



# Enduring Allies

Pakistan's partnership with Saudi Arabia runs deeper

WHEN CROWN PRINCE SULTAN OF Saudi Arabia died this fall, the first foreign head of state to announce he would attend the funeral was President Asif Ali Zardari of Pakistan. Accompanying him was the chief of army staff, General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani, the real power in the country.

It was no surprise that Zardari and Kayani would rush to pay their respects to the House of Saud. Pakistan and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia have a long-standing and an intimate relationship. It is one of the most enduring alliances of modern times. They have had a deep strategic military relationship for decades and today, they may have an unacknowledged nuclear partnership to provide the Kingdom with a nuclear deterrent on short notice, if ever needed. Understanding the Saudi-Pakistani relationship is important to understand the future of both the countries, the nuclear balance in both the Near East and South Asia, and the crisis in Pakistan and Saudi Arabia today.

Pakistan has received more aid from Saudi Arabia than any country outside the Arab world since the Sixties. For example, in May 1998 when Pakistan was deciding whether to respond to India's test of five nuclear weapons, the Saudis promised 50,000 barrels of free oil per day to help it cope with the economic sanctions that might be triggered by the Pakistani counter test. The Saudi oil commitment was a key to then Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's decision to proceed with testing. It considerably cushioned the subsequent US and EU sanctions on Pakistan. Official aid is matched by large investments from Saudi princes and from religious institutions. Much of the Pakistani madrasa educational system is Saudi-funded by private donors connected to the Kingdom's powerful Wahhabi clerical establishment. The new Crown Prince, minister of interior, Prince Nayif, is closely tied to these Wahhabi networks.

In turn Pakistan has provided military aid and expertise to the Kingdom for

decades. It began with help to the Royal Saudi Air Force to maintain and pilot its first jet fighters in the Sixties. Pakistani Air Force pilots flew RSAF Lightnings that repulsed a communist South Yemeni incursion into the Kingdom's southern border in 1969. In the Seventies and Eighties, up to 15,000 Pakistani troops were stationed in the Kingdom, some in a brigade-sized combat force called the Khaled bin Walid brigade stationed near the Israeli-Jordanian-Saudi border. During the first Gulf war in 1991, a Pakistani brigade guarded the Kingdom's southern flank against Yemen while most of the American, Saudi and other forces faced Iraq in the north. The close ties continue between the militaries today. This fall, Saudi and Pakistani troops held joint training manoeuvres in Pakistan.

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Economic and military ties are matched by close intelligence and security relations. During the Eighties, the Saudis financed more than half of the jihad to support the Afghan insurgency against the Soviet 40th Army in Afghanistan and worked more closely than anyone else with the Pakistani intelligence service, ISI, to support the war effort. Those ties continued in the Nineties when the Saudis and Pakistanis assisted the Taliban for some time. Former Saudi intelligence chief Prince Turki bin Faysal has said, "It's probably one of the

closest relationships in the world between any two countries." When former chairman of the joint chiefs Admiral Mike Mullen said Pakistan uses the Afghan Taliban as a 'strategic tool' to fight NATO in Afghanistan, Kayani immediately dispatched the head of the ISI to Riyadh to confer with the Saudis.

The two Sunni states also share a concern about Shia Iran. Both seek to keep ties with Teheran as normal as possible but both have a deep fear that Iran might encourage unrest in their Shia minorities. Both have had serious frictions with Iran in the past and work together to minimise Iranian influence in the region. A nuclear Iran worries both its neighbours to the south and to the east. The Wikileaks have dramatically shown how worried King Abdallah bin Abdul Aziz is about the Iranian bomb and his requests that America strike the head of the Persian snake sooner rather than later.

## Enter the Bomb

Shortly after Pakistan tested its nuclear weapons in 1998, Prince Sultan (who was minister of defence and aviation from 1962 until his death) visited Pakistan and toured its nuclear and missile facilities outside Islamabad. Pakistan's famous A.Q. Khan provided some of the colour commentary for these unprecedented tours. At that time, US officials expressed concern that the Pakistanis might be providing a nuclear weapon to the Saudis. In its 10 July 1999 edition, New York Times carried an article by Jane Perlez titled, 'Saudis Visit to Arms Site in Pakistan Worries US'. Saudi connections with Pakistan's nuclear programme go back further. Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto sought financial help for the programme from Saudi Arabia in the early Seventies, according to some accounts. Then King Faysal of Saudi Arabia provided some money in return for a promise that Pakistan's nuclear programme would provide a security umbrella for the Kingdom. Bhutto repaid the favour by renaming a city in

the King's honour, Faisalabad.

After Sharif's ouster in a coup by Pervez Musharraf in 1999, he went into exile to Saudi Arabia, an agreement negotiated by myself for the Clinton administration to forestall Nawaz's execution. The deal was arranged with the influence of Saudi ambassador to the US, Prince Bandar, Sultan's son. Saudi Arabia provided sanctuary in exile to Sharif until he went home in 2007 and heavily funds his political party today. The nuclear relationship continued and matured under Musharraf. In October 2003, then Crown Prince Abdallah visited Pakistan for a state visit. Several experts reported after the trip that a secret agreement was concluded that would ensure Pakistan would provide Saudi Arabia with nuclear technology and a bomb if Saudi Arabia felt threatened by a third party nuclear programme in the future. Both countries, of course, denied the stories.

Assuming an agreement exists, it is likely the two have practiced the deployment of Pakistani warheads to Saudi Arabia for use with Saudi delivery systems. It would also make sense for RSAF and Pakistani pilots to jointly train for their use. More frequent exercises would help assure Riyadh that it can count on Islamabad in a crisis and that any deal is for real. Saudi Arabia's Chinese-made intermediate range missiles, now increasingly obsolete, are also widely assumed to be a possible delivery system for Pakistani warheads in a crisis. It was, of course, former Saudi ambassador to the US, Prince Bandar bin Sultan, who arranged their purchase. Pakistan produces its own IRBM, the Ghauri named after a famous Muslim warrior in the subcontinent, and the Saudis may have access to these as well.

Some reports allege the RSAF keeps a couple of aircraft permanently deployed in Pakistan to be able to deliver the bomb to Riyadh on short notice if the King asks for them. It is impossible to know if these reports have any veracity but the idea makes sense.

Despite President Barack Obama's efforts to build ties with the Saudis (his first visit to an Arab capital as President was to Riyadh), the royal family has soured on the President. They believe he has promised but not delivered on the Israeli-Palestinian process and done too little to counter Iran, especially in Bahrain. They were shocked that Obama did not stand by Mubarak to the bitter end. While the Saudis know they cannot ignore Washington, they are looking for alternatives to the east.



**BROTHERHOOD OF FAITH** (Clockwise from Top) Pakistan Army on Pak-Afghan border; Pakistan President Zardari with Saudi ambassador and former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif during his exile to Saudi Arabia

Abdallah has turned back to Islamabad for contingency support. Prince Bandar bin Sultan, now national security advisor, travelled to Islamabad in late March to raise the prospect of a return engagement for the Pakistani Army. Islamabad was quick to say yes. Long before the Bandar trip, a Pakistani battalion was already in Bahrain to back up the Khalifas if needed. Other Pakistani advisors or retired officers man much of the armed forces of the UAE, Qatar and Oman. All are recruiting heavily in Pakistan today to build up anti-riot forces.

Does Saudi Arabia have a secret commitment from Pakistan for nuclear weapons if the Kingdom feels threatened by Iran? The answer is we don't know but there is considerable evidence to suggest Riyadh and Islamabad have at least discussed such an understanding. If they have, then the Pakistan-Saudi nuclear alliance adds new perspective on their bilateral relationship, their individual nuclear programmes and the regional implications of Iran's nuclear

weapons ambitions.

Both states are confronting enormous and unprecedented challenges. The Saudis are living in an Arab world which is in turmoil. Old allies are gone. Civil war threats in Yemen and Shia unrest in Bahrain has forced Saudi military intervention for the first time in a Gulf Cooperation Council state. And ties with the US are strained. Pakistan faces the worst internal violence in its history as jihadist groups wage war against the State even as the army provides sanctuary and support to other jihadists. The Zardari government is intimidated by the army and the ISI. And Pakistani-American relations are in free fall with no bottom in sight yet. In this environment Riyadh and Rawalpindi look to old friends more than ever. ■

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