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SAUDI ARABIA - A NEW PLAYER ON THE NUCLEAR SCENE?

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For many years rumors have circulated to the effect that Saudi Arabia has been interested in acquiring a nuclear military option. Since the country does not have the technical infrastructure needed for the development of an indigenous military nuclear capability, it was suspected that the Saudis were seeking it elsewhere. Recent information about a secret agreement on nuclear cooperation enhances the possibility that the focus of the Saudi search is Pakistan.

In the late 1980s, China sold Saudi Arabia thirty-six CSS-2 missiles, with a range of 3000 kilometers. This raised many eyebrows, since the only logical use for such missiles would be to deliver unconventional warheads to well-protected strategic targets. Otherwise, the considerable Saudi Air Force would be capable of delivering a more substantial conventional explosives payload at much reduced cost.

The rumors that Saudi Arabia has been deeply involved in Pakistan's nuclear program were apparently corroborated by a Saudi defector in 1994. As reported by a former US intelligence officer, it is China that is actually interested in the cooperation with Saudi Arabia. But China has chosen Pakistan as the vehicle for this cooperation since it does not want to disclose a

direct nuclear link. China and Pakistan have a lengthy history of nuclear cooperation that facilitated Pakistan's becoming a *de facto* nuclear weapons state. Saudi Arabia, it was reported, has been financing Pakistan's purchases from China, and thus has become deeply involved in the nuclear development program that Pakistan could hardly have financed on its own.

Pakistan has been long suspected of providing know-how and technologies to other countries seeking nuclear weapons. The two remaining members of the "Axis of Evil" – Iran and North Korea -- are presumed recipients of such assistance. Indeed, concerns about the supply of centrifuge technologies to Iran have been heightened by the evidence uncovered by the IAEA, coupled with Iran's admission that the technology was externally supplied. Nevertheless, both Iran and Pakistan are denying that Pakistan is the source of this assistance.

In September 2003, it was reported that Saudi Arabia was considering a strategy paper on its nuclear options. Three options were mentioned: the acquisition of a nuclear capability as a deterrent; maintaining or entering into an alliance with an existing nuclear power that would offer

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protection; or trying to reach an agreement on a nuclear-free Middle East. The first option (unless the Saudis are buying their capability "off-the-shelf") is unrealistic given the conditions in the country and the very long timetable for establishing the complete cycle for indigenous production of the fissile materials and the weapons. The third one, although the object of various proposals stretching back over many years, still seems to lie far in the future. Therefore, the only viable option appears to be the second one. Implicit in this option is the possibility of renouncing reliance on the US as the guarantor of Saudi security or severing all military alliances with it. If not the US, Pakistan remains the only available choice, unless China is willing to fill that role.

Just a month after the report on the strategy options paper, the nuclear cooperation agreement with Pakistan came to light. Although the joint communiqué mentioned an agreement for "the maximum utilization of the existing economic potential of the two countries," this could well be a euphemism for nuclear cooperation, since anything else would look like a marriage between an elephant and a mouse. In this case, the exchange is fair, since both have something the other needs. Pakistan is a very poor state but has a military nuclear production capability. Saudi Arabia is an oil-rich country but has very limited technical resources.

Why does Saudi Arabia need this? Why at this time? There can be no doubt that its threat perception is heightened by the information concerning Iran's progress towards a military nuclear capability, notwithstanding Iran's apparent acceptance of the Additional Protocol. Saudi Arabia probably does not place much faith either in Iran or in the power of the UN to curb Iran's nuclear ambitions. That raises the intriguing question whether the deterioration in the military-security relationship with the US

was a calculated step designed to give it greater independence, freedom of maneuverability, and lower possibility of scrutiny and oversight by a world power. Another little-noticed fact is that Saudi Arabia, while a signatory to the Non-Proliferation Treaty, has never concluded the obligatory safeguards agreement with the IAEA. No inspections can take place in Saudi Arabia, even according to the (not very effective) "full-scope" safeguards regime. Even if it does sign up now to the safeguards regime, that will not provide even a minimal degree of assurance unless Saudi Arabia also accepts the Additional Protocol.

What does the Saudi-Pakistani agreement mean? It may mean that Pakistani nuclear forces will be deployed in Saudi Arabia, upon request, at times of tension. Alternatively, they could be deployed there permanently. In either case, further questions arise about the possible transfer of Pakistani weapons and delivery systems into Saudi hands and about ultimate control and launch authority over those weapons.

This agreement confronts the world with two major problems. The first is the possibility that Saudi Arabia will, in fact, become a nuclear weapons state. The second is the growing role of Pakistan as a global nuclear proliferator. A quick solution to the second problem should also solve the first one. But if the first is not solved, there is a further danger that nuclear weapons on Saudi territory could fall into the hands of terrorists or be inherited by a successor regime in case the current regime is overthrown.

Although the US tries publicly to downplay reports of the agreement, the Administration probably takes this information very seriously, as it should. In 2001, a former senior Clinton administration official was asked who would be the next nuclear proliferators in the Middle East. He put Saudi Arabia at the top of the list.