
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. Rooted on shared religious and cultural ties, the bilateral relationship rapidly developed into a multifaceted alliance. Saudi Arabia was among the initial nations to recognise Pakistan's independence, so laying the groundwork for continued engagement. Over the years, the two nations have offered mutual support in political matters, established military and defence relationships, and strategically aligned to address regional and global challenges. This paper examines the complex dynamics of the relationship by investigating its political underpinnings, strategic elements, and security implications. It highlights the enduring significance of Saudi Arabia inside Pakistan's foreign policy and the reciprocal benefits characterising their alliance.

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

Introduction

The relationship between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia holds a unique position in international politics, since it intertwines religion, strategy, and security, surpassing conventional bilateral relations. Both regimes have utilised Islamic iconography to depict their connection as "brotherly"; nevertheless, a more thorough examination indicates that strategic need has been the primary motivator. Saudi Arabia has historically functioned as a political ally, a provider of oil and financial aid, and a market for Pakistan's labour and military proficiency. Pakistan has been an essential ally for Saudi Arabia, offering defence training, technological expertise, and political backing in both regional and international arenas. The outcome has been a connection that is robust yet unequal, founded not solely on ideology but on a pragmatic assessment of reciprocal necessities. This paper critically analyses the development of Pakistan–Saudi ties, emphasising political, strategic, and military aspects. It contends that although religion has supplied the lexicon of fraternity, it is security and power dynamics that elucidate the extent of collaboration. Divergences have arisen when domestic politics or regional balancing limited Pakistan's capacity to completely align with Saudi preferences. Saudi Arabia was one of the initial nations to acknowledge Pakistan following its independence in 1947. This early acknowledgement from the custodian of the Two Holy Mosques held significant symbolic legitimacy for Pakistan. As a nascent state pursuing recognition and alliances within the Muslim world, Pakistan leveraged this connection to bolster its Islamic character in both domestic politics and diplomacy. For Saudi Arabia, the connection provided more than mere symbolic. In the early Cold War era, the Kingdom encountered strategic vulnerabilities. The armed forces were deficient in contemporary training, and its geographical location rendered them a prospective target in regional conflicts. Collaborating with Pakistan, a nation that adopted British military

frameworks and possessed proficient armed forces, afforded Saudi Arabia a reliable Muslim ally. Consequently, from the beginning, the cooperation was founded on an agreement: Saudi Arabia would offer financial and political goodwill, while Pakistan would supply trained personnel, defence experience, and political backing in international arenas.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative historical-analytical methodology to investigate the progression of Pakistan–Saudi Arabia ties from 1947 to the present, emphasising political, strategic, and military aspects. The study design is founded on three interconnected components: historical analysis, document-based investigation, and interpretive evaluation of policy and leadership conduct.

Research Design and Approach

The research employs a qualitative interpretive framework to analyse the dynamics of bilateral ties within their wider regional and international contexts. The research prioritises the analysis of events, public pronouncements, and policy results over numerical data to delineate changes in the connection over time. The approach is descriptive, explanatory, and critical, aiming to reveal how religion, power politics, and strategic need have interacted to shape the nature and trajectory of the alliance.

Data Sources

The research relies primarily on secondary sources. These include:

- Official records and policy statements of both the Governments of Pakistan and Saudi Arabia.
- Speeches, communiqués, and press releases issued by foreign ministries and embassies.

- Reports from international organizations such as the United Nations, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and regional security forums.
- Published scholarly works—books, journal articles, and think-tank reports—on South Asian and Middle Eastern politics.
- Contemporary news archives from credible outlets (e.g., Dawn, Arab News, BBC, The Guardian, and Al Jazeera), which provide insights into leadership visits, strategic agreements, and policy decisions.

The reliance on such diverse sources allows for triangulation, ensuring that interpretations are supported by multiple forms of evidence and reducing the risk of narrative bias. Data were collected through a systematic review of historical documents and academic literature spanning from 1947 to 2024. The analysis was carried out in three stages: the first is Chronological mapping: Events were arranged along a timeline to identify key turning points in Pakistan–Saudi relations, such as wars, diplomatic initiatives, regime changes, and economic agreements. Second, Thematic categorization: Information was organized under major themes—political and diplomatic engagements, military and strategic cooperation, economic and manpower linkages, and post-9/11 transformations—to ensure a coherent analytical flow. Third, the Interpretive analysis: each theme was examined through the lens of international relations theories, particularly realism and constructivism, to assess whether the partnership was primarily driven by religious affinity or strategic pragmatism.

Analytical Framework

The analytical framework integrates historical institutionalism and foreign policy analysis.

- Historical institutionalism helps explain how past decisions—such as military cooperation agreements or economic assistance packages—created enduring patterns of dependency and trust between the two states.
- Foreign policy analysis provides the lens to assess leadership motivations and domestic constraints, particularly during military regimes and democratic transitions in Pakistan. This dual framework allows the study to capture both structural and agency-level determinants of the relationship.

Periodization of Study

To capture the evolution of bilateral ties, the research divides the historical timeline into six analytical phases:

1. 1947–1969: Formation of early diplomatic and military cooperation.
2. 1970–1989: Consolidation of strategic and ideological bonds during regional conflicts.
3. 1990–2001: Realignment during nuclearization and post–Cold War adjustments.
4. 2001–2010: Transformation under the post-9/11 security order.
5. 2010–2018: Redefinition under shifting regional alliances and leadership transitions.
6. 2018–Present: Institutionalization of economic and defense partnerships under changing global geopolitics.

This periodization ensures that the analysis remains historically grounded and contextually specific, avoiding generalizations across different political eras.

The research recognises specific methodological constraints. Due to the sensitive nature of defence and intelligence collaboration, official information regarding military arrangements is rarely entirely revealed, necessitating that some findings rely on secondary verification. Secondly, although the study aims for impartiality,

interpretations of political intentions and diplomatic gestures necessitate subjective judgement. The research does not utilise quantitative methods, prioritising qualitative insights and historical context over statistical connection.

Expected Contribution

This work enhances the field of foreign policy and security studies by providing a thorough, historically informed, and critically evaluated analysis of Pakistan–Saudi ties. It reconciles the idealistic ideals of Islamic brotherhood with the pragmatic realities of strategic collaboration, offering a nuanced comprehension of how asymmetrical reliance has influenced the alliance over time. The research demonstrates that, via the amalgamation of historical facts and interpretive analysis, religion has conferred legitimacy and cultural significance, while strategic need and political realism have consistently underpinned Pakistan–Saudi relations.

Political and Diplomatic Engagements

The political aspect of Pak–Saudi relations has been characterised by senior-level visits and personal diplomacy. Saudi kings have made numerous visits to Pakistan: King Saud in 1954, King Faisal in 1966, King Khalid in 1974, King Fahd in 1980, and King Abdullah multiple times from 1984 to 2003. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman’s 2019 visit was characterised as a reaffirmation of strong relations. Pakistani leaders often designate Saudi Arabia as their initial trip upon gaining power, emphasising the Kingdom's significance in Islamabad's foreign policy.

These visits were not mere protocol. They reinforced political legitimacy for leaders in both states. For Pakistan, Saudi recognition provided a stamp of approval, particularly for military rulers such as General Zia-ul-Haq and General Musharraf, who leveraged the symbolism of Islamic solidarity to consolidate authority at home (Horizon, 1966). For Saudi

leaders, Pakistan's loyalty demonstrated that the Kingdom could mobilize Muslim allies in support of its regional and global positions. Analytically, this pattern shows that diplomacy between the two states has always been personalized (Rizvi, 1981). Ties were driven less by bureaucratic institutions and more by the decisions of ruling elites, making the relationship vulnerable to shifts in leadership but also flexible in adapting to new contexts (Safran, 1988).

Military and Strategic Cooperation

The military dimension became visible in the 1960s. In 1967, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia signed their first formal defense cooperation agreement. Pakistan provided training and technical assistance to Saudi armed forces, and Pakistani personnel were stationed in the Kingdom to strengthen its defense capabilities (Pakistan News, 1967). At one stage in the 1980s, nearly 20,000 Pakistani troops were deployed in Saudi Arabia, covering air defense, military planning, and technical support.

This arrangement revealed the structural asymmetry of the relationship: Saudi Arabia, though wealthy, lacked military expertise; Pakistan, though resource-constrained, had a surplus of trained officers and soldiers. Cooperation thus became mutually beneficial—Saudi Arabia secured manpower, while Pakistan earned political goodwill and financial assistance.

The 1965 War and Kashmir Issue

The 1965 Indo-Pak war marked a turning point. Saudi Arabia openly supported Pakistan's stance on Kashmir, providing both political and financial assistance (Pakistan News, 1967). King Faisal's subsequent 1966 visit to Pakistan emphasized solidarity and the two states jointly demanded at the United Nations that Kashmir's be granted the right of self-determination (Pakistan News, 1967).

From an analytical standpoint, this episode demonstrates how Saudi Arabia used its Islamic leadership role to extend legitimacy to Pakistan's core foreign policy concern, while Pakistan reciprocated by reinforcing Saudi prestige in the Muslim world (Telegraph, 1968).

Arab–Israel Conflicts and Regional Dynamics

The Arab Israeli conflicts of 1967 and 1973 revealed the deficiencies of Arab military forces. Saudi Arabia, acknowledging its defence deficiencies, pursued enhanced assistance from Pakistan. Pakistani aviators conducted combat operations for Arab nations, and Pakistan's military footprint in Saudi Arabia increased. The lesson for Saudi Arabia was unequivocal: oil affluence could not ensure security without capable partners. Pakistan's involvement in Arab issues bolstered its Islamic legitimacy and ensured ongoing financial support from Saudi Arabia, particularly preferential oil deliveries during periods of economic hardship.

The Iran–Iraq War and Expanded Cooperation

Throughout the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988), Saudi Arabia once more depended on Pakistan for military assistance, soliciting supplementary troops and security collaboration. Pakistan, meanwhile, confronted a precarious balancing act. While providing military backing to Saudi Arabia, it aimed to evade direct conflict with Iran, with which it had shared borders and religious affiliations. This time exemplifies a persistent conflict: Pakistan frequently grapples with balancing its reliance on Saudi financial assistance with its necessity to sustain functional relations with Iran. Nonetheless, the Kingdom continued to be Pakistan's paramount Middle Eastern ally, procuring armaments from Pakistan and enhancing defence cooperation.

Economic and Manpower Linkages

In addition to military alliances, labour migration established a significant economic link. Since the 1970s, millions of Pakistani labourers have relocated to Saudi Arabia, finding employment in construction, industries, and services. Their remittances emerged as a crucial source of foreign cash for Pakistan. This dynamic illustrates a further asymmetry: Saudi Arabia profited from affordable, disciplined labour, but Pakistan relied on remittances to stabilise its economy. The movement of personnel also held political implications. For typical Pakistanis, employment in Saudi Arabia conferred Islamic dignity, strengthening the notion of a spiritual connection between the two nations.

Post-9/11 Transformations

The September 11, 2001, attacks altered the geopolitical landscape for both nations. Saudi Arabia encountered global criticism about the nationality of numerous assailants, whereas Pakistan emerged as a main supporter in the U.S. "War on Terror." Both states endeavoured to leverage their relationship to manage these demands. Saudi Arabia depended on Pakistan's counterterrorism proficiency and intelligence collaboration. Pakistan, consequently, pursued Saudi political support amidst domestic turmoil and global scepticism. This period also revealed vulnerabilities. Saudi Arabia extended financial aid to Pakistan while simultaneously exerting pressure on Islamabad to conform to U.S. aims, thereby constraining Pakistan's autonomy.

The analytical conclusion is that the alliance remained robust; yet external influences—especially from the United States shaped the agenda, frequently limiting Pakistan's capacity for manoeuvrability.

Contemporary Developments and Strategic Partnerships

In the 2010s, Pakistan–Saudi cooperation diversified. Defense agreements in 2001 and 2005 institutionalized military collaboration, extending Pakistani training to Saudi internal security forces. Joint exercises such as the *Al-Assam* series strengthened counterterrorism coordination. Saudi interest in Pakistani defense technology also grew, with discussions around the Al-Khalid tank and JF-17 fighter aircraft. Symbolically, General Raheel Sharif's role as commander of the Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism (IMAFT) highlighted Saudi confidence in Pakistani leadership for pan-Islamic security initiatives.

Analytically, this phase reflects Saudi Arabia's attempt to hedge between reliance on Western allies and cultivating trusted partners in the Muslim world. For Pakistan, participation enhanced prestige but also carried risks of being drawn into regional conflicts not directly aligned with its national interest.

Challenges and Divergences

Notwithstanding overall proximity, discrepancies have been apparent. A prominent instance transpired in 2015, when Saudi Arabia solicited Pakistani troops for its military operations in Yemen. The parliament of Pakistan overwhelmingly declined, citing internal dissent and the potential deterioration of relations with Iran. This signified an uncommon public difference and underscored the limitations of "Islamic brotherhood" when faced with Pakistan's strategic restrictions. Likewise, Pakistan has intermittently opposed complete alignment with Saudi stances on regional crises. Maintaining equilibrium in ties with Iran continues to be a persistent challenge. Domestically, political groups in Pakistan frequently dispute the suitable extent of military engagement in Saudi matters, resulting in internal discord.

These tensions indicate that the relationship, while robust, is transactional. Pakistan appreciates Saudi assistance and investment; but it cannot consistently fulfil Saudi strategic

demands without compromising its regional equilibrium. The relations between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have been among the most persistent in the Muslim world, upheld by religious, security, and strategic imperatives. The extent of collaboration is primarily elucidated not by the discourse of Islamic unity, but by pragmatic considerations: Saudi Arabia's reliance on Pakistani military proficiency and personnel, and Pakistan's dependency on Saudi oil, remittances, and financial assistance.

The relationship is thus characterized by mutual dependency but structural asymmetry. Saudi Arabia holds financial leverage, while Pakistan provides human and military capital. Political leaders in both states have used the rhetoric of Islamic unity to legitimize this arrangement, but critical examination shows it has always been shaped by strategic utility (Irish, 2017).

Anticipating the future, Pakistan-Saudi relations are expected to remain robust yet contingent. Pakistan will persist in appreciating Saudi financial aid and religious validation, whereas Saudi Arabia will depend on Pakistan's military and diplomatic backing. Nonetheless, divergences particularly about matters such as Yemen or Iran illustrate that the alliance has constraints. Pakistan faces the difficulty of maintaining the advantages of its relationships while avoiding entanglement in regional problems beyond its influence.

Saudi Influence and Pakistan's Political Trajectory

The political and economic trajectory of Pakistan following the 1998 nuclear tests has been intricately linked to its ties with Saudi Arabia. The Kingdom has frequently intervened with financial assistance, political mediation, and diplomatic support during periods of Pakistan's international isolation or domestic turmoil. In exchange, Pakistan has provided military experience, political backing, and symbolic legitimacy to the Kingdom. This section rigorously analyses Saudi Arabia's impact on Pakistan's political landscape following the nuclear tests, focussing specifically on Nawaz Sharif's exile, General Pervez Musharraf's

governance, and the wider ramifications of bilateral relations in both regional and international contexts.

After the May 1998 nuclear tests, Pakistan faced international sanctions and economic seclusion. Saudi Arabia became its most reliable ally. The Nawaz Sharif administration obtained both spiritual support and essential financial and energy aid. Riyadh sustained continuous petroleum supplies and, for many years, abstained from imposing charges on Pakistan for oil imports. This assistance stabilised Pakistan's precarious economy after other nations withdrew their support.

The Kingdom's confidence-building initiative extended beyond monetary assistance. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman was granted access to Pakistan's nuclear facilities, highlighting the strategic significance of their relationship. This reinforced the belief in Pakistan that its nuclear deterrent was not merely a national treasure but also a symbol of Islamic prestige. Nonetheless, when regional and global dynamics evolved, Saudi Arabia ultimately retracted the concessional oil facility, underscoring that such measures were contingent and linked to its overarching strategic considerations.

The 1999 Coup and the Doctrine of Necessity

The political landscape of Pakistan underwent a dramatic shift with General Pervez Musharraf's coup in October 1999. Nawaz Sharif's elected government was overthrown, and he, along with his brother Shahbaz Sharif, faced charges including the controversial PIA plane hijacking case. Musharraf assumed power as "Chief Executive," declaring an emergency while suspending the 1973 Constitution under the Provisional Constitutional Order (PCO).

The judiciary once again invoked the "doctrine of necessity," legitimizing the military takeover and even granting Musharraf authority to amend the Constitution. This continuity of

judicial endorsement, rooted in Chief Justice Munir's earlier jurisprudence, demonstrated how constitutional manipulation had become institutionalized in Pakistan. Scholars such as Leslie Wolf have criticized this legal culture for repeatedly enabling extra-constitutional regimes.

News of Nawaz Sharif's possible execution alarmed both Riyadh and Washington. Saudi Arabia played a decisive role in mediating between Musharraf and the Sharif family. Reportedly, King Fahd, with the support of U.S. President Bill Clinton, pressured Musharraf to avoid capital punishment. Eventually, Nawaz Sharif was released after 14 months in prison and exiled to Jeddah under a secret agreement.

The terms of exile, later revealed, imposed significant restrictions:

1. The Sharif family was barred from political activity for over a decade.
2. Their properties worth \$8.3 million were forfeited, along with a \$500,000 fine.
3. They were prohibited from engaging in politics even within Saudi Arabia.
4. Members of the family were allowed to leave Pakistan but could not return.

Saudi Arabia not only mediated the deal but also became the guarantor of Nawaz Sharif's exile. King Abdullah, Prince Muqrin bin Abdul Aziz (Saudi intelligence chief), and Lebanese politician Saad al-Hariri were instrumental in securing the arrangement. The exile allowed Musharraf to consolidate power, while Riyadh demonstrated its ability to shape Pakistan's internal political settlement.

Although the exile was intended to last a decade, Nawaz Sharif repeatedly sought to return, defying the agreement. On several occasions, Saudi officials—including Saad al-Hariri reminded him to honor his commitment. Musharraf also argued that Sharif's premature return would destabilize the country (Darwiesh, 2016). This episode illustrates Saudi Arabia's role as

both mediator and enforcer in Pakistan's domestic politics, acting beyond the scope of bilateral relations to reshape internal power dynamics.

Continuity of Relations under Musharraf

Despite Nawaz Sharif's removal, Saudi Arabia maintained close ties with Pakistan. The Kingdom did not allow regime change in Islamabad to disrupt the broader relationship. Crown Prince Abdullah visited Pakistan in October 2003, accompanied by senior ministers including Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal. Discussions focused on Palestine, Iraq, terrorism, and regional peace. Both sides condemned terrorism and agreed on the need to counter the growing perception of Islam as synonymous with extremism.

In March 2004, President Musharraf reciprocated with an official visit to Riyadh. The talks reaffirmed the centrality of bilateralism in Pak–Saudi diplomacy. Issues of mutual concern Palestine, Iraq, and counter terrorism dominated discussions, reflecting shared anxieties about global narratives targeting Muslim states. The repeated exchange of visits between Pakistani and Saudi leaders underscores the centrality of bilateralism in their relations. Unlike multilateral frameworks such as NATO or the United Nations, which involve broader consensus-building, bilateralism allowed both states to manage sensitive issues directly and flexibly.

For Pakistan, bilateralism with Saudi Arabia carried legitimacy beyond material gains it reinforced its Islamic identity and political stability at home. For Saudi Arabia, engaging Pakistan bilaterally secured a loyal Muslim partner capable of providing manpower, training, and diplomatic support without the complications of multilateral bargaining.

High-Level Exchanges (2004–2007)

From 2004 to 2007, high-level exchanges intensified. Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz visited Saudi Arabia several times, addressing the Jeddah Economic Forum and holding talks with King Fahd and Crown Prince Abdullah. Senior Saudi officials, including Sheikh Saleh bin Abdullah (Chairman of Majlis al-Shura), Health Minister Dr. Hamad bin Abdullah, and defence Assistant Minister Prince Khalid bin Abdul Aziz, visited Pakistan. These interactions broadened cooperation into education, health, and parliamentary diplomacy.

The highlight of this period was King Abdullah's historic visit to Pakistan in February 2006. Pakistani leaders described the visit as embodying the depth of bilateral ties rooted in religion, brotherhood, and mutual trust (Bokhari, 2019).

Musharraf lauded Saudi Arabia's timely aid during the 2005 earthquake and emphasized that Pakistan viewed the Kingdom's strength as its own. Both sides discussed investment opportunities, educational cooperation, and counterterrorism strategies, reaffirming shared interests in Middle Eastern stability and the global "War on Terror."

Regional Peace and Afghanistan

Pak–Saudi cooperation extended into Afghanistan. Analysts argued that their alignment was crucial for regional stability. Pakistani and Afghan observers stressed that collaboration between Islamabad and Riyadh could promote peace in Afghanistan, given their shared positions on the Taliban and post-9/11 developments. Professor Khurshid Ahmed of the Institute of Policy Studies highlighted that political and defense ties between the two states had grown into a "solid" partnership, enabling them to jointly influence Afghan stability.

Domestic Challenges and Return of Nawaz Sharif

Domestically, Musharraf faced growing opposition by 2007, particularly from the lawyers' movement, which arose after his suspension of Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry. The

movement, supported by political parties including Nawaz Sharif's PML-N, accused Musharraf of assaulting judicial independence. Amid this political turmoil, Nawaz Sharif attempted to return to Pakistan in September 2007 despite warnings from Musharraf. His return attempt underscored the limits of Saudi influence: while Riyadh mediated his exile, Sharif was determined to reclaim his political space in Pakistan.

Saudi Arabia's influence in Pakistan's politics from the late 1990s through the Musharraf era demonstrates the depth of bilateralism in their relationship. The Kingdom provided economic lifelines during sanctions, mediated Nawaz Sharif's exile, and maintained continuity of relations despite regime changes in Islamabad. Its role went far beyond traditional diplomacy it actively shaped Pakistan's internal political settlements (Defence World, 2019). At the same time, this influence highlights structural asymmetry. Pakistan has relied on Saudi oil, aid, and political cover, while Saudi Arabia has leveraged Pakistan's military expertise and loyalty. The relationship remains resilient but conditional, shaped by regional geopolitics and domestic shifts in both countries.

The relationship between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia is a multifaceted alliance rooted in shared religious, cultural, and strategic interests. Over decades, this partnership has navigated complex geopolitical challenges, including regional rivalries, domestic political shifts, and global pressures. This analysis examines the historical trajectory of Pakistan-Saudi relations, focusing on key events, strategic alignments, and challenges, particularly during the period surrounding Nawaz Sharif's exile and return, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) government's tenure, and the evolving dynamics under subsequent administrations. The discussion also addresses Pakistan's delicate balancing act between Saudi Arabia and Iran, its role in regional conflicts, and the deepening of bilateral ties through economic and military cooperation.

In 2007, Pakistan's political landscape was marked by significant turmoil, particularly concerning the exile and attempted return of former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif (Dawn, 2013). After being ousted in a 1999 military coup led by General Pervez Musharraf, Sharif spent years in exile in Saudi Arabia, a country that provided him refuge and maintained close ties with him. Saudi Arabia's rulers reportedly favoured Sharif's return to Pakistan to participate in upcoming elections announced by Musharraf, reflecting their interest in stabilizing Pakistan's political environment with a leader they trusted.

However, Sharif's first attempt to return in September 2007 was met with immediate arrest and deportation back to Jeddah within hours of landing in Pakistan. This act drew widespread international condemnation, with the global community viewing it as an affront to democratic principles. The Supreme Court of Pakistan ruled in Sharif's favor, affirming his right to return, while the European Union emphasized the need to respect this judicial decision. The deportation sparked domestic unrest, with Sharif's supporters vowing legal and political resistance, and placed Musharraf under intense scrutiny both domestically and internationally.

By November 2007, mounting pressure from Saudi Arabia, particularly from King Abdullah, who expressed displeasure at the treatment of a prominent Muslim leader, compelled Musharraf to relent. Sharif's second attempt to enter Pakistan succeeded, marking a significant moment in Pakistan-Saudi relations. King Abdullah's influence underscored Saudi Arabia's role as a key ally capable of shaping Pakistan's domestic politics. However, Sharif's return did not translate into immediate electoral success, as the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) emerged victorious in the 2008 general elections, forming a coalition government.

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

The PPP government's tenure from 2008 to 2013 marked a period of strained relations with Saudi Arabia, largely due to Pakistan's perceived tilt toward Iran. The PPP, under President Asif Ali Zardari, prioritized improving ties with Iran, a move driven by a strategy of neutrality in the Saudi-Iran regional rivalry. This approach exacerbated tensions, as Saudi Arabia viewed Pakistan's warming relations with Iran as a challenge to its regional influence. The Iran factor, coupled with Pakistan's balanced stance in the Shia-Sunni conflict, led to reduced Saudi investment in Pakistani projects during this period.

Despite these strains, diplomatic engagements persisted. President Zardari's visits to Saudi Arabia in July 2011 and Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani's trip in August 2011 aimed to restore confidence. These visits culminated in symbolic gestures, such as Zardari's attendance at the funeral of Crown Prince Nayef bin Abdul Aziz in October 2011, accompanied by the Chief of Army Staff (COAS). These efforts reinforced the strategic partnership, particularly through the revision of the 1982 Military Cooperation Agreement in 2005, which established a Joint Military Committee. Joint exercises, such as Samsam-IV in 2011 and Naseem al Bahr in 2012, further solidified military ties.

Pakistan's neutrality in the Saudi-Iran rivalry, however, complicated its foreign policy. The PPP's efforts to maintain cordial relations with both nations were challenged by regional dynamics, including Iran's influence in Pakistan and Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia's support for Sunni groups. Pakistan's historical alignment with Saudi Arabia, dating back to General Zia-ul-Haq's Islamization policies in the 1970s and 1980s, clashed with Iran's growing influence following the 1979 Iranian Revolution. The PPP's perceived pro-Iran stance was seen as a departure from Pakistan's traditional alignment with Saudi Arabia, leading to a cooling of bilateral relations (The Economic Times, 2019).

Pakistan's strategic position as a nuclear-armed Muslim nation with significant military capabilities has placed it at the centre of the Saudi-Iran rivalry. The country has sought to maintain equilibrium in its relations with both nations, a task complicated by historical and ideological factors. During the 1970s and 1980s, General Zia's policies aligned Pakistan closely with Saudi Arabia, particularly during the Soviet Afghan War, where both nations supported Sunni groups against Soviet forces. Conversely, the Iranian Revolution inspired Shia groups in Pakistan, creating domestic sectarian tensions that were exacerbated by external funding from both Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Pakistan's neutrality was tested in 2015 when its parliament passed a resolution advocating non-involvement in the Yemen conflict, despite Saudi Arabia's request for military support. This decision was influenced by domestic pressure from pro-Iran groups and political parties like the PPP and Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), who argued for mediation over military engagement. The resolution reflected Pakistan's attempt to apply mediation theory, positioning itself as a neutral arbiter to facilitate dialogue between Saudi Arabia and Iran. However, this stance drew criticism from Saudi Arabia, which viewed Pakistan's neutrality as a betrayal, particularly given the Kingdom's historical support for Pakistan.

The Saudi-Iran rivalry, often termed a "cold war," has had broader implications for regional stability, affecting countries like Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bahrain. Saudi Arabia's establishment of the Islamic Military Counterterrorism Coalition (IMCTC) in 2015, headquartered in Riyadh, aimed to counter terrorism, particularly targeting groups like ISIS. Pakistan's initial reluctance to join the IMCTC reflected its cautious approach, but it eventually became a member, with former COAS General Raheel Sharif appointed as its commander (Ahmad & Shah, 2017). This decision underscored Pakistan's strategic alignment with Saudi Arabia, despite domestic opposition from pro-Iran factions.

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

The election of Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) government in 2013 marked a turning point in Pakistan-Saudi relations. Saudi Arabia viewed Sharif as a trusted ally, particularly given his exile in the Kingdom following the 1999 coup. The Saudi government extended a \$15 billion relief package to address Pakistan's energy crisis, mirroring a similar bailout provided in 1998 during Sharif's earlier tenure. This financial support was a testament to the Kingdom's confidence in Sharif's leadership and a desire to repair ties strained under the PPP.

High-level visits in 2014, including those by Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal, Governor of Tabuk Prince Fahd bin Sultan, and Deputy Defense Minister Prince Salman bin Sultan, underscored the renewed commitment to bilateral cooperation. Pakistan's COAS General Raheel Sharif's visit to Saudi Arabia in February 2014 further strengthened military ties. However, Pakistan's initial neutrality in the Syrian conflict, where it resisted Saudi pressure to support the removal of President Bashar al-Assad, created tensions with Iran, highlighting the challenges of balancing relations with both nations (Fitch, 2016).

The Nawaz government faced domestic pressure from pro-Iran groups, particularly regarding Pakistan's participation in the IMCTC and the deployment of troops to Saudi Arabia. In 2018, COAS General Qamar Javed Bajwa's visit to Saudi Arabia resulted in an agreement to deploy 1,000 Pakistani troops for internal security purposes, clarifying that these forces would not participate in the Yemen conflict (Ahmad & Shah, 2017). This decision sparked controversy, with opposition parties questioning the deployment's implications for Pakistan's neutrality.

Pakistan-Saudi Relations Under the PTI Government

The election of the PTI government in 2018, led by Prime Minister Imran Khan, ushered in a new phase of Pakistan-Saudi relations. Khan's first foreign visit to Saudi Arabia in September 2018 signalled a commitment to strengthening ties. Accompanied by key ministers, Khan met King Salman and Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman (MBS), who expressed strong support for Pakistan, with MBS describing himself as an "ambassador of Pakistan in Saudi Arabia (Fitch, 2016)." The visit focused on securing economic assistance, including a \$6 billion bailout package and deferred oil payments, which began in July 2019 (The Express Tribune, 2018).

MBS's visit to Pakistan in February 2019 was a landmark event, resulting in agreements worth \$12 billion, including a \$10 billion oil refinery project in Gwadar. Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) were signed in areas such as energy, trade, and security, reflecting a deepening of economic and strategic ties (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). Pakistan-Saudi relations are underpinned by mutual strategic and economic interests. Saudi Arabia relies on Pakistan's military capabilities and human capital, while Pakistan benefits from Saudi financial assistance and oil supplies. The Kingdom's role as a mediator in Pakistan's relations with the United States has been significant, particularly in softening U.S. policies toward Pakistan (Council on Foreign Relations, 2019). Additionally, Saudi Arabia's concerns about

Iran's influence, particularly its alleged ties with the Afghan Taliban, have prompted closer cooperation with Pakistan to counter regional threats.

Pakistan's nuclear capabilities and large military force enhance its strategic importance to Saudi Arabia, particularly in the context of regional security. The IMCTC and joint military exercises demonstrate the depth of this partnership. Economically, Saudi investments in projects like the Gwadar oil refinery and Pakistan's reliance on deferred oil payments highlight the interdependent nature of the relationship.

Challenges and Future Prospects

Despite the strong ties, Pakistan-Saudi relations face challenges, including domestic opposition to Saudi influence in Pakistan's religious and political spheres. Critics argue that Saudi funding of religious seminaries fuels sectarianism, while others view the Kingdom's strategic demands, such as troop deployments, as compromising Pakistan's sovereignty. Pakistan's relations with China, particularly through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), have also raised concerns in Saudi Arabia, given China's growing regional influence.

Looking ahead, several factors suggest that Pakistan-Saudi relations will continue to strengthen:

1. **Shared Religious and Cultural Ties:** The shared Islamic faith and Pakistan's reverence for the holy cities of Mecca and Medina create a strong bond.
2. **Economic Interdependence:** Saudi Arabia's need for skilled Pakistani manpower and Pakistan's reliance on Saudi oil and financial aid ensure mutual benefits.
3. **Strategic Alignment:** Pakistan's role as a mediator in Saudi-Iran relations and its military contributions to regional security align with Saudi interests.
4. **Geopolitical Realities:** As Saudi Arabia diversifies its economy and Pakistan seeks to stabilize its economy, cooperation in renewable energy, trade, and investment will grow.

However, Pakistan must continue to balance its relations with Iran to avoid alienating a key neighbour. The theory of mediation and arbitration, which Pakistan has attempted to apply, will remain critical in navigating the Saudi-Iran rivalry. The pragmatic approach adopted by Pakistan, balancing national interests with strategic alliances, will shape the future of its relations with Saudi Arabia.

Conclusion

The connection between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia is fundamental to the foreign policy of both states, influenced by common religious principles, strategic objectives, and economic need. Notwithstanding instances of tension, like the PPP's administration and the Yemen conflict, the alliance has exhibited resiliency. Significant occurrences, such as Nawaz Sharif's exile and subsequent return, the formation of the IMCTC, and prominent visits during the PTI administration, underscore the profundity of this relationship. As global and regional dynamics progress, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia are expected to enhance their collaboration, addressing difficulties through diplomacy and reciprocal support. The lasting connections, grounded in history and strengthened by current circumstances, establish this relationship as a crucial element of regional stability and worldwide Islamic collaboration.

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