The Iran-Saudi Cyber and Hybrid Warfare: Analyzing the Strategic Implications for Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

This article delves into the complex dynamics of hybrid warfare and cyber conflicts, particularly in the context of the ongoing rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and its implications for Pakistan. It investigates how the strategic competition between these two Middle Eastern nations is expressed through proxy warfare, cyber attacks, and ideological influence, significantly affecting Pakistan's internal security and regional policy. The study provides a thorough analysis of how Iran and Saudi Arabia's ambitions for regional supremacy intertwine with Pakistan's socio-political landscape, intensifying sectarian divisions and contributing to political unrest. By utilizing a qualitative approach that combines historical data with current geopolitical developments, this research highlights Pakistan's challenging position: striving for diplomatic neutrality while dealing with the overwhelming influence of its powerful neighbors. The findings emphasize the urgent need for Pakistan to strengthen its cybersecurity capabilities and infrastructure resilience to protect its national interests amid rising regional cyber conflicts. Ultimately, the study stresses the strategic importance for Pakistan to enhance its diplomatic efforts and capitalize on its geopolitical relevance to promote regional stability. This article adds to the wider discussion on the effects of hybrid warfare in the Middle East, offering insights into the intricate relationships between cyber warfare, regional politics, and national security strategies in a turbulent geopolitical landscape.

Keywords: Hybrid Warfare, Cyber Conflicts, Iran-Saudi Rivalry, Pakistan's Security Dynamics, Regional Geopolitics

INTRODUCTION

The Middle East is marked by chaos, instability, and a struggle for power. A major factor contributing to this situation is the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. This competition stems from various elements, including differing legitimacies,

geostrategic interests, and religious as well as sectarian divides. Both nations are deeply engaged in direct and indirect proxy conflicts in Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon, and Bahrain. Pakistan finds itself in a position where it shares security and economic interests with both Iran and Saudi Arabia. While Pakistan aims to strengthen its relationships with both countries and maintain neutrality in their rivalry, it faces several vulnerabilities that require effective responses to both domestic and regional developments. The options available to Pakistan are quite limited, as it cannot openly align with either side in the Saudi-Iran competition (Faheem et al., 2021).

The rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, often referred to as the 'Cold War in the Middle East,' has created significant historical factors that contribute to ongoing tensions and their effects on Pakistan's domestic politics. As Islamic nations, both countries have differing religious beliefs and international strategies. Iran is predominantly Shia, while Saudi Arabia is primarily Sunni, and both aspire to lead the Muslim world and assert dominance in the region. This conflict has prompted these nations to employ hybrid warfare tactics, engaging in indirect confrontations through proxy wars, diplomatic maneuvers, cyber warfare, and the use of Special Forces such as the IRGC, Houthi Rebels, Hezbollah, and TTP, along with economic strategies (Tahir, 2024). The Islamic Revolution of 1979, led by Ayatollah Khomeini, marked the beginning of the Iran-Saudi rivalry, as Khomeini criticized the Saudi monarchy. The Saudis have heavily invested in Pakistan, notably contributing around $120 million for the construction of the Shah Faisal Masjid in 1986 (Afzal, 2019). Additionally, they have invested approximately $100 billion globally to promote the Wahhabi doctrine. In Pakistan, the number of madrassas skyrocketed from 244 in the 1960s to over 24,000 by 2020, illustrating how Saudi funding translates into influence. Pakistan, being an Islamic state with a Sunni majority and a Shia minority, has felt the repercussions of rising tensions between these two Middle Eastern powers. This rivalry has indirectly fueled sectarianism, radicalization, and discrimination within Pakistan. Citizens are increasingly fearful for their religious beliefs, raising concerns about national security and the state's ability to protect their rights and foster a peaceful coexistence. The relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia reached a new low following the execution of a prominent cleric (Tahir, 2024).

Pakistan, the second largest Islamic country in the world, has a predominantly Sunni population but also hosts the second largest Shia community globally. This unique demographic situation places Pakistan in a challenging position, caught in the ongoing conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Sectarianism has found fertile ground in Pakistan, where Shias make up about 15–20 percent of the population (Rathore, 2017). A dataset covering the years from 1989 to 2017 indicates that sectarian violence has resulted in 5,681 deaths and over 11,110 injuries due to attacks. The 1990s saw a rise in militant attacks against Pakistani Shias, targeting officials such as diplomats, engineers, and cadets during 1997–1998(Muzaffar et al., 2017). Pakistan was one of only three countries, alongside Saudi Arabia and the U.A.E., that recognized the Taliban regime in Kabul after 1996, which led to an implicit association with the regime's assaults on Iranian diplomats in Afghanistan in 1998. This situation strained Pakistan-Iran relations significantly (Muzaffar et al., 2017). In retaliation, Iran began

to support militant Shia groups within Pakistan . While Iran and Pakistan maintained diplomatic ties, William Milam, the American Ambassador to Islamabad from 1998 to 2001, noted that their relations were "correct" but lacked warmth (Muzaffar et al., 2017). Tensions escalated in 2017 when the Saudi-backed militant group Jaish-ul-Adl killed 10 Iranian border guards, with the shots fired from within Pakistan. The head of the Iranian army warned that Tehran would target bases inside Pakistan if the government failed to address the militants(Dawn,2016)Similar tensions arose in 2014 when Jaish-ul-Adl kidnapped five Iranian border guards, and in 2015 and 2013, when eight and fourteen border guards were killed by the same group, respectively. This ongoing conflict is a direct result of the state's Sunni-centric Islamization (Muzaffar et al., 2017).

The strategic competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran stems from their conflicting political, ideological, religious, and sectarian ambitions, which have intensified the regional security landscape. Both nations are striving to promote their vision of political Islam and reshape the regional order to further their interests. They actively engage in political movements and fund proxies in neighboring conflicts to undermine each other's influence. While Saudi Arabia aims to maintain the status quo and prevent the emergence of anti-Saudi elements, Iran seeks to disrupt this balance and spread its revolutionary ideals. Pakistan, with its deep socio-religious ties to both Iran and Saudi Arabia, aims to strengthen its friendly relations with both while striving to remain neutral in their ongoing rivalry. However, this position exposes Pakistan to various vulnerabilities that require effective responses. The country faces numerous implications and negative consequences as a result of this rivalry, with many of its current internal security challenges linked to these externally driven factors. These issues threaten national security and socio-economic development, allowing anti-state nationalist groups to exploit existing weaknesses. Pakistan's options are limited, as it cannot align itself with either side in the Saudi-Iran conflict. It must ensure that its territory is safeguarded from the influence of both Iranian and Saudi proxies and their political and ideological agendas (Faheem et al., 2021).

The primary aim of this study is to investigate the dynamics of cyber conflicts between Iran and Saudi Arabia, as well as the proxy and sectarian wars involving Saudi Arabia and Iran. It will assess the vulnerabilities of Pakistan's critical infrastructure. Additionally, this research will explore the implications of this proxy conflict on Pakistan's internal and external challenges.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cyber conflict plays a significant role in today's political landscape. There is often a connection between historical political issues and ongoing cyber disputes. The long-standing rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran is now manifesting through cyber operations. This study aims to contextualize the current cyber conflicts between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Iran. It briefly explores the political history of both nations before examining specific cyber incidents that arise from this existing political tension. The current relationship between Saudi Arabia and Iran can be characterized as a cyber cold war. This study highlights both recent cyber incidents and the political

and historical backdrop against which they occur. The histories of modern Iran and Saudi Arabia provide essential context for understanding the political tensions between the two countries (Easttom & Butler, 2021).

The research conducted by Hamail Tahir highlights the Iran-Saudi rivalry, which has deep historical roots and significant implications for Pakistan's internal affairs. Scholars have noted that these two Islamic powers adopt different strategies for leadership and dominance in the Middle East. The author employs qualitative methodology, drawing on research papers and documentaries to support this paper. As the conflict intensifies, the resulting instability in Pakistan also increases, particularly given its Sunni majority and Shia minority, which leads to considerable sectarian tensions. To bolster this argument, the theory of Realism is applied, emphasizing how both states prioritize their national interests (Tahir, 2024).

Arafat provides a thorough examination of the defense and security strategies of both Iran and Saudi Arabia. This study focuses on various aspects of Iran's approach, including its use of asymmetric and hybrid warfare, its ballistic missile and nuclear programs, and its methods of soft warfare and cyberwarfare. In a clear manner, this chapter also addresses the driving forces behind Saudi Arabia's foreign policy and defense strategies, as well as its national interest objectives and perceptions of threats from Iran. Ultimately, the chapter concludes that Iran has developed an effective security and defense strategy, successfully achieving its national security goals, while Saudi Arabia lacks a unified approach in the region. Instead, it relies on cash diplomacy to secure the loyalty of Sunni states but has not managed to establish a regional alliance to protect its national security or that of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) (Arafat & Arafat, 2020).

Pakistan asserts that it maintains a neutral stance in the Iran–Saudi rift. However, upholding this position has proven challenging amid the escalating rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The choices made by Pakistan indicate a leaning towards Saudi Arabia. Drawing from extensive fieldwork in Islamabad, this paper examines the implications and applications of neutrality in Pakistan's foreign policy. It contends that true neutrality is unattainable for Pakistan due to its deep cultural, economic, and defense connections with Saudi Arabia, yet it promotes this narrative because of various demographic, geographic, and geopolitical factors. Islamabad's declaration of neutrality serves to advance national interests in both domestic and international contexts. Given its economic, sectarian, and geopolitical realities, Pakistan aspires to maintain neutrality in the Iranian-Saudi conflict, but this is complicated by its strong and diverse relationships with Saudi Arabia. Through an analysis of Pakistan's foreign policy decisions, we argue that the country continues to shift away from Iran in favor of Saudi Arabia(Ahmed & Akbarzadeh, 2020).

Diplomatic relations between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran were cut off in 2016. Recently, however, there has been a rapprochement between the two nations, facilitated by China. Both countries have expressed a commitment to addressing the issues that separate them. Pakistan maintains strong connections with both Saudi Arabia and Iran. Due to their geographical proximity and status as neighbors, discussions about Saudi Arabia and

Iran frequently arise in Pakistan's domestic and international policy dialogues. The recent reconciliation between these two nations could indicate a significant shift in the regional balance of power, potentially impacting Pakistan in both positive and negative ways. Moreover, Pakistan has lauded the restoration of diplomatic relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia as a significant achievement, viewing the agreement as a step toward regional peace and stability. By fostering balanced diplomatic relations with both Iran and Saudi Arabia, Pakistan can avoid the pressure to take sides or mediate disputes, while also benefiting from enhanced economic cooperation with both nations, particularly through participation in projects led by China. The agreement has been welcomed by Pakistan as a constructive move toward regional stability and peace. Nevertheless, the new Saudi-Iranian alliance presents both opportunities and challenges for Pakistan. On one hand, the improved relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran could help reduce regional tensions and create new avenues for collaboration among neighboring countries. On the other hand, it may also intensify the competition between China and the US for influence in Pakistan and the surrounding region. This study aims to explore the opportunities and challenges that Pakistan faces in light of the evolving Saudi-Iranian relationship(Hussain et al., 2024)

In various regional contexts, Iran and Saudi Arabia play a crucial role in shaping Pakistan's foreign policy. Policymakers in Pakistan face challenges in maintaining balanced relations and policies towards both nations due to the intense rivalries between Iran and Saudi Arabia, as well as the significant interests of key players in Middle Eastern politics. This research aims to clarify the differing perspectives of Iran and Saudi Arabia and their effects on Pakistan's policies. The study examines the diplomatic, political, and economic developments among Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan during the recent tenure of the PML (N) government. To achieve this, a qualitative method with a historical research design has been employed, utilizing an argumentative approach while applying complex interdependence theory to analyze the nature of these triangular relations and their implications for regional politics and the economy. The findings offer valuable insights relevant to this specific context, highlighting a range of outcomes(Naeem, 2022)

The relationship between Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Pakistan is complex, dynamic, and constantly evolving. The rivalry between Pakistan's neighboring countries poses significant challenges for social cohesion, economic stability, and foreign policy. This essay primarily focuses on the diplomatic tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran, examining the internal and external pressures that shape Pakistan's foreign policy. Given its historical, geographical, and topographical context, this rivalry has always been crucial in both regional and international affairs. Key factors influencing Pakistan's policy decisions include economic considerations, regional security concerns, and the need for domestic political stability. As a participant in the Saudi-Iranian conflict, Pakistan must navigate its relationships with both nations and other regional players with care. Achieving a balance is challenging, especially since Saudi Arabia and Iran often resolve their disputes in various geopolitical arenas. This study will enhance policymakers' and experts' understanding of issues in South Asia

and the Middle East, making it a vital step toward promoting regional stability(Dorsey, 2016).

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The research utilized both descriptive and analytical approaches to reach its conclusions. To this end, a qualitative method was employed. All data for this study was gathered from books, journals, official reports from organizations, and insights from experts available online. Secondary research methods were consulted and the recommendations analyzed.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is based on the Realist theory of International Relations (IR), which focuses on power dynamics, state sovereignty, and the pursuit of national interests within an anarchic global system. Realism suggests that states prioritize their survival and security, often resulting in power struggles and competition. The cyber rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia serves as a clear example of this competition for regional dominance. Pakistan, positioned between these two powers, must carefully navigate these dynamics to safeguard its national interests. Realist theory offers valuable insights into how states behave in cyberspace, showing that cyber capabilities can be used as instruments for strategic advantage. By analyzing the Iran-Saudi cyber conflict through a realist perspective, this research highlights the importance for Pakistan to manage regional pressures while strengthening its sovereignty in the cyber realm. Additionally, realism points out the interconnectedness of regional security frameworks, indicating that instability in one area can create ripple effects throughout neighboring states.

The theory of neoclassical realism is the most suitable framework for analyzing Iran-Saudi Arabia relations, as it allows for a comprehensive examination of this complex issue. This theory is grounded in the analysis of states' relative power within the international system. Although, various factors can lead countries to act outside the expected framework. In some cases, nations may become embroiled in devastating conflicts driven by specific ideologies, revolutionary movements, or the interests of particular groups. Iran and Saudi Arabia are recognized as regional powers in the Middle East, with religion, identity, and pressure groups significantly shaping their foreign policies. These nations hold considerable political, military, and economic influence in the region, as well as a vital role in global affairs. These two rival nations make use of every tool at their disposal—diplomatic, military, civilian, cultural, and religious—to secure their survival within the current international framework. For instance, they have been supporting both Shiite and Sunni factions in the area, providing resources to aligned groups and using propaganda against each other, highlighting the lengths both countries will go to maintain their regimes (Nakhavali, 2022).

Before exploring the security dilemma, it's important to first address two key categories: offensive and defensive realism. From the perspective of offensive realism, represented notably by Fareed Zakaria and John Mearsheimer, the idea is that nations inherently possess an aggressive nature, and any enhancement in military capabilities

can be perceived as a threat by others. Mearsheimer not only recognizes the complexities surrounding security but also argues that these complexities reflect the core tenets of defensive realism. He suggests that offensive realism promotes the strengt hening of military power as a means to potentially invade other countries in order to protect national interests((2006).)In this form of realism, acts of aggression occur, disrupting the balance of threat. Consequently, threat perception, the balance of threat, and the concept of security are framed within defensive realism. Proponents of defensive realism contend that governments do not inherently lean towards aggression. This perspective permits the use of military force solely for the defense of territory. The concept of security has been introduced by defensive realists. According to Taliaferro, defensive realism rests on four key assumptions: the fragile structure of power, the realm of domestic politics, the perceptions held by leaders, and ultimately, the enigma of security(2, 2024; Mohammadi & BadrGharmi; Mohammadi, 2024)

Throughout its history, Saudi Arabia has primarily followed a strategy of defensive realism to ensure its international security and survival. From its establishment in 1932 until 2015, Riyadh positioned itself as a status-quo power in the Gulf region, adopting policies that focused on caution, reflexivity, and balancing. Additionally, the kingdom has consistently rejected the notion of pursuing hegemony in either the Gulf or the broader Middle East. Regardless of the reigning monarch, Riyadh has aimed for careful containment and proxy engagement with its rivals. Since 2015, Saudi Arabia's foreign policy has evolved from a focus on defensive realism to a stance that aligns more with offensive realism. Riyadh's increasing hostility towards Iran, and the assassination of Washington Post journalist and political reformist Jamal Khashoggi in Istanbul. Each of these events might be viewed as isolated incidents. However, when considered together, they indicate a broader strategy aimed at maximizing power and assertively establishing Riyadh's security and diplomatic influence over other nations, striving for a position of greater dominance in its immediate region.(Rich & Moore-Gilbert, 2019).

DISCUSSION

Iran and Saudi Arabia engage in proxy wars across Yemen, Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq. The Saudis assert that they have supplied weapons to Syria to help defend against Iranian influence. Additionally, Salafi groups share a sectarian identity with the Saudis and act as a counterforce to the IRGC. Conversely, the Fatmiyah Group, an Afghan Shia organization, receives training from the IRGC. One of the most notable groups is Hezbollah, the Shia militant organization from Lebanon, which is focused on countering Iranian influence in the Middle East. The situation in Pakistan is also affected: Iran backs Shia military factions like Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and conducts cyber-attacks on Pakistani government websites and infrastructure. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia supports Pakistani leaders who align with its interests. The Sipah-e-Sahaba (SSP), a Sunni extremist group closely linked to Saudi Arabia, has been implicated in attacks against Shia and Christian communities in Pakistan, contributing to instability within the country (Tahir, 2024).

Both countries support opposition groups and manipulate political processes,

which can undermine rival governments. This situation may also affect Pakistan's political stability and democratic processes. Opportunities that could arise from countering hybrid warfare tactics in this area include the promotion of national unity. The issues of disinformation and sectarian manipulation can be addressed through cohesion and resilience. Pakistan's long history of acting as a mediator and balancer can be an asset in fostering peaceful resolutions to regional conflicts. Additionally, Pakistan can focus on strengthening its intelligence sector to identify potential threats stemming from this rivalry and address them promptly. There is a significant internal security threat due to hybrid warfare tactics such as misinformation and cyber-attacks affecting Pakistan's internal affairs. The rivalry could escalate sectarian tensions and fuel insurgency in regions like Balochistan. Pakistan's critical infrastructure and government networks are at risk of cyber-attacks from non-state actors involved in the Saudi-Iran rivalry. These countries could potentially exert coercion on Pakistan, pressuring it to align with their respective interests.(Tahir, 2024) There have been reports about the discovery of ultra-conservative Sunni groups and madrassas operating in Balochistan, a province in Pakistan, by Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Some of the funding channels for these groups are reportedly connected to banned organizations such as Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and Ahle-Sunnat-Wal-Jamaat (Shujhai, 2019). Although Pakistan has taken steps to dismantle these threats, relations between Iran and Pakistan have deteriorated due to the killing of Iranian border guards and other anti-Iran activities carried out by these banned groups. Additionally, Iran is accused of supporting certain sectarian groups in Pakistan, with reports indicating that the 'Zainebiyoun' Brigade, backed by Iran, has been recruiting Pakistani Shia fighters to participate in conflicts in the Middle East (Ghazali & Hussain, 2021).

The fluctuations in Middle Eastern politics and the resulting security challenges have heightened the potential for unexpected polarization in Pakistani public opinion. Both Saudi Arabia and Iran have supporters in Pakistan, largely due to their connections with specific sectarian groups; Sunnis tend to favor Saudi Arabia, while Shias lean towards Iran. The divide between liberal and conservative viewpoints is becoming more pronounced, with liberals advocating for a stance of neutrality and conservatives aligning more closely with Saudi interests. The state of Pakistan's economy could face serious repercussions from the situation in the Middle East. Instability in the region may hinder the flow of significant remittances from Pakistani workers in the Gulf States, which are vital for the economy. If this trend persists, a decline in remittances could have devastating effects on Pakistan's economic landscape, potentially leading to job losses for Pakistani expatriates (Faheem et al., 2021).

The rivalry and competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia have had considerable economic consequences for Pakistan in the past. For instance, when Saudi Arabia enacted an oil embargo against Iran in 2012, Pakistan had to reduce its oil imports from Iran due to pressure from Saudi Arabia. This significantly affected Pakistan's economy (Hussain et al., 2024).

CONCLUSION

Pakistan is not in a position to afford to jeopardize its relationships with Iran and Saudi Arabia, as both countries hold significant importance in te region. As a result, Pakistan has been attempting to act as a mediator to resolve the political and ideological tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Iran is crucial for Pakistan, not just for its geographical proximity, which offers economic benefits, but also because both nations can collaborate to tackle common issues like sectarianism and terrorism. Similarly, Saudi Arabia is vital to Pakistan, having provided economic and political support on numerous occasions. Therefore, as the only major atomic power in the Islamic world, Pakistan has a responsibility to help resolve the ideological conflicts between Iran and Saudi Arabia (Rab et al., 2022).

Pakistan has maintained a friendly and brotherly relationship with Saudi Arabia since its independence. This bond is not solely based on religious ties but also on the generosity that Saudi Arabia extends through economic assistance to Pakistan. The two countries have also entered into several defense agreements. Conversely, Iran is another significant Muslim neighbor that shares various regional interests with Pakistan. For Pakistan, taking sides in the Saudi-Iran rivalry can lead to negative consequences. Meanwhile, opting for neutrality might seem appealing, but it could force Pakistan to defend itself against regional strategies from either Iran or Saudi Arabia that could unintentionally harm its national interests (Ghazali & Hussain, 2021).

Even after reproaching due to Saudi Arabia and Iran face deep-rooted tensions that won't be easily resolved. Nevertheless, the involvement of other regional states shows a willingness to work together to ease these frictions. Pakistan should take advantage of this moment to support the peace process for its own security. By cooperating, Saudi Arabia and Iran could enhance the economic and humanitarian landscape, thereby crafting a more favorable global image. Tehran and Jeddah need to put their differences aside and work towards fostering peace and stability in the region. In the past, such cooperation has sometimes led to heightened issues, but this time it is likely to be more restrained. Pakistan should approach both nations with respect, embrace multilateralism, and acknowledge the crucial needs of each, ensuring that it doesn't overlook the legitimate concerns of the other. It is essential for Pakistan to develop an independent foreign policy based on an unbiased assessment of the current geostrategic and changing geo-economic context. The ability of Pakistan to meet its goals hinges on maintaining a strong economy and a peaceful internal environment (Asifa, 2022).

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