for the third Future Investment Initiative Forum in Riyadh on October, 29, 2019, which is perceived as granting a remarkable honour among Saudi authorities.

²¹ This MoU was an [outcome](#) of the first meeting of the India-Saudi Arabia joint committee on defense cooperation in 2012.

strategic and security-related than economic in nature. This is unlikely to change, even in the event of a Saudi engagement within the CPEC initiative. The fact that Saudi Arabia expressed its interest in 2019 to invest 100 billion in India (compared to 20 billion in Pakistan) constitutes an unequivocal indicator of economic priorities in South Asia. Unsurprisingly, the KSA ‘does not want to risk its business interests in India for the sake of supporting Pakistan over Kashmir’.

Future causes for the Pakistan-KSA ties

It is expected that as long as MBS effectively runs the affairs of the kingdom, there will be no significant change in current dynamics. Pakistan's effort to repair relations with the KSA has therefore faced several backslashes. Noteworthy is the fact that MBS refused to meet with the Pakistani COAS Qamar Javed Bajwa and DG ISI Lieutenant General Faiz Hameed during their visit to the KSA. The Saudi Crown Prince snubbed the Pakistani high-level delegation presumably because of the ongoing improvement in Islamabad-Tehran ties – which, as mentioned above, is linked to the intensification of China-Iran interactions, the potential integration of Tehran in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and the envisaged ‘China-Iran Comprehensive Strategic Partnership’. On the other hand, Pakistan’s offers to mitigate between Riyadh and Tehran as well as between the KSA/Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states and Qatar were not well taken. The fact that Islamabad assumed a more or less ‘neutral position’ in conflicts involving the Kingdom makes Saudi decision-makers question the strategic value and loyalty of Pakistan as a trustworthy ally. Riyadh could be under the impression that Islamabad lacks determination or is too preoccupied with domestic and South Asian regional affairs to protect the territory of the Saudi Kingdom. For instance the refusal by Pakistan to join the Yemen war is perceived in Riyadh as a failure in commitment – and this despite generous financial assistance by the Saudis. The fact that Iran replaced Israel in the KSA’s top threat perception, as well as the fact that the Kingdom is reinforcing its defence and security-oriented collaboration with India, are further points to consider in the Riyadh-Islamabad equation.

Both the KSA and Pakistan are aware that they have different priorities and increasingly diverging positions in their foreign policies.²² However, according to

²² For example, [PM Khan pointed out](#) that ‘Saudi has its own foreign policy. We shouldn’t think that because we want something Saudi will do just that’.

Mushahid Hussain, chairman of Pakistan's standing committee on foreign relations, 'there is a strategic confluence of objectives and interests between Islamabad and Riyadh which remains unchanged despite some technical differences on some issues'. Decisions-makers in Riyadh and Islamabad aim to find a ground of mutual interests, foremost in the areas of military-to-military cooperation, internal security and defence²³, energy, trade, as well as commercial and investment cooperation. For instance, a close cooperation within the framework of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor/CPEC (Wolf, 2019), for example in the form of investments in the (envisaged) Special Economic Zones (SEZ/s), could become significant in economic ties. The current Saudi envoy to Pakistan highlighted that bilateral trade and economic interaction is 'much below the real potential of both countries' and expressed an interest by his country to invest in the CPEC's SEZs. Moreover, in order to appease Pakistan, he underlined the significance of 'projecting the positive things of Pakistan' due to existing 'misperceptions' in the 'foreign world' when it comes to the South Asian state. However, the ambassador did not mention whether the KSA will play an active role in a potential image campaign for Islamabad.

Perhaps 'relations between the two countries will reconcile sooner or later' because of their deeply entrenched defence and political linkages. During the above-mentioned spat in 2015²⁴, both sides immediately took steps to relativise and downplay reports of potential rifts in their bilateral ties. Particular Pakistan spends efforts 'dedicated to pleasing the Saudi leadership by confirming its loyalty to Riyadh' and side-lining the "diplomatic fallout" of Qureshi. The spokesman of the Foreign Ministry, Zahid Chaudhri, made a statement praising the contribution of the OIC for the Kashmir cause.

For several months, Pakistan's FM has held frequent talks with his Saudi counterpart Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud. Said FM carefully avoided (as the whole government did) to make any reference to the notion of a new Muslim bloc (formed in collaboration with Turkey, Iran, Malaysia) willing to support Pakistan's

²³ Here, the intense and close collaboration will be continued in the form of training and/or advising of armed forces (including the Royal Guards), as well as the Ministries of Defence and Interior of the KSA. Pakistan will also proceed with the deployment of troops on Saudi soil (when requested) as well as offering military procurement and technical support. However, the Saudi leadership should not expect that Pakistan will change fundamentally its [policy](#) of not deploying its troops stationed in the kingdom outside its borders, particularly not in combat missions in Yemen.

²⁴ In an interview, [PM Khan stated](#) that 'Pakistan and Saudi Arabia had no differences', 'the rumours that our relations with Saudi Arabia have soured are totally false', and that 'relations are very good'.

Kashmir policy, at least for the moment. Instead, he made public statements supporting the Saudi position on various occasions. For instance, traditionally, ‘Pakistan would not do anything that could be perceived as taking sides in the regional rivalry between Tehran and Riyadh which has inflamed sectarian divisions across the Middle East’. Nevertheless, Pakistan did condemn the attacks of Houthi militants against a border village in the KSA. Yet the Pakistani military always emphasized that the centrality of the KSA to the Muslim world is unquestionable. All reports regarding tensions in KAS-Pakistan relations were rejected.²⁵

Last but not least, the question remains – how far is the chasm institutionally as opposed to personally driven? On the Pakistani side, there are clear indications that it’s institutional, meaning that both the civilian government and the military are in favour of more independence from the KSA. However, in the Saudi kingdom scepticism regarding the worth of Pakistan as a strategic ally (as well as the increased interest in India) seem strongly linked with MBS himself. However, the unwillingness to support Pakistan’s Kashmir policy as well as the increasing collaboration with India is so deeply entrenched that must reach beyond personal preferences of a single person or faction within Saudi leadership circles. In any case, the ‘present layout of power dynamics’ in the Kingdom squarely revolves around MBS.

Concluding remarks - Pakistan’s realignment of its foreign policy?

It is unlikely we are to witness any major break in Pakistan-KSA relations. However, the deduced rifts in the KSA-Pakistan ties are more than just baseless and misleading insinuations. There are indeed indications of a re-orientation in Pakistan’s foreign policy; or in the words of Ayesha Siddiqa, ‘a gradual shift in relations’. Siddiqa further points out that the latest unfortunate episode in KSA-Pakistan relations reveals a growing awareness within Pakistan of the need for a ‘strategic divergence from Saudi Arabia’. This sentiment is in part sustained by the realization among decision-makers both in Islamabad and in Rawalpindi that the limitations to the nation’s foreign policy set by the desire to maintain good relations with Riyadh must be overcome. Perhaps Islamabad is looking for room to manoeuvre tighter relations with KSA rivals Turkey and Iran – a policy necessarily

²⁵ COAS Bajwa [stated](#) that ‘Pakistan is proud of its brotherly relationship with Saudi Arabia’ and the DG ISPR General Major General Babar Iftikhar [accentuated](#) that ‘this relationship is historic, very important and excellent, and will remain excellent. There should be no doubt about it.’

implying a reduced dependence on Riyadh. Noteworthy, this view is shared by both the government and the military: PM Khan and his administration demonstrate a lean towards Turkey, reflected in the promotion of relations with Ankara – and reciprocated by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s vehement public support for Pakistan’s position on Kashmir.²⁶ Indeed, today ‘Pakistan is closer to Turkey than it ever was in the past’. Khan also favours Iran and seeks more engagement with Tehran, which in turn recently altered its traditionally approach of balancing between India and Pakistan by issuing a ‘rare criticism of India over Kashmir’. Doubtless, Khan’s moves towards both Tehran and Ankara are in line with the interests of the military as well. COAS Bajwa seems to be keen on building a relationship with Iran, in addition to the deeply entrenched military-to-military relations between Turkey and his country. However, this is not reflected in the political dimension as yet.

Obviously, Pakistan aspires to cement firmer ties with Iran and Turkey – as well as other Muslim countries such as Malaysia. The Pakistani objective seems to be the formation of some kind of alliance able to contain India and open new avenues for cooperation on regional issues (foremost stability in Afghanistan und its border regions – especially Balochistan –, energy, infrastructure connectivity, and trade) uncoupled from Saudi influence. The fact that the Taliban – mainly sponsored by Pakistan – were able to convince the Iranian government to end its resistance against the potential establishment of an interim government in Kabul points at future collaborations. The formation of an interim government in Afghanistan is one of Islamabad’s most immediate goals; however, Tehran initially opposed it. However, Durrani comes to the conclusion that PM Khan ‘plans to forge a non-Arab alliance with Iran and Turkey, and hopes for support from the bigwigs, China and Russia. [This] will only end up antagonizing the Arab world and US-led grouping’. Furthermore, the former ISI chief states that ‘Saudi Arabia not as important for Pakistan as it was in past’ and that this is opening new avenues for the country to ‘play a pivotal role’ in a regional bloc – consisting of Turkey, Russia, China and Iran –, a bloc able to ‘determine Pakistan’s consolidated position in the

²⁶ One example is Erdogan’s speech in the United Nation General Assembly, in which he termed Kashmir ‘[a still burning issue](#)’. This sparked much criticisms in New Delhi, which labelled the statement by the Turkish President as an ‘completely unacceptable’ disrespect to India’s sovereignty.

region'. Here, Durrani is in line with an increasing number of analysts presuming that a Tehran-Beijing-Islamabad-linkage built around the larger Chinese Belt-and-Road initiative' provides 'much more to be gained' for Pakistan than attempting to follow the traditional patterns of appeasing Riyadh. That PM Khan was forced by Saudi pressure to disengage from the Malaysia summit reveals the hampering impact of the KSA on Pakistan's foreign policy.

Additional push and pull factors for a reorientation in Islamabad's foreign policy include the fact that Pakistan can no longer take for granted the substantial financial largesse from KSA when it needs a new bailout. According to observers, there is a decrease in the 'confidence in Riyadh's ability to remain Pakistan's cash-cow' due to the oil crisis and related financial implications. Moreover, Saudi Arabia's latest labour law reforms (Nitaqat system²⁷), also known as nationalisation, Saudization or Arabisation, impacted the country's VISA policy (a phenomenon witnessed in other GCC countries as well) – with far-reaching consequences for Pakistan's migrant workers and overall economy. The remittances from Pakistan's expatriated labour force based in the KSA constitute a quarter of Pakistan's total remittances from abroad²⁸ - a lifeline for the country's struggling economy. State Bank of Pakistan (SBP) announced that the remittances in January 2021 were recorded at \$2.3 billion, up by 19 per cent from a year earlier, a new record for the last the eighth consecutive month. These now seem at risk, especially when one considers the decline in remittances in December 2020.²⁹ It is reported that Pakistanis were disproportionately affected – and that Saudi authorities deported 285,980 Pakistanis from Riyadh and Jeddah between 2015 and 2019. This Saudi move of course created both among Pakistani workers and the government in Islamabad 'perceptual misunderstandings', especially since befriended nations of the KSA such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are now following Riyadh's labour and visa policies.³⁰ The KSA might no longer constitute 'a major destination for

²⁷ Nitaqat requires employers in the private sector to hire a minimum percentage of Saudi nationals, depending on the business sector and number of employees.

²⁸ It is estimated that Pakistan's over [2.2 million expatriated labour force](#) remits around [\\$6 billion](#) annually.

²⁹ Also the [increase in remittances](#) need to be put in perspective since the 'sustained increase in workers' remittances generally reflects the growing use of banking channel' instead of the illegal and unrecorded money transfer channels of the Hawala/Hundi system (based on an recommendation of the Financial Action Task Force/FATF).

³⁰ Actually, the UAE went a step further from the KSA by placing a [ban on issuing work visas](#) for

Pakistani labour'. Furthermore, were other countries from the Arab world to withdraw support for Pakistan, this could have tremendous financial and economic repercussions. That the KSA and UAE cut the 'two largest sources of foreign remittances at a delicate economic juncture' after the Qureshi remarks means that lessening of the dependence on the KSA must be perceived in Islamabad as a clear strategic need.

Despite the importance of Pakistan's security forces for the internal security and border defence of the KSA – as well as for the protection of the Saudi royalty –, the Pakistani leadership is realizing that it is no longer the sole guarantor of the Arab kingdom. According to experts, Egypt has now arguably taken on the role of ensuring the internal security of the KSA – as well as the function as guardian of regional security.³¹ Nevertheless, Pakistan will continue to be an essential part of the KSA's 'strategic depth', for its 'military power and nuclear capabilities' address Riyadh's 'strategic requirements'. It seems that Pakistan will continue to function as the 'net tactical security provider' for the KSA as far as manpower goes. Nevertheless, Islamabad does not want to be further drawn into the sectarian conflict caused by the Tehran-Riyadh rivalry. There are worries among the Pakistani leadership that these could undermine the cohesion of the country's security forces and produce destabilising impacts for domestic security.³²

In sum, Pakistan seems on its way of trading its dependency on the KSA for an enhanced dependency on China. As such, Islamabad might be able to realign some parameters within its foreign policy; however, decisive foreign influence in this decision-making area will remain. Beijing will probably use its growing leverage in Pakistan as a bargaining chip in its relations with the KSA. It is apparent that Riyadh is still interested in maintaining good relations with Islamabad, despite the tilt towards more independence and despite its own rapprochement with Pakistan's arch-enemy New Delhi. Therefore, for the proponents of a realignment of

Pakistani labourers. This was officially imposed due to COVID-19 – however, Indian workers were spared from this regulation.

³¹ Traditionally the Saudi royal family has preferred Pakistan's armed forces over the ones from Egypt or other Arab states. However, this approach changed.

³² Regarding Rifaat Hussain, an expert on Pakistan's relations with the GCC, '[up to a quarter of Pakistanis are also Shiite, and that proportion is reflected in the armed forces.](#)'

Pakistan's foreign policy 'Shah Mehmood Qureshi can be blamed for his style of delivering the message, but not the message itself.'

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