SAUDI ARABIA-IRAN RIVALRY: FRAGILE BALANCE OF NUCLEAR DÉTENTE

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the Effects of Iran's Nuclear Program on Saudi Arabia's National Security Strategy and the Arms Race in the Region. Using a descriptive analytical method, it explores how Iran's pursuit of nuclear capabilities has influenced Saudi Arabia's defense strategies, regional alliances, and military modernization efforts. Moreover, this analysis extends beyond the bilateral relationship, considering the broader regional implications and the engagement of outside powers including China, Russia, and the United States. As the research also acknowledges the role of non-state actors and emerging challenges like cyber warfare in reshaping regional security dynamics. The analysis considers the complex dynamics of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, including proxy wars and competition for regional dominance, and examines Saudi Arabia's multifaceted response, encompassing diplomatic, military, and economic measures

Keywords: Security, Nuclear, deterrent, Anarchic

INTRODUCTION

The Middle East's intricate political landscape has been reshaped by movements advocating for democratization, compounded by significant economic and political instability that shows no signs of abating (Gallarotti et al., 2012). These factors have triggered a restructuring of power dynamics within the region, creating an environment conducive to collaborative endeavors involving Saudi Arabia and Iran (Anwar, 2020). The pursuit of nuclear capabilities by Iran has emerged as a contentious issue, significantly influencing the security perceptions

and strategic calculations of its regional neighbors, particularly Saudi Arabia. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, recognizing its regional influence, consistently engages in the political affairs of neighboring countries, striving to preempt domestic instability by monitoring potential threats and intervening in political dynamics (Machmudi, 2020). This proactive engagement underscores Saudi Arabia's commitment to maintaining regional stability and safeguarding its interests within the evolving geopolitical landscape. The Iranian nuclear program, along with the continuous efforts to contain it, has become a focal point in the regional and international security matrix, holding substantial implications for global strategic management (Ishaque et al., 2017). These shifts have prompted Saudi Arabia to re-evaluate its defense strategies and foreign policy orientations to counter potential threats emanating from Iran's nuclear advancements (Babar et al., 2021).

Analyzing Saudi Arabia's Security Concerns

Saudi Arabia's apprehension regarding Iran's nuclear program is rooted in a complex interplay of factors, encompassing national security, regional power balance, and sectarian considerations (Gallarotti et al., 2012). The Saudi government has historically prioritized maintaining political stability both within its borders and throughout the region, employing various strategies such as economic compensation and direct involvement in the political affairs of neighboring countries (Machmudi, 2020). The acquisition of nuclear weapons by Iran would fundamentally alter the strategic landscape, potentially enabling Iran to project power more assertively and embolden its regional proxies, thereby undermining Saudi Arabia's influence and security (Gallarotti & Al-Filali, 2012). The historical rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, characterized by divergent geopolitical interests and sectarian differences, further exacerbates these concerns. Saudi Arabia's threat perception is further compounded by Iran's consistent efforts to expand its regional influence through supporting non-state actors and engaging in proxy conflicts in countries like Yemen, Syria, and Lebanon (Pasha, 2012). The Saudi government views Iran's actions as a direct challenge to its regional hegemony and a threat to the stability of the existing regional order. Furthermore, the possibility of nuclear proliferation in the region constitutes a critical concern for Saudi Arabia, fearing that Iran's nuclear program could instigate a cascade of nuclear proliferation among other regional actors, leading to a highly volatile and dangerous security environment.

Saudi Arabia's Policy Responses to Iran's Nuclear Program

In response to the perceived threat posed by Iran's nuclear program, Saudi Arabia has adopted a multifaceted approach encompassing diplomatic engagement, defense modernization, and the pursuit of a potential nuclear deterrent. Understanding the motivations behind Islamist militancy, including recruitment methods and radicalization environments, is crucial for addressing the underlying issues in the region (Hafez, 2008). On the diplomatic front, Saudi Arabia has actively collaborated with international powers, including the United States, to seek a diplomatic solution to the nuclear problem with Iran. The Kingdom has continuously backed international initiatives to stop Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons, such as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) negotiations and the levying of economic sanctions. Simultaneously, Saudi Arabia has embarked on an ambitious defense modernization program, investing billions of dollars in advanced military hardware and technology to enhance its defensive capabilities. This includes procuring advanced aircraft, missile defense systems, and naval assets from Western countries, particularly the United States. The focus of these modernizations is to ensure non-offensive defense while focusing on regional conditions.

Beyond diplomatic and military measures, Saudi Arabia has also explored the possibility of developing its own nuclear capability as a deterrent against Iran. While Saudi Arabia has publicly maintained that it is not actively pursuing nuclear weapons, it has also stated that it reserves the right to do so if Iran acquires a nuclear capability. Some have interpreted this as a strategy of nuclear ambiguity, aimed at deterring Iran while avoiding the destabilizing effects of openly pursuing nuclear weapons. In addition, Saudi Arabia's energy policies play a significant role in its strategic calculations vis-à-vis Iran. Saudi Arabia, a significant global energy actor, has traditionally depended on fossil fuels; however, it has acknowledged the necessity of diversifying its energy portfolio and fostering the integration of renewable energy sources (Derouez et al., 2024). This can ensure long-term sustainability, reduce reliance on fossil fuels, and potentially decrease its vulnerability to geopolitical risks associated with energy dependence.

Saudi Arabia possesses substantial soft power, rooted in its unique position as the heartland of Islam. This cultural and religious influence has historically been a significant source of strength for the Kingdom, enabling it to exert influence and garner support across the Muslim world (Gallarotti & Al-Filali, 2012). The country harnesses its soft power through religious diplomacy, cultural exchanges, and humanitarian aid, which reinforces its leadership role and

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fosters goodwill among Muslim populations (Gallarotti & Al-Filali, 2012) (Gallarotti et al., 2012).

The Regional Arms Race Dynamics

The ongoing tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran have fueled a regional arms race, with both countries investing heavily in modern military capabilities. This arms race has exacerbated regional instability, diverting resources from economic development and social programs and increasing the risk of military conflict. The rivalry has extended beyond conventional weapons to include cyber warfare capabilities, with both countries reportedly engaging in cyberattacks and espionage against each other. This mutual distrust and security dilemma have created a self-reinforcing cycle of military buildup, further complicating efforts to promote regional stability and cooperation. The Saudi-Iranian rivalry and nuclear ambitions are further complicated by the involvement of external powers, each pursuing their own strategic interests in the region. These external actors have historically played a significant role in shaping the regional security landscape, often exacerbating existing tensions and complicating efforts to find peaceful resolutions to regional conflicts (Gassama et al., 2020).

The complex relationship between Turkey and Saudi Arabia is impacted by religion, identities, and power positions (Öztürk, 2022). Given that Saudi Arabia and Turkey are prominent players in the region, it is crucial to examine the perspectives of regional actors through different approaches to foreign policy (Cengiz, 2019). The ideological elements of the conflict have been evident in the Gulf crisis, where Turkey and Saudi Arabia have taken opposing positions (Cengiz, 2019). It is critical to monitor the future trajectory of the Saudi-Turkish rivalry as it will significantly shape regional politics and security dynamics.

The participation of other countries, including the United States, Russia, and China, exacerbates the regional security dynamics. These global actors pursue their own strategic interests in the region, including maintaining access to energy resources, countering terrorism, and containing Iranian influence. The United States has historically been a major security partner of Saudi Arabia, providing military assistance and security guarantees. However, the U.S.-Saudi relationship has experienced periodic strains due to disagreements over issues such as human rights, the Yemen conflict, and the Iran nuclear deal. In contrast, China has increased its economic and diplomatic presence in the region, seeking to expand its influence and secure access to energy resources (MISTRY, 2021). Russia has also sought to expand its influence in

the Middle East, particularly through its support for the Syrian regime and its growing military presence in the region (Ishaque et al., 2020). It is worth noting that Turkey can mobilize external resources to achieve regional hegemony, necessitating alliances with powerful patrons (Troulis, 2019). Through Belt and Road Initiative China is growing it's role in the Middle East, which seeks to connect China with Europe, Africa, and the Middle East through infrastructure development and trade.

The interplay between regional and external actors has created a complex web of alliances and rivalries, further complicating efforts to resolve regional conflicts and promote stability. The conflict in Ukraine has had a profound impact on the international system, the world order, and global geopolitics, with significant spillover effects on the reorganization of political blocs (Liu & Shu, 2023). The crisis has further exposed the limitations of US influence in the Middle East, as countries in the region pursue independent foreign policies to protect their national interests (Liu & Shu, 2023). Moreover, the U.S. maintains close ties with India while also navigating its relationship with Pakistan, further complicating the regional dynamics (Gurjar, 2024).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Pakistan's foreign policy options have been evaluated as a delicate balance between the United States and China, where the United States has been a major export market for Pakistani goods while China has been a strategic partner and arms supplier (Zulfqar, 2022). Realism and neorealism suggest that "states prioritize their security and survival in an anarchic international system", leading to a focus on power and the balance of power (Gul, 2024). In contrast, liberalism places a strong emphasis on the value of institutions, global collaboration, and economic interdependence in fostering peace and stability (Ishaque et al., 2020). Constructivism emphasizes on the "role of ideas, norms, and identities in shaping state behavior and international relations".

The security dilemma, a concept closely associated with realism, highlights how a state's efforts to enhance its own security can inadvertently threaten the security of other states, resulting in a scramble to acquire weapons and increased tensions (Gul, 2024). The theory of hegemonic stability explains that "a dominant power can provide stability and order in the international system", but also that the decline of a hegemon can lead to instability and conflict. The interdependence theory postulates that the interaction of nation-states creates dependence and reciprocal reliance on each other, reducing competition and minimizing conflicts (Ishaque et

al., 2020). These theoretical frameworks offer significant perspectives on security policies of Saudi Arabia and the regional arms race in response to nuclear program of Iran.

In the Middle East, many states have responded to perceived threats by boosting their military capabilities and establishing new alliances. This cooperation is detrimental to regional stability, enhancing regional dominance and raising security interests and the regional arms race (Gul, 2024). In an anarchic international system, states seek to ensure their survival through "internal balancing (building up their own military capabilities) and external balancing (forming alliances with other states)". For internal balancing, a country builds up its own force. For external balancing, it forms alliances with other countries to fight a possible threat. The rise of ISIS and other non-state actors has further complicated the regional security landscape, posing new challenges to state sovereignty and regional order. To optimise security advantages and mitigate security threats, statesmen will respond logically to these prerequisites and select the foreign policy approach that suits them (Elman, 1995). Scholars have also examined the role of domestic politics in shaping foreign policy decisions, highlighting the influence of factors such as public opinion, interest groups, and bureaucratic politics. The concept of national interest underpins realism, which emphasises the state's central position in international systems (Dermawan, 2020). Some scholars emphasize the importance of regime type, arguing that democratic states are more likely to pursue peaceful foreign policies than authoritarian states. Others focus on the role of state-society relations, arguing that the way a state organizes its relationship with its society can affect its foreign policy choices (Salloukh, 2000).

The Saudi-Iranian rivalry is rooted in a complex interplay of factors, including sectarianism, geopolitical competition, and differing visions for the region's future. Saudi Arabia, a Sunni-majority kingdom, views Iran's Shia-led government as a threat to its regional influence and internal stability. Iran, in turn, accuses Saudi Arabia of supporting Sunni extremist groups and interfering in the affairs of other countries in the region. The rise of non-state actors, such as ISIS and al-Qaeda, has further fueled the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, as both countries have supported rival factions in conflicts across the region.

The failure of the United States to anticipate the Soviet Union collapse underscores the difficulty in predicting major shifts in the international system. The Soviet intervention in Afghanistan and the establishment of the Regional Defence Force by the United States heightened concerns about external interference in Gulf affairs (Pasha, 2012). The perception

that the United States is an unreliable security partner is based on the Islamic revolution in Iran (Pasha, 2012). The complex interplay of regional and external actors has created a volatile security environment in the Middle East, requiring a nuanced and comprehensive approach to understanding the drivers of conflict and cooperation.

Nuclear Program of Iran

Iran's nuclear program has been a major source of concern for Saudi Arabia, which views it as an existential threat (Zweiri & Nassar, 2021). Saudi Arabia's threat perception is shaped by historical grievances, ideological differences, and geopolitical competition. The Saudi regime is aware of the Iranian regime's use of foreign policy crises to gather support among Iranians (Zweiri & Nassar, 2021). The acquisition of nuclear weapons by Iran would alter the balance of power in the region, potentially emboldening Iran to act more aggressively and undermining Saudi Arabia's security. Saudi Arabia has been a vocal critic of Iran's nuclear program, calling for strict international monitoring and verification to ensure that it is not used for military purposes.

The Iranian nuclear program is a critical component that has heightened Saudi Arabia's security concerns, prompting a reassessment of its defense strategies and regional alliances. The program's implications extend beyond military considerations, influencing Saudi Arabia's foreign policy decisions and its engagement in regional conflicts. Due to its extended history, geographic proximity, and cultural similarities, Iran continues to be Afghanistan's most important neighbor (Fürtig, 2014). Saudi Arabia's response to Iran's nuclear program is shaped by its threat perception rooted in "historical grievances, ideological differences, and geopolitical competition". The Saudi regime has long viewed Iran as a potential adversary, citing its support for regional proxies, its ballistic missile program, and its pursuit of nuclear weapons capabilities.

The Saudi-Iran rivalry is a key factor that shapes the security dynamics of the Middle East. The rivalry is fueled by sectarianism, geopolitical competition, and differing visions for the region's future (Hokayem, 2014). In conflicts all over the area, such as in Yemen, Syria, and Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and Iran have backed opposing sides. These conflicts have exacerbated sectarian tensions and undermined regional stability. The Saudi-Iranian rivalry has also played out in the oil market, with both countries vying for market share and influence over global oil prices.

Saudi Arabia's response to Iran's nuclear program has been multifaceted, encompassing diplomatic, military, and economic measures. Saudi Arabia has worked closely with the United States and other international partners to pressure Iran to halt its nuclear program. It has also invested heavily in its own military capabilities, including acquiring advanced weapons systems from the United States and other countries. To protect itself, Saudi Arabia has adopted a multi-faceted approach involving diplomacy, military modernization, and the exploration of a nuclear deterrent. The potential development of nuclear weapons by Iran has spurred Saudi Arabia to consider developing its own nuclear program or acquiring nuclear weapons from other countries.

The Saudi leadership has sent mixed signals on this issue, with some officials suggesting that Saudi Arabia would seek to acquire nuclear weapons if Iran were to do so, while others have emphasized the importance of nuclear non-proliferation. The security dilemma in the Middle East is exacerbated by the lack of trust and communication between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

METHODOLOGY

This study will use a descriptive analytical method to assess the impact of nuclear program of Iran on security policies of Saudi Arabia and the regional arms race. This methodological approach will allow for a comprehensive and nuanced analysis of the rivalry between the two countries that has paved way for Iran in developing nuclear ambitions

RESULTS

Saudi Arabia's security policies have been significantly impacted by Iran's nuclear program, leading to a reassessment of its defense strategies and regional alliances. To counter Iran's growing influence, Saudi Arabia has strengthened its strategic partnership with the United States, seeking security guarantees and advanced military hardware (Hafez, 2008). This close alignment with the US has been a cornerstone of Saudi foreign policy, providing a sense of security in a turbulent region.

The Saudi-Iranian rivalry is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon with deep historical roots. The competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran has intensified in recent years, with both countries vying for regional dominance. This rivalry has played out in various arenas, including proxy wars, political influence, and economic competition.

In response to the challenges posed by Iran's nuclear program, Saudi Arabia has embarked on an ambitious military modernization program, investing heavily in advanced weapons systems and defense technologies. This modernization drive is aimed at enhancing Saudi Arabia's defense capabilities and deterring potential aggression. Saudi Arabia's defense spending has increased significantly in recent years, making it one of the largest arms importers in the world. Saudi Arabia's perception of the Iranian nuclear threat is a critical driver of its security policies and regional arms race. The potential for a nuclear arms race in the Middle East is a serious concern, have broad consequences for both regional and world security.

DISCUSSION

The global non-proliferation system and regional stability are significantly impacted by Iran's nuclear program. The possibility of a nuclear-armed Iran has triggered a debate within Saudi Arabia about the need to develop its own nuclear deterrent. This debate has been fueled by a sense of vulnerability and a goal to preserve a strategic equilibrium of power in the region. The prospect of nuclear proliferation in the Middle East poses significant concerns regarding regional security and the threat of nuclear conflict. Saudi Arabia's response to Iran's nuclear program has been characterized by a combination of hedging and balancing strategies.

CONCLUSION

The Saudi-Iranian rivalry is a defining feature of the Middle East's geopolitical landscape, with profound implications for regional security and stability. The security policies of Saudi Arabia have been significantly affected by the Iranian nuclear program, which has resulted in a reassessment of its defense plans and regional alliances. Saudi Arabia has strengthened its strategic alliance with the United States in order to counteract Iran's growing influence, requesting security assurances and cutting-edge military hardware.

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Author's Declaration

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