

Contemporary Relations between Iran, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia



March 30, 2016

Compiled by: Imran Iqbal and Sidra Khan

STRATEGIC VISION INSTITUTE (SVI), ISLAMABAD

Panel Discussion Report

Contemporary Relations between Iran, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia

Strategic Vision Institute (SVI) in collaboration with Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) organized a one-day panel discussion on the “Contemporary Relations between Iran, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia.” The panel discussion was held at Islamabad Club on 30th March, 2016. In view of Pakistan’s historical, cultural, economic and political relationships with Tehran and Riyadh, Dr Zafar Iqbal Cheema (President & Executive Director, SVI) emphasised that the topic of the panel discussion is not only important but also very timely, especially given the current state of affairs in the Middle East. What makes this topic highly relevant and significant is the current dilemma that Pakistan faces in terms of keeping a balanced relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the two regional powers who have locked horns in their geopolitical rivalry and conflicts. “It is a dilemma for Pakistan so long as the relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia are not improved, and this also comes with a major challenge as to which side to choose if [Pakistan has] to choose any at all”, said Dr. Cheema.



The speakers of the panel discussion were former Ambassador Mr Gunter Mulack, Executive Director German Orient Institute, Berlin; and Ambassador (Retd) Khalid Mehmood Chairman Institute of Strategic Studies, Islamabad. Dr Zafar Iqbal Cheema and Mr Ronny Heine thanked the participants, especially, Mr Gunter Mulack and Ambassador Khalid Mehmood for their unwavering courage and commitment to make it to the venue in the midst of critical law and order situation prevailing around D chowk, Islamabad.

Mr Ronny Heine thanked Gunter Mulack for accepting the invitation to visit Pakistan



again. He also thanked Ambassador Khalid Mehmood for gracing the event. Mr Ronny also applauded Dr Zafar Iqbal Cheema and SVI Team for organising the Panel Discussion on such an important topic. He gave a brief overview of the efforts of his organisation in promoting democratic traditions in Pakistan and expressed his gratitude that they could get a partner like SVI to support them in this regard. While Mr Gunter Mulack and Ambassador Khalid Mahmood

expressed their appreciation and congratulated Dr Cheema and SVI Team for organising such an important event and inviting them to share their views on the “Contemporary Relations between Iran, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia”.

While deliberating upon the “Contemporary Relations between Iran, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia”, Mr Mulack, in his opening remarks recognized the fact that Pakistan is the second largest Muslim country in the world and the only Muslim state with nuclear capability. He observed that Pakistan is a firm ally of West and has always been on-board regarding important regional and international issues. While elaborating on Iran’s historical and geopolitical importance, Mr. Mulack criticised the United States for having isolated Iran for decades, especially after global war on terrorism (GWT) which led the Bush administration to include Tehran into its so-called ‘Axis of Evil’. According to Mr. Mulack this particular decision by the US was quite instrumental in hampering Pakistan-Iran economic cooperation, for the American policy pushed Tehran down into the corner. However, after Iran reached a final agreement with P5 + 1 Group on its nuclear program, the situation changed, allowing countries such as Pakistan, Germany and others to undertake normal economic and political cooperation with Iran. Mr. Mulack recognised the efforts being undertaken by the concerned parties to resolve the nuclear issue with Iran and expressed that Germany is willing to be part of it. He further mentioned that Germany has been an active member of the group that worked towards finding a peaceful settlement of Iranian nuclear issue. Mr. Mulack, in particular, appreciated John Kerry, the U.S Secretary of State, for his sincere efforts in this regard. He lauded the fact that Iran is a country today we all can do business with. While talking about Iranian civilization he mentioned that Iran is a proud and one of the oldest

civilisations of the world, hence impossible to ignore let alone isolate. Moreover, given Iran's strategic position that makes it a bridge between West Asia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq and Southern Asia and Central-Asia, it is impossible to ignore Iran's importance and role in the political and economic future of Southwest, Southeast and Central Asian regions.

However, pertaining to Iran and Saudi Arabia, he argued that their relationship is marred by mutual hatred. He acknowledged that both the states are extremely important players



given their huge reserves of black gold on which they float in the international system. Mr. Mulack, also indicated that without huge hydrocarbon reserves, both Tehran and Riyadh have no or little value in today's world. Even though, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia holds a key position among Muslims in the world, for it is the keeper of two most important Muslim holy places, which gives it a

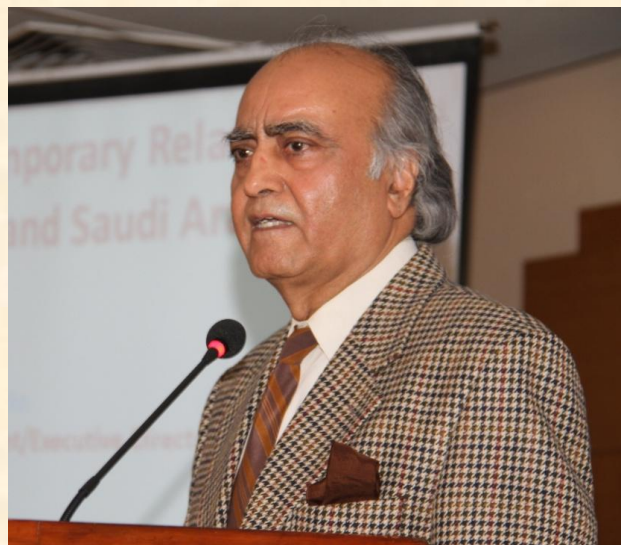
special and prominent place among the Muslim countries. Nevertheless, the Kingdom is generally perceived as a family or private enterprise of the House of Saud. Mr. Mulack was critical of the United States' dual policy towards the Kingdom where he argued that the US has been a close ally of the Kingdom, offering, at times, unqualified support to Saudi family despite its human rights violations and other dictatorial policies.

In terms of Saudi geopolitics, Mr. Mulack censured Kingdom's decision to intervene in Yemen politics, considering it as a misadventure, which backfired. For Saudi actions, Mr. Mulack argued, pushed Yemenis further close to and dependent upon Iran. The growing dependence of Yemen on Iran could have been avoided had Saudis acted more rationally and instead worked towards peaceful or negotiated solution of Yemen crisis. Regarding Pakistan's role in the Yemen crisis, he lauded the political establishment of Pakistan for their rational and timely decision not to send troops to Yemen or else it would have been identical to what happened in 1962 when President Nasir of Egypt sent his forces into Yemen. He also expressed his scepticism pertaining to the Kingdom's show of muscles by organising military exercises, code named as "North Thunder" especially against the backdrop of prevailing situation of lower oil prices in the world. When asked as to what has triggered change of hearts in Europe especially Germany towards KSA and whether refugee crisis and the rising

threat of Daish (Islamic State) are responsible for change of perception in Europe towards Saudi Arabia, Ambassador Mulack saw the ideologically driven geopolitics of KSA adding to the spread of extremism and growing refugee crisis in Europe.

Mr. Mulack emphasised upon the need for an open society in Iran and considered it important to convince the hardliners in Iran to open up, which will help in having closer and long term economic relationship with countries like Pakistan, Germany and the West at large. Opening up to the world can bring an immense opportunities and advantages to Iran especially in the business sector, which will then cater to Iran's domestic needs and will put its economy back on the track. In this regard, he acknowledged the Iranian President's visit to Pakistan as a positive step. He further stressed that Saudi Arabia needs to build normal and functioning state institutions and should open up or else it will continue to face difficulties. The Kingdom is feeling left out and is looking around for friends on whom it can rely especially when Americans are shifting their focus from the Middle East to East Asia and are no more forthcoming in terms of supporting Kingdom's geopolitics. He contended that it is against this backdrop the Saudis, tend to count on Pakistan and view Pakistani military as a last resort. While staying critical of Saudi's geopolitical aspirations, Mr. Mulack was more appreciative of Iran as a country with which he suggested that Pakistan can develop close ties, especially, in the energy sector and can join hands to mutually address various regional issues.

The second Guest Speaker Ambassador Khalid Mehmood however expressed less optimistic views vis-à-vis Iran's behaviour. He brought to light some of the factors that can cause impediments in developing normal relationship with Iran. He pointed out sectarian signatures of Iran's policies, border security issues, and above all, Tehran's close security relation with New Delhi that can obstruct Pakistan's attempts at developing close political and economic ties with Iran. He argued that although Iran has come out of its isolation, however, this could be short-lived due to Tehran's aggressive policies in the Middle East. On the other hand, Ambassador Khalid Mehmood reminded the audience and his fellow speaker how Saudis have been forthcoming and generous towards Pakistan in testing times. He specifically drew the audience's attention



towards Riyadh's generous help in the wake of Pakistan's nuclear tests in 1998, which led to the imposition of international sanctions on Pakistan especially by the US and how King Abdullah resisted the American pressure not to assist Pakistan. He further revealed that King Abdullah refused to budge when President Bill Clinton personally telephoned him asking not to assist Pakistan. Regarding, Iran, Ambassador Khalid, though was not against developing close political and economic ties, highlighted how a number of issues have bedevilled Pakistan-Iran relations. Most importantly, the Iranian tendency to hurl unsubstantiated accusations on Pakistan for backing the irredentist or anti-Iranian Baluch segments have caused a considerable damage to Iran's image in Pakistan. It is important to note that Iranians, on a number of occasions, have violated the international border with Pakistan while pursuing Baluchi separatists. However, Ambassador Khalid believed that it is in fact Iranian soil which has been used by Baluch separatists who have been involved in terrorist activities in Pakistani province of Baluchistan. According to general perception in Pakistan, India has been using Tehran, or, more specifically, some not very friendly elements in Iran to conduct a well-calculated campaign of economic sabotage in Pakistani province of Baluchistan.

Likewise, the troubled relationship between U.S-Iran also had negative impact on Pakistan-Iran relations especially in terms of economic cooperation in the energy sector. There were times, the Ambassador revealed, when due to U.S, Islamabad relations with Iran were mismanaged "but now as Iranian relations with US are on the course of improvement, a better future can be predicted". He claimed that Iran will always be a reliable friend and support to Pakistan in case the later is confronted with an existential threat. Short of that Iran will always keep on modulating its policy in accordance with its national interest. In particular, Tehran's nuclear policy and Middle Eastern geopolitics would continue to be dictated by its national interests and most probably be on a colliding course with that of American and Saudi's interests.

During the Question & Answer session, former defence secretary Lt-General Asif Yaseen Malik advised a more cautious approach while dealing with both Tehran and Riyadh. The underlying message was that Pakistan must follow an independent and pragmatic foreign policy and should not allow the unconstructive and self-inflicting geopolitics of other states to harm its own national interests. The former Ambassador Javed Hafiz requested the worthy speakers to further elaborate on Pakistan's role in the reconciliation between Tehran and Riyadh. He stated that Pakistan has played this role more than once, sometimes with success and sometime not with so much success. He asked the speakers as to how could Pakistan play

an important role in normalisation of Iran-Saudi Arabia relationship. He also asked how the role of Pakistan is being perceived by Iran and KSA in this regard and if Pakistan should continue to play this role and what are the chances of success in this regard?

In response to his queries, Ambassador Gunter Mulack very pertinently replied that Pakistan takes pride and credit for its close strategic relations with Riyadh, which the former can use as a diplomatic leverage to encourage both the regional powers to use peaceful means to solve their geopolitical differences and conflicts. Likewise, KSA can also use Pakistan to influence Iran in certain ways. Ambassador Khalid also gave his views and stated that mediating between Tehran and Riyadh is quite a difficult task for Pakistan. However, Pakistan has been trying in earnest to resolve the differences between Tehran and Riyadh. Much, nevertheless, depends on how Riyadh and Iran behave towards each other. He suggested that it is still possible for them to put aside their differences as they have done several times in the past.

Likewise, Dr Zafar Iqbal Cheema brought to light the significance of Pakistan's relations with both Iran and Saudi Arabia with whom he believed Pakistan shares historical, cultural, and religious affinities. Dr Cheema observed that Pakistan is a Sunni-majority state with the second-largest Shiite population in the world after Iran, hence could not be overlooked neither could Pakistan afford to take sides between Tehran and Riyadh. He, therefore, stressed that Pakistan should not be over-committing itself to the Middle Eastern politics, or, more specifically, to the Tehran-Riyadh geopolitics at the expense of its own national interest and integrity. Dr Cheema also opined that Pakistan should not be expected to deal with Saudi Arabia and Iran in a holistic manner i.e. not to lump economic and cultural ties with that of Tehran-Riyadh's mutual hostility. Instead, Islamabad should deal with Riyadh and Tehran separately and on bilateral basis, especially, when it comes to economic and cultural cooperation. He also brought to light that although Iran and Saudi Arabia have been important allies of Pakistan, however, he cautioned that both should not further categorize Pakistan in terms of its demographic and sectarian identity or orientation and must avoid entangling Pakistan into their sectarian



differences. Iran is an important regional state and cannot be excluded let alone be ignored when it comes to regional stability, particularly when it comes to Afghanistan's future stability, which is directly linked with the stability and economic development of Pakistan's largest province, Baluchistan.

No doubt Iran and KSA are important regional players and it is in the best interest of Pakistan to see both brotherly countries developing friendly and cooperative relationship. The continuing fissure between Tehran and Riyadh could aggravate already chaotic situation in the Middle East which can seriously undermine Pakistan's ongoing operation against terrorists and extremist groups. Further turmoil in the Middle East would only help the extremists groups to expand their extreme ideology and flourish in the vacuum that failed states and war-torn societies offer. Therefore, Iran and Saudi Arabia must not play in the hands of extremists and shun their state-centric view of conventional geopolitics. The future stability and development of Middle East and Southwest Asia at large, depends on the nature of Saudi and Iranian geopolitics. Their sectarian based or inspired geopolitics can engulf other countries especially Pakistan where sectarian violence and terrorism has been creating immense devastation. It is, therefore, in Pakistan's best interests to see Tehran and Riyadh engaged in constructive geopolitics. However, Pakistan, as mentioned earlier in the report should not be over-committing itself to the Middle Eastern politics or more specifically, Tehran-Riyadh geopolitics at the expense of its own national interest and integrity.