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Can Pakistan succeed in its quest to reconcile conflicting regional interests?

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In the past, Pakistan provided troops and military support to the Saudis

AHEAD of the inevitable withdrawal of US and NATO forces from Afghanistan and the ensuing shift in the regional power balance, Pakistan is striving to position itself in an arena of conflicting interests, writes World Review expert Lisa Curtis.

As well as consolidating historical ties with China, Islamabad wants to stay in with long-standing Gulf ally, Saudi Arabia and buddy up with new regional influencers, Iran. But Pakistan may find it tricky to maintain amicable relations with both Shiite-dominated Iran and Sunni-majority Saudi Arabia. While having historic ties with Saudi Arabia, it also wants to keep options open with Iran, whose energy resources, Pakistan would like to tap into.

Connections between the countries are deep-rooted with an estimated one and a half million Pakistanis living and working in Saudi Arabia. Money sent home forms an essential part of the Pakistan economy. The Saudis have provided significant aid to Pakistan over the last 30 years.

Nonetheless, Islamabad rejected Riyadh's April 2015 request for Pakistani soldiers to help fight in Yemen against the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels, not wanting to get sucked into a sectarian war that could stoke up Shia-Sunni tensions within Pakistan.

On the other hand, Pakistan provided troops and military support to the Saudis in preparations for the first Gulf War in 1990. Saudi Arabia has close relations with Pakistan's civilian leadership, brokering a deal in 1999 that allowed current Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, to live in political exile in Saudi Arabia for eight years after he had been deposed.

However, the Saudis will be concerned by Iran's growing power in the region, having in the past, fought to counter Iranian influence in Afghanistan by supporting Sunni militant groups such as the Taliban and Haqqani Network.

Sections of Pakistan's civil society resent the Saudis' ideological influence on religion through Deobandi schools in Pakistan. These follow a strict and puritanical interpretation of Islam similar to Saudi Wahhabism and have been accused of supporting extremism and sectarian violence.

A possible P-5+1 (China, Russia, US, UK, France plus Germany) nuclear agreement with Iran has led to speculation that the Saudis will look to Pakistan to provide it with nuclear weapons technology and so join the nuclear club. However, Pakistan's Foreign Secretary Aizaz Ahmad Chaudhry has dismissed such reports as baseless.

Pakistan's track record on nuclear proliferation has been terrible with metallurgist Abdul Qadeer Khan having been found guilty of selling advanced nuclear weapons technology to the Iranian, Libyan, and North Korean governments in the 1980s-1990s.

Pakistani-Saudi nerves were tested in April 2015 when Pakistan's parliament voted unanimously to reject Saudi requests for Pakistan soldiers to help fight Houthi rebels in Yemen.

The Pakistani establishment ruled that Pakistan had to remain neutral in the conflict, not wanting to pour fuel on the potential fire of Shia-Sunni antipathy at home. In recent years, attacks have even targeted Shiite professionals, including doctors, lawyers and college professors. In March 2015, an attack on a bus in Karachi killed 45 Ismaeli Shias.

Iran-Pakistan relations have thawed as Pakistan recognises Iran's growing regional influence and seeks to position itself to take advantage of economic opportunities that will arise if the West lift sanctions on Iran.

In the US-Pakistan joint statement issued following talks in Washington in June 2015, Pakistan welcomed the P5+1 nuclear talks with Iran stressing the importance of resolving the Iran nuclear issue peacefully. Pakistan's Foreign Secretary Chaudhry said an agreement would have significant economic benefits for Pakistan, allowing it to complete a long-sought gas pipeline project with its western neighbour.

In the past, the two countries have had a cordial but sometimes prickly relationship due to differences over Afghanistan and sectarianism. In the past, Tehran accused Pakistan of providing sanctuary to members of Jundullah – an Iranian Sunni Baloch terrorist group that kidnapped and executed 16 Iranian paramilitary forces in 2008 and continue skirmishes across the Iran-Pakistan border.

So, to what extent will Pakistan be able to square the circle of the mutual and conflicting demands of these three important regional players?