Pakistan-Saudi Arabia: A Strategic Partnership Part 2

The Military-Political Aspect

The strengthening of relations between the Islamic Republic of Pakistan and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in the defence and security arenas reflects modern political trends in the Middle East at large, on both sides of the Strait of Hormuz.

The events of the Arab Spring, the political reformating of the region, the death or departure of recognized leaders of the Arab world (Yasser Arafat, Muammar Qaddafi, Hosni Mubarak) and finally the paradigm shift in the Syrian conflict have placed several questions before Riyadh: on the one hand, about political leadership and the forming of a new centre of power, and on the other - about the safety of its economic, territorial and other interests. Several additional - and legitimate - concerns can be added to the above list: the recent unrest in Bahrain (Riyadh deployed a limited military contingent to the country in March 2011), Yemen, Iraq with its Shiite domination, the growing position of the constitutional monarchy of Jordan and the strengthening of Shiite Iran’s foreign policy, resulting from the easing of international economic sanctions.

The Syria crisis is worth a separate file in the Saudi regional dossier. Riyadh has played a key role in the armed conflict. In the initial stages, the objective was the armed overthrow of President Bashar al-Assad. The intensification and expansion of Syria’s internal war, however, has led to a revised position by world powers and by Riyadh itself.

By the end of 2013 the situation had changed - on the one hand following the US refusal (thanks to international efforts) to carry out missile strikes on Syrian objectives, and on the other - the spread of Islamic radicalism pushed the Monarchy to recognize the possible consequences of a situation spiralled out of control, and that Riyadh would be left alone with jihadism in the region. If this were to happen, the “tidal wave” of criminal extremism could take on an uncontrollable direction, breaking on Saudi Arabia itself, which managed to evade the influence of the Arab Spring.

All of this persuaded Riyadh to redirect the course of its foreign policy and again consider shifting the balance of power and strengthening its position in the region. It is reaching out to its reliable, proven regional partner - Islamabad, boosting political and military agreement between the countries.

For Islamabad’s part, it has always been prestigious and advantageous to maintain contact with Riyadh. Beginning from the 1960s, Saudi Arabia has provided diplomatic, economic and political support to Pakistan. Traditional bilateral ties in the arenas of defence, hydrocarbon dependency (Saudi Arabia provides up to 70% of Pakistan’s crude oil), the royal family’s mediation in internal disputes between the ruling elite and the opposition (during periods of military, military-civilian and civil administration rule), the mediatery role in differences between Pakistan and the US and, finally, personal sympathies have pushed the capitals toward close cooperation with one another.
But it is with the statement on Syria that Riyadh and Islamabad began a joint political communique, broadcast around the world. It is worth noting that the statement was made within the context of an official visit to Pakistan by the Saudi Crown Prince, Salman bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud, serving as the Saudi Minister of Defence, which took place from February 15-17, 2014. Both parties affirmed the necessity of finding a speedy solution to the conflict in Syria in accordance with the UN resolution, with the objective of restoring peace and security in the country and of preventing further bloodshed of the Syrian people. In particular, the two parties emphasized the importance of the following:

- The rapid withdrawal of all foreign armed forces and elements from Syrian territory
- Lifting the siege on Syrian towns and villages and putting an end to aerial and artillery bombardment
- Setting up corridors of safety and areas for the delivery of food and humanitarian aid to besieged Syrian citizens, under international supervision
- The formation of a transitional governing body with full executive powers, enabling it to take charge of affairs in the country

Islamabad had earlier adhered to similar positions. Beginning with the outbreak of hostilities in Syria, Islamabad had expressed its concern about the “turmoil and unrest” in the country, which is “an integral part of the Muslim Ummah (world)”; it had cautioned that prolonged instability in Syria could have serious consequences for the region. Islamabad supported the 6-point peace proposal developed by special envoy for the UN Kofi Annan on respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria. Further, despite its long-standing and close ties with Ankara, Islamabad condemned the shelling of Syria from Turkish territory, calling it, “reprehensible and advising the Syrian government to exercise extreme caution in this matter”. It sharply criticized the use of chemical weapons in Syria, supporting the UN investigation in the Syrian Arab Republic.

A stance taken by Islamabad on a similar issue included drafting its conception of sovereign protection and territorial integrity, in particular its position on the border issue, the condemning of trans-border crossings from Afghanistan and the inviolability of the Line of Control (LOC) along India’s border with the Kashmir region. Riyadh’s latest statement on Syria, therefore, wholly corresponded with Islamabad’s position.

Looking ahead, let us take note that the Pakistani-Saudi meetings took place against the backdrop of unfolding dialogue between the Pakistani federal government and the banned Taliban Movement of Pakistan. The harsh statement by Islamabad/Riyadh on the inadmissibility of armed attacks (as a method of achieving objectives) against the federal army and the civilian population (primarily religious minorities) should be regarded as a warning to Pakistani and Afghan militants. It is widely known that beginning from the 1980s Saudi Arabia financially supported and armed the Afghan mujahideen. In Pakistan the main focus groups, in addition to military leadership and the ruling elite, were - and still are - religious rights’ parties. Several of them, as well as a large number of Madrassas (schools for the study of Islam) in Pakistan, received - and continue to receive - funding from both public and private sources in the Gulf countries, primarily Saudi Arabia. At the present time several parties have formed a committee and are acting on behalf of the Taliban Movement of Pakistan.

Cooperation between the two countries in the defence field began in the latter part of the 1960s and has developed in two key directions: training of middle and senior-level Saudi commanders by the Pakistani military, and purchasing of Saudi weapons by Pakistan. In 1967 a bilateral program of cooperation between the armed forces of the two countries was launched. In December 1982 the Organization of Saudi-Pakistani Armed Forces was founded, headquartered in Riyadh. In addition to training professional personnel and Pakistani military equipment maintenance specialists serving in Saudi Arabia, the agreement included a provision for joint cooperation in the field of defence production and scientific research. Half a century later trends have remained essentially the same, but changes have been made, effecting an increase in the number of military specialists and the flow of finances. The main difference from former times is that Saudi Arabia has become interested in Islamabad’s defence industry potential.

During the 1990s the Iran-Iraq war changed the Saudi leadership’s conception of border security. This prompted the start of talks between Riyadh and Islamabad on the deployment of a limited contingent of Pakistani troops on Saudi territory. In turn, the presence of Pakistani troops in Saudi Arabia caused contention between Islamabad and Tehran.

A new stage of cooperation in the defence and security fields was launched in 2004, when, for the first time, joint
military exercises between the two armies were held under the title Al-Samsaam (Sharp Sword). A decision was made for them to be held on a regular basis in future years (the last exercises were held in 2011).

For a number of reasons, from 2010-2011 the deployment of Pakistani troops again became an issue for Saudi authorities. The situation demanded a speedy settlement, which prompted Riyadh to reach out to the civilian government of Pakistan. Saudi Arabia regarded the political career of President Asif Ali Zardari with caution, and held talks mainly with then-Chief of Army Staff General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani. The main topic was gaining Pakistan’s support for sending retired officers to Bahrain to strengthen security forces as well as deploying security personnel to Saudi Arabia for the localization of possible internal unrest. All of this was consistent with Riyadh’s conception of the formation “of a unified military force, a clear chain of command”, as Prince Turki Al-Faisal stated in 2012.

In 2011 few paid attention to the words of then-Chief of Army Staff General Kayani, which described Saudi Arabia as “the most important country for Pakistan”. That year was filled with events which led to a sharp confrontation in US-Pakistani relations, and which alienated Islamabad’s foreign policy vector from Washington. In contrast to the opportunistic political elite, Pakistani military leadership remained loyal to historic military ties forged with Arab monarchies, in particular with Saudi Arabia.

In the opinion of many analysts Saudi security forces are currently capable of coping with the vast majority of domestic problems. However, the use of foreign troops (primarily Sunnis) for emergency situations remains on the books, in the instance that a situation were to spin out of control.

Diplomatic traffic between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia has become quite congested in recent months. The first official visit of the Saudi Minister of Foreign Affairs to Pakistan since June 2013, when Mian Nawaz Sharif assumed the role of Prime Minister, took place on January 6-7, 2014. The Saudi deputy Minister of Defence flew to Pakistan soon after. During a briefing in the Pakistani Ministry of Defence the question was raised of signing a number of bilateral agreements, including on the issues of defence and security and on Saudi Arabia’s interest in purchasing Pakistani JF-17 Thunder fighter jets. A few days later, during a 3-day official visit to Riyadh held from February 4-6, 2014, Chief of Army Staff General Raheel Sharif led talks with top Saudi political and military leadership on developing bilateral relations, with a special emphasis on cooperation in the security and defence fields. In particular, the question of coordinating Al-Samsaam joint military exercises in 2014 was touched upon.

On arrival in Pakistan, Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia Salman bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud (also deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defence) discussed and affirmed funding for a number of economic projects. He also visited several military facilities, expressed interest in the purchase of JF-17 Thunder fighter jets of joint Pakistani-Chinese production and communicated his intentions of participating in this project.

A fundamental agreement between Islamabad and Riyadh on the supplying of military equipment has been reached. It may be concluded within the framework of a large-scale agreement on military-technical cooperation. Many analysts view it as the binding factor of strained Pakistani-Saudi relations with the US.

(To be continued...)

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