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SAUDI ARABIA – SHIFT IN STRATEGIC FOCUS

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There are no permanent friends or enemies in international relations- only interests are permanent. This analogy aptly sums up the new shift in Saudi Arabia's strategic thinking. The current direct engagement in Yemen, proactive participation in Syria, aggressive posturing to counter Iran, bid to look for new allies within the region, a foreign policy that does not kowtow to the US, foretells the shifting contours of Saudi thinking.

The main factor driving the Saudi strategy is attributed to the fear of growing Iranian regional hegemony. The Saudis visualize Iran as a growing regional threat, committed to stirring up Shia population in the Gulf States and elsewhere, and to exporting its brand of "revolutionary" Islam.¹ These fears were supported by the popular uprising in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Bahrain in 2011. Specifically, Saudi Arabia was very apprehensive about the uprising in Bahrain as it borders the eastern province of Saudi Arabia, which is the kingdom's oil centre. This province also has a Shia majority, and the Saudis feared that the Shia rebellion in Bahrain will spread and that any concessions the Bahraini monarch makes to his Shia

community will be demanded by theirs as well. Also, the reforms in Bahrain would empower the Shia community and place them in a pivotal political position in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) as a member-country, providing a boost to Iran at Saudi Arabia's very door step. Because of its economic and political clout and location of two holy places in its territory, Saudi Arabia perceives itself as the custodian of Arab affairs, and is thus interested in keeping Iran at arms length from interfering in the internal affairs of the Arabs. Moreover, growing engagement of US administration under President Barack Obama with Iran has added to Riyadh's fears. The US led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the overthrowing of Saddam Hussein was seen as handing over of Iraq to Iran on a platter. Washington's willingness to abandon President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt in the wake of the Arab Spring compounded concerns in Riyadh that the US might be an undependable ally. Further, the signing of the Nuclear Framework Agreement in April 2015 and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in July 2015, made matters worse². It was felt that the US has "abandoned Saudi Arabia in favour of a



dangerous and quixotic quest to improve relations with Iran, and that the Kingdom's interests are increasingly irrelevant to Washington"³

The Nuclear Agreement brought Iran closer to a nuclear threshold capability. Further, the lifting of sanctions opened the Iranian economy (one of the untapped emerging markets) to international trade and investment. Also, Iran got access to more than \$100 billion of money that was frozen overseas⁴. All these factors have posed great challenges to Saudi Arabia, consequently, forcing the Saudi rulers to act more aggressively. This has escalated the Saudi-Iranian confrontation in the region. The recent execution of Saudi Shia cleric, Nimr al-Nimr, and the consequent Iranian protests which have caused damage to the Saudi diplomatic facilities and Saudi decision to cut diplomatic ties⁵ is the latest and most extreme example of a growing conflict in the region. Saudi Arabia received support from its neighbours such as UAE, Bahrain, Kuwait, who also followed Saudi Arabia's example of recalling their envoys from Tehran.

In due course, Saudi Arabia abandoned its hitherto moderate and restrained approach in regional affairs and embarked on a pro-active competition with Iran. It signalled a more independent foreign policy, which is less reliant on US in recent years. In Syria, it backed the Islamist militia to secure regime change, while in Yemen it directly involved itself in military action against the Iran backed Houthi militia. The strategic goal of overthrowing Syrian President Bashar al-Assad (and weakening Iran) had been the main focus of Saudi

Arabia's foreign policy. Its aim was to strengthen elements among the rebels, so that if and when Assad falls, those elements would gain control over what remains of the Syrian state. To that end, Saudi Arabia's role was not focussed on providing material and financial assistance, but also offering to boost the status and capabilities of the political opposition to President Assad⁶. Further, by undertaking a huge military operation in Yemen, Saudi Arabia has shown that it will not hesitate to use force to ensure security in its neighbourhood. The Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen 'Operation Decisive Storm' was intended to bring stability to Yemen by reinstating the government led by President Abd Mansur Hadi and stopping the advance of Houthis. Saudi Arabia left no stone unturned to make the operation a success. Along with its GCC neighbours (UAE, Kuwait, Qatar and Bahrain), and other Arab countries such as Jordan, Morocco, Egypt and Senegal, were also drawn into participate in the military operation⁷.

However, with the conflicts snowballing to a stalemate on both battlefronts, Saudi Arabia has not shied away from the peace process. In Syria, it has been supportive of the US-Russian initiative that has achieved a "cessation of hostilities", and pulled the contending parties to the Geneva-111 Conference, and in Yemen, the Saudis have created a divide between the Houthis and former President Ali Abdullah Saleh by entering into secret negotiations with the former.⁸

Another policy initiative from the Saudi rulers was to coordinate the efforts of every Muslim

country fighting terrorism. In December 2015, it announced the setting up of an “Islamic Military Alliance”, bringing together 34 countries under its umbrella to fight various terrorist groups and ISIS through military actions. Although not many details have been provided about its specific role, organisation, deployment and funding and the likely targets, but it has been described as a “Sunni Coalition” given the absence of Iran and Iraq⁹. The political and military success of the military is yet to be seen, but the deliberate omission of Iran may limit its capabilities to achieve its intended objective of defeating terrorist groups and the Islamic State. Also, it is seen as the Kingdom’s assertion to take matters of regional security into its own hands¹⁰ and a show of strength that it enjoys abroad base of support among Arab and Muslim countries¹¹. Although the member countries of the alliance are mostly friendly in their approach towards Saudi Arabia, still political differences exist among them, which may pose a big challenge in future.

The agenda of mending relations and looking for new allies within the region seems to be working well for Saudi Arabia. The visit of King Salman to Egypt in April 2016 opened new vistas of cooperation between the two countries. Transfer of two Red Sea Islands of Tiran and Sanafir from Egypt to Saudi sovereignty, agreement to build a land bridge between the two countries, establishing King Salman University in Sinai, heavy Saudi investment in the ailing Egyptian economy etc. have set the ball rolling. The two islands are of great strategic importance as they lie at the mouth of the

Gulf of Aqaba from where access to Jordan’s Port of Aqaba and Israel’s Port of Eilat can be controlled. Also, the connection through the proposed bridge will help in easing out both trade and pilgrimage to Mecca. On the economic front, Egypt’s ailing economy will get cash inflow of billions of dollars in the form of Saudi investment¹². Further, on the question of transferring of islands, it is believed that Israel had been privy to the secret negotiations and has apparently made no objection provided its shipping is not affected. This, sort of, confirms a good working relationship among the three countries and suggest that their agenda of common interest is broadening.¹³ Officially, Riyadh still opposes formal relations with Israel, but both countries share similar views on key issues such as threat posed by Iran.¹⁴ Certain reports suggest that the Saudi and Israeli officials have met at least five times since 2014, leading the Saudi- Israel relations to an entirely new level of strategic understanding.¹⁵

On the economic front, Saudi Arabia has planned to restructure its oil-dependent economy by diversification, privatisation of massive state assets including the energy giant Aramco, subsidy cuts etc.¹⁶ The objective of this move is to make the country capable of living without oil trade within the next four years. To achieve this goal, the Kingdom approved a long term blue print for economic growth dubbed as “Saudi Vision 2030”.¹⁷ Besides, Saudis request for \$10 billion loan signals that the Kingdom is looking at other ways to finance its economy after the global oil price slump.¹⁸ However, it is essential that these initiatives,

underway, would ensure Saudis sustainability given the current state of the Kingdom's geo-political condition.

The overtures of Saudi Foreign Policy indicate that a rebalancing act is underway. Between restructuring some of the country's most important political and economic institutions and launching an unprecedented, large-scale military operation in a neighbouring country that is on the verge of a civil war, one could witness the beginning of a completely new Saudi way of thinking, which is proactive and independent. Although the relation with the US is still on an even pitch, the foundational basis of the relationship has been shaken and therefore it will not be business as usual for them in times to come. In its quest for regional hegemony and dominance, by countering Iran, new alliances, adjustments, accommodations are underway, which may increase the unrest in the region.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes:

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