

Nuclear Nuances of Saudi-Pakistan Meeting

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Feb 3, 2015

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Brief Analysis

Tuesday's meeting in Riyadh between King Salman and Pakistan's top military commander will revive speculation of a secret nuclear agreement to counter any Iranian nuclear threat.

The visit by the chairman of Pakistan's Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee will likely prompt concern in Washington and other major capitals that Saudi Arabia and Pakistan have reconfirmed an arrangement whereby Pakistan, if asked, will supply Saudi Arabia with nuclear warheads. The main meeting on Gen. Rashid Mahmud's itinerary was with King Salman -- the topics discussed were reported as "deep relations between the two countries and...a number of issues of common interest." General Rashid also saw separately Defense Minister Prince Muhammad bin Salman -- who presented him with the King Abdulaziz medal of excellence -- as well as Deputy Crown Prince and Interior Minister Muhammad bin Nayef and Minister of the National Guard Prince Mitab bin Abdullah. The only senior Saudi absent from the meetings appears to have been Crown Prince Muqrin.

For decades, Riyadh has been judged a supporter of Pakistan's nuclear weapons program, providing financing in return for a widely assumed understanding that, if needed, Islamabad will transfer technology or even warheads. It has been noticeable that changes in leadership in either country have quickly been followed by top-level meetings, as if to reconfirm such nuclear arrangements. Although Pakistani nuclear technology also helped Iran's program, the relationship between Islamabad and Riyadh has been much more obvious.

In 1999, a year after Pakistan tested two nuclear weapons, then Saudi defense minister Prince Sultan visited the unsafeguarded uranium enrichment plant at Kahuta outside Islamabad -- prompting a U.S. diplomatic protest. Last year, as Riyadh's concern at the prospect of Iranian nuclear hegemony in the Gulf grew, Pakistan's chief of army staff, Gen. Raheel Sharif, was a guest of honor when Saudi Arabia publicly paraded its Chinese CSS-2 missiles for the first time since they were delivered in the 1980s. Although now nearly obsolete, the CSS-2 missile once formed the core of China's nuclear force. Pakistan's first nuclear devices were based on a Chinese design.

Pakistan's prime minister, Nawaz Sharif, visited the kingdom January 23 for the funeral of King Abdullah and had also been there a couple of weeks earlier to pay his respects to the ailing monarch. The civilian leader and his military commanders have an awkward relationship -- in an earlier term of office, Nawaz Sharif was overthrown in a military coup and sent into exile in Saudi Arabia -- but Pakistan's nuclear program seems above any civil-military partisanship.

The visit by General Rashid comes a day after Pakistan announced the successful flight-testing of its Raad air-launched 220-mile-range cruise missile, which reportedly is able to deliver nuclear and conventional warheads with pinpoint accuracy.

While chairing his first cabinet meeting as prime minister yesterday, King Salman announced there would be no change in Saudi foreign policy. In its own way, today's top-level meetings with the Pakistani military delegation seem to confirm this statement, adding perhaps an extra awkward complication to the Obama administration's effort to secure a diplomatic agreement with Tehran over Iran's nuclear program.

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