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The Politics of Mutual Dependence: Strategic and Economic Dimensions of Pakistan–Saudi Arabia Relations (2001-2025)

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ABSTRACT

In terms of the foreign policy of Pakistan, Saudi Arabia is one of the most important countries. But despite that the academic research on relations with Saudi Arabia is scanty. This paper is an attempt to fill that research gap. The Pakistan-Saudi relations are traditionally depicted merely as a religiously bonded relationship, but this study shows the interactions between the two involve much more same as in the transactional mode characterized by strategic partnership and the economic inter-dependence. This article examines the gradual evolution of Pakistan's strategic partnership with Saudi Arabia from 2001 to 2025. It addresses two fundamental questions: What has Pakistan provided to Saudi Arabia in return for its consistent financial and political support? And how has Saudi Arabia relied on Pakistan for military cooperation and diplomatic alignment on key regional and global issues? The article employs qualitative research design using secondary sources, mainly policy documents, news reports, and scholarly journals. Using the international relations theory of 'interdependence', this study demonstrates—through empirical evidence—that the Saudi-Pakistan relationship is not a unilateral patron-client relationship, but rather one of mutual benefit and strategic interdependence. Pakistan depends on Saudi Arabia for vital economic support, including oil imports, financial aid, direct investments, and remittances from its expatriate workforce in the Kingdom. Conversely, Saudi Arabia gains significantly from Pakistan's military cooperation, security expertise, and human resource contributions, which bolster its regional influence and strategic depth. This reciprocal relationship highlights how both states derive tangible benefits, reinforcing the notion that interdependence, rather than asymmetrical dependency, defines their bilateral engagement.

Introduction

The Pakistan–Saudi Arabia bilateral relationship is often portrayed in terms of shared religious identity, Islamic solidarity, and ideological affinity. However, beneath this veneer of religious camaraderie lies a pragmatic, strategic partnership shaped by mutual necessity and transactional interests. Since the 1970s, Pakistan has consistently received economic assistance, concessional oil arrangements, and political backing from Saudi Arabia (Barnett & Duvall, 2005; Jaffrelot, 2016). In return, Pakistan has extended military cooperation, security expertise, and steadfast diplomatic support to the Kingdom. Following the events of September 11, 2001, the relationship deepened further as both states confronted common challenges, including regional instability, terrorism, and shifting geopolitical dynamics in the Middle East and South Asia (Riedel, 2011b).

Irrespective of the robustness of this relationship, a paradox has appeared in recent years. Pakistan continues to rely on Saudi Arabia in terms of fiscal bailout, investments and remittances, however, it has become increasingly cautious in completely aligning itself with sectarian and military interests of Saudi Arabia, such as in 2015 when Pakistan declined Saudi invitation to join the Saudi led coalition in Yemen (Walsh, 2015; Reidel, 2020c). On the other hand, Saudi Arabia has embarked on strengthening its ties with other countries like the new diplomatic and economic relationship with India, which has stifled the expectations of Islamabad (Kaye, 2021).

The issue that this study is going to address is the lack of balance in the scholarly emphasis. Many writings focus on what Saudi Arabia gives to Pakistan; the loans, fuel, aid and investment and the strategic assistance that Pakistan gave to Saudi Arabia from time period 1970-1990 (Riedel, 2008a; Lacey, 2010; Teller, 2016; Guzansky, 2016; Munir, 2017; Hameeda, 2018). Moreover, Saudi-Pak relations has been usually investigated under the prism of religion or individual diplomacy and therefore, the bigger picture concerning the geopolitical/strategic and economical consideration is ignored (Haqqani, 2013; Tharoor, 2015; Ali, 2015; Cafiero, and Wagner, 2015). By investigating both the economic and strategic relationship of dependency from 2001 to 2025, this article fills the gap in existing literature, and develop a better-informed theory-driven explanation of relationship between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia.

This article has investigated the questions such as How has the strategic and economic dimensions have produced mutual dependence in Saudi-Pak relationship in post-2001 period? What are the strategic interests determining the Saudi-Pak bilateral relationship? How has the Saudi Arabia economic assistance shaped foreign policy of Pakistan towards Saudi Arabia? It is argued in the study that, the post-2001 relationship between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia has developed to be a complex relationship of interdependent mutual interests, whereby one does not dictate the behaviour of the other based on an ideology or religious attachment but at the national interest level. To the Kingdom, Pakistan has strategic support, military collaboration, and a possible nuclear safety net whereas to Pakistan, the Kingdom is a significant source of economic support, energy security as well as diplomatic support. Although, this relationship is supported by common geopolitical interests, but is also asymmetrical, with the former offering economic advantages that encourage Pakistan to pursue a foreign policy that follows its lead especially in influencing Pakistani choices to follow Saudi interests in areas of regional significance to the latter.

Literature Review

The review of literature explores the changing relationship between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia by structuring the discussion into two main dimensions of economic interests and strategic interests. The economic interests section addresses financial assistance, labour force movement as well as remittances as an instrument of power, the strategic section however concentrates on military interactions, nuclear partnership as well as geopolitical engagement.

Economic interests

The economic dimension of the Pakistan-Saudi Arabia relationships is reflected in the form of financial aid, labour export, energy interdependence, and ideological sponsoring. All these factors have contributed to the perpetuation of the asymmetrical economic relationship whereby Pakistan lives off the Saudi generosity as a trade off against the strategic and political orientation. Bruce Riedel (2008a) has observed that Saudi Arabia has never failed to project itself as an external stakeholder with a keen interest in regard to the internal stability of Pakistan especially when there is failure in governance or even an economic meltdown. He attributes the origin of this relationship to the 1960s and 70s, as Saudi Arabia offered financial aid when Pakistan faced economic crises, in exchange Pakistan helped Saudi Arabia with cooperation and military training. The deployment of more than 15,000 Pakistani soldiers in the Kingdom and provision by the Pakistani Air Force of support to the Royal Saudi Air Force are considered as paybacks to Saudi economic patronage of a pattern of interdependence guided by utility rather than generosity (Riedel, 2008a).

Arshad Munir (2017) builds on this point developing the argument that Saudi Arabia provided financial support after wars between Pakistan and India in 1965 and 1971. He points out that Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto was the first leader to expressly solicit Saudi economic assistance in countering Indian ambitions to become nuclear power-operation that set the stage towards a greater economic- security alignment. Munir also notes the importance of labour migration especially the more than 2 million Pakistani laborers working in the Kingdom whose remittances have over the years comprised a sizeable percentage of Pakistani foreign reserves (Munir, 2017). Nonetheless, this economic relationship is not seen as benevolent or even balanced by every scholar. This is critically analysed by Syed Muhammad Ali (2015) who argues that Saudi economic aid mostly comes with ideological and political conditions attached. According to him, the Pakistani foreign policy has increasingly been at the mercy of Saudi strategic calculus, particularly, on issues related to Iran and sectarian politics. Ali claims that such Saudi donor support to madrassas and religious groups in Pakistan has contributed to sectarian divisions in the country and made domestic security more problematic in Pakistan. This, he claims, is a soft coercion and the economic dependency leads to the ideological and policy conformity (Ali, 2015).

Ishaan Tharoor (2015) discusses further the long-term ideological investments long made by the Saudi state in Pakistan. According to him, the origin of this influence dates back to the Afghan jihad when Saudi Arabia, acting together with the United States and the intelligence services of Pakistan, sent financial and logistical assistance to Islamist fighters. This produced an analogous religious-political environment in Pakistan, which grew over time to intersect its foreign-policy direction, as well as its anti-Iranian/pro-Gulf positioning (Tharoor, 2015). The argument of economic dependence is also supported by Umer Karim (2022), which provides an overview of the full picture of the Pakistani engagement with Saudi Arabia and other gulf states. Karim asserts that the relationship can best be summed into a combination of religious and cultural similarity to be used in affirms, but the contemporary nature of the relations is rather defined by the factors of strategic need and economic reliance.

Karim (2022) continues to explain that the economic dependence of Pakistan on the Gulf states that is especially manifested in the remittances, subsidized oil imports as well as financial bailouts has been structurally programmed the Pakistani foreign policy behaviour. This economic aid, fundamental to the economic livelihood of Pakistan, has also circumscribed its sovereignty on regional sensitive matters like the Yemen conflict, reliance between Iran and Saudi Arabia as well as within the gulf. The, the writer notes that the leadership of Pakistan is normally in the precarious situation where the need to insure

sustenance of the level of Gulf economic patronage comes at the expense of flexibility in foreign policy (Karim, 2022).

Strategic interests

The strategic basis of Pakistan Saudi Arabia relations is historically geopolitically grounded in geopolitical calculations, threat perceptions in the region, military cooperation, and management of external alliances be it during the Cold War competitions and to regional insecurity after Cold War. These relationships are most properly interpreted as those based upon mutual national interest because these relationships cannot be viewed through the lens of religious solidarity or ideological affinity. Zulfikar A. Khalid (2008) addresses the bilateral relationship in its early decades, giving a basis to overview of the friendship in his work *Evolution of the Saudi-Pak Strategic Relationship (1947-1990)*. He positions Pakistan and Saudi Arabia between the major regional powers in the larger super power rivalry between the United States and Soviet Union, especially in the cold war. In its argument, therefore, Khalid holds that the geostrategic position of Pakistan in South Asia and the powerful presence of Saudi Arabia in the oil-rich Gulf made the two states essential elements in U.S strategic equations. When there was chaos, the two states were known to be on the same side in realigning common security goals (the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Iran-Iraq War, and build-up of naval forces in the gulf) (Khalid, 2008).

This has been supported by Umer Karim (2020) who argues that the reason as to why Pakistan has always had a major influence in the creation of relations between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia has been because of its military establishment, specifically in military regimes. He records the process of institutionalization of this collaboration in the form of bilateral defense agreements, the results of which were the protracted sending of Pakistani military advisors and trainers to the Kingdom, including the cooperation framework on military support activities of 1967 and the Protocol Agreement on Deputation of Armed Personnel of 1982 (Karim, 2020). Karim point out that this co-operation has been in place over various changes in the civilian leadership, indicating that military-to-military ties remain the core of bilateral relationship, and that the states would tend to prioritize matters relating to its survival, security well before any ideological or civilian considerations.

The nuclear sphere is also involved in the strategic relationship. According to a report by Bruce Riedel (2008a), claimed that Saudi Arabia provided the financial donations to the nuclear program of Pakistan in the 1970s as part of an informal agreement whereby Pakistani would offer a nuclear shield to the Kingdom in the case of such an emergency. According to Riedel (2008a), at that time, King Faisal funded the nuclear ambitions of the then prime minister of Pakistan, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who in turn changed the name Lyallpur to be called Faisalabad in honour of King Faisal (Riedel, 2008a). Similarly, Syeda Hameeda (2018) describes the manner in which Bhutto ingeniously ensured that he forged relationships with Saudi Arabia even after the dismembering of Pakistan in 1971. The organization of the Second Islamic Summit in Lahore in 1974 under Saudi financial and political sponsorship was not so much a cultural but a strategic initiative to restore the credibility of Pakistan in the region, and its ability to exercise its influence in the Muslim world. The summit also assisted Bhutto to legitimise his authority and rereading Pakistan as a centre of Islamic geopolitics (Hameeda, 2018).

A new stage and level of the bilateral strategic relationship operationalization was achieved in the 1980s. According to Giorgio Cafiero and Daniel Wagner (2015), Pakistani troops had already been brought to Saudi Arabia this decade on a mission to defend the Kingdom against potential attacks by Iran during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988). This sort of cooperation was further boosted by the Soviet-Afghan War (1979-1989), where Saudi Arabia and Pakistan under the watchful eye of U.S. joined forces to assist the Afghan mujahideen with both training and finance. This trilateral alliance (Saudi Arabia, Pakistan United States)

was a conventional case of balancing against external threats and coalition-building, scoring another point in proving the claim that it is strategic necessity and alignment of interest but not religious identity that provides the basis of this relationship (Cafiero & Wagner, 2015). Supporting this further, experts like Neville Teller, Yoel Guzansky, Robert Lacey and Mateen Haider bring out the fact that Saudi Arabia has turned to Pakistan to fulfil not only its training needs, but actually active defence exchange partnership at a time of internal disquiet and external threatening moments particularly Iran, Houthi like elements in Yemen, and international terrorism. Together with these authors, it can be suggested that the disposition to serve as supporter of Saudi Arabia security has been constant in Pakistani-Saudi relations, especially when Riyadh has been experiencing challenges of clerics, modernists, and militant groups on the domestic level (Teller, 2016; Guzansky, 2016; Lacey, 2010).

Lastly, Rashid Ahmad Siddiqui (2019) explores the recent trends of the Pakistan-Saudi relations against changed strategic conditions. He claims that the bilateral relationship, which had been quite robust has been gaining complexity. The newer factors that have entered the strategic equation include the appearance of India-Saudi relations, the increasing impact of China and the realignments in the Gulf region. Through such changes, however, Siddiqui argues that the close ties with Riyadh is one of critical pillars of foreign policy of Pakistan especially as Saudi Arabia offers intermittent economic and political assistance (Siddiqui, 2019).

Theoretical Framework

In this article, the concept of interdependence between states in international politics has been used in an attempt to analyse the economic and strategic interdependence between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. The concept of Interdependence in international relations has been conceptualised by both liberal and realist school of thought. The interdependence as stated in liberalism, especially economic interdependence may result in increased cooperation and decrease in the possible occurrence of war between states (Pevehouse, 2004; Rana, 2015). Additionally, liberalism believe that the emergence of international institutions and norms allow cooperation between states leading to the establishment of peace. Nevertheless, the promises of liberalism do not reflect empirical reality of the international politics. Rather to understand international politics, realist school of thought provide much more grounded understanding (Rousseau, & Walker, 2009).

According to realism the international system is anarchic in nature with no central authority to control and states are self-interested and motivated by national interest and gain over power. In this respect, interdependence in a world devoid of a central authority would not result in cooperation as suggested by liberalism, but the interdependence would of different nature. A State would become dependent on another state either regarding resources or protection but this would just fuel competition and rivalry since each state is mainly interested in its own survival (Spindler, 2014; Rana, 2015; Keohane, & Nye, 2017). This understanding was further refined when Kenneth Waltz (2000) through his development of structural realism developed the concept.

Waltz insisted that the international system is anarchic and this leads to a security dilemma in which states face a pressure to maximize their security and survival. The nature of dependence of economies or political situations does not eliminate the struggle of power according to Waltz (Waltz, 2000a). Interdependence can provide temporary motives to cooperation; however, it does not represent a core change in the state conduct. Interdependency among states puts them in a constant state of rivalry as they face extinction or domination of balance in power shift (Waltz, 2015b). In this manner, the Pakistan-Saudi economic and strategic cooperation must be understood for the perspective of interdependence as understood by realism because both the states are more interested in the protection of their own national interests.

Research methodology

The qualitative research methodology would best fit this kind of research because a detailed analysis of the phenomenon is required. When it comes to exploring state behaviour, changes in foreign policy, and the strategic decision-making processes through contextual and interpretive resources then qualitative methods are more suitable. This study did not require interviews or fieldwork, as sufficient secondary data was available to conduct the research. A qualitative content analysis was employed, utilizing publicly accessible sources such as official statements, policy documents, news reports, and scholarly interpretations. These materials were thematically coded to identify recurring patterns and narratives. This methodological approach is particularly suited to the political and historical nature of the subject, enabling a structured explanation of how Pakistan has navigated and responded to Saudi Arabia's financial and political support—particularly in the realms of military cooperation and diplomatic alignment.

Historical overview of Pak-Saudi relations (1947-2000)

After independence of Pakistan in August 1947, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was one of the early states to recognize a new state. This diplomatic relationship is the early contact that was initially motivated neither purely politically nor evangelically but with a common religious identity and pan-Islamic solidarity. As Pakistan was establishing itself as the place where Muslims could find a home in South Asia, Saudi Arabia, as the custodian of the holy places in Islam, was inevitably adopted as a spiritual, as well as a strategic ally. The ideological connection of the two nations was the basis of the bilateral relation over the next few decades (Khan & Khan, 2021).

In 1951, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan signed a Treaty of Friendship institutionalizing their fraternal relationships and providing the framework in which economic, cultural, and strategic partnership can be established (Khan, 2021). This was time of expressing goodwill symbolically, which was done in mutual state visits, the most notable visit that took place was the 1954 visit of King Saud to Pakistan. In this visit, the Kingdom committed financial support which was used in developing some of the infrastructures like the suburb, Saudabad in Karachi that showed that the kingdom was willing to invest in the long-term development of Pakistan (Siddiqi, 2019).

Although economic interaction was limited in the 1950s, Saudi Arabia was able to give small financial aid to Pakistan in its early days and this only strengthened the view that the Kingdom acted as a benevolent Islamic supervisor. Pakistan, in turn, was faithful to Saudi Arabia on the international arena as she defended Saudi Arabia on the international stage especially in the United Nations and Muslim bloc. The two states also shared political interests since they were both anti-communists, Western-allied states during the early years of the Cold War, and supported Muslim unity on an international level, such as the Muslim World League, founded under the rule of King Faisal (Anwar et.al, 2025).

In the early 1960s, collaboration started degrading to purely symbolic actions toward strategic collaboration. In spite of the fact that formal military cooperation would pick up later, the era saw the fledgling aspects of technical defence cooperation. Pakistan increased military training to Saudi military personnel and also started sending experienced Pakistani officers to take up advising positions in the Kingdom military setup (Khalid, 1989). The 1970s witnessed a critical moment in Saudi Aramco relations, which was distinguished by a further expansion of economic relations, the ideological convergence as well as the legalisation of the strategic military alliances. The Indo-Pak war of 1971 and East Pakistan secession undermined the status of Islamabad on the world map. In this regard, Saudi Arabia appeared as a steady advocate and financial contributor that gave both moral and material support to a country in crisis. Riyadh did not recognize Bangladesh immediately and did this as a show of support to the stance of Pakistan (Siddiqi, 2019). Saudi Arabia also offered big

economic relief to enable Pakistan to come out of the economic effects of war and political isolation.

The relations with Saudi Arabia were further improved under Prime minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (1971-1977). Bhutto tried to establish Pakistan as the major Islamic voice, which was in line with what King Faisal had in mind about having an Islamic bloc. The 1974 Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) Summit in Lahore where King Faisal and other key Muslim leaders were present marked the peak of Islamic unity diplomacies and entrenched Saudi Pakistan relations as major components of this new Muslim identity (Khan & Khan, 2021). Saudi governments have given extra financial assistance in this period and have directly financed the financial means on the religious and social infrastructure development such as building mosques, Islamic centres and schools.

The economic aspect of the relationship expanded greatly following the 1973 oil crisis that equipped Saudi Arabia with increased financial strength. Saudi largesse was pre-eminently a windfall to Pakistan in the form of aid and grant and concessional loans. Most important perhaps, during this time a massive Pakistani worker migration to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf started. This group of expat laborers became a vital source of remittances, a vital source of these, keeping the economy of Pakistan afloat during the late 1970s and 1980s (Anwar et.al, 2025).

Under General Zia-ul-Haq (1977-988), bilateral relations had become more ideologically and strategically enshrined. Both the governments were conservative Islamic oriented and the policies of the time towards Islamization adopted by Zia reflected the religious-political outlook of Saudi Arabia. Riyadh stepped up the monetary and ideological backing of Pakistan whose government through funds was able to sponsor a number of religious seminaries (madrasas) most of which propagated Deobandi and Wahhabi forms of Islam. The role of these institutions in the regional security environment would much later on prove to be controversial (Khalid, 1982).

Strategically, the invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviets in 1979 converted Saudi Pakistan relations into an intense piece of security association. Saudi Arabia and Pakistan were part of a trilateral coalition with the United States of America to fund, equip and train Afghan mujahideen who were resisting the Soviet occupation in their country. The operational base of this covert urgent became fronted by Pakistan Inter-Services intelligence (ISI) with the logistical and financial support of Riyadh and Washington. It is believed that Saudi Arabia provided billions of dollars in financial contributions to the resistance in Afghanistan and was on a dollar-to-dollar basis in many instances equal to U.S. contributions. At the same time, military-to-military relations were intensified. In Saudi Arabia, the Pakistani army deployed and trained Saudi soldiers and also advised them in areas such as internal security, and counterinsurgency activities. By the middle of the 1980s, a few thousand Pakistani military personnel were deployed in the Kingdom to be involved in bilateral agreements (Rubin, 2002). Not only did this collaboration aid Saudi Arabia to maintain its internal stability at a time of volatility in the region both due to the Iran-Iraq war but also, the role that Pakistan would play in ensuring the security of the Kingdom would become an institutionalized phenomenon.

The 1990s maintained the pattern of a closely-linked Saudi with Pakistan relationship, but the decade came with its own complexities based on the changing regional trends and the internal changes to the Pakistani domestic environment. Pakistan dispatched thousands of troops to Kingdom in the realm of supporting Saudi Arabia during the 1990-91 gulf war, though they did not directly participate in opposing Iraq. This has given Pakistan the third line of defence in strengthening her commitment to security support to Saudi Arabia, and Saudi leadership has expressed their gratitude over Islamabad activities to regional stability publicly (Khalid, 1989). From an economic point of view, the decade was characterized by Saudi Arabia giving

Pakistan critical monetary relief especially in times of economic sanctions, as well as times of balance of payment crises.

Following the nuclear tests of India in May 1998 in retaliation to Pakistan tests, Pakistan was internationally sanctioned leading to economic isolation. Saudi Arabia has bailed Pakistani in time of economic crisis. Saudi Arabia has played a crucial role, namely, deferring oil payments, granting, and diplomatic assistance in this context. The Saudi oil shipments were selling in billions of dollars and this enabled the Pakistani economy to remain stable during this turbulent time (Siddiqi, 2019). Saudi Arabia gave 180 million worth of oil per year to ease the effects of sanctions; a trend that undoubtedly extended into early 2000s (Anwar et al., 2025). Saudi Arabia continued to be a major energy provider to Pakistan where a big portion of the oil was offered on deferred payments. By 2001, the relationship between Saudi and Pakistan had become a formidable and multilateral alliance based both on complementary strategic interests, affinity of religion and an ancient record of partnership. However, the alliance was going to experience the post-9/11 world full of challenges and re-alignments with drastically changing global perceptions regarding security and extremism (Mehmood, & Ahmed, 2018).

Economic dependence of Pakistan on Saudi Arabia (2001-2025)

Economic relations between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan between 2001 and 2025 have been informed by the classical rules of realism informing the economic relationship based on national interest, sovereignty, and power in an anarchic international system. Instead of driven by religious inclination or historical fraternity, the two countries interacted economically as rational actors who are keen to maximize the level of strategic advantage. In the context of the events of 9/11 and the fact that Pakistan had decided to ally itself with the United States in the War on Terror, Saudi Arabia perceived a stable Pakistan as key to regional balance and also to the combat the threat of transnational extremists (Boyle, 2008). Consequently, Saudi economic assistance to Pakistan burgeoned mostly in the form of direct loans, oil-arrears financing and balance-of-payments assistance.

In 2014, Saudi Arabia gave Pakistan a grant of 1.5 billion dollars, which is commonly seen as an act of goodwill connected to geopolitical alignment (Anwar et al., 2025). When Pakistan was facing one of the worst financial crises in its history in October 2018, Saudi Arabia offered a six-billion-dollar support package of both a central bank deposit and a deferred oil payment facility in equal measure (Al Jazeera, 2018). In his 2019 visit to Pakistan, the crown prince Mohammed bin Salman announced Saudi investment of \$20 billion, among others, a 10-billion-dollar oil refinery in Gwadar (AP News, 2024b). Such processes were the determinants of structural economic diplomacy.

The Pakistani expatriates who found work in Saudi Arabia continued to send back huge amounts of money that were another pillar of the bilateral economic relationship. These remittances alone reached about 7.6 billion USD in the context of the fiscal year 2020-21, which serves as a primary source of foreign exchange inflow to Pakistan, pointing to the necessity of labour and capital reciprocity (Kaye, 2021). This kind of relationship has been described as a transactional relationship where Pakistan provides labour and receives much needed income, but Saudi Arabia gets a cheap but affordable source of labour, to support its internal economy.

During the period, Saudi investment initiatives to Pakistan also increased, and some of the projects were identified as strategic as per the Saudi vision 2030, and financing of Pakistan required infrastructure. In 2025, Manara Minerals of Saudi Arabia offered to take a significant share in the Reko Diq copper-gold mining investment that could be up to a billion dollars, evidence of the Riyadh interest in maintaining a long-term access to resources (Financial Times, 2025). Moreover, in October 2024, 27 memoranda of understanding were

signed at an amount of 2 billion dollars in the fields of agriculture, technology, and energy (Tribune, 2024).

Yet, classical realism also demonstrates the contingency that this economic activity is based on. In 2015, when Pakistan refused to join the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen, Riyadh temporarily hushed down its financial aid as a precursor to its economic cooperation hinges on shared strategy. In the same way, when Pakistan criticized OIC President on its approach to the Kashmir issue in 2020, a temporary diplomatic freeze occurred, which once again confirmed the transnationalism of Saudi patronage (Riedel, 2020c). Also, Saudi aid has been used as an accessory tool to facilitate the ease of Pakistan to adhere to IMF program conditions. As an example, in 2024, Saudi Arabia, Chinese, and UAE governments gave the required financial guarantees that allowed Pakistan to obtain an Extended Fund Facility worth 7 billion at the IMF (Reuters, 2024c). Such measures indicate that Saudi Arabia has a multi-dimensional economic foreign policy in which they engage in both straightforward financial aid and subtle strategic influence.

Strategic reliance of Saudi Arabia on Pakistan

The Saudi Arabia and Pakistan strategic partnership during the period between 2001 and 2025 can be explained better by classical realism ideas that power, survival, and national interest are important in the anarchic international system. Classical realism holds that self-interest is the major trait that is likely to drive the activities of states, with security and stockpiling of strategic advantages being nearly the most compelling reasons behind state behaviours (Lebow, 2024). Pakistan-Saudi is a complex relationship which is centred on military, economic and financial interdependence, and converging strategic interests that promote the ideology of security and of common expediency as opposed to Islamic solidarity and moral principle.

In the sense of realist approach, the military dependence of Saudi Arabia on Pakistan was not a question of Islamic solidarity but rather a logical counteraction against the regional security. With the ambiguous security situation in Saudi Arabia and internal insecurities, Saudi outsourced key components of its security structure to a potential partner capable of doing so. Pakistan as a strategic asset was a depth asset in the form of a professional army with a nuclear deterrence. At the beginning of 2017, to underline this mutual strategic trust, former General Raheel Sharif took over the command of the Saudi-led Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC) which indicated that Islamabad was heavily involved in Saudi-proposed security arrangements (Reuters, 2017a). Pakistan in its turn realized this alliance as an opportunity to expand its regional significance and put some diplomatic and financial demands

Besides the military alliance, Pakistan also provided defensive technology and weapons to Saudi Arabia. Among these are the export orders to Saudi by Pakistan Ordnance Factories (POF) including the reported order of a sum amount of USD 81 million in 2016 (Mateen, 2016). These agreements allowed Pakistan to sell Saudi Arabia small and medium range weapon systems, military logistics, equipment, thereby strengthening the security of Riyadh and by adopting the WTO defence sector policies, such as the intention to purchase small and medium range weapon systems, military logistics, equipment which further strengthen the defence of Riyadh in connection with the Saudi economic interest in the field of construction in Pakistan.

In addition to material output in military terms, Pakistan provided strategic support on both levels as well as diplomatic support in regional flows. When crises related to Saudi Arabia, like its 2016 falling out with Iran, occurred, Pakistan made statements that Islamabad would strongly respond to any threats to the Kingdoms territorial integrity (Time, 2016).

The maritime field is another dimension through which Pakistan is more strategically important to Saudi Arabia due to combined naval drills and security cooperation in the Indian

Ocean Region (IOR). A notable example was the AMAN-2025 navy event that was held in Pakistan in February 2025 where more than 40 navies participated including the Saudi one. The training was on joint anti-piracy exercise, maritime security and combined crisis response in the Arabian Sea. The Saudi Arabian naval element in AMAN-2025 was a seminal and operational announcement sincerely to Pakistan as a maritime leader in the region, as well as, brandishing its desire to extend the influence assessment by means of multilateral security relations. In the case of Saudi Arabia, AMAN -2025 achieved several objectives. It also gave its maritime forces a chance to exercise with the more experienced Pakistani navy, particularly in a littoral combat and search-and-rescue missions where Saudi naval forces remain weaker compared to their land and air force. Engagement also enhanced the defence integration between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan as well as other Muslim majority nations (Al-Kinani, 2025). In case of Pakistan, Saudi presence there bolstered its reputation of playing a role as a regional maritime security hub, which it had provided as an incentive to keep getting economic aid coming in form of Saudi Arabia.

In addition to drills, there has been also a close interaction between the Pakistani and Saudi military planning teams in alignment of doctrine and the threat perception which was primarily on the areas of maritime terrorism, protection of the oil route, as well as, regional choke points like the strait of Hormuz. This military coordination was translated into practical strategic benefit to Saudi Arabia, and it served to safeguard its exports of oil by means of the sea and to sharpen the field of regional deterrence (Khan, 2025). The case of the partnership between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia is not just limited to their military drills rather, it can be also examined through the lens of the diplomatic alignment of the countries during the major regional conflicts. An example is the de-escalation plea by the Saudi and Pakistan jointly between India and Pakistan in April 2024. In the visit of Sharif to Riyadh, Sharif and the Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman issued a statement which urged peaceful dialog, especially on Kashmir. The statement spoke of restraint and reaffirmed support to peace in the South Asian region which was more in line with the new marketing strategy that Saudi Arabia was employing in the region of economic connection rather than war (Reuters, 2024b). In this position, Saudi Arabia was able to balance a close relationship with India that was developing with its traditional ties with Pakistan. In the case of Pakistan, public support of Saudi Arabia on the matter facilitated sustenance of investment and strengthen the perception of being a positive influence in the region. Such a stand became more serious in May 2025, when India and Pakistan nearly got into conflict due to the use of missiles and drones. In an interview with the press, Shehbaz Sharif expressed gratitude to Saudi Arabia and China who became mediators of a back-channel ceasefire and ensured the absence of escalation, further establishing Saudi Arabia as a stabilizing force in the South Asian region (The Guardian, 2025). The next point that was aligned was the Gaza crisis of 2024. At a time when Israel was deepening its military operations in Gaza, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia made similar demands of a ceasefire and setting up of humanitarian corridors. The statements issued by both of them repeated that the protection of civilian life and adherence to the international humanitarian law were paramount and were similarly worded (AP News, 2024a).

Since 2010, the civilian and military leadership of Pakistan has been taking a more considered approach in its long-standing partnership with Saudi Arabia. Although Saudi Arabia has been a strategic and financially important partner, Pakistan has embarked on a policy of calculated loyalty particularly in situations that touch on regional sectarian and Saudi Arabia changing alliances-most notably their relationship with India. One point of no turning back happened in April 2015, when Saudi Arabia invited Pakistan to join a fighting campaign in Yemen against the rebels of the Houthi movement. The parliament of Pakistan unanimously voted against joining the Saudi-led coalition because of the fear of getting involved in a sectarian war and destabilizing its own Sunni-Shia balance within its country

(Walsh, 2015). It was a major strategic shift that shows that although Pakistan would protect the Saudi territorial integrity, they were not going to necessarily line up with Riyadh in its foreign military conflicts.

That decision was especially appropriate considering how Saudi Arabia had used its finances to be generous to Islamabad in the past, including a gift of more than 1.5 billion in 2014. However, Pakistan's denial in Yemen highlighted its increasing interest in keeping itself neutral in the region and trying to juggle relationships amid key regional players, including its neighbour Iran as a major stakeholder in the same year sectarian situation in the Middle East (Riedel, 2020c).

As a further complication in the relationship, Saudi Arabia developed increased interaction with India more specifically, in trade, energy, and defence areas. Although Riyadh traditionally considered Pakistan as its nearest Muslim ally, the last ten years are marked by a trend of the Kingdom focusing more on economic pragmatism than ideological orientation leading to the intensification of the relations with New Delhi. This change did not sit well with the customary expectations of exclusivity of the Saudi alliance in the city of Islamabad. Analysts at dayan.org state that it is the need to improve trade relations and Saudi investments, as well as bilateral economic opportunities, which have forced Pakistan to change its foreign policy stance (Kaye, 2021). This shift towards an off-balance Turkey is also a more transactional and pragmatic approach which Pakistan feels more comfortable about Saudi relations but is increasingly realizing the changing realignments of the region and the domestic limitations of its own constraints.

Conclusion

The bilateral relations between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia between 2001 and 2025 is mutually beneficial partnership that has been lasting but has continued to develop to a position where the two countries can hardly be separated as neither can subsist without the other since both have a strategic necessity in relation to each other and since both are economically dependent on one another. The alliance has been demonstrating the transactional, yet mutually beneficial relationship over a period of more than a quarter century, determined by changing geopolitics of the region, domestic factors, as well as economic and political trends.

On strategic front, Pakistan has always given Saudi Arabia military and security cover of the highest importance. Since the deployment of troops and military personnel to the Kingdom through joint military training missions, as well as the top-level liaison with the military, Pakistan has been an important safety ally. When the head of the IMCTC was appointed to be General Raheel Sharif in 2017, Saudi Arabia was banking on the skill of the Pakistani military leadership. Among other things, Saudi involvement in the AMAN-2025 naval drills in Karachi were the epitome of maritime collaboration and it moved Saudi operational ability in the Arabian Sea in addition to strengthening the ability of Pakistan to act as a security facilitator in the region.

Diplomatic aid has also been provided by Pakistan during regional tantrums. Even in light of support of Saudi demands of peace in Gaza, condoning its stances in the OIC or even paying homage to the sovereignty of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia during its tussle with Iran in 2016, the limited state sources have repeatedly tailored its diplomacy to support its regional ambition. When Pakistan pulled out of the Saudi led military action in Yemen in 2015, it still pledged with Saudi Arabia to defend its territorial integrity. This was an indication that though a prospect of obtaining unconditional military support by Pakistan is unlikely, Pakistan still views the security of the Kingdom as part and parcel of its foreign policy.

It has an economic aspect to the relationship that is now stronger than ever, particularly in the last decade. Saudi Arabia has played the role of financial stabilizer of Pakistan on a number of occasions, pledging to put several billions of dollars in the central bank of Pakistan,

lending oil on deferred payments and making commitments on solid investments. As an example, in 2019 when the Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman visited Islamabad, Saudi Arabia promised more than 20 billion dollars' worth of intentional investments. This was later on followed up in 2024 when Riyadh committed another 5bn dollars and signed 27 MOUs totalling 2 bn dollars in other areas like mining, agriculture, IT and healthcare.

The strategic investment that the Kingdom plans to invest in the Reko Diq copper gold project (approximately, one billion dollars) is a case in point of this tradition moving towards strategic investment. Further, another dimension of economic interdependence can be seen in the fact that Pakistan has a large fight in Saudi Arabia and Saudi Arabia earns more than 5 billion dollars annually as a form of remittances, making it another level of dependence.

The Pakistan Saudi Arabia relationship is no more a traditional aid-relationship based sojourn and it has moved towards a more qualitative relationship, one that involves mutual strategic importance and economic potential. Although both nations are still trying to cope with emergent difficulties like the augmentation of Saudi Arabia and India contact and the changing stance of Pakistan in the region, the core of military confidence, economic cooperation, and diplomatic coordination has so far not been severed. This relationship will go on to be maintained in the future, the strategic returns that are provided by Islamabad on a more consistent basis and the readiness of Riyadh to perceive Pakistan as more than a dependent satellite state, but as a partner that is relevant and flexible to the region.

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