

**RESEARCH PAPER****Iran-Saudi Rapprochement: Challenges and Opportunities for Pakistan****¹Dr. Arshad Abbasi* and ²Dr. Nasreen Akhtar**

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***Corresponding Author:** arshadabasi@gmail.com**ABSTRACT**

This paper analyses the challenges and opportunities for Pakistan arising out of Iran-Saudi rapprochement. The reconciliation between these two important countries for Pakistan will define its posture and policies in its immediate and extended neighbourhood. The paper while using qualitative research explores the potential challenges of this normalisation deal for Pakistan. It also discusses the prospects this deal opens up for Pakistan. The paper also proffers recommendations to mitigate the challenges and optimise the opportunities generated by Iran-Saudi rapprochement. The recommendations are primarily aimed at policy-making in the key Government stake holders such as Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Commerce, Economic Affairs Division, Planning Commission and Ministry of Overseas Pakistanis. Recommendations also take into account semi-Government institutions such as academia, Government-sponsored think tanks and private entities such as research centres and business fraternity.

KEYWORDS China, Interests, Iran, Middle East, Pakistan, Peace, Rivalry, Saudi Arab**Introduction**

Iran and Saudi Arabia have restored their diplomatic ties in March 2023 after they broke off in 2016. In January 2016 a mob burned down the Saudi embassy in Tehran and Consulate in Mushhad. It was a reaction of execution of Nimr Al Nimr, a Shia cleric in Saudi Arabia (Dawn, 2016). The relations dipped to a new low after the incident and added another dimension to the rivalry between the two countries which spread over centuries. The rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia is etched in competing and contesting sectarian, ethnic and political worldviews and differences. Both countries have been fighting through proxies in the Middle East and beyond. The breaking off of diplomatic ties brought the matters almost to point of no return but they decided to reengage by reopening the respective embassies.

Pakistan endeavored - 2016, 2019- to normalise relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia but would not succeed. It was China which brokered rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Although Iraq kept both countries engaged with a view to normalise their ties, but efforts did not bear fruit (Figueroa, 2023). China is increasingly strengthening its footprint in the Middle East through its economic outreach and soft power. China has built diplomatic capital in both countries. It was on this count that China hosted Foreign Ministers of both countries in Beijing in March 2023 where both dignitaries announced to reopen their embassies and vowed to resolve their differences. Iran's embassy in Saudi Arabia became functional on 07 June 2023 whereas Saudi Embassy is temporarily based in a hotel in Tehran pending the completion of repair work of its embassy compound after it was set ablaze (Benmansour, 2023).

Restoration of ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia poses challenges and offers opportunities to Pakistan. This paper explores these challenges and opportunities and offers

recommendations to offset the challenges and benefit from the opportunities. Pakistan has close affinity with both countries. With Iran Pakistan shares border and with Saudi Arabia ties are predicated on the largest Pakistani diaspora there. Moreover, both countries hold religious significance for Pakistan. The role of outside powers like China, United States, Russia and India is also an important factor in Pakistan's equation with Iran and Saudi Arabia. This paper will take into account the unfolding scenario for Pakistan in the wake of Iran-Saudi rapprochement and looks at how Pakistan should position itself in coming years and how can normalization between Iran- Saudi Arabia promote Pakistan's interests. Will this tie, between Iran-Saudi Arabia, upset Pakistan's relations with these countries. This paper would attempt to answer these questions.

Iran and Saudi Arabia have resumed diplomatic ties which broke off in 2016. This is the outcome of Chinese-brokered rapprochement between the two countries. Both countries have pledged to address the differences causing tensions between them. Pakistan has close affinity with both, Iran and Saudi Arabia. Iran being the neighbour and Saudi Arabia being close on several counts always figure prominently in Pakistan's domestic discourse and foreign policy formulation. The rapprochement between the two countries entails challenges for Pakistan and also offers opportunities. Challenges include economic, political and strategic. On the contrary opportunities exist in the same spheres provided Pakistan's response to the challenges is based on realistic appraisal of its foreign policy in the wake of changing regional and global geopolitical, geo-economics and geostrategic matrices. This study aims at exploring the challenges and opportunities arising for Pakistan out of Iran-Saudi rapprochement. Having done this, the research proffers policy recommendations for mitigating challenges and benefitting from opportunities that Iran-Saudi rapprochement is likely to generate for Pakistan. Pakistan at times found difficult to navigate through the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Literature Review

An Overview : Iran-Saudi Arabia- China in the Past and Present

Iran's revolutions 1979 changed the political and security landscape of the Middle East. Particularly, relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran became atypical in the region (Mebon, 2015). Since 1979, serious and triggering incidents have been happened in the Middle East region and both Saudi Arabia and Iran opposed or criticized echoer- Iran- Iraq war, Gulf war, the rise of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Syria and Yemen crisis, these all factors had have great implications to the two significant countries in the Middle East (Mohammad, 2022) and other Muslim countries- Pakistan, however, played pivotal role in maintaining the balance relations with two ideologically different states- despite the Iran's security concerns in the region. Pakistan also desired normalization between Saudi Arabia and Iran but owing to trust deficit and clash on Pakistan-Iran borders (Notezai, 2018) Iran continued its reluctance in developing ties with Saudi Arabia and would not accept Pakistan's mediation in defusing tension with Saudi Arabia. Pakistan-Iran have been distanced over regional conflicts-Taliban, India, and sectarian rifts in Pakistan. Both, Pakistan and Iran, are hard neighbors- facing internal challenges across the borders.

Recently, China has developed relations with Iran and Saudi Arabia. China, under Xi Jinping, is altering the regional order and global strategic order. China is a close friend of Pakistan and have historical relations with Iran and Saudi Arabia- China has harmonized relations between two old rival in the Middle East. "China remained Iran's strongest ally on the Security Council and it had been involved in modernizing Iran's military, and engineering services for oil" (Graver, 2006). China views Iran as a potential partner in the Middle East region for controlling the US influence whereas Iran views China as the strongest ally against the US (Heralod & Nader, 2012)- both need each other to contain the influence of their common rival in the Middle East to pursue their strategic objectives. China and Iran have been close

collaborative states during the Cold War and they continued their friendly relations after the Cold War- the post-9/11 scenario reinforced their ties. Both countries remain “committed to undermining the US led rules based order-both countries have heralded 25 years &400 million strategic cooperation in 2021 named as “General Framework for China-Iran Cooperation” (Singleton, 2022)) at regional and global level – “ in the face of the current complex changes in the world, times, and history, China and Iran supported each other and worked together in solidarity and cooperation”, (Al Jazeera, 2023)

China-Saudi Arabia had conflictual relations during the Cold War –their contradictory ideology have been an irritant until they had established diplomatic relations in 1990. In 1971, Saudi Arabia was the only state who opposed China’s admission the United Nations-but economic exchange always played significant role between China and Saudi Arabia- the two countries enjoy high volume of trade \$400 million in 1990 “\$64 billion in 2011 and \$78.8 billion in 2019” and China’s Belt Road Initiative (BRI) also aligning with Saudi Arabia vision 2030 (Wu& Zhao, 2020),in 2019, China and Saudi Arabia signed 35 cooperation agreements-after Xi’s state visit 2006 the two countries have developed mutual and deeper understanding of co-existence (Wu & Zhao, 2020). In 2023, China has emerged as a broker, between the two regional rivals in the Middle East, to end their hostility – Saudi Arabia and Iran both have normalized their relations and have established strong contact owing to Israel’s war against Palestinian’s Gaza strip. Since 1945, the history of International Relations shows that “there is no permanent rival in politics” yesterday’s foes have become close ally and partners. Some of them have shifted paradigms in their foreign relations and foreign policies. For instance, the rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran has defused tension between Iran and other regional countries those had distanced themselves in support of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (Motamedi, 2023).

Iran and Saudi Arabia have become more significant regional actors to discuss their bilateral and regional issues. The recent telephonic talk between Iranian President and Saudi Arabia’s prince has urged the international community to resolve the current war between Israel and Hamas Organization. China has melted ice and enabled the Saudi prince and Iran’s president to talk cooperatively to play their role in region. The new dawn in their relationship may develop peace in the Middle East and would help the extra-regional actors to understand the complexity in Middle Eastern region. Moreover, Pakistan will benefit internally-as sectarian and militancy have become serious peril in the country (Muzaffar, Khan, & Yaseen, 2017).

Material and Methods

This is an analytical study aimed at understanding the challenges and opportunities for Pakistan arising out of Iran-Saudi rapprochement. The paper also contains policy options to cope with the challenges and optimise the opportunities. Since it is an analytical study dealing with an ongoing interstate issue, hence qualitative approach has been adopted. Qualitative research approach has an advantage that it can accommodate varying and competing perspectives in a single study as is the case with Iran-Saudi relations and Pakistan’s relevance. Since relations among nations are largely driven by motivations, experiences, perceptions and interests, so its qualitative approach which is more suitable for such studies (Berg, 2003).

Results and Discussion

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis has been used to analyse the data for the paper. According to Braun and Clark (2013) thematic analysis is an analytical technique by which the researcher is able to locate meanings and discover patterns within the data set used for a study. Gray (2009) posits that there emerge significant themes within data which relate to the driving question behind a research. Thematic analysis is useful for analysing a large and diverse dataset which has been used for this paper. It throws up themes in accordance with the

puzzle and central precept of a study. The subsequent sections dealing with challenges and opportunities for Pakistan in the wake of Iran-Saudi rapprochement are based on the themes derived from the data collected for this study.

Challenges for Pakistan

The rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia can have both positive and negative implications for Pakistan. While it may present certain opportunities, it also poses several challenges for the country. Here are some of the challenges that Pakistan may face in the wake of Iran-Saudi rapprochement.

Balancing Regional Alliances

Pakistan has historically maintained close ties with both Iran and Saudi Arabia. However, the rivalry between these two regional powers has often put Pakistan in a catch-22 situation. With the rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia, Pakistan will need to carefully navigate its relationships with both countries to avoid being caught in the middle. In Saudi Arabia it was perceived against the backdrop of Yemen conflict that Pakistan is not aiding the Kingdom. Apart from that episode in Iran it was felt that Pakistan is under the Saudi influence. According to Khan (Bhowmick 2023) Pakistan's reliance on Saudi Arabia for economic reasons and religious affiliation, it was tilted more towards the former. In the light of the recent rapprochement Pakistan has to weigh its options carefully to maintain a favourable equilibrium to advance its own interest as both Iran and Saudi Arabia have normalise their diplomatic ties considering their own pragmatic interests.

Streamlining the Institutional Mechanisms

Pakistan's institutional mechanisms with Iran are at tactical cum operational level whereas with Saudi Arabia these mechanisms are at operational cum strategic level. In the wake of the recent rapprochement Pakistan has to navigate through the challenge of streamlining the institutional mechanisms with both countries so as to create favourable chemistry with them.

There is Supreme Coordination Council (SCC) between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan established in November 2019 when Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad Bin Salman visited Pakistan. The SCC is headed by the Crown Prince from Saudi side and from Pakistan the Prime Minister is the chair. SCC is an umbrella forum for overall areas of bilateral cooperation between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia and replaced Joint Ministerial Commission. Under SCC there are three main sectoral mechanisms; a) political and security-headed by foreign ministers, b) Social and cultural; 5 areas of cooperation under it headed by respective ministers which include education, information, culture, religious and human resource, c) Economic; finance and commerce to be headed by respective ministers. In November 2022 ministerial meetings took place to review the entire gamut of relations. With Iran, there is Joint Economic Commission headed by Commerce Ministers, Joint Border Trade Committee headed by senior Customs officials from both sides, Border Security Commission headed by Chief Secretary Balochistan his official counterpart from Zahidan-Iran and Bilateral Political Consultations headed by the Foreign Secretaries of both countries. This shows that Pakistan has bilateral institutional mechanisms with both countries but there is a need of upgrading them with Iran so as to strike a balance between a neighbour and a strategic partner. This is where the challenge is as sudden uptick in Pakistan-Iran ties may generate reservations in Saudi Arabia given that rivalry between both countries is deep-rooted and may not yield to the euphoria created by the recent rapprochement.

Underlying Causes of Rivalry

Although Iran and Saudi Arabia have normalised their diplomatic ties by reopening embassies, the underlying causes of their rivalry still persist. Historically, the rivalry between the two countries is deep-rooted spreading over centuries and reflecting in competing ethnic and sectarian worldviews. This in turn generates political differences leading to proxy conflicts between the two countries which extend beyond the Middle Eastern region. Given the deep-rooted rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia full normalisation of ties still may take decades. Pakistan has to be mindful of the fault lines between the two countries (Abbas, 2023). Any future tensions can upset Pakistan's posturing taking shape in the wake of the current phase of Iran-Saudi ties defined by their rapprochement facilitated by China. The latent Iran-Saudi unease will place a burden on Pakistan which already lost some ground in the Middle East as happened in the Yemen proxy conflict. Iran has voiced reservation that Pakistan is the conduit of Saudi-backed Jaishul Adl to stir troubles in Iran (Rana, 2023). Hence Pakistan has to be careful that non-state actors do not spoil its ties with either Iran or Saudi Arabia. Pakistan's incumbent Chief of Army Staff Gen Syed Asim Munir visited Iran in July 2023 and held talks with a broad range of Iranian civil and military leaderships. Both countries decided to expand their military, security and defence ties (Arab News, 2023). Particular reference was made to bolster border security as both nations share km917 border which is prone to unauthorised and illegal crossing and poses challenge to the bilateral relations.

Navigating Through the US-China Conflict

The competition between the US and China bordering on new Cold War is also taking on newer proportions in the Middle East. This will put pressure on Pakistan as well. On one hand China will want Pakistan to be a conduit for its BRI extending it Westward and on the other hand the US's implacable hostility towards Iran, unceasing competition with China and growing skepticism towards Saudi Arabia will dissuade Pakistan from getting closer to these countries (Hussain, 2023). This will test Pakistan's diplomatic capital as to how to steer clear through the nettlesome the US- China ties and their impact on the Middle East. Pakistan's Minister of State, Hina Rabbani Khar, stated that Pakistan does not want to pick sides with either the US or China (Arab News, 2023). This is easier said than done especially when push will come to shove between the two global giants.

Overall, while the Iran-Saudi rapprochement presents certain opportunities for Pakistan, it also poses significant challenges. Pakistan will need to carefully manage its relationships with both countries, navigate sectarian tensions, monitor economic implications, adjust its foreign policy alignment, handle potential proxy conflicts, and work towards regional stability

Opportunities for Pakistan

Where there are challenges for Pakistan in the wake of Iran-Saudi rapprochement, opportunities also exist. Pakistan's response to this development can enable it to draw mileage from it.

Leeway from Zero-Sum Iran-Saudi Rivalry

Pakistan now will have an opportunity to benefit from Iran-Saudi reconciliation. The thaw in the bilateral ties between these two important countries for Pakistan will result in frictionless regional politics. Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal Bin Farhan visited Iran in June 2023 and stated "I would like to point out the importance of cooperation between our two countries concerning the regional security" (Motamedi, 2023). In the past Pakistan was put in an unenviable position where it had to choose between these two nations which had been locked in a zero-sum competition. This ceaseless hostility extended into Pakistan and

demonstrated in the sectarian bloodshed in Pakistan. Pakistan and Gulf Cooperation Council signed a strategic partnership agreement in 2010 which is lying dormant since then. There is a need to revive this arrangement and bring Iran on this platform as well to forge cooperation in crucial areas of security and economy.

Overcoming Economic Mess

Pakistan is a long-standing ally of Saudi Arabia and immediate neighbour of Iran hence improvement of ties between the two countries has the potential to have positive economic spin-off for the whole region. Pakistan stands to gain from this economic turnaround. According to Pakistan Bureau of Statistics 58 percent of total inbound remittances for Pakistan come from Gulf countries of which Saudi Arabia has the largest share (Hussain, 2023). The care taker Prime Minister, Anwar ul Haq Kakar, revealed that Saudi Arabia would fix \$24 billion for investing in Pakistan's agricultural, Information Technology and mining sectors (Hammond, 2023). At present negotiations are ongoing between Pakistan and GCC for concluding Free Trade Area (FTA) which includes goods, services, investment, intellectual property and E-commerce. The draft texts have been exchanged and both sides are putting finishing touches on the agreement. Saudi Arabia has included separate investment annexure addition to GCC-Pakistan FTA platform whose indication is the setting of oil refinery facility by Aramco at Gwadar (Ahmed, 2023).

Similarly, Pakistan's incomplete gas pipe line with Iran is another crucial project helping the country to cope with the crippling energy crunch. Since Saudi Arabia may no longer object to the completion of Iran-Pakistan gas pipe line, Pakistan can construct its side of the pipe line albeit skirting around the US pressure (Anadolu, 2023) argues that the US is close to India and it does not have any objection to its trade with Iran. India can convince the US to bring Iran -Pakistan- India (IPI) gas pipeline to fruition although it requires normalisation of India-Pakistan ties. Furthermore, recently Pakistan and Iran agreed on barter trade listing 26 products which includes petroleum products as well (Gul, 2023). This is an attempt to sidestep the potential US sanctions on the countries buying Iranian oil. The Iran-Saudi rapprochement has the potential to uplift Pakistan economically provided the latter is also serious in putting its own house in order.

Sectarian Aspect

Pakistan has a diverse population with a significant Shia minority. The Iran-Saudi rapprochement may have a positive impact on sectarian dynamics within the country. If tensions do not flare up between Iran and Saudi Arabia in future, it could potentially help Pakistani authorities to address the sectarian unrest and violence which still stalks the country's socio-cultural milieu (Siddiq, 2023; Hussain, 2023). Moreover, the reconciliation between these two important countries can foster intersectarian tolerance in Pakistan leading to reduction in sectarian violence which is crucial for peaceful coexistence in the country (Khan, 2023).

Regional Stability

The Iran-Saudi rapprochement has the potential to contribute to regional stability as it will lead to reduced tensions and cooperation between the two countries. In the past conflicts arising from this relationship had a destabilizing impact on the broader region, including Pakistan (Khan, Muzaffar, & Khan, 2019). Pakistan's strategic ally China has invested a great deal in this rapprochement. China wants to extend its BRI into Central Asia, Middle East and from then into Europe. Pakistan is poised to play a pivotal role in China's grand project of worldwide connectivity. In order for this to happen, regional stability in South, Central and West Asia i.e., Middle East now holds greater prospect in the wake of Iran-Saudi rapprochement. Pakistan will be among the biggest beneficiaries if this deal holds and China is able to realise its BRI project.

Lesson to Normalise Ties with Neighbours

At present, there is a complete deadlock between Pakistan and India. With Afghanistan despite Taliban regime tensions flare up every now and then. Border skirmishes symbolize an element of unease between Iran and Pakistan. Pakistan can take a leaf out of Iran-Saudi rapprochement and embark on a meaningful and sustainable path of lasting peace in its neighbourhood. In another instance Saudi Arabia and Bahrain settled their long-standing border dispute in 2000 which provides a lesson for dispute settlement (The Washington Institute, 2001). Onus for such durable peace will obviously lie on Pakistan's neighbours, but there is no alternative to peaceful and prosperous neighbourhood. A way has to be found to engage with India in the wake of its unilateral actions of 5 August 2019. The visit of Pakistan's Foreign Minister, Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, to India in May 2023 and before that Indian Prime Minister Modi's desire to initiate dialogue with Pakistan is an indication of possible thaw between the two South Asian countries. Iran-Saudi reconciliation can provide an inspiration and impetus for regional peace in South Asia along the lines of regional peace in the Middle East.

There is a vista of opportunities opened up for Pakistan from Iran-Saudi rapprochement. Pakistan can capitalize on these opportunities by its proactive foreign policy and domestic consensus. If Pakistan once again finds itself a bystander in this equation, then things will move on even at the cost of laggards who cannot take their own destiny in their hands.

Conclusion

Iran-Saudi rapprochement throws up challenges and offers opportunities for Pakistan in key socio-political, economic and strategic domains. Pakistan's response to these challenges and opportunities will determine whether it is able to benefit from this rapprochement or remains a spectator. Pakistan is once again at the cusp of powerful regional change and its future hinges on its ability to cope with the challenges and cash in on the opportunities arising out of this rapprochement. Considering this this research paper proffers recommendations aimed at policy response.

Recommendations

This section proffers recommendations to mitigate the challenges and maximise the benefits for Pakistan which may result from Iran-Saudi rapprochement. There are two sets of recommendations-short to medium term and medium to long term.

Short to Medium Term

- a. Bolstering and balancing institutional mechanisms: Pakistan needs to bolster its institutional mechanisms with Iran by bringing them at par with those of with Saudi Arabia. On the other hand institutional mechanisms with Saudi Arabia need to be streamlined so as to bring them out of personality-driven mode. For instance Pak-Saudi SCC is a high level umbrella forum at the level of heads of Government, but only meeting (inaugural session) took place in November 2019. Here MoFA along with Prime Minister Office can chart a course of action whereby having realistic platforms with Saudi Arabia without creating resentment with the other side.
- b. Policy Planning Division in MoFA is its interface with the think tanks, academia and public diplomacy platforms. The Division needs to organise in-house discussion in the Ministry about the evolving regional scenario in ME and South Asia. It should also hold panel discussions with intelligentsia, think tanks, academia and media. There is a retired diplomats forum, which can be a handy source of brainstorming. Some retired diplomats have served in Tehran and Riyadh, they need to be invited to these discussions. The purpose is to feed policy with optimal outcomes.

- c. **Balancing act:** Maintaining a balance in ties with Iran and Saudi Arabia will be the key for Pakistan to benefit from the recent thaw between the two countries. In past it was due to Pakistan's inconsistent approach and sometimes vague and sometimes unnecessarily vocal pronouncements that both countries got upset. In order to maintain the balance Pakistan has to meaningfully implement the vision of geo-economics encapsulated in National Security Policy 2022. Pakistan's former Foreign Secretary Aizaz Chaudhry (2021) asserts that geo-economics is the path for economic security and political clout. Here declarations will have to match actions.
- d. **Managing border:** Border skirmishes between Iran and Pakistan have to be addressed on top priority basis. Here the existing mechanism of cross-border coordination needs to be constantly active. For instance, Joint Action Rapid Force (2021), Joint Working Group (2022) and Border Security Commission are the existing bilateral border management forums between Iran and Pakistan which ought to be proactive instead of reacting episodically. Man-Pishin border market between the two countries has the potential to unlock more trade opportunities, but for that to happen peaceful and safe border is a prerequisite. Refugee by militants from both sides in each other's land has to be addressed. This has the potential to upset the bilateral ties between Iran and Pakistan. IPI gas pipe line is also conditioned on peaceful border and even security in the hinterland especially on Pakistan side. Here coordination between the civilian institutions and the security forces assumes importance under the platforms listed here.
- e. **Fixing Balochistan:** Pakistan stands to gain immensely in terms of economic bonanza and energy flow from the normalisation of ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia. In order to capitalize on this opportunity, situation of law and order in Balochistan has to be addressed on war footing. If Balochistan remains in flux, then Pakistan will not be able to leverage the emerging regional permutations to its advantage. The success of CPEC also hinges in fixing the law enforcement issues in Balochistan. Here the role of security forces becomes pivotal. Baloch insurgents of various stripes have to be either neutralised or co-opted with the symbiotic coordination between civilian and security institutions. Balochistan's Provincial Government can act as a fulcrum for choreographing well-coordinated response to redress the grievances of the Baloch so that the problem can be addressed holistically.
- f. **Normalising ties with India:** Taking a cue from Iran-Saudi rapprochement Pakistan needs to explore options to normalise ties with India. The starting point can be the reappointment of ambassadors as embassies in both capitals are functional. If Iran and Saudi Arabia despite multidimensional rivalry of centuries can reconcile, then why not Pakistan and India. Pakistan's dream of pitching itself as the hub for regional integration will hard to come by if relations with India remain in a stalemate. Diplomacy is the art of possible so doors should not be completely shut on India. Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) can engage in procedural nitty-gritty of making a reset with India whereas critical move will have to come from the top political leadership backed by the top military brass.

Medium to Long Term

- a. **Synergy between academia and policy-making:** There is a need for sustainable linkages between policy-making circles and academia in Pakistan. This is the need of the hour whether its business/industry academia nexus or MoFA/academia synergy. In the context of this topic, Afghanistan, Middle East and Africa centre/AMCA in Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad and the Middle East Study Centre in Balochistan University are worth mentioning. It is a sad commentary that there is no durable linkage of MoFA with these two entities, which specialise in the politics of Middle East. In the context of this study, MoFA needs to seek inputs from these institutes along with others and incorporate them where required. Expert opinion of research centres and think tanks can help MoFA to have a holistic view of an emergent situation like Iran-Saudi rapprochement. Policy of any sort is hard to bring dividends if its bereft of evidence,

solid data and credible research. PP Division in MoFA is responsible for maintaining liaison with academia and think tanks. Therefore, aligning the job description of PP Division with engaging the research community can help bring to life the elusive goal of bridging the gulf between academia and policy-making world. This can generate the discussion and weigh the options for Pakistan with regard to Iran-Pakistan rapprochement.

- b. Understanding elements behind Iran-Saudi rapprochement: generate discussion and debate to understand the elements behind the Iran-Saudi rapprochement. Without this understanding Pakistan may find itself tumbling across the path of regional integration thus augmenting the challenges and hampering the prospects linked with this rapprochement. Any enthusiastic reaction to this warm phase of otherwise hostile Iran-Saudi ties can put Pakistan in a difficult spot. Moreover, there needs to be a comprehensive understanding about the factors generating the Iran-Saudi thaw. Only then, Pakistan can meaningfully respond to this as well as other emerging regional scenarios in ME and SA. Another advantage is that the institutional mechanisms and processes adopted to understand the Iran-Saudi rapprochement and Pakistan's response can be replicated to evaluate Pakistan's foreign policy undertakings on other issues as well. Foreign Affairs Committee in the National Assembly can act as a platform for such debates and brainstorming sessions.
- c. Inter-Ministerial coordination: There is a need to enhance and streamline inter-ministerial and inter-departmental coordination to act in unison across the relevant Government stake-holders with regard to minimizing risks and augmenting prospects for Pakistan in the wake of Iran-Saudi rapprochement. Challenges and opportunities for Pakistan generated by this event spread across the economic, security and political spectra. Therefore, this collaboration will help to respond proactively to the evolving regional scenario in the immediate neighbourhood of Pakistan. There are meetings at the inter-ministerial level but follow-up is often missing. Moreover, at times security entities either do not turn up in such meetings or take actions which run counter to the publicly stated position on a certain issue. Pakistan's relations with both Iran and Saudi Arabia are delicately poised, therefore, here an element of smooth coordination is essential.
- d. People-centric foreign policy approach: Foreign policy in Pakistan is an elite-driven process like elsewhere in the world. However, given the importance of human security which was a key feature of NSP-2022, people i.e. public welfare needs to be put at the centre of any foreign policy decision. While analysing challenges and opportunities arising out of Pakistan from Iran-Saudi rapprochement, the focus needs to be how people will benefit or lose. Resolving energy crisis, streamlining travel across borders, inter-sectarian harmony are the elements which are directly related to people. This approach can introduce a socio-economic aspect in foreign policy making and execution which is the key for positive change at societal level. Here MOFA's public policy section can lead the process by integrating civil society, business fraternity and political leadership on the issues of foreign policy.

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