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The Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism (IMAFT) sponsored by Saudi Arabia which is a misnomer as it is essentially a "Sunni Muslim NATO Alliance" has finally emerged in May 2017 commanded by former Pak Army Chief, General Raheel Sharif.

It would be fair to designate IMAFT as "Sunni Muslim NATO Alliance" as its 34 Muslim nations membership when reviewed comprises only Sunni Muslim nations. Shia –majority nations like Iran and Iraq stand excluded from this Alliance.

By its very exclusivity of being a sectarian Islamic Sunni military alliance it carries the portents of emerging as one more additional disruptive factor in the severe turbulence that plagues the Middle East and Greater South West Asia.

The above fact negates the very intent of IMAFT being brought into existence for a concerted effort by Muslim nations to fight terrorism. In effect "Sunni NATO" as better abbreviated, seems to have been the brainchild of Saudi Arabia as a combat instrument to fight Saudi Arabia's proxy wars with its main Gulf rival and contender for regional power, namely, Iran.

Western media reports indicate that the US Trump Administration along with Israel have encouraged Saudi Arabia to go ahead with this project viewing it as another instrument to fight and destroy the ISIS. Saudi Arabia has been toying with this proposal from 2015 onwards but it found traction for forward movement in early 2017 when controversies broke out in Pakistan's domestic politics of the wisdom of the Pakistan Government giving permission to recently retired Pakistan Army Chief, General Raheel Sharif to head the Sunni NATO Alliance on demands by Saudi Arabia.

The Headquarters of Sunni NATO Alliance is to be located at Riyadh in Saudi Arabia. No further details of Sunni NATO Alliance in terms of its command and staff structure have yet surfaced in the public domain. It would be fair to assume that these would now be planned, worked out and put into place by Pakistani General Raheel Sharif as the C-in-C of this Alliance. Similarly there have been no firm details about the Charter of the Alliances or on the contribution of troop strengths for this Alliance by its Sunni Member nations.

Reviewing the Sunni NATO Alliance three major aspects need to be examined in relation to the underlying intent for the formation of this Alliance, its impact on Middle East dynamics and more importantly its implications for India's national security interests.

The first aspect of the intention for formation of Sunni NATO Alliance has been indicated above in that it is primarily a geopolitical move by Saudi Arabia for a containment of Iran in concert with major Sunni nations. It has nothing to do with its lofty designation of an Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism even though it would be projected that the Alliance's immediate task would be to counter the spreading tentacles of the ISIS in the Muslim world. Could not the existing Organisation of Islamic Countries served the same purpose by crafting a military arm for this purpose? That would however not have facilitated the exclusion of Iran and the Shia Muslim countries.

The second aspect of the impact of Sunni NATO Alliance on Middle East dynamics has many complicated facets. Firstly, it sharpens the cleavages between the Sunni Muslim nations and the Shia Muslim nations. This by itself creates additional challenges for any concerted moves within the region to find solutions for combatting the ISIS or conflict resolution in the Middle East.

Secondly, the United States putting its weight behind a Saudi Arabia sponsored Alliance commanded by a former Pak Army General positions the United States as not being an 'honest broker' of Middle East peace processes.

Thirdly, a perceptual Saudi Arabia-United States combine to isolate Iran in the Middle East robs the United States of co-opting Iran as the leading regional power in the Gulf Region for a better and stable security environment in the Middle East. This by itself would expectedly lead to hardening of Iran's positions in the Northern Tier of the Middle East and possibly spur Iran towards nuclear weaponisation.

The third aspect and the most disconcerting one, in terms of implications for Indian national security interest are worrisome. A host of questions strike one's mind when reviewing the Sunni NATO Alliance character and its intent. The first and foremost is the 'Pakistan Factor' that dominates the command structure of the Sunni NATO Alliance. Then is the aspect of the possible interventions of this Alliance in India's neighbourhood. Lastly, how does the backing by the United States for this Alliance affect Indo-US relations?

Pakistan's centrality in terms of command of Sunni NATO Alliance by a former Pak Army Chief positions Pakistan in an advantageous position to distort the intended role of this Alliance. It follows that General Raheel Sharif will get his way in having the Staff of this Alliance predominantly from the Pakistan Army whose implications are obvious. It carries a host of connotations which can be addressed as a subject

of a separate Paper.

In terms of Sunni NATO Alliance possible military interventions in India's neighbourhood for so-called purpose of fighting terrorism in Muslim countries extends from Afghanistan to Bangladesh and possibly the Maldives. India has legitimate national security interest in these countries. Would the Indian Government of the day be in a position to forestall Sunni NATO Alliance military interventions on India's doorsteps or be able to neutralise them once they take place? Indian contingency planning should commence even if the chances presently are remote.

India has all the right to be perturbed by United States history of past pro-Pakistan tilts which kept the world's two prominent democracies estranged. The Sunni NATO Alliance inherently carries the seeds of estrangement once again not only because of geopolitical factors but more importantly because India has always abhorred Islam-centric military alliances or even multilateral alliances with predominant Islamic membership. That the Sunni NATO Alliance is not only exclusively Islamic but two steps ahead in terms of being Islamic-sectarian in composition aggravates the situation.

Before concluding two more questions need to be addressed and these are as to why Saudi Arabia specifically preferred to have Pakistani former Army Chief, General Raheel Sharif to head the Sunni NATO Alliance? Why did Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif buckle under Saudi pressure to be a prominent factor in this Alliance conscious that this would seriously impact Pakistan's relations with its giant neighbour, Iran?

Pakistan it seems becomes a logical choice in term of Saudi Arabia's preferential choices because of the IOUs that Pakistan and PM Nawaz Sharif personally owe to Saudi Arabia. In the same vein, it can be analytically expected that the Sunni NATO Alliance would be fleshed out in a major way by standing major troop contributions from the Pakistan Army with only token contributions by other major Sunni nations. It is within the realms of possibility that the Sunni NATO Alliance could possibly have a standing reserve of a Pakistan Army Brigade as a nucleus for any expeditionary intervention force at the command of the Sunni NATO Alliance.

Pakistan's relations with Iran can be severely tested by not only Pakistan's participation in a US-sponsored/backed Sunni NATO Alliance ostensibly aimed at Iran but also that it is headed by the recently retired Pakistan Army Chief, General Raheel Sharif noted for his hard-line attitudes not only towards India and Afghanistan but also towards Iran. Stiff opposition is being offered in Pakistani domestic politics as to how the Government deviated from established procedures to grant a 'no Objection Certificate' to General Raheel Sharif to assume command of the Sunni NATO Alliance.

Pakistan has resorted to feverish damage-control initiatives with Iran by a flurry of high level visits of Pakistani top officials. But this cannot make headway until Saudi Arabia agrees to shed the 'Sunni Tag' of this Alliance and welcomes Iran and other major Shia nations in its fold. This is highly unlikely and places Pakistan in a policy cleft-stick.

In conclusion, as a first attempt of solely analysing the inherent contradictions that could surface in the Sunni NATO Alliance to affect its military effectiveness in the near future as a potent Islamic military force, one cannot however rule out that the very concept of a Sunni NATO Alliance has the potential of being a disruptive element in the already severely turbulent Middle East and Greater South West Asia region.

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