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Yemen, Pakistan and Arab Monarchies: Widening Gulf ?

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Sunni-dominated Saudi Arabia might have miscalculated when it went into Yemen, not with boots on the ground but with bombs from the air, to try and deter the advance of the Shiite Houthi rebels. Riyadh and its Gulf allies, somewhat grandiosely called their intervention ‘Operation Decisive Storm’, obviously borrowing the jargon from the West. When it began the airstrikes, which appeared to be in imitation of a number of similar Western actions in the Middle East and North Africa, the Saudis and their co-bombers might have assumed it would be a cake-walk. It wasn’t. Notwithstanding mounting civilian casualties, the Houthis fought back with resilience that took the Gulf monarchies by surprise. In their consternation, the monarchies turned to the militarily most powerful Muslim State, the nuclear-armed Pakistan, asking for military support. The Pakistani response was a greater shock to them than even the trail of Houthi successes. The government in Islamabad demurred, and then turned the ball over to the Parliament, which after a long and arduous debate, declined.

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It was not an easy decision, and when the outcome was apparent, after five days of heated debate, it belied any impressions that the Pakistani lawmakers are guided more by their hearts than their heads. It is easy to see why their hearts should be with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and the other Gulf Sheikdoms. Saudi Arabia's largesse to Pakistan has always flowed freely. For instance, after the natural disaster that Pakistan suffered in 2010 Saudi coffers opened up, both private ones of the royalty and of the State. Over US\$ 361 million was immediately released, and Riyadh also initiated the world's largest 'air relief bridge' to Pakistan. The syncretic Islam largely practised by Pakistanis places great store by the symbolic citadels of the faith, and the Saudi King is the guardian of the two holiest shrines of Islam. On military matters the two countries enjoy the closest partnership. Saudi Arabia, the UAE and the Gulf States host millions of Pakistani workers whose remittances keep the Pakistani economy afloat. With the UAE bilateral trade has also ballooned above US\$ 10 billion.

The fact that perceived national self-interest could supersede material and spiritual yearnings might have come as bit of a surprise to the Gulf capitals, but that was indeed the case with the Pakistani leadership. There was a tinge of sophistry in the manner in which the Pakistani Finance Minister Ishaq Dar conveyed the decision to the outside world. "The Parliament of Pakistan calls upon the warring factions in Yemen to resolve their disputes peacefully through dialogue": fair enough, there could be no quarrel with that. 'Dispute-resolution through dialogue' is like motherhood, which no one can find unacceptable. Then he states a fact, somewhat alarming: "(It) apprehends that the crisis in Yemen could plunge the region into turmoil", a distinct possibility. Thereafter Dar makes the key disclosure: "(It) desires that Pakistan should maintain neutrality in the Yemen conflict so as to be able to play a proactive diplomatic role to end the crisis". As a sop to the Saudis, he added in a rhetorical flourish, with more sound than substance, that "(The Parliament) expresses unequivocal support for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and affirms that in case of any violation of territorial integrity or any threat to *Harmain Sharifain* [Islamic holy places], Pakistan will stand shoulder to shoulder with Saudi Arabia and its people". Translation: Pakistan will only intervene if Saudi territory or holy places are attacked, but would *not* participate in any military campaign in Yemen against the Shiite Houthis.

The emotional proximity to the Gulf rulers notwithstanding, Pakistan had reasons to be circumspect. Pakistan is well aware that for it, or perhaps for any other non-Arab Muslim country, to take open sides in what is clearly a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran would be like rushing in where angels fear to tread. Pakistan shares a 900-kilometre border with Iran, where at times tensions have prevailed. About 20% of the 180 million Pakistani are Shias, and sectarian violence in places has been rife. The Pakistan Foreign Office, with its penchant for drawing on tradition, has recollections of happy times with Tehran dating back to the Cold war days. Recently, to reignite those sentiments, and to instil some hard-headed realities into Islamabad's psyche, the Iranian Foreign Minister, Javad Zarif, a diplomat of consummate skill, with whom the author has related over several decades, visited the Pakistani capital. Zarif's main Pakistani counterparts, Sartaj Aziz and Syed Tariq Fatmi (Pakistan does not have a designated Foreign Minister, but the role is fulfilled by the former, called Adviser, and the latter, named Prime Minister's Special Assistant) – wise men of considerable intellect and experience, also refused to upset the applecart of reason – and may have counselled their decision-making colleagues to be cautious. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif was persuaded, as was the Parliament, and though Nawaz himself made some pro-Saudi remarks, the sum and substance of the Parliamentary resolution remained intact.

Does this mean a widened and unbridgeable gulf between the Arab monarchies and Pakistan? Not necessarily. While adopting their formal position, the utterances of the Pakistani leadership thereafter, the Prime Minister included, lends credence to the idea that a modicum of practical military support to the Saudis, in a routine fashion, could be extended, at levels below what could lead the Iranians to raise a hue and cry. In the real-world diplomacy, the country that has nuclear weapons does not always call the shots, as is evidenced in this carefully nuanced treatment of Saudi request to Pakistan.

Yemen attracts interest in many non-Arab Muslim countries. Events in Yemen have wide implications, particularly in Muslim-majority countries in the region where power, politics and spirituality closely intersect, as Yemeni Saints and preachers have travelled to those parts to propagate Islam, as Hazrat Shahjalal in present-day Bangladesh. Also, countries where there is an influential body of Muslim citizens, such as Singapore, many claim Yemeni roots. How these people view the civil war in Yemen is important to these governments.

By intervening in Yemen, the Gulf monarchies might have unleashed forces they may be unable to control. The implications of the event go far beyond its immediate context. The Pakistani decision may serve as a frame of reference to these nations, who have interests, though not necessarily stakes. Despite the brouhaha that the Parliamentary resolution in Islamabad produced, nothing much is likely to change in terms of relations between the monarchies and Pakistan. Princes and Sheikhs from Gulf Arabia will still treat Pakistan as their playground. They will still come to Pakistan to hunt rare birds with their falcons, which is a sport denied to the local Pakistani hoi polloi – and, even the better-bred! Pakistani businessmen will still treat Dubai as their trading hub, and continue to draw spiritual pabulum from their pilgrimages to Saudi cities. What Pakistan, and other non-Arab Muslim countries will perhaps need to develop, in response to the Yemeni crisis and other emerging intra-Arab issues, is the deft art of running with the hare, and hunting with the hound.

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