

Pakistan's renewed relevance to Arab Gulf security

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Pakistan and the Arab Gulf countries have long enjoyed close relations, underpinned by cultural affinities and a sense of shared destiny as Sunni Muslims. Pakistan remains a largely poor and underdeveloped country but with a population growing to more than 215 million, an advanced nuclear arsenal and powerful military, it is a country not easily ignored.

The Arab Gulf, on the other hand, has at least one-third of proven global oil reserves, two of Islam's most sacred sites and likely the keys to the Middle East's future.

Pakistan-Arab Gulf ties are largely based on unwritten rules. Strategic pacts, where they exist, do not delve into detail. For Pakistan, the Arab Gulf has been the only region of the world where it has enjoyed favour almost without question and, often, generous financial assistance. In return, Arab Gulf countries have maintained an expectation that Pakistan will lend its weight where and when their core interests are threatened.

Perhaps the most successful Pakistan-Arab Gulf effort was, together with the Americans, in forcing the Soviet retreat of Afghanistan in the 1980s. Since then, Pakistani troops have manned Saudi borders with Iraq and its retired officers have helped quell unrest in Bahrain. Earlier, oil-rich Arabs provided different kinds of support to Pakistan's pursuit of nuclear weapons. Pakistan estimates it has trained some 10,000 servicemen from Saudi Arabia.

Historically, the Pakistan-Arab Gulf relationship has indeed been special.

Recently, the Pakistan Army announced it would send a 1,000-per-



Increasing cooperation. Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz (C) and Pakistani Army chief General Raheel Sharif (L) review a guard of honour at the General Headquarters in Rawalpindi.

(AFP)

son contingent of trainers and advisers to Saudi Arabia, joining at least 1,600 Pakistani servicemen deployed there. The development follows the second visit in two months of General Qamar Bajwa, the Pakistani Army chief, to Saudi Arabia.

The rule of King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud and ascension of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz have coincided with a revision of Saudi security policy generally but in particular with Pakistan. Saudi Arabia has rekindled ties with the Pakistani Army through sustained key leader engagements and largely pulled away from Nawaz Sharif, once Riyadh's point man in Pakistan, who was ousted as prime minister.

As the Saudi-led intervention began in Yemen in 2015, Riyadh was upset by Pakistan's reluctance to join the campaign. Pakistan instead

offered itself as a mediator between Riyadh and Tehran, an offer that, as expected, garnered little interest.

Pakistan did, however, reiterate a commitment to protecting Saudi territorial integrity and the security of the holy sites of Mecca and Medina. Since then General Raheel Sharif, formerly Pakistan's Army chief, has become commander of the Islamic Military Counter-Terrorism Coalition in Riyadh, one of King Salman's most important initiatives.

The Arab Gulf's hastening courtship of rival India, the Saudi-Iranian cold war, the Saudi-led quartet's boycott of Qatar and the Saudi-led intervention into Yemen have created new dynamics in Pakistan-Arab Gulf ties.

Pakistan continues to seek a balance. The announcement from Pakistan came only after Bajwa took into confidence the envoys of Iran

and Turkey and made a low-key visit to meet with Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani. Three months ago, Bajwa became the first Pakistan Army chief to visit Iran in more than two decades, resulting in plans for deeper defence cooperation.

Pakistan's strategy to not take sides in the Middle East's power competition while being attentive to important bilateral relationships has largely worked. To some extent, it may be Chinese influence rubbing off. Under the China-Pakistan economic corridor programme, China will invest as much as \$62 billion in Pakistan. An estimated \$27 billion in projects are under way or completed.

In that context, deteriorating ties with India and a broken-again relationship with the United States provide no strategic rationale for Paki-

stan to change course.

Pakistan will continue pursuing its Middle East interests as an outsider but anticipates its strategic influence to grow naturally. There has been speculation for many years that China was seeking a naval base on Pakistan's southern coast to project power. Recent reports suggest China will develop its second overseas naval base at Jiwani, 80km from Gwadar port. A Chinese naval base in Jiwani could well be the closest China can get to the oil-rich Arab Gulf and for monitoring some of the world's most important maritime trade routes for energy supplies.

Pakistan remains as relevant as ever to Arab Gulf security but in a distinctly new emerging context.

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Viewpoint



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No clear prospect for getting out of the Sahel quagmire

hush. Parliaments in Rome, Paris and London, let alone the US Congress, have never debated a cancer that is quietly metastasising across borders that are difficult to patrol, into Nigeria – which has its own Boko Haram problem – Cameroon and Cote d'Ivoire.

A series of attacks March 2 in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, illustrate the seriousness of this cancer spreading through the Sahel. The problem is fuelled by an ever-growing weapons trade originating in Libya, Sudan and the Cote d'Ivoire, described in detail in the 2016 report "Investigating cross-border weapons transfer in the Sahel" published by the Conflict Armament Research.

French President Emmanuel Macron, on a visit to Algiers in December, tried to break the deadlock between France and Algeria on how to handle the situation in Mali. This matters to the French president because Operation Barkhane, begun in August 2014 after January 2013's Operation Serval, prevented the collapse of Mali and involved the deployment of French troops in the five aforementioned countries. Nearly half – 1,700 of 4,000 – of those soldiers are in Mali, by far France's major military operation abroad.

The troops in Mali are centred in Gao but also operate out of two military bases further north 120km from the Algerian border. Quite apart from the cost of the operation, the reputation of the French Army is at stake. So is the broader security of a region as large as Europe where France has many economic interests, notably the mining of uranium at Arlit, Niger, which acts as a corridor for illegal immigration of Africans hoping for a better life in Europe. The region also boasts coltan, manganese, lithium and rare earths.

Last October, Chairman of the

US Joint Chiefs of Staff Joseph Dunford said his services were convinced that Islamic State (ISIS) fighters, defeated in Syria and Iraq, were intent on moving to the Sahel. Hundreds – or thousands depending on the source – of ISIS soldiers are from Libya, Tunisia, Morocco and countries south of the Sahara.

Africom, the US military command for Africa, has defined its mission in narrow security terms. Reducing long-standing social, economic and tribal conflicts hardly allows for a nuanced understanding of their complexity. If the problem is defined as a bed of nails, as the United States and France seem intent on defining it, the only answer is a hammer.

This explains why Algeria and France are at loggerheads over how to bring greater security to the Sahel. The French complain that the peace protocol signed in Algiers in 2015 between Mali and the Azawad, an unwieldy coalition of Tuareg, Arab and Peul groups, has never really worked.

The ceasefire is regularly broken as troops of the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (Minusma), the force that guarantees the security of Mali, are ambushed. Coordination between the forces that are fighting Azawad is problematic: They include Minusma, French troops operating in the framework of Barkhane, US special forces and the G5 set up under French authority.

This is a recipe for confusion because attackers surge from nowhere to occupy a village or a town for a few hours, kidnap or kill a Mali official and disappear into the bush or the desert. The attackers have perfected the art of the chameleon as they morph from Islamist terrorists to smugglers of people or weapons and drugs.

Huge amounts of money offer a basic income to impoverished communities.

Macron insists Algeria should commit troops – the Algerian Army is 400,000 strong and very well equipped – and money. France is short of the \$500 million needed every year to keep the G5 military operation running. It contributes \$2.5 million to the operation and is heavily committed militarily in Africa, a continent that accounts for approximately \$1.2 billion out of the \$1.5 billion Paris spends on military operations overseas, the balance going to operations in Syria and Iraq.

A meeting February 23 in Brussels failed to raise additional funds for the G5 operation and those who participated did not commit to any multiyear programme, which means the French must spend much time every year drumming up international support for their policy.

It is surely of more than symbolic importance that a visit to the Mediterranean by Nikolai Petrov, the very influential secretary-general of the Russian Security Council, included Tel Aviv and Algiers. As it was not a coincidence that the Algerian Minister of Foreign Affairs Abdelkader Messahel recently visited Moscow.

Algeria has been adamant that international forces deployed

in the Sahel be put under the command of the African Union, an organisation to which neither France nor the United States, belongs. Algeria will not commit troops outside its borders except to ensure its immediate security. Its troops have reportedly intervened in Tunisia with the agreement of the Tunisian government to help fight jihadist groups in 2012-17, well before the Europeans appreciated the threat to North Africa's smallest country posed by the chaos in Libya. They are said to have crossed the border into Libya in the wake of the terrorist attack on the country's gas field of Tiguertourine in January 2013.

However, senior Algerian security officials and diplomats hold firm to the argument that the challenges in the Sahel cannot be solved by using a hammer. They insist that it was the French-led and NATO-supported operation in Libya in 2011 that destroyed the Libyan Army, thousands of whose troops were long-standing Tuareg refugees from northern Mali and opened the floodgates of Muammar Qaddafi's weapons dumps to terrorist groups.

In a speech to the Tunisian Assembly of the Representatives of the People in February, Macron conceded as much, criticising his predecessor, Nicolas Sarkozy, in no uncertain terms.

The policy of Algeria is complicated by another factor. Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika has been dogged by ill-health for years. Despite being all but invisible to his people, he is considering standing for a fifth term next year.

While the key principles of Algerian security and foreign affairs are well-established, the battle that rages around his succession makes the country's foreign policy decisions difficult to read for outsiders.

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