

## Saudi Arabia's Nuclear Thinking and the Pakistani Connection

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## **Summary**

Riyadh anticipates that in the long run a nuclear Iran will be challenging Saudi's proxy conflicts with Iran in states like Palestine, Bahrain, Yemen and Syria. Amidst such concerns, Riyadh's rejection of a UN Security Council seat in October 2013 followed by the revelation of the BBC news about possible nuclear weapons cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan in November 2013 has raised questions whether Riyadh aspires to acquire nuclear weapons capability.

Two recent developments have generated concerns among non-proliferation advocates. A recent BBC report allegedly claimed that Saudi Arabia invested in developing nuclear weapons made in Pakistan which are now ready for delivery to the Kingdom nation. The second event relates to the recently concluded nuclear deal between Iran and the global powers. The two developments can be related given Saudi Arabia's skeptic response to the Iran nuclear deal. Given the apprehension that Riyadh possesses of Tehran, the Kingdom nation believes that the emerging rapprochement between the United States and the Iran will prove inimical to the interests of the ideologically differing Saudi Arabia. Though there has not been any official reaction from Riyadh, there is sufficient anxiety amongst the Saudis that Iran can never be persuaded to give up its nuclear programme.

Saudi Arabia worries that the West will turn its focus away from Iran once the problem over the Iranian nuclear programme is diffused. Riyadh anticipates that in the long run a nuclear Iran will be emboldened in Saudi Arabia's proxy conflicts with Iran in states like Palestine, Bahrain, Yemen and most recently Syria. Amidst such concerns, Riyadh's rejection of a coveted seat at the United Nations Security Council in October 2013 followed by the revelation of the BBC news about possible nuclear weapons cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan in November 2013 has raised questions whether Riyadh aspires to acquire nuclear weapons capability? What has been the level of nuclear cooperation between the two Islamic nations? This issue brief looks at the factors that might influence Saudi Arabian government to go nuclear. It records the existing news reports and the latest happenings on Riyadh's ostensible nuclear programme. Based on these reports and indicators the author has made an attempt to draw the attention of the reader that the final outcome of the nuclear deal between the P5+1 countries and Iran might prove to be potent factor weighing Saudi decision to develop its strategic programme. At present, there is enormous skepticism prevailing the nuclear deal will between Iran and the P5+1 countries will persuade Tehran to renounce its nuclear weapons programme. President Hassan Rouhani has already emphasized in an interview to the *Financial Times* that Iran will not fully dismantle its nuclear programme as part of a comprehensive agreement. Understandably, at this stage, there is no credible evidence indicating a robust Saudi-Pakistan nuclear weapons collaboration. Hence, much of the brief is based on speculations that presumably some understanding for a Saudi-Pakistan secret nuclear commitment has been discussed between the two Muslim nations. This brief emphasizes there is something on. The Iran nuclear deal is yet to reach a comprehensive conclusion on its strategic programme about which Saudi Arabia has expressed its strong apprehension and skepticism. Whether Iran will relinquish its nuclear programme as demanded by the western powers, Israel and the Arab states including Riyadh is not known. It is within this backdrop, that this issue brief seeks to delve into the indications of a possible Saudi-Pakistan nuclear weapons association.

## Saudi-Pakistan nuclear connection

The factor that has added criticality to Saudi Arabia's nuclear thinking is the reported Pakistani linkage to the issue. In early November BBC reported that Saudi Arabia prognosticating that Iran can never be persuaded to give up the nuclear bomb, has invested in Pakistan's nuclear weapons projects and atomic bombs are ready for delivery from Islamabad to Riyadh. Though there is no credible evidence to authenticate such reports, yet there are some indicators that point that Pakistan and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia have a longstanding and an intimate relationship.<sup>1</sup> There are alleged information suggesting Riyadh is beefing up its military links with Islamabad to counter Tehran's expansionist plans either by acquiring atomic weapons from Islamabad or a pledge of nuclear cover.<sup>2</sup> They have had a deep strategic military relationship for decades and may have an unacknowledged nuclear partnership to provide the Kingdom with a nuclear deterrent on short notice, if ever needed.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps a strong indicator of Saudi-Pakistani strategic ties is Riyadh's robust support to Islamabad when contemplating to test its nuclear weapons in May 1998. Riyadh promised 50,000 barrels of free oil per day to cope with the economic sanctions that were expected to follow as part of the international opprobrium. The Saudi oil commitment was a key to then Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's decision to proceed with testing.<sup>4</sup> Saudi generosity was reciprocated with military aid and expenditure from Pakistan for several decades. Other indicators of Saudi-Pakistan nuclear links include the "unusual visit" of Saudi Arabia's Defense Minister, Prince Sultan bin Abdelaziz al-Saudi accompanied by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and AQ Khan to a uranium enrichment plant at Kahuta and one missile site at Ghauri. There was acute alarm within the Clinton administration over the visit particularly in the backdrop of rumors that Riyadh wanted to replace the covertly acquired Chinese intercontinental ballistic missiles with new generation of missiles being tested by Pakistan. These missiles reportedly with a range of 1,500 miles were capable of reaching the mainland of Riyadh's chief foes - Iraq and Iran. Though the general belief was that the Saudis were primarily interested in missiles technology there was wide coverage in the Pakistani dailies inferring that Saudis were assisting weapons production in Islamabad. There are other accounts dating Saudi-Pakistan nuclear cooperation back to the 1970s when reportedly Zulfikar Ali Bhutto sought financial assistance from King Faysal for its strategic programme in "return for a promise that

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce Riedel, "Enduring Allies: Pakistan's Partnership with Saudi Arabia Runs Deeper," Brookings Institution, December 9, 2011, p.20 at [http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/articles/2011/12/09%20saudi%20arabia%20pakistan%20riedel/1209\\_saudi\\_arabia\\_pakistan\\_riedel.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/articles/2011/12/09%20saudi%20arabia%20pakistan%20riedel/1209_saudi_arabia_pakistan_riedel.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> "Saudis 'eye Pakistani nukes' to face Iran," *United Press International*, September 15, 2011 and Julian Borger, "Pakistan's bomb and Saudi Arabia," *The Guardian*, May 11, 2010 at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/julian-borger-global-security-blog/2010/may/11/pakistan-saudi-arabia>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

Pakistan's nuclear programme would provide a security umbrella for the Kingdom." The *Nucleonics* in the late seventies reported that Saudi Arabia offered to finance the construction of a reprocessing facility at Chashma in exchange for Pakistani training of Saudi scientists on nuclear power.<sup>5</sup> The October 2003 state visit of Crown Prince Abdallah to Pakistan was followed by speculations that a secret nuclear agreement outlining Pakistani support to Saudi Arabia in case of a nuclear threat from any third party. Such allegations were of course denied by both Islamabad and Riyadh. However, denials become difficult when alleged Saudi-Pakistan nuclear cooperation reports come from credible Pakistani sources. Brigadier Feroz Hassan Khan, a former director of arms control and disarmament affairs in the Strategic Plans Division in his book *Eating Grass: The Making of the Pakistani Bomb* revealed "Saudi Arabia provided generous financial support to Pakistan that enabled the nuclear program to continue, especially when the country was under sanctions."<sup>6</sup>

## Does Saudi Arabia want the Bomb?

Conventionally, Saudi Arabia has been a strong advocate of a Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone (WMDFZ) in the Middle East since the early 1970s. This has been the stated nuclear non-proliferation official and nuclear disarmament policy of all Arab States including Saudi Arabia. It firmly advocates that it is in the best interests of all states including Israel and Iran to relinquish their nuclear weapons. However, recent developments in the Middle East have increased insecurity and displeasure in certain quarters within Saudi Arabia. The reconciliatory policies of the Western Powers towards Syria and Iran angered the Saudi monarchy and led the Kingdom to reject the highly

<sup>5</sup> Christopher Clary & Mara E. Karlin, "The Pak-Saudi Nuke, and How to Stop It," *The American Interest*, [https://doc-0c-1g-apps-viewer.googleusercontent.com/viewer/secure/pdf/bd6hf233jp3emcusasc4f9u6jpn2v3im/i0u25jnkiteersdnaulqfjuujibb2rmg/1385722575000/gmail/14994883148382393898/ACFrOgCimflmLU6OzOzewxSzXwdbGaJ4nMXk9QmZCmRkjinPevJFhTCG\\_PfmvpfUWKf1wAW1dE8BTWZ3TIR6Q4l9j9Z3bge\\_mhujxJ32rx0rx7STc3Z4O54-Ckx4bhM=/bd6hf233jp3emcusasc4f9u6jpn2v3im/a21mlrb8rp42967hkrcneh826432e81a/1385726625000/gmail/14994883148382393898/ACFrOgCimflmLU6OzOzewxSzXwdbGaJ4nMXk9QmZCmRkjinPevJFhTCG\\_PfmvpfUWKf1wAW1dE8BTWZ3TIR6Q4l9j9Z3bge\\_mhujxJ32rx0rx7STc3Z4O54-Ckx4bhM=/bd6hf233jp3emcusasc4f9u6jpn2v3im/qup43cnndmmf58ncn5g3hldjig5lk17i/1385733600000/gmail/14994883148382393898/ACFrOgCimflmLU6OzOzewxSzXwdbGaJ4nMXk9QmZCmRkjinPevJFhTCG\\_PfmvpfUWKf1wAW1dE8BTWZ3TIR6Q4l9j9Z3bge\\_mhujxJ32rx0rx7STc3Z4O54-Ckx4bhM=/bd6hf233jp3emcusasc4f9u6jpn2v3im/e930roq1iba1cenlb2fpvjfelvlekqjb/1385734275000/gmail/14994883148382393898/ACFrOgCimflmLU6OzOzewxSzXwdbGaJ4nMXk9QmZCmRkjinPevJFhTCG\\_PfmvpfUWKf1wAW1dE8BTWZ3TIR6Q4l9j9Z3bge\\_mhujxJ32rx0rx7STc3Z4O54-Ckx4bhM=?nonce=k9o6krih573uq&hash=9i42b6fdcku4uoschbuhi06btuijv517&user=14994883148382393898&print=true](https://doc-0c-1g-apps-viewer.googleusercontent.com/viewer/secure/pdf/bd6hf233jp3emcusasc4f9u6jpn2v3im/i0u25jnkiteersdnaulqfjuujibb2rmg/1385722575000/gmail/14994883148382393898/ACFrOgCimflmLU6OzOzewxSzXwdbGaJ4nMXk9QmZCmRkjinPevJFhTCG_PfmvpfUWKf1wAW1dE8BTWZ3TIR6Q4l9j9Z3bge_mhujxJ32rx0rx7STc3Z4O54-Ckx4bhM=/bd6hf233jp3emcusasc4f9u6jpn2v3im/a21mlrb8rp42967hkrcneh826432e81a/1385726625000/gmail/14994883148382393898/ACFrOgCimflmLU6OzOzewxSzXwdbGaJ4nMXk9QmZCmRkjinPevJFhTCG_PfmvpfUWKf1wAW1dE8BTWZ3TIR6Q4l9j9Z3bge_mhujxJ32rx0rx7STc3Z4O54-Ckx4bhM=/bd6hf233jp3emcusasc4f9u6jpn2v3im/qup43cnndmmf58ncn5g3hldjig5lk17i/1385733600000/gmail/14994883148382393898/ACFrOgCimflmLU6OzOzewxSzXwdbGaJ4nMXk9QmZCmRkjinPevJFhTCG_PfmvpfUWKf1wAW1dE8BTWZ3TIR6Q4l9j9Z3bge_mhujxJ32rx0rx7STc3Z4O54-Ckx4bhM=/bd6hf233jp3emcusasc4f9u6jpn2v3im/e930roq1iba1cenlb2fpvjfelvlekqjb/1385734275000/gmail/14994883148382393898/ACFrOgCimflmLU6OzOzewxSzXwdbGaJ4nMXk9QmZCmRkjinPevJFhTCG_PfmvpfUWKf1wAW1dE8BTWZ3TIR6Q4l9j9Z3bge_mhujxJ32rx0rx7STc3Z4O54-Ckx4bhM=?nonce=k9o6krih573uq&hash=9i42b6fdcku4uoschbuhi06btuijv517&user=14994883148382393898&print=true)

<sup>6</sup> Feroz Hassan Khan, *Eating Grass: The Making of the Pakistani Bomb* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012), p.383.

coveted UNSC seat. The rising anxiety within Riyadh has given rise to speculations about acquisition of the nuclear bomb. Does Saudi Arabia want the bomb? What are the factors that would drive Riyadh to strive for nuclear weapons capability?

## The Iran nuclear deal

The interim nuclear pact reached between Iran and the world powers have been received with guarded approval within the Saudi Arabia. Unlike the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the Saudi Arabian government has maintained a discreet silence over the Iranian nuclear deal in Geneva emphasizing Riyadh's distrust on the pact. Though there have not been any official reactions from Riyadh, the Kingdom nation's reservations on the Iran pact have been evident from several quarters within Riyadh. Fearing that the landmark nuclear deal will presumably advance Tehran's regional ambitions, Jamal Khashoggi, a veteran Saudi political analyst expressed that the nuclear deal will provide Iran with "a free hand to go and meddle in the region." Similar warnings have been echoed by Abdullah Al-Akar, chairman of the foreign affairs committee at the Shoura Council stating that "the government of Iran ...has proven that it has an ugly agenda in the region, and in this regard, no one in the region will sleep and assume things are going smoothly." He expressed belief that if the interim deal fails to achieve comprehensive results in preventing Iran from acquiring the bomb, Saudi Arabia will go ahead and get the bomb. He apprehends a break out of a potential nuclear arms race in the region with Turkey, United Arab Emirates and Egypt aspiring to acquiring nuclear technology if Iran reneges on the deal. Saudis perceive that acquisition of nuclear capability by Iran will embolden it to pursue its hegemonic aspirations within the Persian Gulf region. If Iran goes nuclear the primary motive of Saudi Arabia will be use its desired nuclear bomb to prevent any other state from taking military action or indulging in extra-state activities just as Pakistan is doing against India. The Saudis thus have reasons to believe that with the risk of nuclear proliferation that Iran poses it is a rival if not an existential threat in the region. Analysts have also questioned the utility of the \$7 billion dollars worth fund provided to Iran as part of the nuclear pact. There are sufficient speculations among the Saudis whether the funds will be used for the welfare of the Iranian people or would it be utilized for financing disruptive activities in the region. The US funded approximately \$100 million for improving Pakistan's nuclear security. However, Pakistan has evaded being transparent in on matters of audit on how that funding has been utilized. Reports have claimed that a great deal of the amount has been used for providing assistance in counterterrorism activities against the Taliban and Al Qaeda. It is quite obvious that Saudi Arabia is wary of Iran's nuclear intentions. It is still early to presume that Iran no longer wants the bomb because of the interim deal with the western powers. Experts like Hossein Askari in his article has emphasized that "Iran either already has this capability or will have it within a few months." Simultaneously, it can be presumed that politically Riyadh will never accommodate a nuclear Tehran. Diplomatic cables acquired by *WikiLeaks* revealed that King Abdullah had privately warned the US in 2008 that if Iran developed

nuclear weapons “everyone in the region would do the same, including Saudi Arabia”. Speaking at the Annual Arab-U.S. Policymakers Conference in Washington DC, held October 22-23, 2013 by the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations former Saudi Ambassador to Washington and former intelligence chief Prince Turki Al-Faisal expressed that if Iran develops nuclear weapons, “the Gulf Cooperation Council members should carefully weigh all options, including acquiring a nuclear deterrent.”

The emerging US-Iran rapprochement could be a harbinger of a Tehran’s policy of appeasement towards Washington. Continued policy of appeasement towards the US could benefit Iran to progress on its nuclear programme in the long term. This was evident when the Reagan administration kept US aid flowing to Pakistan for aiding the anti-Soviet war in Afghanistan inspite of evidences of Islamabad illegally trying to procure material that could be used for a nuclear weapons program. US foreign policy interests triumphed over nonproliferation policy imperatives in the name of national security. The emerging cordial relations between US and Iran and given their mutual interests surrounding global oil economy could emerge as a potential factor for Tehran to pursue their nuclear interests. Given these conjectures, it can be speculated that Riyadh in the interests of its national security can decide to go nuclear in future.

### **Trust deficit in US-Saudi bilateral relations**

A second factor in the Saudi calculus that might potentially drive Riyadh to pursue the nuclear option is their fear of deterioration in US-Saudi bilateral relations. Saudi Arabia that has been an important partner of the US in counterterrorism operations, among other regional goals is presently disenchanted with the US policies towards Riyadh’s primary foe, Iran. The Iran nuclear pact has led to an emergence of distrust in bilateral relations. The US-Iran rapprochement while underscoring a cardinal difference in the perceptions of Washington and Riyadh has led the Kingdom believes that the US has provided Tehran with relief from sanctions without comprehensively reducing the Iranian nuclear threat. Expressing deep skepticism in the nuclear deal, Riyadh believes that the nuclear deal will confer a new legitimacy to Iran and facilitate it to pursue its hegemonic ambitions to become a regional power in the future. The Sunni-dominated Arab states including Saudi Arabia is deeply apprehensive of Shia-dominated Iran’s influence in the region. Riyadh’s goal is to encircle Iran in the region, weaken its allies and cap its regional aspirations. However, the nuclear deal concluded between the global powers led by Washington and Iran seemingly appears to scuttle Riyadh’s goals in countering Tehran’s influence in the region. What bothers Riyadh more is the belief that with the diffusion of the Iranian nuclear problem, Washington could eventually turn its attention away from the Middle East leading to a deterioration of US protective umbrella in the region. The Obama administration’s abandonment of its long-standing regional ally in Egypt’s Hosni Mubarak and its recent diplomatic initiatives in Syria and Iran bears testimony to Iran’s apprehensions. With increasingly different priorities over Israeli-Palestinian conflict, on

how to deal with Iran, on shifting energy markets that reduces the global dependency on the Gulf for oil have left the Saudis disenchanted with the US. US policies have thus aggravated Saudi concerns. In a poll conducted by the University of Maryland on the Annual Arab Public Opinion Survey in 2010, 63 percent indicated that they are discouraged by President Obama's policies towards the Middle East.<sup>7</sup> In strategic terms, US policies could potentially lead to the emergence of Iran as a regional superpower while relegating the Arab states to a subjugated status. US foreign policies could potentially create a void in the security and strategic alliances with Saudi Arabia thereby questioning Washington's capacity to defend Riyadh. Hence, clearly there is a corrosion of confidence of Saudi Arabia in the US. Though it is premature to expect that US policies in the Middle East would drive Saudi nuclear ambitions, yet the possibility that Riyadh will not remain mute to corroding security calculus in region cannot be ignored.

### Economic imperatives

Another critical factor influencing Riyadh's nuclear equation is the economic perspective. The Kingdom is heavily dependent of its oil exports for its national revenue. Simultaneously Riyadh is a high consumer of crude oil. Oil consumption in Saudi Arabia has increased 369 per cent to nearly three million barrels a day, since 1980. The Energy Information Administration (EIA) says that in peak summer months, when power demand for air conditioning is at the highest level, Saudi Arabia burns over a million barrel of oil daily to produce energy. As of January 1, 2012, the per capita basis of oil consumption per day per 1000 people is 100 barrels making it the world's sixth largest consumer of oil. Economists argue that Riyadh's current oil consumption pattern can reduce it to an oil importer by 2030. Given the dynamics, Saudi Arabia is optimistic about nuclear and renewables as the solution to their economic challenges. The country is looking to add more than 80GW (predominantly from nuclear and renewable sources) to its existing ~60GW of electricity generation capacity by 2032.<sup>8</sup> This is with a view to replacing oil as 50% of the fuel used to produce its power supply.<sup>9</sup> However, the Saudi nuclear optimism is presently challenged with issues of lack of available nuclear power plant experts, plant safety risks and cost overruns.

Given the challenges involved in August 2009 the Saudi government announced that it was considering a nuclear power program on its own, and in April 2010 a royal decree

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<sup>7</sup> "Annual Arab Public Opinion Survey," *University of Maryland with Zogby International*, June-July 2010 at [http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/reports/2010/8/05%20arab%20opinion%20poll%20telhami/0805\\_arabic\\_opinion\\_poll\\_telhami.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/reports/2010/8/05%20arab%20opinion%20poll%20telhami/0805_arabic_opinion_poll_telhami.pdf) p.5.

<sup>8</sup> Heidy Rehman, "Saudi Petrochemicals: The End of the Magic Porridge Pot?" Citigroup, London, September 4, 2012, p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

said: "The development of atomic energy is essential to meet the Kingdom's growing requirements for energy to generate electricity, produce desalinated water and reduce reliance on depleting hydrocarbon resources."<sup>10</sup> The King Abdullah City for Nuclear and Renewable Energy (KA-CARE) was set up in Riyadh to advance this agenda as an alternative to oil and to be the competent agency for treaties on nuclear energy signed by the kingdom.<sup>11</sup> Riyadh intends to become a leader in renewable energy by building 16 nuclear reactors with a combined capacity of 22GW at an estimated cost of more than \$100 billion. In June 2011 the coordinator of scientific collaboration at KA-CARE said that it plans to construct 16 nuclear power reactors over the next 20 years at a cost of more than 300 billion riyals (\$80 billion).<sup>12</sup> In 2012, while speaking at the Conference on First Renewable Energy Conference and Exhibition at the King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals (KFUPM), Dhahran, Dr. Abdullah M. Al-Shehri, Governor of the Electricity and Co-Generation Regulatory Authority (ECRA) outlined Saudi Arabia's road map in building its nuclear capabilities for peaceful means for building a national nuclear program. "First, we need to secure international cooperation; second, come up with long term planning; third, study the required safety measures mandated by the international community; fourth, ensure we have the needed fuel supply; and fifth, we must prepare a national workforce that is educated in nuclear engineering and operation."<sup>13</sup> Saudi nuclear ambitions which also hold the potential to enrich uranium is on the cards but whether it might get crystallized as a Saudi national security policy is yet to be seen.

### **Saudi-Pakistani nuclear cooperation – strategic value**

So far no credible revelations or evidences conclusively indicate that a Saudi-Pakistan nuclear deal has already been affected. But there is considerable evidence to suggest that Riyadh and Islamabad have at least discussed such an understanding.<sup>14</sup> Arguably, there is no indicator to disprove it. Any nuclear cooperation between the two nations will be confronted with critical challenges from the non-proliferation advocates and the international community. Ranging from violation of Non Proliferation Treaty, crippling sanctions and consequent international opprobrium, the two nations will be faced with unprecedented criticism if they embark on any strategic cooperation. Despite so, is a Saudi-Pakistan nuclear cooperation possible? Does a Saudi-Pakistani nuclear cooperation hold any mutual strategic value? Nuclear cooperation between the two Muslim nations

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<sup>10</sup> "Nuclear Power in Saudi Arabia," *World Nuclear Association*, September 2013 at <http://world-nuclear.org/info/Country-Profiles/Countries-O-S/Saudi-Arabia/>

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Joe Avancena, "Kingdom's road map to nuclear energy outlined," *Saudi Gazette*, February 22, 2012 at <http://www.saudigazette.com.sa/index.cfm?method=home.regcon&contentid=20120222118085>

<sup>14</sup> Bruce Riedel, "Enduring Allies," *op. cit.*,



can occur either by a direct transfer of Pakistani nuclear weapons to Riyadh or by deploying nuclear weapons on Saudi soil by way of an extended nuclear deterrence. Of these the first one is not a practical option for both the nations given the global condemnation in the form of stringent sanctions and criticisms that will consequently follow. However, given the intimate military links, a Pakistani nuclear guarantee would be a more attractive option for Saudi Arabia. Such an alternative is already precedent by the US in West Germany during the Cold War whereby although American nuclear arms were distributed to German army units at the time, U.S. personnel maintained control over all such munitions, thereby allowing West Germany to adhere to the letter of its obligation under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) to refrain from acquiring nuclear weapons.<sup>15</sup> Such an arrangement between Riyadh and Islamabad would be suitable for them to replace any corrosion of US protection in Afghanistan and Iraq. With US defence military budget cuts projected at \$1.2 trillion, Saudis are concerned about US commitment to the region. Under such circumstances, the Saudis would find it strategically feasible to depend on their long term military partner Pakistan to provide nuclear umbrella by stationing Pakistani troops on Saudi soil and equipping them with nuclear weapons capability. For Pakistan this arrangement would be of considerable value. Nuclear weapons deployed on Saudi soil and controlled by Pakistan would strengthen Islamabad's second-strike capabilities and can be used as a hedge to neutralize any possible (though unlikely) nuclear first strike attack from India. Additionally, Pakistan can safely reserve its strategic weapons outside its terrorist infested and politically disturbed country.

### Implications of a Saudi-Pakistani nuclear cooperation

Any nuclear exchange between Riyadh and Islamabad is fraught with several challenges. It will be extremely controversial and will renew proliferation concerns worldwide. Both nations will be faced with stringent sanctions and their reputation will be subject to international condemnation. Saudi Arabia being a member of the NPT would be severely criticized and be put in the bracket of states of proliferation concerns like North Korea, Iran and Pakistan. Any such deal will be perceived by the international community as extremely provocative with full potential to destabilize the Middle East and possible South Asia regions. There is also the possibility that Saudi nuclear acquisition might invite a pre-emptive Israeli attack on Riyadh particularly before the conclusion of any such deal. Pakistan would inevitably be drawn into an ongoing Saudi-Iranian rivalry forcing Islamabad to divert its strategic forces and consequently reduce its deterrence capability against India. Moreover, at a diplomatic level Saudi-US and US-Pakistani bilateral ties will be significantly jeopardized perhaps to an irrevocable level. It would abrogate US-

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<sup>15</sup> Simon Henderson, "Toward a Saudi Nuclear Option: The Saudi-Pakistani Summit," *The Washington Institute*, Policy #793, October 16, 2003 at <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/toward-a-saudi-nuclear-option-the-saudi-pakistani-summit>

Saudi Memorandum of understanding of 2008 whereby Washington has pledged to provide civilian nuclear energy assistance on the condition that Riyadh refrains from pursuing "sensitive nuclear technologies". Pakistan which is still to come clean on the infamous AQ Khan case will be extremely cautious to take a bold step as to provided extended deterrence to Riyadh at the cost of severe sanctions, criticisms and its efforts to come clean on its proliferation record.

What are the possibilities of a potential Saudi-Pakistan nuclear cooperation? Any probability for nuclear cooperation between Riyadh and Islamabad can arise in the backdrop of drifting Washington-Riyadh ties. The emerging US-Iran rapprochement and Washington's efforts to integrate Tehran into the global economy and the global comity of nations is not perceived to be in the interests of the Saudis. There is a sense of US abandonment within Riyadh, which has created significant insecurity. The recently concluded Iran nuclear deal has been viewed with skepticism within Saudi Arabia. Saudis believe that the nuclear deal provides Iran the opportunities to acquire nuclear capability in the future. This will lead to a domino effect in the Middle East, which could compel Riyadh to strive for nuclear capability (which is unlikely given the technological challenges involved) or acquire nuclear assurances from sympathetic states like Pakistan. Saudis are also anxious over the emerging changes in the calculus for global oil demands. With sanctions being eased, Iran will gradually be in a position to flood the oil market with its supplies. Saudis apprehend that the rapid changes in the oil economy hold the potential to relegate it to an inferior position within the Middle East and the global power structure. On the other hand growing economies like China will have increased oil demands in the future, which make it a mutually lucrative prospect Riyadh, and Beijing to develop close ties. So for Riyadh, waning ties with the US could be compensated with better relations with China. This can also counterbalance Washington's dissatisfaction with Riyadh in the event it decides to acquire nuclear protection from Pakistan.

Recently, US-Pakistan relations are increasingly becoming complicated given Washington's persistent reliance on drone attacks. With the possibility of complete US withdrawal from Afghanistan shelved off, the danger of US attacks with remote controlled weapons still exists and obviously generates significant unease within Pakistan. Simultaneously Saudi-Pakistani relations are well-grounded and are expected to grow stronger in the future. Noteworthy, in the face of raging controversy, there has been no official statement from Pakistan assuring that no proposed Riyadh-Islamabad nuclear deal is in the offing. Hence, given the concept of "permanent interests", it can be fairly assumed that driven mutually beneficial interests can bring Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and China closer together.

In the final analysis, it can be presumed that Saudi Arabia is already an "off the shelf" nuclear power. The underlying assumption is Riyadh has invested in Pakistan's nuclear weapons programme with the understanding that "if the Saudis were to ask for them at any given time they would immediately be transferred." Understandably, a lot will have

to be put at stake by Riyadh and Pakistan to enter into any nuclear cooperation. But it is also important to be cognizant of the fact that given increased deterioration in the US ties with the two Sunni nations, Washington's influence is slowly waning from there. Unless the US and the rest of the global community act timely, it will difficult to halt any destabilizing nuclear agreement between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan.