

Pak- Saudi- Iran Relations in the View of IMA

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Abstract

Dubbed as the NATO of the Muslim world- Islamic Military Alliance (IMA) since its inception has been quite a ride, may or may not be as an alliance in itself or its proposed functions, but surely for the bilateral ties between the three powers of the Islamic worlds Pakistan, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and The Islamic Republic of Iran. The military alliance has made the three countries to sketch their future ties carefully by analyzing the possible outcomes of any wrong decision, for the geostrategic challenges of the region has exacerbated if viewed in the wake of Islamic Military Alliance. This paper will be analyzing how IMA shaped the relations between these states and how they have been trying to cope with the challenges and response to the challenges that appeared for each state in the aftermath of the formation of IMA.

Key Words: IMA, Balance of Power, Deterrence, Mediation, Iran

Introduction

The Islamic Military Alliance aimed at knocking out the terrorists and terrorism which has affected Muslims more than anyone else. However its controversial nature is not unclear as the NATO of the Muslim World is led controversially by a state with majority of Sunni population, and not includes the other an important Muslim state of the region with majority of Shia population- a state that is considered as rival of the former, it is understood as not to be coincidental. Meanwhile talking about the leadership of the military alliance, involvement of Pakistan into the debated alliance with appointment of Pakistan's former Chief of Army Staff General Raheel Sharif as the commander of the Islamic force has raised questions on the neutrality part of Pakistan's political engagements when Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Iran are concerned.

Furthermore, Pakistan's involvement into Islamic Military Alliance has raised challenges, while it has the opportunity to make things better and bring rivals (Saudi Arabia and Iran) closer. Nevertheless, the challenges are more than the opportunities, as

Pakistan has to manage the population at home, political and public opinion, ties with the neighboring Iran plus working out the already existing differences, newly generated apprehensions regarding Islamic Military Alliance and also not letting IMA emerging as the zero sum game for Pakistan. Loosing Iran and adding another foe on its border, along with loosing Saudi Arabia which is a long standing and plus doing something that adds fuel to the sectarian rift and drift the Muslim world truly apart was never and would never be an option for Pakistan.

So the IMA, its establishment, the environment then at the time of its inception, the controversies related to its projection, and how the scandalous association of Pakistan with the Sunni led Military Alliance and a threat perception in Iran has shaped the bilateral engagements of these three nations would be discussed in the coming paragraphs.

Background of the Ties

Talking of the Pak- Saudi ties since ever, the bonhomie

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between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia is not unknown. The strategic relations between both the countries have remained strong over the years, while both the states are part of the many global, regional and bilateral forums. The two way friendship works as Islamabad receives financial support when in need while Riyadh gets the backing on security front. Prince Turki bin Faisal who was the former Saudi Intelligence Chief described the Pak- Saudi ties as “probably one of the closest relationships in the world between any two countries”. Moreover, from providing to crude oil on deferred payments to Pakistan, supporting Islamabad on nuclear attacks, Islamabad asking President Bashar al Assad to form transitional governing body, Riyadh’s assisting Pakistan in enhancing foreign exchange reserves and what not. The two countries have polished their ties in order to make them radiant than before forever.

On the contrary, Pakistan’s ties with Iran witnessed waves of convergences and divergences. Tehran being the first to recognize Pakistan in 1947 and support years after until Iranian Revolution of 1979. Relations with Pakistan drifted as Islamabad was helping Washington in Afghanistan and for Tehran U.S. was a foe. On the other hand the Indo-Iran ties were being established. Pakistan when in 1990s supported Taliban, Tehran was supporting Northern Alliance on the contrary. Though both the countries have been engaging in making things work for good.

Formation of IMA and the Relations Afterwards

December 2018 marked the announcement for the formation of Islamic Military Alliance when Saudi foreign Minister Adel Al Jubeir talked about it in Paris. It was told that Muslim world is enough of the being the target of terrorism and now is the time to fight back against those who commit these acts of terror and those who aid them. Initially having 39 members, IMA grew to 41 members later on.

IMA is a practical example of balance of power in the real politics of Middle Eastern region. Analyzing the environment and the timing of its inception, it shows that it emerged at the time when Washington was disinclined to act forcefully into the region. At that time Obama Administration was counting its days. On the other hand Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was on the table that was to provide Iran a freedom to work in nuclear energy that surely was not welcoming for Riyadh. Riyadh was sensing a powerful rival with potential nuclear force in hand thus a losing a balance in the geopolitics of the Gulf. In order to create a balance of power, Riyadh came up with IMA

that was supposed to target any terrorist organization working in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya and Egypt. Iran was not mentioned, but analysts considered Iran into the list.

Losing a grip on the Middle East by Washington seems not so favorable if one sees Tehran as state sponsoring terrorism, so Washington also welcomed IMA. Then Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter praised IMA as, “It appears (IMAFIT) is very much in line with something we’ve been urging for quite some time, which is greater involvement in the campaign to combat ISIL by Sunni Arab Countries”. Moreover, Iran perceived the threat well, regardless of the thing that Riyadh has always claimed IMA to be the non-sectarian alliance and for the greater protection of the Muslim world, but if it is not sectarian then what is the point of keeping Iran and Iraq out of it. Adding to this Yemen Crisis advocates this stance too.

Additionally when Pakistan is concerned, it has the heterogeneous population and a good part of the population is Shiite. Islamabad has always managed and tried to balance its ties between Riyadh and Tehran and also tried that its bilateral ties won’t affect relations with other. But the involvement of Pakistan into the much controversial and allegedly anti- Iran alliance with the appointment of former Chief of Army Staff General Raheel Sharif as the leader of the military force under IMA has put Islamabad’s neutral position under question. Appointment of General Raheel was not liked by Iran and this sentiment was conveyed to the leadership in Islamabad and Rawalpindi.

Constructivism was used as a tool by Saudi Arabia while balancing its power against Iran. Realities were tried to be constructed by portraying Riyadh as the potential leader of the Islamic world and structuring things that indirectly portrayed Tehran as the target of the accountability meant for the terrorists. In the two days Riyadh Summit that held in 2017, Tehran was isolated while counter terrorism was being paid attention. An impression was built as terrorism and Iranian systems come hand in hand. President Trump supported the stance more than anyone else.

Pak- Saudi- Iran ties

The relations between Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Iran have become challenging more than ever. These are complicated as these states want brotherly ties yet their greater national interests and interest for supremacy halts their way towards peace. While the efforts made for deterrence and to cope existing security dilemma provides an opportunity to bring

peace. Iran and Saudi Arabia could not reap peace but the ties strained, however it has been reported that General Suleimani was on a peace mission with Iran. At the other hand Saudi Arabia wants peace but acknowledges that it is not possible unless Tehran breaks ties with terrorist organizations. Whereas Pakistan is on tight rope as is not in a position to lose one for the other and also claims having intent to mediate between Riyadh and Tehran. Pakistan's position had become skeptical in the eyes of Tehran right after Pakistan joined IMA, and Pakistan had to deal with that so that it won't affect badly. Pakistan has been playing conscious since then like the visits of officials, confidence building. Foreign Minister Qureshi travelled to Tehran after General Suleimani's death to make them sure that Pakistan does not want to be caught up into this regional strife. He traveled to Riyadh and Islamabad on many forums have been offering and focusing for the mediation between Riyadh and Tehran. Whereas the latter two have been at loggerheads. IMA has opened the doors for these countries to redefine or reshape their bilateral ties.

Pak-Iran Relations

As mentioned in the earlier part of the article that Tehran was not pleased with the involvement of Pakistan into the alliance which it considered anti-Iran. The concerns were conveyed. Looking back into the history of the ties of these two nations, it is evident that these had quite a journey and not uniform in its warmth to be specific. Questions were raised on Pakistan's neutrality stance with involvement in IMA.

In the wake of IMA and Pakistan's participation in it had the potential to make things worse on Pakistan's western border, but the geopolitical scenario, implications and challenges were assessed right on time. Pakistan initially defended its position in IMA and also against other challenges. Pakistan got its position in IMA as leverage. Islamabad's assessment of security dilemma and counter measure for that very well transported the threat perception in Tehran, which resulted into eager tries to work out differences.

Pakistan maintained its position that it does not aim to work against Iran, but would try its best to bring the rivals closer thus drawing Islamic world closer. For that matter there was need for Pakistan to stay as part of IMA. However, real politics describes the scenario on the contrary. It is possible that security dilemma and uncertainty of the global (regional to be specific) politics had pushed Pakistan to join IMA by sending its former COAS to command IMA. The security dilemma

that resulted from the increased Indo-Iranian bonhomie, increased involvement in the construction of Chahbahar port, fear of Iranian territory be used by Indian agencies against Pakistan or Tehran supporting Baloch separatists in Baluchistan. Joining these two schools provides a holistic view of the debate that Pakistan may have joined IMA to shape its ties with Tehran within its best interests where at one place Islamabad has no bad intentions for Tehran and also eager to make things better for Iran while on the other hand using IMA as a leverage against India factor in relations with Tehran or any other attempt from Iran that could sabotage the goodwill from the other side.

However Pakistan's involvement into IMA put Islamabad into a defensive position initially, where it had to defend its own stance of neutrality, save itself from damages from internal chaos, saving itself from sectarian issues inside and outside the region and also from making a new rival on its western border. Pakistan defended its position inside IMA to Tehran as in November 2017, on the occasion of the inaugural summit of IMCTC General Raheel Sharif said, "Not against any country or any sect". Moreover then Foreign Secretary of Pakistan TehminaJanjua had to visit Iran to clear whatever the misperceptions regarding General Sharif's presence into IMA. She stated that Pakistan's participation into IMCTC is not of sectarian nature plus Islamabad would not be part of any proxies in Middle East. However Pakistan Army educating Senate about planning to send 1000 Army personals to Riyadh under joint security cooperation agreement in 2017 appears as an evidence to the argument made above that Pakistan had to manage Iran and Saudi Arabia and use its ties with Riyadh and IMA as leverage.

So the threat perception worked well for Iran and both the nations had to give symbolic gestures so that no sectarian violence should occur, no drifting of Islamic world, conciliation, defeating mutual enemies, and avoid security dilemma. Additionally, the current Prime Minister and his party has remained pro-Iran, supported JCPOA, and criticized appointment of General Raheel into IMA, so these thing worked for both the nations to cooperate. The warmth of the relations can be sensed as Kashmir is talked in the Iranian leader's speeches and how Iranian posters commemorated Pakistan's Independence Day, calling Chahbahar as the sister port to CPEC and showing interest in CPEC, goodwill gesture by Islamabad donating for Iranian flood victims in April 2019. Prime Minister Khan visited Tehran where President Rouhani and PM Khan agreed to set up a joint force for security

to secure the border region. However, the time and the series of events has showed that both the states have not left their basic instinct towards each other (i.e. blaming each other for harboring terrorism for the other like Pakistan accused Iran for letting its soil used by Indian spy missions), despite they have started trying more often to make things for bilateral good.

In order to cooperate more, Iran and Pakistan worked on situation in Kabul. They jointly contributed in Kabul process and signed Tashkent declaration too. They both sat down to settle things with Taliban in Moscow in 2018 too.

In a nut shell, Pak- Iran ties in the view of IMA are practice example of what structural realism believes in, that the uncertainty of global politics along with leader's motivation drives s states' behavior. There was uncertainty as Pakistan has always been skeptic about indo-Iran ties, Iran's involvement with New Delhi and providing place for anti-Pakistani factors there, possible terrorist attacks on the border and also the border security. The uncertainty of losing brotherly image in the eyes of Tehran along with new leadership's motivation to establish brotherly ties with Tehran and bring Islamic community closer, relations based on trust. IMA stood and is standing somewhere in the back as a leverage, but that surely presented as a mean towards building better ties with Tehran and also as a mean to cope with uncertainty of regional politics and any mischiefs resulting from Iranian side.

Saudi-Iran Ties

The history of strained Saudi- Iran ties is not too long, as both the nations used to feels like brothers in earlier years and the issues that generated were resolved courtesy farsightedness of the leaders from both the sides. However, starting from the Iranian revolution and specially with the coming of Ahmadinejad just took the ties towards the worst. History shows that the strain in the ties resulted from the sectarian issues, beheading of the monuments sacred to Shiites in Saudi Arabia, deaths of Shiites in Kingdom and divergence of interests in the wake of power struggle for the supremacy in the region thus fighting proxy wars in Syria, Yemen and Iraq or the killing of Shia Cleric in Saudi Arabia including Iran's efforts to go nuclear.

However, the formation of IMA did not go well with Tehran as it is supposed and allegedly against Iran. In order to look on the Saudi- Iran ties in the wake of IMA, one thing is important to understand that IMA has just added fuel to the fire and accelerated already

existing tug for the supremacy of the region between Riyadh and Tehran.

IMA Appeared just as Another event into the Timeline of Conflicts

Iran surely bounced back. It can be evaluated from the course of events occurred in past couple of years after the formation of IMA that Iran has increased its asymmetric capabilities (extended support for Houthi rebels, helping Turkey in Syria and presence of IRGC in Syria) to counter Saudi Arabia's effect whether generated through IMA or with U.S. help.

The game of balance of power has been on and IMA just renewed that sense of need to acquire more power and already existing believe in devastating the Saudi Kingdom as Ahmad Reza Pourdastan who is the commander of Iranian Army once said, "The al-saud is a hated family and just understands the language of power. The al-sauds understand nothing but the language of force and one should speak merely with the language of power" Although IMA is practically not functioning but it appeared as an effective deterrent for Tehran. Few months later about twenty coalition forces conducted military training near Iraqi border in Southern Saudi Arabia and also Riyadh offered publically to commit ground forces in Syria.

Talking of Iran bouncing back in this real politics, it increased its asymmetric capabilities. It coordinated its loyal Shiite militias with the air strikes from Russia in order to save Assad regime and brought devastation to eastern Aleppo. Militias appeared to form a strong foothold for increased Iranian influence in Syria. At the end of January 2017, Iranian backed Houthis attacked a Saudi frigate with three explosive boats which were unmanned in Red Sea. In the second month of 2017, CAR (Conflict Armament Research) recognized UAVs designed by Iran that were provided to Houthi to use as "Kamikaze" drones. Even in September 2017, Iranian backed Houthis claimed that they have the capability to target anywhere they want in UAE. However the list goes on but the point here is that Iran exaggerated and accelerated its influence to counter Saudi Arabia wherever possible.

Heightened tensions galvanized with the severing of diplomatic ties in the backdrop of killing of Shia Cleric Nimr al Nimr and Iranian mobs burnt the Saudi diplomatic facilities. In 2016, Ayatullah Khomeini issued a statement via Tweeter saying, "The only act of #SheikhNimr was outspoken criticism. The unfairly-spilled blood of oppressed martyr #SheikhNimr will affect rapidly and divine revenge will seize Saudi

politicians". Furthermore, the race for greater and ultimate influence and rage took neighboring states into effect as Lebanon accused of failing to back anti-Iran measure was denied the \$4 billion assistance which was promised. Even Gulf allies warned their citizens to visit Lebanon. Moreover, GCC and Arab League declared HEZBOLLAH as terrorist organization. Saudi continued their activities and Turki al Faisal attended an annual conference of Mujahedeen-e-Khalq and said, "I too want the downfall of the regime".

U.S. factor has been another important factor to shape Saudi-Iran ties as President Trump in Islamic Summit of 2017 signaled about renewal of sanctions on Iran. While analyzing Saudi-Iran ties, it appears that Saudi ties with U.S. have always been an irritant for Iran and for that reason when Washington declared IRGC as terrorist organization in summer 2019, then the counter attack from Tehran's side did not leave Riyadh from the havoc of its rage. Iran backed Houthis attacked airports in Saudi Arabia. Riyadh also claimed about intercepting missiles that were targeted on Mecca. Even Saudi oil facilities were targeted as drones attacked two major Aramco facilities.

One thing is of much importance that Tehran and Riyadh have always fought proxies for the supremacy of the region and never came eye ball to eye ball because of the understanding of the devastating results. Nonetheless this can be assessed from the Saudi's inability to digest General Qassem Suleimani's killing by U.S. where Riyadh was found clarifying that it has nothing to do with this very act and they were not even consulted. This clarification from Riyadh shows that Kingdom is very well aware of the devastation resulting from the direct escalation between Iran and KSA.

Summarizing, IMA triggered Tehran to balance its power which world analyzed in the form of asymmetric capabilities. The series of unfortunate events made this sure that Tehran has the capability to hit Saudi interests wherever, and Riyadh too perceived the threat well. That made them clarifying their position on Suleimani's death and opening for mediation.

Pak- Saudi Ties

The pattern of Pak- Saudi ties is not unclear to the world. It is a two way friendship where Pakistan depends on the financial assistance from Saudi Arabia when in need. Joining IMA and not making KSA angry about it altered pretty much nothing for this

bonhomie as Pakistan continued to be the brother, getting financial aids, support for the CPEC, trying to live up to its motivation to bridge the trust gap and mediate between Riyadh and Tehran.

Pakistan's denial to send its troops to Yemen surely infuriated Saudi Arabia, but this wrath was compensated by Pakistan with its joining IMA. Pakistan sent its troops for military exercises held in 2016 in Saudi Arabia. The course of events show that both the countries are pursuing strategic relationship with much pragmatic approach as Pakistan would be nothing to do with Riyadh's ties with New Delhi when former is a friend to Islamabad. Same goes for Pak-Iran ties, as Pakistan desperately needs to be balanced in its approach because after joining IMA (which is clearly supposed as anti-Iran) Pakistan needs to prevent any sort of serious issue that could irritate Tehran. That would definitely not go well with Pakistan.

Additionally, COAS General Bajwa visited Tehran where he discussed bilateral military relations and joint exercises and also the exchange of military expertise. This can also be taken as a message to Tehran though.

Saudi King Muhammad Bin Salman has visited Pakistan and promised to release Pakistani prisoners, showed interests in CPEC and also had announced bailout package for Pakistan's financial assistance. This is not to say that it occurred for the first time, but the point here is that joining IMA has strengthened the ties and filled the gap in Pak- Saudi ties that occurred in the time of Yemen Crisis.

Conclusion

Middle East is a hideous place as far as the question of peace is concerned. Two hegemony fighting proxies to gain supremacy of the region. Sectarian divide adds fuel to the fire. The formation of IMA is another feather in Riyadh's cap as far as Saudi Arabia is concerned for creating new venues to fight over the regional control. The IMA which is said to be anti-terrorists but because of its different dimensions like Sunni coalition, having praise from Washington and a common notion of Iran as state sponsor of terrorism, is viewed as anti-Iran. Pakistan's joining of IMA made things good for its bilateral ties with Riyadh but ties with Tehran have been strained, more cautious and both Islamabad and Tehran had to work things out to live up to Pakistan's claim that its presence in IMA won't work against Iran. Rather Pakistan is ready to mediate between Saudi Arabia and Iran with by all means. The relations between the triad in the view of

IMA has been complicated, where no one is winning if even one is not playing its genuine part. IMA worked well for Pak- Saudi ties. IMA indirectly made Pakistan and Iran to work on their issues like border security, regional security and others. It made them to build trust in each other's intent while strategic importance and potential strategic use of IMA as a deterrent is also not unclear. Whereas the ties between Saudi Arabia-Iran has been on a roller coaster where they recognize

that a direct conflict would devastate the region ultimately and they acknowledge the importance of peace and mediation. Summarizing, triad has the opportunity to bring peace when they have recognized the possible devastating effects of any direct conflict. Taking Iran into IMA would best serve the purpose if these states genuinely want to build trust and bring peace to the region, otherwise what real politics brings is evident to the world.

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