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Prospects for Nuclear Cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan

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As Iran seeks to build a nuclear arsenal, Saudi Arabia might move to another phase of an arms race with its regional and ideological rival in the region. In 2010, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia started efforts to create its own civilian nuclear program; however, it might also consider other options to answer Iran's nuclear capabilities. Among a few hypothetical scenarios, Pakistan seems to be the Saudis' most likely partner in the development of the Kingdom's military nuclear programme.

Saudi Arabia's Intentions and Options. Even when the attention of the international community is directed towards the possible reactions by Israel to progress in Iran's nuclear programme, the strategic calculations of Saudi Arabia are equally important. For more than three decades, the Saudi monarchy and Iran have been rivals in the Persian Gulf and the Islamic world as well as in OPEC. The hostility between them is exaggerated by Sunni–Shia sectarianism, and the Saudi–Iranian rivalry is influencing instability in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. Further progress towards the nuclearisation of Iran is causing security dilemmas for the Kingdom, which officially is promoting the idea of a nuclear-weapons free zone in the Middle East. In private contacts with the West since 2003, the Saudis have been showing a willingness to build their own nuclear arsenal in case of a fiasco of diplomatic efforts and sanctions towards Iran. According to Dennis Ross, a former high-ranking official in the National Security Council of President Barack Obama's administration, King Abdullah II's warnings about the possible consequences of a "Shia bomb" were passed to the U.S. in 2009.

Since 2006, Saudi Arabia has declared its desire to develop its own civilian nuclear energy programme, and to possibly cooperate in this area with the other five members of the Gulf Cooperation Council. The Saudis are planning to open 16 reactors by 2030, the costs of which are estimated to total $100 billion. Officially, the Kingdom's plans are the result of the need to decrease the domestic consumption of oil in order to increase output for oil export, as well as expected increases in electric energy consumption and the need for new water desalination installations. Since 2007, the authorities in Riyadh have signed bilateral agreements on nuclear cooperation with the U.S., Great Britain, France, China and Russia, as well with Argentina, Czech Republic and the ROK. In 2010, the King Abdullah City for Atomic and Renewable Energy (K.A.CARE) was opened. It will conduct scientific research, implement government plans, draft official laws and train personnel for the Kingdom's nuclear programme. All of those efforts might help to build the appropriate infrastructure, but with the NPT regime, they are not very useful in converting the production of fissile materials (highly enriched uranium and plutonium) to the construction of nuclear warheads. Starting a Saudi civilian programme and hiding within it a nuclear weaponisation project are too complicated and time-consuming, so these exclude a quick response to the already existing capabilities of Iran. Moreover, even by purchasing and starting the first reactors in Saudi Arabia, the Kingdom will be dependent on imported nuclear fuel to operate them.

Saudi Arabia might study and consider other options. Pre-emptive strikes by Saudi Arabia (similar to Israel) might cause an open war with Iran, with the additional risk of Shia minority unrest in the Eastern Province of the Kingdom, an area full of oil reserves. More desirable for Saudi Arabia would be to gain formal security guarantees from some of the nuclear powers. The U.S. might not be interested in formalising this since it is in a parallel and more tight alliance with Israel, and because Congressional opposition would be expected to the ratification of such an agreement with the Kingdom. For the U.S., the more probable scenario might be the continuation of America's current

assistance to the Gulf Cooperation Council through such means as the transfers of modern weaponry and the construction of a regional ballistic missile defence system. For some Saudi royal family members, the more attractive option might be China or Pakistan. In the past, China has delivered CSS-2 ballistic missiles to Saudi Arabia, as well as engaged in nuclear proliferation to Pakistan and Iran.[1] Nevertheless, China's past record is not necessarily equal to its future desire to be entangled in a formal alliance with the Saudis because of the need to avoid further tensions in the Gulf, the main source of oil for the Chinese economy. In this context, Pakistan might be seen as the most natural ally of Saudi Arabia against a nuclear-armed Iran.

Potential for Saudi–Pakistani Cooperation. Cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan in the area of security has been more enduring than the relations of both countries with the U.S. This cooperation is supplemented by the close friendship of Saudi and Pakistani elites, the presence of a few million Pakistani workers in the Kingdom and the transfers of Saudi oil at privileged prices to Pakistan. Since 1979, both countries have coordinated their policies towards Iran, and until 2001 worked on a common strategy in Afghanistan. Also, in the past there have been occasional deployments of Pakistani military units to the Arab countries of the Gulf, but it seems unlikely that Pakistan would agree to a scenario of a permanent presence of some of its nuclear weapons on the Kingdom's territory. More likely, Pakistan may decide to retaliate for Iranian aggression on the Kingdom or by delivering to the Saudis some operational warheads before any crisis. Nuclear guarantees from Pakistan might not be without risks for the Saudis, due first to the country's internal instability, and also the continuation of the Afghan conflict as well as Pakistan's need to balance the conventional military superiority of India.

For Pakistan, there are other conditions that suggest it may assist the Saudis to quickly develop their nuclear arsenal. In the past, the Pakistani network of A.Q. Khan assisted in the beginnings of the nuclear weapons programmes of Libya, Iraq, Iran and the DPRK, and has been in touch with al-Qaida members. Created by Dr. Khan, the government nuclear complex grew to almost 10,000 personnel and is still expanding. It is estimated that Pakistan now possess 95–110 operational nuclear warheads. Newly opened installations in Kahuta and Khushab might be capable of producing another 7–15 uranium and 4–6 plutonium warheads every year. With constant growth in these capabilities, some expect that by 2015 Pakistan will achieve superiority to India's nuclear arsenal as well as be close to or equal the level of the French and British nuclear arsenals.

Saudi Arabia was considered a sponsor of the nuclear programme of Pakistan in the '80s. Previous media speculation were confirmed by Dr. Bruce Riedel, author of Obama's first strategic review of U.S. policy towards Afghanistan and Pakistan. In 1998 (after nuclear tests), members of the Saudi royal family were assured about Pakistan's reciprocal will to assist them in the future, and they were allowed to visit Pakistani secret military sites in 1999 and 2003. It is not unthinkable and cannot be excluded that the Kingdom and its perception of the Iranian threat is deeply behind the huge increase in production of Pakistani nuclear warheads. Pakistan might offer the Saudis a wide range of warheads and means of delivery that are much more advanced and accurate than the Chinese CSS-2 missiles. Among them are new models of air bombs, Ghauri and Shaheen-2 ballistic missiles as well Babur and Raad cruise-missiles.

Implications and Conclusions. A possible fiasco of diplomatic talks with Iran and its creation of a nuclear arsenal might cause further regional proliferation and an arms race, including by Saudi Arabia. This should be seen as an additional reason for Western efforts in stopping the nuclearisation of Iran. The Saudi civilian nuclear programme should be seen more in an economic aspect and with regard to national prestige, not necessarily the sign of a quick path to a military programme. One possible way to reduce Saudi and other Arab monarchies' fears might be to extend nuclear security guarantees from the U.S, UK and France. Even with occasional tensions in U.S. relations with the Kingdom, the Saudis might be influenced and open to Western concerns. At a minimum, U.S. assistance in regional military integration (especially in missile defence) and clear political declarations about deterrence and "red lines" for Iran might defuse some of the worst concerns of the Saudis and other Arab countries. The last and ultimate option for them might be closer Saudi–Pakistani nuclear cooperation, and may even include Saudis buying some part of the fast-growing operational warhead inventory of Pakistan.

[1] Chinese CSS-2/DF-3A ballistic missiles have ranges of 2,400 km, and might deliver a warhead of 2,500 kg. They were secretly sold to Saudi Arabia in 1988. There are different estimates, but Saudi Arabia still might have 36–48 missiles and 12–15 launchers for them.