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Pakistan & the Yemen War: Perils of Joining the Saudi-led Coalition

By Abdul Basit

Synopsis

Saudi Arabia's demand to Pakistan to join its coalition against the Houthi uprising in Yemen has put Islamabad in a catch-22 situation. Pakistan is caught between joining the Saudi alliance and not antagonising its neighbour Iran. Joining the Saudi coalition will have long-term political, economic and security repercussions for Pakistan.

Commentary

THE PAKISTANI parliament met on 6 April 2015 to debate the merits of joining the Saudi-led coalition against the Houthi uprising in Yemen. The session was convened after Saudi Arabia requested Pakistan to join the Saudi coalition. Before that a high-level Pakistani delegation also visited Saudi Arabia.

The Saudis have asked Pakistan for aircrafts, naval vessels and ground troops. This has put Pakistan in a catch-22 situation. Pakistan is walking a tightrope balancing its alliance with Saudi Arabia against the possibility of taking part in active combat in Yemen that can antagonise its neighbour Iran.

Six reasons not to join the Saudi mission in Yemen

Politically Pakistan is not in a position to say "no" to the Saudis but militarily Pakistan cannot afford to commit its troops. Surrounded by a multitude of internal and external security challenges Pakistan's plate is full on all sides. Joining the Saudi coalition will have serious long-term political, economic and security repercussions for Pakistan.

To put things in context, the balance of power is shifting in the Middle East after the successful conclusion of the US-Iran nuclear deal. The Saudi airstrikes in Yemen close to the nuclear deal is not a coincidence. So, the conflict in Yemen is the start of a wider regional tussle in the Middle East between Saudi Arabia and Iran for influence and hegemony. Pakistan should not join the Saudi coalition for six reasons.

First, getting sucked into the Iranian-Saudi power struggle can be detrimental to Pakistan's fight against home-grown terrorism. Now that the situation is gradually stabilising in Pakistan after more

than a decade of violence, moving troops to Middle East will be a fatal mistake. Currently, Pakistan's armed forces are stretched with 40 percent in combat positions. A third of the military and paramilitary troops are engaged in counter-terrorism operation in Afghanistan-Pakistan border areas. The remaining troops are deployed along the eastern border with India while others are engaged in a multitude of counter-terrorism-related activities inside the country. So, Pakistan will do well to keep itself neutral and focus on the more urgent domestic matters.

Potential domestic and regional polarisation

Second, committing Pakistani troops to Saudi in return for financial assistance will certainly come with a caveat of allowing Saudi-backed Salafist groups to preach their radical version of Islam in Pakistan without any check. This will increase religious radicalisation and polarisation in Pakistan.

Third, the decision to join the Saudi coalition will antagonise Iran which shares a 900 kilometre border with Pakistan. It can result in another episode of Saudi-Iranian proxy war on Pakistani soil between the Sunni and Shia militant groups backed by the two countries. After Iran the second largest number of Shia in the world live in Pakistan who make up around 15-20 percent of Pakistan's total population. Iran can use the sectarian card against Pakistan. Shia and Sunni militant groups have been involved in tit-for-tat sectarian killings in Pakistan for last three decades.

Already the Saudi-backed Sunni groups like Ahl-e-Sunnat Wal Jamaat (ASWJ), Jamat-e-Islami and Iranian-backed Majlis-e-Wahdat-ul-Muslimeen (MWM) and Imamia Student Organisation (ISO) are carrying out protest demonstrations either in favour or opposition of Pakistan's prospective decision to join the Saudi coalition.

Fourth, any Sunni-Shia rift in Pakistan will provide an ideal opening to the IS-affiliated groups in Pakistan to exploit the sectarian fault lines to gain a foothold and increase their influence in the society. The anti-Shia and anti-Iranian militant groups like Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) and Jandullah can also join hands with IS in such a situation.

Fifth, Iran can potentially undermine Pakistani interests in Afghanistan. It can extend support to groups and forces hostile to Pakistan, especially the Baloch separatist groups.

Finally, the lifting of US sanctions on Iran as a result of the nuclear deal has opened up a way for the energy-starved Pakistan to fulfil its soaring energy demands by importing gas from Iran. Importing gas from Iran is the quickest and cheapest way of overcoming the chronic energy crisis in Pakistan. If Pakistan joins the Saudi coalition, the 2012 Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline agreement allows Iran to exercise the option of penalising Pakistan to the tune of US\$300 million daily for failing to construct the Pakistani portion of the gas pipeline.

Give peace a chance

At the height of the Cold War in the 1970s, Pakistan acted as a bridge for Sino-American rapprochement. Pakistan facilitated then US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's secret visit to China which paved the way for US President Richard Nixon's visit to Beijing in 1972. Pakistan can play the same bridging role between Saudi Arabia and Iran when no other Muslim country is making any serious efforts to find a peaceful solution to the crisis in Yemen. This will help Pakistan to not only improve its negative reputation internationally but also prove itself as a responsible state in the Muslim world.

Pakistan has already started making efforts in this direction. On 3 April Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif visited Turkey seeking assistance to find a peaceful settlement to the Yemeni dispute. This week, the Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif is due to visit Pakistan - on the government's invitation - to discuss the situation in Yemen. Pakistan is also making efforts to convene an emergency summit of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC).

Pakistan should have learnt its lessons from thirty years of Jihadi misadventures in Afghanistan and Indian Kashmir. The Iranian-Saudi conflict in the Middle East goes beyond sectarian and geopolitical considerations to the civilizational Arab-Ajam (non-Arab) tussle between Arabian and Persian

civilisations. Committing Pakistani troops to this never-ending Iranian-Saudi power struggle is foolhardy at best.

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