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Dynamics of Pakistan–Saudi Relations: Politics, Strategy, and Security (1947–2018)

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ABSTRACT

The evolution of relations between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia exemplifies a unique amalgamation of political alignment, strategic alliance, and security cooperation from 1947 to 2018. The bilateral relationship, which was founded on mutual religious and cultural relations, evolved into a complex alliance quite fast. Saudi Arabia was one of the first countries that recognised the independence of Pakistan, therefore, establishing the foundation towards further interaction. The two countries have provided support to each other in political affairs, formed military and defence ties, and aligned themselves strategically to overcome the challenges in the region and the world. This paper will analyse the intricate nature of the relationship by exploring the political nature of the relationship, the strategic nature, and the security implication of such relationship. It points out the persistence of the relevance of the Saudi Arabia within the foreign policy of Pakistan and the mutual gain that defines the relationship between the two countries.

Key Words: Diplomatic, Military, Political, Strategic, Relations, Defence.

Introduction

The friendship between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan occupies a special status among the relationships of the international politics as the friendship between the countries is interconnected with the religious, strategy and security issues and this is beyond the traditional bilateral relations. The Islamic iconography has been used by both regimes to portray the relationship that they have as being brotherly, however, a closer look reveals that strategic necessity has been the major driver. Traditionally, Saudi Arabia is a political ally, oil and financial aid provider, and buyer of Pakistan labour and military expertise. Saudi Arabia has had a strong ally in Pakistan who has provided defence training, technological skills, and political support both regionally and internationally. What has resulted has been a relationship which is resolute and at the same time unequal, and which is based not only on the ideology but of the practical evaluation of shared needs. This paper is a critical examination of how the ties between Pakistan and Saudi have been developed focusing on political, strategic, and military dimensions. It argues that even though religion has provided the vocabulary of fraternity, security and power relations which explain the level of cooperation. Inconsistency has also come about where local politics, or local balance restricted the ability of Pakistan to fully conform to the Saudi wishes. Saudi Arabia became one of the first countries to recognise Pakistan when it attained independence in 1947. This early recognition by the custodian of the Two Holy Mosques had a great symbolic validity on the part of Pakistan. Being an immature state that also sought recognition and alliances in the Muslim world, Pakistan used this affiliation to enhance its Islamic nature in its domestic politics as well as the foreign policy.

In the case of Saudi Arabia, the relationship did not offer purely symbolic value. During the early Cold War period, the Kingdom faced the problem of strategic vulnerability. The military lacked modern training, and geographical position made it a potential target in local wars. Partnership with Pakistan, a country, which restructured its military systems based on British

systems and had effective military, presented Saudi Arabia with a solid Muslim partner. Therefore, since the inception, the relationship had been based on a deal: Saudi Arabia would provide financial and political goodwill, whereas Pakistan would provide trained people, defence experience, and political support at the international levels.

Research Methodology

The study utilises a qualitative interpretative paradigm to examine the nature of bilateral relations on the broader regional and international scales. This study gives the events, pronouncements by the people, and the outcomes of the policies precedence instead of using numerical data to outline the shifts in the relationship through time. The methodology is descriptive, explanatory and critical which seeks to bring out how religion, power politics and strategic need have intertwined to determine the nature and the direction of the alliance.

Research Design and Approach

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Data Sources

The study is based mainly on the secondary sources. These include:

Official Governmental and policy statements of the Governments of Pakistan and Saudi Arabia.

- Things that were said by foreign ministries and embassies in speeches, communiques and press releases.
- International organizations report, including the United Nations, Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and the security forums in the region.
- Scholarly publications- books, journal articles, and think-tank publications- on South Asian and Middle East politics.
- The current news archives of reliable sources (e.g., Dawn, Arab news, BBC, The Guardian, and Al Jazeera), which give information on leadership visits, strategic coalitions, and policy choices.

Such variety of sources enables them to be triangulated so that interpretations become backed by different types of evidence and minimize the possibility of narrative bias.

Data Collection and Analysis

The information was gathered by means of systematic review of historical documents and scholarly literature that covered the period between 1947 and 2024. The analysis was done in three phases:

1. Chronological mapping: The events were chronologically mapped out to find important turning points in the Pakistan Saudi relations as to wars, diplomatic initiatives, regime changes and economic agreements.
2. Categorization based on a theme: To present a coherent flow of analysis of information, information was sorted into major themes such as political and diplomatic engagements, military and strategic cooperation, economic and manpower linkages, and post-9/11 changes.

3. Interpretive analysis: Every theme was evaluated based on the international relations theories, especially realism and constructivism to determine whether the partnership was mainly motivated by religious affinity or strategic pragmatism.

Analytical Framework

The analytical paradigm incorporates the historical institutionalism and foreign policy analysis.

The use of historical institutionalism can be used to explain the past decisions like army cooperation terms or economic aid packages, which left pattern of dependency and trust between the two states.

The foreign policy analysis offers the prism to evaluate the reasons behind leadership and domestic inhibitors, especially in military regimes and democratic transitions in Pakistan.

This two-level structure enables the research to include structural and agency-level predictors of the relationship.

Periodization of Study

In order to trace the development of bilateral relations, the study splits the historical time into six stages of analysis:

1. 1947 1969: Development of initial diplomatic and military cooperation.
2. 1970 -1989: Strengthening of strategic and ideological ties in the process of regional struggle.
3. 19902001: Realignment in the process of nuclearization and post-Cold War revisioning.
4. 2001-2010: Transformation in the post-9/11 security order.
5. 2010-2018: Re-definition in changing regional alliances and change of leadership.

6. 2018-current: Economical and defense partnerships institutionalization in evolving global geopolitics.

The periodization will make sure that the analysis will be both historically based and contextually determined without making generalizations across the various periods in politics.

Limitations

The study acknowledges certain limitations of the methodology.

The collaboration between the defence and intelligence sector is sensitive hence official information about the military setups is not fully disclosed and therefore some of the findings are to be based on secondary verification. Secondly, the study should also be objective, but the interpretation of political intentions and diplomatic gestures require subjective judgement. The study is not carried out through the quantitative means, it is focused on the qualitative information and historical background rather than statistical correlation.

Ethical Considerations

The sources of information applied in this paper are publicly available and it has been cited. The study does not contain any hypothetical claims or unproved facts that cannot be documented. The purpose is to maintain the academic honesty, accuracy of the information, and objectivity in evaluating the measures and intentions of the two states.

Expected Contribution

This publication enrichs the domain of foreign policy and security studies because it offers the history and a critical assessment of the relationship between Pakistan and Saudi based on thorough and historically informed analysis. It balances the utopian principle of Islamic fraternity with the strategic facts of practical cooperation, providing a subtle understanding of

how unequal dependency has over the years affected the partnership. The study shows that, through the combination of historical reality and the interpretation, religion has provided legitimacy and cultural meaning, and strategic necessity and political realism have continued to be the pillars of the Pakistan Saudi relationship.

Political and Diplomatic Engagements

The political dimension of the Pak-Saudi relations has been typified by the visits of the seniors and personal diplomacy. Visits have been made to Pakistan by Saudi kings King Saud in 1954, King Faisal in 1966, King Khalid in 1974, King Fahd in 1980 and King Abdullah on several occasions between 1984 and 2003. The visit of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in 2019 was defined as a re-establishment of good relations. Upon taking power, Pakistani leaders are likely to make Saudi Arabia the first destination of their visit, and underline the role of the Kingdom in the foreign policy of Islamabad.

These visits did not constitute a routine. They strengthened political legitimacy among the leaders in the two states. To Pakistan, Saudi acknowledgement was like the seal of approval especially to the military dictators like General Zia-ul-Haq and General Musharraf, who used the image of Islamic unity to cement power back at the home front (Horizon, 1966). To the Saudi leaders, the faithfulness of Pakistan was a sign that the Kingdom could take advantage of the Muslim allies in order to help it to take up the regional and global stances. Analytically, this tendency demonstrates the fact that the diplomatic relations between the two states have always remained personal (Rizvi, 1981). Ties were not necessarily structured through bureaucratic institutions but by decision of ruling elites and as such the relationship was always prone to change with changes in leadership but at the same time was flexible to changes in situations (Safran, 1988).

Military and Strategic Cooperation

The military aspect was manifested in the 1960s. In 1967, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia signed the first official defense cooperation accord. Pakistan also trained and assisted Saudi armed forces and Pakistani soldiers were posted in the Kingdom in order to build its defense (Pakistan News, 1967). During one period in 1980s, almost 20000 Pakistani forces were stationed in Saudi Arabia which included air defense, military planning and technical support services.

This position reflected the asymmetry of the structural relations: Saudi Arabia, despite its prosperity, did not have experience in military operations; Pakistan, despite its lack of resources, was over-staffed with trained officers and soldiers. This cooperation was therefore not only in their mutual interest as Saudi Arabia gained manpower and Pakistan gained political goodwill and financial aid.

The 1965 War and Kashmir Issue

The war in 1965 between India and Pakistan was a breakthrough. Saudi Arabia publicly sided with Pakistan on the Kashmir issue by offering Pakistan political and financial aid (Pakistan News, 1967) King Faisal also followed this with a 1966 visit to Pakistan and together they lobbied the UN to give the Kashmir the right to self-determination (Pakistan News, 1967).

Analytically, this episode exhibits how the Saudi Arabia leveraged on its Islamic leadership position to give Pakistan the right to legitimize its main foreign policy issue and vice versa to strengthen Saudi prestige in the Muslim world (Telegraph, 1968).

Arab–Israel Conflicts and Regional Dynamics

The failures of the Arab military forces were demonstrated during the Arab Israeli conflicts in 1967 and 1973. The realisation of the defence weakness in Saudi Arabia led to the

increased aid that Pakistan was seeking. Pakistani pilots were engaged in war missions on behalf of Arab countries and the number of Pakistani military presence in Saudi Arabia grew. The Saudi Arabian lesson was categorical: oil wealth could not guarantee security unless they had good partners. Its participation in the Arab affairs enhanced the Islamic credibility of Pakistan, and guaranteed it continued financial aid of Saudi Arabia, especially of preferential oil shipments in times of economic distress.

The Iran–Iraq War and Expanded Cooperation

During the Iran-Iraq War (19801988), Saudi Arabia again relied on the military support of Pakistan requesting the additional troop and security cooperation. Pakistan, in its turn, had to face a difficult balancing act. When it gave military support to Saudi Arabia, it wanted to avoid direct confrontation with Iran which it had common borders and religious affiliations. This example was an illustration of a long-term tension, though, as Pakistan often has to balance between its dependency on Saudi financial aid and its need to maintain working relationships with Iran. However, the Kingdom remained the most important Middle Eastern ally of Pakistan, acquiring arms ticketed through Pakistan and increasing the level of defence cooperation.

Economic and Manpower Linkages

Labour migration also created a great economic connection in addition to military alliances. Labour migration of Pakistani to Saudi Arabia has been conducting since the 1970s where the Pakistani labourers have been employed in construction, industries, and services. Their remittances became an important source of foreign funds to Pakistan. This relationship exemplifies another imbalance, Saudi Arabia benefited in terms of cheap, disciplined labour, but Pakistan depended on remittances to stabilise the economy. There were also political implications of the flow of personnel. To the ordinary Pakistanis, working in Saudi Arabia

meant Islamic esteem, which enhanced the idea of a spiritual bonding between the two countries.

Post-9/11 Transformations

The attacks of September 11, 2001, changed the geopolitical situation of the two countries. Saudi Arabia faced criticism across the globe regarding the nationality of the many attackers, whilst Pakistan became a key ally of the U. S. in the War on Terror. Both the states tried to use their relationship to meet these demands. Saudi Arabia relied on the counterterrorism expertise and collaboration of intelligence by Pakistan. Pakistan, in its turn, sought Saudi political assistance in a state of domestic instability and international cynicism. This is also a time that was vulnerable. Saudi Arabia gave financial assistance to Pakistan and at the same time put pressure to Pakistan to follow the U.S. ambitions hence constrained the independence of Pakistan.

It is concluded analytically that the alliance was strong; however, external factors, in particular, the United States formed the agenda, which often diminished the ability of Pakistan to manoeuvre.

Contemporary Developments and Strategic Partnerships

During the 2010s, the cooperation of Pakistan and Saudi became diversified. In 2001 and 2005, the military cooperation was formalized through defense agreements that incorporated training of Saudi internal security forces by the Pakistani side. Combined actions like the Al-Assam series increased coordination in counterterrorism. There was also increased interest of Saudi interest in Pakistani defense technology, talks about the Al-Khalid tank and JF-17 fighter aircraft. In a symbolic gesture, the General Raheel Sharif, as the commander of the Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism (IMAFT), demonstrated the Saudi faith on Pakistani leadership in pan-Islamic security programs.

Analytically, the stage shows an attempt by Saudi Arabia to hedge on the need to depend on allies in the west and nurture trusted allies in the Muslim world. In the case of Pakistan, the participation served to improve prestige, but it had also the risk of getting involved in regional wars which did not necessarily serve its national interest.

Challenges and Divergences

Despite the general proximity, inconsistencies have been evident. A notable case occurred in 2015, when Saudi Arabia requested the use of Pakistani soldiers in its military actions in Yemen. The Pakistani parliament refused overwhelmingly on the same grounds of internal dissent and the fact that it might result in worsening of relationship with Iran. This marked a rare atmosphere of disagreement in the masses and highlighted the constraints of the Islamic brotherhood in the face of the strategic constraints of Pakistan. Similarly, Pakistan has intermittently disagreed with total support to Saudi positions on crisis in the region. It remains a challenge to maintain a balance in relations with Iran. In Pakistan, the political factions often fight over the appropriate level of military involvement in Saudi affairs and this has caused an internal conflict in the country.

All these tensions suggest that the relationship is a strong, but transactional one. Pakistan values Saudi aid and investment; it is not able to meet Saudi strategic needs at all times without disturbing its regional balance. The Pakistan Saudi relations have been one of the longest running in the Muslim world, which is supported by religious, security and strategic interests. The degree of cooperation is largely explained not by the rhetoric of Islamic unity, but by practical factors: Saudi Arabia is dependent on the Pakistani military expertise and manpower, and Pakistan is dependent on Saudi oil, remittances, and financial aid.

The dependency between the two is therefore an asymmetrical structure. Saudi Arabia has a financial leverage, and Pakistan has human and military capital. Both states have involved

themselves in this arrangement through the rhetoric of Islamic unity but the critical analysis reveals that this has always been influenced by strategic utility (Irish, 2017).

In the future, the relations between Pakistan and Saudi would continue to be strong but conditional. Pakistan will continue to enjoy the Saudi financial assistance and religious legitimacy, and Saudi Arabia will rely on military and diplomatic support of Pakistan. However, there are differences especially regarding issues like Yemen or Iran, which portrays the alliance as having limitations. Pakistan has the challenge of benefiting by its association without causing its involvement in regional issues that are not within its control.

Saudi Influence and Pakistan's Political Trajectory

Pakistan-Saudi Arabia relations have been closely associated with political and economic dynamics of the country after the nuclear testing of 1998. The Kingdom has intervened in many occasions by giving financial aid, political intervention and diplomatic support when Pakistan is in its international isolation or internal conflicts. Pakistan in its turn has offered military experience, political support, and symbolic legitimacy towards the Kingdom. This part critically examines the influence of the Saudi Arabia on the entire political situation in Pakistan since the nuclear tests with particular reference to the exile of Nawaz Sharif, the leadership of General Pervez Musharraf and the overall implication of bilateral relations both regionally and internationally.

Pakistan was sanctioned internationally and isolated economically following the nuclear tests of 1998 (May). Saudi Arabia established itself as its best ally. The Nawaz Sharif government received spiritual backing and the much needed financial and energy resources. Riyadh also maintained constant petroleum reserves and never charged Pakistan on the importation of oil over several years. This support made the shaky economy of Pakistan stable when other countries pulled out their support.

The confidence-building project by the Kingdom did not just end at the monetary aid. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman was given the opportunity to visit Pakistan nuclear facilities, and this is why the relations between the two countries can be considered strategic. This helped to support the ideology of Pakistan that its nuclear deterrent was not only a treasure of its nation but also a source of Islamic pride. However, as regional and global forces changed, the concessional oil facility was eventually withdrawn by Saudi Arabia, reminding that these were conditioned actions and tied to its global strategic concerns.

The 1999 Coup and the Doctrine of Necessity

Pakistani politics witnessed a drama change as General Pervez Musharraf took over through coup in October 1999. The elected party of Nawaz Sharif was overthrown, and he, as well as his brother Shahbaz Sharif were charged with some controversial cases such as the PIA plane hijacking. Musharraf took overpower as Chief Executive, declared an emergency and suspended the 1973 Constitution under the Provisional Constitutional Order (PCO).

Another principle employed by the judiciary was the need to use the doctrine of necessity, which justified the military coup and even gave Musharraf the right to change the Constitution. This unbroken judicial approval was based on the previous jurisprudence of Chief Justice Munir and this showed how constitutional manipulation had become institutionalized in Pakistan. This legal culture has been criticized by scholars like Leslie Wolf who claim that it has empowered extra-constitutional regimes over and over again.

Riyadh and Washington were alarmed with news of the possible execution of Nawaz Sharif. Saudi Arabia took a very decisive role in reconciling between Musharraf and Sharif family. It was reported that King Fahd, backed up by the U.S. President Bill Clinton, pressurized Musharraf not to impose capital punishment. Nawaz Sharif later was given a secret deal and was released after 14 months in prison and sent into exile to Jeddah.

The exile conditions, which were disclosed after, were very limiting:

1. Sharif family had been prohibited of political activity over a period of more than ten years.
2. They lost their properties valued at 8.3 million and a fine of $ 500,000.
3. They were not even allowed to participate in politics even in Saudi Arabia.
4. 4The family members were free to go outside Pakistan but not to come back.

Not only did Saudi Arabia broker the deal but it would also serve as the guarantor to the exile of Nawaz Sharif. Prince Abdullah, Prince Muqrin bin Abdul Aziz (Saudi intelligence chief), and Lebanese politician, Saad al-Hariri played an instrumental role in ensuring the arrangement. The exile gave Musharraf time to consolidate power whereas Riyadh showed that it can influence internal political settlement in Pakistan.

Nawaz Sharif had also violated the agreement by constantly requesting to revisit the exile despite the fact that the exile was supposed to be a ten-year period. On a number of occasions, Saudi officials- such as Saad al-Hariri had to remind him to fulfill his promise. Another claim that Musharraf made was that the early comeback of Sharif will not help the stability of the country (Darwiesh, 2016). This episode demonstrates how Saudi Arabia can mediate and enforce its will in the domestic politics of Pakistan, which is not within the boundaries of bilateral relations, but needs to reorient the internal power relations.

Continuity of Relations under Musharraf

Saudi Arabia continued to be closely related to Pakistan because Nawaz Sharif was ousted. Islamabad was not supposed to be changed by regime and this would not have affected the relationship in the Kingdom. In October 2003, Crown Prince Abdullah paid a visit to Pakistan accompanied by senior ministers such as the Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal. Meetings devoted to Palestine and Iraq, terrorism and peace in the region. Both parties

denounced terrorism and reached an agreement of combating the increased image of Islam as the extremist.

President Musharraf returned this visit with a visit to Riyadh in March 2004. The discussions renewed bilateralism as the focus of Pak Saudi diplomacy. Matters of common interest Palestine, Iraq, and counter terrorism prevailed in talks, as they shared the worries regarding global discourse against the Muslim states. The fact that Pakistani and Saudi leaders have been visiting each other on a regular basis highlights the bilateralism nature of their relations. Bilateralism enabled both states to mediate on delicate matters in a straightforward and relaxed manner, unlike multilateralism structures like the NATO or the United Nations, where a greater group of states is involved in the overall process.

To Pakistan, bilateralism with Saudi Arabia had some legitimacy beyond material benefits that it strengthened its Islamicist and political stability back home. In the case of Saudi Arabia, a bilateral engagement of Pakistan helped it to gain the backing of a loyal Muslim partner who can supply manpower, training and diplomatic back-up without the hassle of engaging in multi-lateral bargaining.

High-Level Exchanges (2004–2007)

Between 2004 and 2007, there was an increase in high-level exchanges. Prime minister Shaukat Aziz had made various visits to Saudi Arabia meeting the Jeddah Economic Forum and having discussions with King Fahd and Crown prince Abdullah. Senior Saudi leaders such as Sheikh Saleh bin Abdullah (Chairman of Majlis al-Shura), Health Minister Dr. Hamad bin Abdullah, and defence Assistant Minister Prince Khalid bin Abdul Aziz, paid a visit to Pakistan. These contacts expanded into realm of education, health and parliament diplomacy.

The best of this period was the historic visit of King Abdullah to Pakistan in February 2006. Pakistani leaders framed the visit as the manifestation of the richness of bilateral relationships between the countries based on religion, brotherhood, and trust (Bokhari, 2019).

Musharraf praised the Saudi aid to Pakistan in the 2005 earthquake that came at the right time and reminded the kingdom that Pakistan considered its power as its power. The two talked of investment prospects, education, and approach to counterterrorism and reiterated common interests in the stability of the Middle East and the global War on Terror.

Regional Peace and Afghanistan

Pak-Saudi collaboration went as far as Afghanistan. Their alignment, according to analysts, was the key to stability in the region. Pakistani and Afghan observers emphasized that the cooperation of Islamabad and Riyadh would facilitate the peace process in Afghanistan as both countries have similar stance on the Taliban and post-9/11 events. As noted by Professor Khurshid Ahmed of the Institute of Policy Studies, political and defense relationships between the two states had become a stable partnership, because of which they were able to influence the state of affairs in Afghanistan together.

Domestic Challenges and Return of Nawaz Sharif

In the country, Musharraf experienced increasingly serious opposition by 2007, especially that of the lawyer's movement which emerged in reaction to his suspension of Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry. The political parties, such as the PML-N, led the movement that accused Musharraf of attacking judicial independence. In this political unrest, Nawaz Sharif tried to come back to Pakistan in September 2007 despite being warned by Musharraf. The fact that his attempt to return highlighted how much the Saudi could do: as much as Riyadh played a mediating role in his exile, Sharif was interested in reestablishing his political sphere in Pakistan.

The bilateralism level in the Saudi Pakistan relationship is evidenced by the level of influence that Saudi Arabia has exerted in the politics of Pakistan since the late 1990s up to the Musharraf era. The Kingdom has played an economic lifeline role in times of sanctions, mediated Nawaz Sharif, and ensured that ties remain intact, despite changes of regimes in Islamabad. Its role was much more than the traditional diplomacy it actively influenced the internal settlements of political affairs in Pakistan (Defence World, 2019). Meanwhile, such an influence brings out structural asymmetry. Saudi oil, aid and political cover have been used by Pakistan whereas Saudi Arabia has been able to utilize the military experience and loyalty of Pakistan. The relationship is strong and contingent, as it is determined by the regional geopolitics and changes imposed inside countries.

The Pak-Saudi alliance is a complex partnership between the two countries based on religious, cultural and strategic interests. This alliance has had to endure complicated geopolitical issues which have included regional and domestic political shifts as well as international forces over decades. This report analyses the trends in Pakistan-Saudi relations including major events, strategic orientations, and issues, especially during the period of Nawaz Sharif in exile and its restoration, the Pakistan people party (PPP) government and the changing dynamics of the relations under the other regimes. There is also discussion of the balancing act of Pakistan between Saudi Arabia and Iran, its participation in the regional conflicts and the strengthening of the bilateral relationships based on the economic and military collaboration.

Pakistan experienced a great political turmoil in the year 2007 especially about exile and his return to Pakistan by former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif (Dawn, 2013). Following his overthrow by a 1999 military coup by General Pervez Musharraf, Sharif went on exile in Saudi Arabia, the country where he was offered refuge and had strong relations with him. This led the rulers of Saudi Arabia to be reportedly interested in Sharif returning to Pakistan to take part

in the next elections announced by Musharraf which they felt would stabilize the political situation in Pakistan with a leader they could have trusted.

His earlier show of return however was immediately met with arrest and deportation into Jeddah hours after landing in Pakistan in September 2007. The world was highly condemned by this act since the world saw it as a disgrace to the democratic values. The Supreme Court of Pakistan ruled in favour of Sharif as he had a right to come back, and the European Union stated that they had to honour this court ruling. The deportation led to internal agitation, as the followers of Sharif promised resistance in the form of both legal and political means, and put Musharraf under heavy critique, both at home and abroad.

In November 2007 mounting pressure by Saudi Arabia, especially by King Abdullah, who took a hand in expressing his dissatisfaction at the treatment of a high-ranking Muslim leader, pushed Musharraf to repent. The second time Sharif tried to enter Pakistan was successful and it was a big milestone in the relations between Pakistan and Saudi. The influence of King Abdullah highlighted the Saudi Arabia as one of the primary allies who can influence the domestic politics of Pakistan. But the coming back of Sharif did not result in direct success in the elections since in 2008, the Pakistan people Party (PPP) was the victorious party in the general elections, forming a coalition government.

Pakistan-Saudi Relations Under the PPP Government (2008–2013)

The PPP government from 2008 to 2013 faced strained relations with Saudi Arabia, largely due to Pakistan's perceived favouritism towards Iran. The PPP, led by President Asif Ali Zardari, focused on improving ties with Iran. This strategy aimed at remaining neutral in the Saudi-Iran rivalry. However, this approach heightened tensions as Saudi Arabia saw Pakistan's closer relations with Iran as a threat to its influence in the region. The Iran factor,

along with Pakistan's balanced stance in the Shia-Sunni conflict, led to decreased Saudi investment in Pakistani projects during this time.

Despite these strains, both countries continued diplomatic engagements. President Zardari visited Saudi Arabia in July 2011, and Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani made a trip there in August 2011 to rebuild confidence. These visits included significant gestures, such as Zardari attending the funeral of Crown Prince Nayef bin Abdul Aziz in October 2011, accompanied by the Chief of Army Staff. These steps reinforced the strategic partnership, especially through revising the 1982 Military Cooperation Agreement in 2005, which created a Joint Military Committee. Joint exercises like Samsam-IV in 2011 and Naseem al Bahr in 2012 further strengthened military relations.

Pakistan's neutrality in the Saudi-Iran rivalry complicated its foreign policy. The PPP aimed to keep friendly ties with both nations, but regional dynamics posed challenges. Iran's influence in Pakistan and Afghanistan, alongside Saudi Arabia's support for Sunni groups, further complicated matters. Historically, Pakistan aligned closely with Saudi Arabia since General Zia-ul-Haq's Islamization policies in the 1970s and 1980s, but Iran's rising influence following the 1979 Iranian Revolution conflicted with that alignment. The PPP's perceived pro-Iran stance seemed to shift away from Pakistan's traditional ties with Saudi Arabia, resulting in cooled relations (The Economic Times, 2019).

As a nuclear-armed Muslim nation with strong military capabilities, Pakistan held a crucial position in the Saudi-Iran rivalry. It sought to balance its relations with both countries, a challenge complicated by historical and ideological factors. During the 1970s and 1980s, Zia's policies closely aligned Pakistan with Saudi Arabia, particularly during the Soviet Afghan War when both countries supported Sunni groups opposing Soviet forces. On the other hand, the

Iranian Revolution motivated Shia groups within Pakistan, leading to domestic sectarian tensions fuelled by external funding from both Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Pakistan's neutrality faced a significant test in 2015 when its parliament passed a resolution promoting non-involvement in the Yemen conflict, despite Saudi Arabia requesting military support. Domestic pressure from pro-Iran groups and political parties like the PPP and Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) pushed for mediation instead of military action. The resolution showed Pakistan's intent to act as a neutral mediator, aiming to foster dialogue between Saudi Arabia and Iran. However, this stance drew criticism from Saudi Arabia, which perceived Pakistan's neutrality as a betrayal, especially considering the Kingdom's historical support for Pakistan.

The Saudi-Iran rivalry, often referred to as a "cold war," has had wider implications for regional stability, affecting countries like Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bahrain. In 2015, Saudi Arabia established the Islamic Military Counterterrorism Coalition (IMCTC) in Riyadh to combat terrorism, especially groups like ISIS. Initially, Pakistan hesitated to join the IMCTC, reflecting its cautious approach, but it eventually became a member, with former Chief of Army Staff General Raheel Sharif appointed as its commander (Ahmad & Shah, 2017). This decision highlighted Pakistan's strategic alignment with Saudi Arabia, despite backlash from pro-Iran factions domestically.

Nawaz Sharif's Return to Power (2013–2018)

Nawaz Sharif's PML-N government started a new period in the long history of Saudi Arabia-Pakistan relations with its election in 2013. After being exiled in Saudi Arabia following the 1999 coup against him, Saudi Arabia saw Sharif as a trusted ally. That is why the Saudi Government provided a $15 billion relief package to help Pakistan deal with its energy crisis, just as it had done during Sharif's earlier tenure in 1998 when he had received a similar amount.

The provision of support was seen as proof of the Kingdom's faith in Sharif and its desire to repair the damage to relations that had been caused by the PPP.

Saudi Arabia demonstrated renewed commitment to bilateral cooperation by hosting high-level visitors in 2014, including: the Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal; the Governor of Tabuk, Prince Fahd bin Sultan; and the Deputy Defence Minister, Prince Salman bin Sultan. Further highlighting Saudi Arabia's renewed cooperation with Pakistan was the visit of Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff General Raheel Sharif to Saudi Arabia in February 2014, which also strengthened the military relationship between the two nations. However, in the beginning, Pakistan maintained a position of neutrality with respect to the ongoing civil war in Syria, which created a point of tension with Iran because of its refusal to conform to Saudi Arabia's position on the need for President Bashar al-Assad to be removed from power to end the violence in Syria. This tension highlighted the difficulties of balancing one's relationships with both Iran and Saudi Arabia (Fitch, 2016).

The Nawaz government faced internal pressure from pro-Iran groups, particularly regarding Pakistan’s role in the IMCTC and the deployment of troops to Saudi Arabia. In 2018, General Qamar Javed Bajwa’s visit to Saudi Arabia led to an agreement to send 1,000 Pakistani troops for internal security. It was made clear that these troops would not be involved in the Yemen conflict (Ahmad & Shah, 2017). This decision stirred controversy, with opposition groups questioning the deployment’s impact on Pakistan’s neutrality.

Pakistan-Saudi Relations Under the PTI Government

The establishment of a PTI government in Pakistan (2018), under the leadership of PM Imran Khan, has resulted in the creation of a new chapter in the relationship between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. In September 2018, Khan travelled to Saudi Arabia on his first official overseas trip to denote his commitment towards improving bilateral relations. Accompanied by senior

ministers, Khan met King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman ("MBS") who pledged their unwavering support towards Pakistan; MBS even referring to himself as the "Ambassador of Pakistan in Saudi Arabia" (Fitch, 2016). The main purpose of Khan's official visit was to discuss economic assistance including a $6 billion loan from Saudi Arabia and the deferral of oil payments, commencing on July 2019 (The Express Tribune, 2018). The visit in February 2019 by MBS to Pakistan marked another significant step toward improving the two countries' economic and political relationship, resulting in the signing of agreements valued at $12 billion, including a $10 billion oil refinery to be built in Gwadar as well as MoUs in energy, trade and security, highlighting the deepening of the relationship between the two countries (Cochran, 1999).

The conferment of the Nishan-e-Pakistan on MBS and the warm reception he received underscored the significance of the visit. The PTI government's alignment with Saudi Arabia was facilitated by General Raheel Sharif's role as IMCTC commander and General Bajwa's prior diplomatic engagements. However, Pakistan continued to navigate its relations with Iran carefully, with Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi emphasizing Pakistan's rejection of militancy and desire for peaceful resolutions to regional conflicts (Dawn, 2019). Mutual strategic and economic interests undergird the relationship between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia; moreover, Pakistan's military capabilities and human capital benefit Saudi Arabia, while Saudi Arabia provides financial assistance and oil to Pakistan. As a mediator in improving Pakistan's relations with the United States and softening U.S. policy toward Pakistan, Saudi Arabia has played a critical role in this regard (Council on Foreign Relations, 2019). Furthermore, Saudi Arabia's concern over Iranian influence including its perceived association with the Afghan Taliban has led to increased collaboration with Pakistan to counter regional threats.

Saudi Arabia recognizes Pakistan's nuclear capability, as well as its vast military force, and therefore places significant value on the strategic importance of Pakistan in relation to its

security. Through the formation of the IMCTC and continued military collaboration, closer ties exist than previously thought.

Challenges and Future Prospects

Pakistan and Saudi Arabia's close relationship has some challenges ahead. Many people in Pakistan push back against the influence of Saudi Arabia over their government, especially when it comes to political and religious issues. As an example, some people believe that Saudi funding of religious institutions is creating sectarian divisions, and others express concern that when Saudi Arabia requests military support or troops from Pakistan, it takes away from the independence of Pakistan's military. Another concern for Saudi Arabia relates to the growing presence of China in the region as a result of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and how this relationship is evolving.

Despite these concerns, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have many reasons to continue to maintain their relationship, and it is likely to continue to strengthen. First, there are historical ties between the two countries that run very deep. The cities of Mecca and Medina are revered by every Pakistani, creating a bond that cannot be minimized. Economically, both countries provide each other with very important goods and services. Saudi Arabia relies on Pakistan for skilled labor, while Pakistan offers Saudi Arabia oil and financial backing. Therefore, they are benefiting each other. In terms of security and stability, Pakistan acts as a conduit between Saudi Arabia and Iran and its military assistance helps to maintain stability in the region, which is ultimately what Saudi Arabia desires.

Conclusion

This relationship between the two nations is based on religious similarities (Islam), a common purpose for both nations and economic considerations. Although at times tensions arise (the PPP, for example) as well as issues created by the conflict in Yemen, the historical bond between the two nations has continued to be resilient. The historical occurrences related to Nawaz Sharif (exile, return), the development of the IMCTC (Islamic Military Counter Terrorist Coalition) and the significant visits made during the PTI government (including Foreign Minister Qureshi) demonstrate how much both nations value each other as partners. It is anticipated that, as global and local impacts on the relationship shift, both Pakistan and Saudi Arabia will continue to form deeper partnerships, use diplomatic means to address issues and provide joint support for pillars of any strategic relationship between the two nations (military, economy). This relationship is a major component of continuing to provide stability throughout the region and forming an Islamic international network.

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