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Pakistani–Saudi Ties: Anatomy of a Unique Relationship

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Table of Contents _____

1- Historical Background	9
2- The Impact of Domestic Politics on the Bilateral Relationship: Authoritarianism Versus Democracy	13
2.1 The Yemen Crisis	14
2.2 The Qatar Diplomatic Crisis	18
3- The Role of Regional Rivals	20
3.1 Pakistani–Iranian Relations	21
3.2 Indian–Saudi Relations	24
4- Pakistani–Saudi Ties Under Imran Khan	27
4.1 Changing Civil-Military Relations	28
4.2 Positive Engagement with Saudi Arabia	29
4.3 Bilateral Ties in Crisis	31
4.4 Rapprochement	34
Conclusion	36

Pakistan and Saudi Arabia remain vital political and security stakeholders in their respective regions, South Asia and the Middle East. Likewise, both countries are leading actors in the Muslim world. From the 1960s to the 1980s, their bilateral relationship evolved into a multi-dimensional engagement that translated into a closely-aligned foreign policy outlook with meaningful collaboration in the security and economic spheres. Historically, a key plank of this cooperation was the Afghanistan War; both countries played a critical role in supporting Afghan resistance against the Soviet invasion throughout the 1980s.⁽¹⁾ This strategic congruence was crucial in the strengthening of the bilateral relationship.

Yet over time, as each side has gradually moved away from fully backing the other's stances and initiatives vis-à-vis its regional rival—India in the case of Pakistan and Iran in the case of Saudi Arabia—the cherished foreign policy alignment of earlier years began to attenuate. Due to a lack of an institutionally structured strategic partnership, and differences in their political systems, their bilateral engagement has become more transactional. The Pakistani–Saudi relationship has also had to recalibrate following the emergence of new ruling elites in both countries seeking to revise their traditional foreign policy approaches. As a result, a bilateral relationship that had attained the status of an informal security alliance in the 1980s has since become “normalized” in that it is amicable but far from close. The strategic alignment honed during the Cold War days has been replaced by strategic dissonance as both countries' political and security paradigms continue to diverge.

The primary purpose of this study is to dissect the nature of the Pakistani–Saudi relationship from an international relations perspective and shed light

(1) Marvin G. Weinbaum and Abdullah B. Khurram, “Pakistan and Saudi Arabia: Deference, Dependence, and Deterrence,” *Middle East Journal* 68: 2, 2014, 211–28, <https://doi.org/10.3751/68.2.12>.

upon how their respective evolving strategic and security outlooks are shaping their bilateral relationship. This research attempts to highlight the critical domestic and regional variables that have impacted the nature of the bilateral relationship. The study further explains the political impact on bilateral ties of strong interpersonal ties between the political and security leaderships of both sides while also pointing out the inherent limitations of such personal or institutional channels against the backdrop of dynamic and often conflictual domestic and regional politics. Another focus of this study is Pakistani–Saudi engagement since the ascension of King Salman to the throne in 2015 and the rise of Imran Khan’s populist brand of politics within Pakistan, and his assumption of the prime ministership in 2018.

The study is divided into five sections. The first provides a historical sketch that details the early engagement between the two countries and the developments that resulted in the strengthening of Pakistani–Saudi political, economic and security bonds in the 1960s and the eventual transformation of their relationship into a strategic partnership in the 1970s and 1980s. This section details the first indications of strategic divergence in the aftermath of the Cold War and how robust personal and institutional linkages between the respective political and security leaderships and shared interests vis-à-vis Afghanistan and Iran helped stabilize the relationship. The second section examines the impact of changing domestic political variables, looking specifically at how populism and other political dynamics in Pakistan shaped its stances on the military intervention in Yemen and the Gulf crisis in 2017. The third section explores the impact of regional factors on salient bilateral relationships, primarily Pakistani–Iranian relations and Saudi–Indian relations. The fourth section focuses on the prime ministership of Imran Khan, arguing that it exemplifies many of the tensions taking place within the Pakistani–Saudi relationship and how domestic and regional factors continue

to shape its development. Finally, the ameliorating role of the Pakistani military in arresting the downward spiral of the Pakistani–Saudi relationship will be considered. The study ends with a short conclusion drawing together the findings and marking out the key implications of the research.

1- Historical Background

When Pakistan achieved independence from the British in 1947, a new Muslim-majority polity emerged, one that naturally sought to develop stronger ties with Saudi Arabia, the land of the Two Holy Mosques. There were reciprocal state visits throughout the 1950s and 1960s, but Pakistani–Saudi relations only began to assume a strategic dimension after the 1967 Arab–Israeli War, with Saudi Arabia seeking more defense cooperation with Pakistan in the wake of the Khartoum Arab Summit. The two states concluded a security pact in August 1967 during the visit of then Saudi minister of defense, Prince Sultan bin Abdul Aziz to Pakistan. This defense agreement led to the dispatch of over one hundred Pakistani military and air force officers to Saudi Arabia.⁽²⁾ In 1969, growing Pakistani–Saudi military cooperation was tested when Pakistani pilots flying Saudi jets repelled a military column of the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen that had attacked the Saudi southern border post of Wadi’a.⁽³⁾

During the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Pakistan fully supported the Arab bloc and the Saudi-led oil embargo. As a result, a strong personal bond between King Faisal and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto developed, which was on full display during the Islamic Summit of 1974 held in Lahore.⁽⁴⁾ While

(2) William O. Staudenmaier and Shireen Tahir-Kheli, *The Saudi-Pakistani Military Relationship and Its Implications for US Strategy in Southwest Asia*, report no. ACN 81026 (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 1981), 3.

(3) Mordechai Abir, *Saudi Arabia: Government, Society and the Gulf Crisis* (London: Routledge, 2002), 60.

(4) Gawdat Baghat, “Pakistan–Saudi Arabia Relations—an Assessment,” in *Pakistan: The US, Geopolitics and Grand Strategies*, edited by Usama Butt and Julian Schofield, 188–205 (London: Pluto, 2012), 191.

relations had been intensifying for a decade, this was the first expression of interpersonal engagement at the leadership level, transcending purely geopolitical concerns. Under Bhutto, Pakistani laborers began to pour into Saudi Arabia to service its burgeoning construction and infrastructure projects, and a steady stream of foreign remittances flowed back into the Pakistani economy.⁽⁵⁾ The result was the creation of a structural linkage between the two economies in which swelling Saudi Arabian petro-dollars, derived from skyrocketing oil revenues extracted from Western consumers, were shared with Pakistan.

The Islamic revolution in Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 led to the collapse of the US's "twin pillars" strategy in the Gulf of containing the Soviet Union through alliances with Saudi Arabia and Iran. In this context, Pakistan joined Saudi Arabia as key strategic partners for Washington in the broader Middle Eastern and South Asian theaters. This dynamic further strengthened the strategic alignment of the two countries and initiated a unique bilateral relationship that Prince Turki Al-Faisal, a former Saudi diplomat and ambassador to both the US and the UK, once described as "probably one of the closest relationships in the world between any two countries without any official treaty."⁽⁶⁾

This phase also marked the beginning of a security-related dependency that endowed Pakistan with significant leverage vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia and enhanced the involvement of the Pakistani military in bilateral affairs. The security understanding between the two sides was further regularized by the 1982 Protocol Agreement regarding the "Deputation of Pakistani Armed Personnel and Military Training," which paved the way for the deployment of

(5) Ian Talbot, *Pakistan: A Modern History* (London: Hurst, 1998), 41.

(6) Arif Rafiq, "The Dangerous, Delicate Saudi-Pakistan Alliance," *Foreign Policy*, April 1, 2015, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/04/01/the-dangerous-delicate-saudi-pakistan-alliance-yemen-iran/>.

nearly 15,000 Pakistani troops in the Kingdom.⁽⁷⁾ The Afghanistan War proved to be a critical arena of strategic cooperation and military intelligence sharing, which, when combined with the dispatch of Pakistan's military personnel, created a unique bond between the Pakistani security institutions and the Saudi royal family. Yet, with the departure of Soviet troops from Afghanistan in 1989, the threat calculus for Saudi Arabia changed, and Pakistan's strategic relevance for the Kingdom declined.⁽⁸⁾

Against this backdrop, a strategic divergence opened with Pakistan's decision to refrain from participating in Operation Desert Storm, which liberated Kuwait from Iraqi forces in early 1991. Instead, Pakistan's forces were committed to a specific and narrow mandate within the framework of Operation Desert Shield, created to protect Saudi territory in case of an Iraqi attack after it invaded Kuwait in August 1990, under United Nations Security Council Resolution 678. Despite this political split, both nations retained mutual interests in Afghanistan and a relatively aligned outlook on regional political divisions. Saudi Arabia, along with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), recognized the Pakistan-backed Taliban government in Afghanistan in 1997.⁽⁹⁾ This Saudi move exhibited the continued strategic alignment between the two sides on crucial regional issues.

(7) National Assembly of Pakistan, *Questions for Oral Answers and Their Replies to be Asked at a Sitting of the National Assembly to be Held on Monday, the 4th August, 2014* (Islamabad: National Assembly Secretariat, 2014),

http://www.na.gov.pk/uploads/documents/questions/1407160619_854.pdf.; Shahid Javed Burki and Craig Baxter, "Pakistan Becomes Prominent in the International Arena," in *Pakistan under the Military: Eleven Years of Zia al-Haq*, 137–54 (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991), 143.

(8) Shahid M. Amin, "Security in the Gulf: Pakistan's Role and Interest," *Pakistan Horizon* 51: 1, 1998, 17–28.

(9) Guido Steinberg and Nils Woermer, *Exploring Iran and Saudi Arabia's Interests in Afghanistan and Pakistan: Stakeholders or Spoilers—A Zero-Sum Game? Part I: Saudi Arabia* (Barcelona: CIDOB, 2013), 3,

https://www.cidob.org/en/publications/publication_series/project_papers/stap_rp/policy_research_papers/exploring_iran_saudi_arabia_s_interests_in_afghanistan_pakistan_stakeholders_or_spoilers_a_zero_sum_game_part_1_saudi_arabia.

The strength of bilateral ties was also reflected in Saudi Defense Minister Prince Sultan bin Abdul Aziz's tour of Pakistani nuclear installations in 1999. He was one of the only foreigners taken to visit these sensitive facilities.⁽¹⁰⁾ The background was that the Kingdom had been one of the few countries to support Pakistan after it incurred international sanctions following the 1998 nuclear tests. In tandem, Saudi Arabia provided Pakistan with US\$2 billion worth of oil in 1998–1999 and later changed this arrangement from a deferred payment to that of a grant in order to help stabilize the country's economic situation.⁽¹¹⁾

This financial support further strengthened the Saudi economic leverage over Pakistan. It was translated into influence in the political arena especially following the 1999 coup whereby Saudi elites were able to broker a deal between General Pervez Musharaf and the sacked Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, resulting in the latter's exile to the Kingdom. After a period defined by cordial ties during General Musharaf's rule (1999–2008), Pakistani–Saudi ties went through a relatively cold period under the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) government (2008–2013), which the Saudis perceived as being sympathetic towards Iran. Relations only began to recover once a Nawaz Sharif-led government replaced PPP in the 2013 elections.⁽¹²⁾ With a generous loan package of US\$1.5 billion offered in 2014, the Nawaz government appeared to have full Saudi support.⁽¹³⁾

(10) Jane Perlez, "Saudi's Visit to Arms Site in Pakistan Worries U.S.," *New York Times*, July 10, 1999. <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/07/10/world/saudi-s-visit-to-arms-site-in-pakistan-worries-us.html?mtrref=www.google.co.uk&gwh=C0EA8EE0C0BEEF28147C5F2D1542A357&gwt=pay>.

(11) M. Arshad Munir, "Pak–Saudi Relations: A History of Goodwill," *Arab News*, March 23, 2017, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1072591/saudi-arabia>.

(12) Safdar Sial, *Emerging Dynamics in Pakistani–Saudi Relations* (Oslo: NOREF Norwegian Centre for Conflict Resolution, 2015), <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/195227/202d14d49238cab72b99e625383101d3.pdf>.

(13) "An Overview of Pakistani–Saudi Relations," *Dawn*, February 18, 2019, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1463802>.

2- The Impact of Domestic Politics on the Bilateral Relationship: Authoritarianism Versus Democracy

Domestic politics plays a different role in each case as far as the bilateral relationship is concerned. From the Saudi perspective, although the personal preferences of different monarchs or decision-makers differ from each other, the relatively ubiquitous nature of the Saudi political system imparts it with political stability and increases the significance of regional variables as compared to domestic political considerations in its calculations.

In Pakistan's case, domestic powerplays and the character of the politicians in power tend to shape foreign policy debates to a much higher degree. It would be fair to say that relations with Saudi Arabia have assumed a greater priority and been more coherent when military dictatorships have been in power in Pakistan; military regimes have been less sensitive to the domestic implications of their foreign policy moves. In contrast, the relationship has witnessed ups and downs under democratic governments. The political right, particularly the Sharif family, has remained close to Saudi Arabia and, to some extent, inherited the political linkages developed between President General Zia-ul-Haq and the Saudi leadership. On the other hand, as mentioned, the Saudi relationship with the PPP-led governments in the 1990s and from 2008–to 2013 was relatively lukewarm.

However, the advent of populism in Pakistan's political firmament, amplified by the digital and social media revolution, has changed the dynamics of Pakistan's foreign policy-making, where realism is increasingly being replaced by populist rhetoric. The Saudi military intervention in Yemen and the subsequent request from Pakistan to contribute to this war effort brought to the fore how populism has affected the debate within Pakistan's political and public spheres.

2.1 The Yemen Crisis

The bilateral relationship faced a major challenge when Pakistan's parliament voted against sending troops to support the Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen in April 2015.⁽¹⁴⁾ The parliament's decision occurred against a backdrop of political conflict and problematic civil-military relations and was only partly related to the question of the Yemen intervention itself. The parliament session summoned to discuss the issue was the first meeting of the constitutional body after the ending of an opposition sit-in that had entirely paralyzed Pakistani politics. Both government and opposition used the occasion of parliamentary debate on Yemen to settle their respective political scores. For that reason, the Yemen question itself and the merits or demerits of Pakistani involvement received scant discussion or proper debate.⁽¹⁵⁾ This political wrangling ended the chances of a compromise between the government and the opposition that could have led to a more positive response to the Saudi request.

The issue was further complicated by the anti-Saudi constituency in Pakistan, which by 2015 had become quite influential and quick to criticize any development in the Pakistani–Saudi relationship. Traditionally, this bloc was made up of figures from non-Sunni minority groups or those affiliated with leftist movements. However, it has now come to include individuals associated with Pakistan's liberal intelligentsia, many of whom are eager to denounce any policy initiative involving Saudi Arabia; some even accuse the Kingdom of being a destabilizing force by “distributing money to promote Wahabism.”⁽¹⁶⁾ These circles portrayed Saudi Arabia as

(14) Mohammad Mukashaf, “Pakistan Declines Saudi Call for Armed Support in Yemen fight,” *Reuters*, April 10, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-idUSKBN0N10LO20150410>.

(15) John Boone and Saeed Kamali Dehghan, “Pakistan's Parliament Votes Against Entering Yemen Conflict,” *The Guardian*, April 10, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/10/pakistans-parliament-votes-against-entering-yemen-conflict>.

(16) Christophe Jaffrelot, “Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Them,” *The Indian Express*, January 24, 2017 <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/imaft-raheel-sharif-army-chief-pakistan-saudi-arabia-4488347/>.

a negative influence on Pakistan, contributing to the country's conservative turn since the 1970s.⁽¹⁷⁾

As the debate on the Saudi request to join the military campaign in Yemen started, two narratives quickly emerged within the media and the public sphere. One was a pro-Saudi line advanced by certain religious groupings, such as the Deobandi and Ahl al-Hadith movements. Both of these have outsized political influence in Pakistan, but a significant majority of Pakistanis are Sufi-leaning and are therefore not particularly receptive to the theological and political discourses these groups promote.⁽¹⁸⁾ On the other hand, political parties associated with Shi'ite minorities, liberal journalists, and opposition politicians pushed an anti-Saudi narrative that strongly denounced Pakistani involvement in Yemen.⁽¹⁹⁾ This fault-line and the associated constellation of actors served to frame the Yemen intervention in primarily sectarian terms and equated any Pakistani involvement as a move against Iran and other religious groups. Certainly, pro-Saudi politically-engaged religious groups were also debating the issue in sectarian terms, and it was thus only natural that the general public opinion would follow a similar discursive line.⁽²⁰⁾ Overall, the heated discussion in the public sphere put the government under considerable pressure not to join the Yemen campaign.

Amid this war of narratives, the Saudi proposal failed to gain much traction in Pakistani society and among political elites. Instead, it highlighted the relatively limited leverage that pro-Saudi lobbies possess within the Pakistani public sphere, particularly when it comes to mobilizing religious networks.

(17) Pervez Hoodbhoy, "The Saudi-isation of Pakistan," *Newsline*, January 2009, <https://newslinemagazine.com/magazine/the-saudi-isation-of-pakistan/>.

(18) Christophe Jaffrelot, "Transnational Sunnism and Saudi Arabia's Influence," *The Wire*, November 15, 2017, <https://thewire.in/books/transnational-sunnism-saudi-arabias-influence>.

(19) Pervez Hoodbhoy, "Let Saudi Arabia Fume," *Dawn*, April 25, 2015, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1177974>.

(20) "پاکستان یمن کے تنازع میں غیرجانبدار رہے، پارلیمان کا فیصلہ،" *BBC News (Urdu)*, April 10, 2015, https://www.bbc.com/urdu/pakistan/2015/04/150410_yemen_pak_parliament_resolution_hk.

Saudi soft power resources that had grown significantly within Pakistan (especially in religious circles) during the Afghanistan War proved of little value in recruiting concrete support for Saudi positions within the Pakistani public sphere. In the political domain, the limitations of Saudi leverage were clear as very few political actors were ready to spend political capital and perhaps even sacrifice the backing of their voters in exchange for goodwill from Riyadh. Indeed, not a single Pakistani parliament member belonging to politico-religious groups long aligned with Saudi Arabia was willing to speak in favor of any such involvement.⁽²¹⁾

There is a military angle to this story. Pakistan had difficulty contributing troops to the Yemen campaign as the security forces were already overstretched. For more than eight years, the army had been fighting a counterinsurgency campaign in the northwestern tribal areas of the country against militants affiliated with the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). The Pakistani military was also active in Balochistan, where the security situation deteriorated owing to an active Baloch separatist insurgency and sectarian killings.⁽²²⁾ With forces dedicated to counterterrorism and stabilization operations across the country, it was difficult for the military leadership to commit troops to the Yemen War effort. The military in Pakistan might not have been affected by the same constraints as political elites, but its operational commitments at the time meant that traditional Saudi linkages with the military were unable to produce the desired outcome. Furthermore, the debates that emerged among Pakistani political elites and in the public sphere more generally in the wake of the parliamentary debate on the Yemen issue further restrained the options available to Pakistan's security establishment.

(۲۱) "یمن کی جنگ دو فرقوں کی جنگ ہے"، *BBC News (Urdu)*, April 8, 2015
https://www.bbc.com/urdu/pakistan/2015/04/150408_parliament_yemen_debate_atk.

(22) Kamal Alam "Saudi Arabia and Pakistan: Moving from the Personal to the Strategic Domain," *Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) blog*, June 18, 2018,
<https://rusi.org/commentary/saudi-arabia-and-pakistan-moving-personal-strategic-domain>.

Sensing a rift opening in the wake of Islamabad's stance on Yemen, the military high command intensified its exchanges with Saudi decision-makers and took two vital steps to assuage Saudi concerns. First, it fully backed the Saudi initiative to create an Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC) and complied with the Saudi request that Pakistan's former army chief General Raheel Sharif lead the coalition.⁽²³⁾ The second important step taken by Pakistan's security establishment to shore up bilateral trust was to dispatch over 1,000 Pakistani troops to the Kingdom in early 2018 under the auspices of the 1982 agreement.⁽²⁴⁾ These soldiers joined the 1,600 Pakistani troops already stationed in the Kingdom.⁽²⁵⁾ The deployment of these additional forces signaled that while Pakistan may not be part of any formal military campaign outside Saudi borders, it remained ready to defend Saudi territorial integrity against outside attack.

The current chief of army staff of Pakistan, General Qamar Javed Bajwa, has been instrumental in initiating this new model of bilateral ties. General Bajwa's association with Saudi Arabia is an old one, and he served for three years on deputation in the Kingdom. He also appears to have successfully cultivated a working relationship with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman (known colloquially as MBS) and his younger brother, Deputy Defense Minister Prince

(23) Salman Masood and Ben Hubbard, "Pakistan Approves Military Hero to Head Tricky Saudi-Led Alliance," *New York Times*, April 2, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/02/world/asia/pakistan-general-saudi-alliance-raheel-sharif.html>.

(24) The parliament was informed by Pakistan's defense minister in early 2018 that Pakistan had decided to deploy a composite brigade of troops within Saudi Arabia for training and advisory purposes. Apparently, this move was made unilaterally by the Pakistan military in order to shore up ties with the Kingdom, which have seen a downturn since Pakistan refused to participate in the Yemen War. The deployment of a composite brigade including different units suggest that this force was intended to help increase the capacity of Saudi forces in various arenas.

(25) Umer Karim, "Why Pakistan Has Troops in Saudi Arabia—and What It Means for the Middle East," *The Conversation*, September 19, 2018, <https://theconversation.com/why-pakistan-has-troops-in-saudi-arabia-and-what-it-means-for-the-middle-east-92613>.

Khaled Bin Salman.⁽²⁶⁾ Bajwa was a constant presence during the crown prince's state visit to Pakistan in early 2019.⁽²⁷⁾ This attests to the continued leverage enjoyed by Saudi Arabia among the Pakistani top brass arising from the interpersonal bonds developed over decades of Pakistani military deployments to Saudi Arabia. However, this interpersonal influence proved limited, and the Kingdom would have been better served had it the ability to exert soft power influence to achieve its objectives during the Yemen episode.

From the Pakistani perspective, this episode was alarming, as it signaled the end of the traditional alignment between the two sides on matters of regional security. This, in turn, meant weaker Pakistani–Saudi defense cooperation and attenuating institutional ties between the two militaries. Moreover, the debates within the public sphere, catalyzed by the emergence of independent digital and social media, limited the government's options in its engagement with a strategically important ally like Saudi Arabia. As a result, debates that would once have remained confined to the domestic sphere spilled over into the foreign policy domain and inspired a unique wave of discursive populism, further binding the government.

2.2 The Qatar Diplomatic Crisis

The Yemen question was not the only crisis that shook bilateral ties in recent years. A divergence of views was apparent when Saudi Arabia—along with Bahrain, the UAE, and Egypt—imposed a diplomatic and economic blockade of Qatar in May 2017. The outdated Pakistani understanding of Gulf politics was in full view when Pakistan's then Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif flew to Riyadh seeking to mediate between Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Instead, he was

(26) Umer Karim, "New Economic Ties Deepen the Saudi-Pakistani Strategic Partnership," *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, February 27, 2019, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/new-economic-ties-deepen-the-saudi-pakistani-strategic-partnershi>

(27) Shafqat Ali, "Gen Bajwa Close Friend of Kingdom: Saudi Expert," *The Nation*, January 23, 2019, <https://nation.com.pk/23-Jan-2019/gen-bajwa-close-friend-of-kingdom-saudi-expert>.

put in a catch-22 situation when King Salman asked him whether he was with the Kingdom or not.⁽²⁸⁾

The Saudi demand complicated an already tricky political environment at home for Sharif. For one, the prime minister was under court investigation connected to the Panama papers leak, and his sole defense rested on the letters sent by former Qatari Prime Minister Sheikh Hamad Bin Jasim to exonerate him from the charge of buying properties in London through laundered money.⁽²⁹⁾ For Sharif, taking a position in favor of Saudi Arabia would have cost him his only line of defense. His government had also inked a major liquid natural gas agreement with Qatar that played a crucial role in alleviating the country's dire need for energy resources. In addition, the presence of 115,000 Pakistani expatriates in Qatar, many of whom were in relatively better job positions than those in the other Gulf states, was a significant factor that his government had to consider.⁽³⁰⁾

This episode again highlighted the constraints faced by Pakistani governments abroad stemming from complications in domestic politics, in this case, the prime minister's delicate political position and the interests of Pakistani nationals working abroad. It also exposed a certain naivete among Pakistani elites about the underlying dynamics of the Gulf feud and a failure to appreciate Pakistan's limited political leverage on matters of Saudi politics. The bitterness created by this episode only began to dissipate with Sharif's departure from office in 2017.

(28) Tom O'Connor, "Saudis Give Pakistan One Choice: 'Are You with Us or with Qatar?'" *Newsweek*, June 16, 2017, <https://www.newsweek.com/saudi-arabia-pakistan-choice-us-qatar-626915>.

(29) "PML-N Papers: Purchase of London Flats and the Al-Thani Connection," *Dawn*, July 4, 2018, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1298572/pml-n-papers-purchase-of-london-flats-and-the-al-thani-connection>.

(30) Shamil Shams, "Pakistan Faces a Diplomatic Conundrum over the Gulf Crisis," *Deutsche Welle*, June 12, 2017, <https://www.dw.com/en/pakistan-faces-a-diplomatic-conundrum-over-the-gulf-crisis/a-39209645>.

3- The Role of Regional Rivals

The impact of Pakistan's domestic politics on bilateral ties is clear but equally important is the sensitivity of Pakistani–Saudi relations to the vagaries of regional geopolitics. After all, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia's strategic relationship took the form of an informal political and security alliance in response to major regional upheavals in 1979 — the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Both events had direct security implications for Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. However, the departure of Soviet troops and the end of the Cold War in 1989–1991 rendered one plank of this political and security cooperation redundant. Moreover, the Iranian threat was also reduced due to the Iran-Iraq War's devastating impact on the Iranian economy and society. Nevertheless, at the time, the longstanding political and institutional ties mentioned above sustained Pakistani–Saudi political alignment and both nations continued to hold strategic expectations from each other regarding support against their respective regional rivals (namely, India and Iran).

Yet, geopolitical complexities, economic priorities, and national security concerns have made it difficult for either side to fully back the other's stances and initiatives vis-à-vis regional rivals. Moreover, the emergence of new political personalities in the decision-making apparatuses of both countries has further encouraged them to reorient their political outlook towards their "home regions," South Asia for Pakistan and the Middle East for Saudi Arabia. This has naturally lessened the strategic congruence between the two sides and contributed to the erosion of the special nature of the bilateral relationship.

There are, furthermore, a few points of difference that should be kept in mind when analyzing these rivalries that underpin the Middle Eastern and South

Asian security complexes.⁽³¹⁾ Pakistan shares land borders with both Iran and India, and has fought three wars with the latter. Moreover, the two states remain in a tense standoff over the question of Kashmir. For its part, Saudi Arabia is engaged in intense competition with Iran for regional influence and power, a dynamic that has only intensified since the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the Arab uprisings in 2011. Iranian proxies, be they sympathetic groups like Hamas or militant organizations like Hezbollah, have been ascendant in the region, carving out a dominant political role in several Arab capitals. Still, the two states do not share a land border, and Iran may not be in a position to launch a direct military assault on the Kingdom, although it has supported the Houthi rebels in Yemen, who have targeted Saudi population centers and installations with ballistic missiles and drones.⁽³²⁾

3.1 Pakistani–Iranian Relations

Over the past decade, Saudi Arabia has repeatedly expressed a desire for Pakistan to participate in its stabilization efforts and anti-Iran initiatives across the region. Pakistan aided its Gulf ally in certain theaters where the presence of its operatives did not involve a direct confrontation with Iran. Some reports have alleged, for example, that former Pakistan armed forces personnel were part of Bahrain’s security setup and contributed to maintaining the country’s security in the wake of the 2011 protests.⁽³³⁾ Yet the possibility of Pakistani involvement in any formal anti-Iran political or security coalition or initiative remains highly unlikely. Pakistan’s policy on Iran continues to be defined by a reluctance to create new enemies in its immediate surroundings. Although Pakistan has always eschewed

(31) Barry Buzan and Ole Waever, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

(32) “Timeline of Houthi Attacks on Saudi Arabia,” *United States Institute of Peace Iran Primer*, September 16, 2019, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2019/sep/16/timeline-houthi-attacks-saudi-arabia>.

(33) Ian Black, “Bahrain Security Forces Accused of Deliberately Recruiting Foreign Nationals,” *The Guardian*, February 17, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/feb/17/bahrain-security-forces-sunni-foreign>.

explicit or implicit balancing between Riyadh and Tehran, its recent policy approach increasingly seems to be assuming that very posture.⁽³⁴⁾

Various security issues impact Islamabad's calculations. Pakistan's main geopolitical rival, India, has been financing the development of the Port of Chahbahar in Iran and has significant intelligence assets deployed across the Iranian-Pakistani border. In addition, Balochistan, which is adjacent to Iran, has witnessed an intense insurgency being waged by separatist and sectarian groups, involving attacks on security forces and civilians. The Pakistani security apparatus considers such activities to be operations orchestrated by the Indian Intelligence Agency Research and Analysis Wing (RAW).⁽³⁵⁾ The arrest of a senior RAW agent, Kulbushan Yadav, as he entered Pakistan from Iran had confirmed Pakistani apprehensions and raised questions regarding Iranian complicity in these activities.⁽³⁶⁾ This prompted the Pakistani government and security institutions to demand that Iran investigate the activities of Indian intelligence operatives on its soil and curb them.⁽³⁷⁾ Pakistani security circles also expressed concern over Iran's recruitment drive in Pakistan for the Zainabiyoun brigade operating in Syria.⁽³⁸⁾ As a result, light action was taken against a local outlet involved in organizing such recruitment in the restive tribal area of Kurram Agency, which had been home to a significant number of Pakistani Shias.⁽³⁹⁾

(34) Umer Karim, "Iran-Pakistan Relations: The Current State of Affairs" (analysis), Center for Iranian Studies (IRAM), October 2017,

<https://iramcenter.org/en/iran-pakistan-relations-the-current-state-of-affairs/>.

(35) Abdul Rauf Iqbal, "Internal and External Factors in Balochistan Conflict," *ISSRA Papers*, 4:1, 2012, 79–102, <https://issrapapers.ndu.edu.pk/site/issue/view/24/17>.

(36) Ayaz Ahmed, "Uri Attack and the Doval Doctrine," *Defence Journal*, 20:3, 2016, 13–18, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1838920569>.

(37) Syed Irfan Raza, "Reference Will Be Sent to Iran Calling for Probe into RAW Presence in Chahbahar," *Dawn*, March 28, 2016, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1248417>.

(38) Aydin Guven, "Analysis—Iran-Backed Zainabiyoun Brigade Could Become Pakistan's New National Security Problem," *Anadolu Ajansı*, November 5, 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/analysis/analysis-iran-backed-zainabiyoun-brigade-could-become-pakistan-s-new-national-security-problem/2033585>. The author's interviews with Pakistani security officials substantiate this assertion.

(39) Qadeer Tanoli, "Recruitment for Syria: Interior Ministry Bans Sectarian Outfit," *Express Tribune*, January 22, 2017, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1303150/recruitment-syria-interior-ministry-bans-sectarian-outfit/>.

Despite these multiple points of concern, Pakistan is unwilling, at least for now, to raise the stakes with Iran. There are three reasons for this. First, Pakistan perceives an active threat from India on its eastern border and an uncertain situation in Afghanistan to its west. Second, Pakistan's relationship with the United States is in dire straits. Third, Pakistan wants to avoid any repetition of the 1990s, when sectarian violence became the norm, and a toxic social environment prevailed throughout the country. Owing to these complications, Pakistan has sought to engage with Iran to address bilateral issues.

For instance, Imran Khan, who served as Pakistan's prime minister from August 2018 to April 2022, made many visits to Iran over his time in office, indicating that Iran's importance to Pakistan is on the rise. In a sign of the times, during a trip to Tehran in 2019, Khan became the first Pakistani official to publicly acknowledge that terrorist groups operating from Pakistani had carried out attacks against Iran.⁽⁴⁰⁾ This was part of an attempt to reset ties and enhance the level of bilateral trust. Even Pakistan's military's posture towards Iran has shifted, with General Bajwa becoming the first chief of the army staff to visit Iran in over two decades.⁽⁴¹⁾ This was soon followed by a reciprocating visit by Mohammad Bagheri, Iran's army chief, to Pakistan, also a first in over forty years.⁽⁴²⁾ The emphasis placed on neutrality and mediation in official Pakistani rhetoric regarding the Middle East underscores this reset.⁽⁴³⁾

Notwithstanding these developments, Pakistan's decision to cancel a proposed Iran–Pakistan gas pipeline due to the US sanctions regime highlights the

(40) Baqir Sajjad Syed, "Pakistan Soil Used for Attacks in Iran: Imran," *Dawn*, April 23, 2019, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1477837>.

(41) Baqir Sajjad Syed, "Pakistan Determined to Expand Ties with Iran: Bajwa," *Dawn*, November 7, 2017, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1368817>.

(42) "Iranian Military Chief's First Visit to Pakistan," *Tehran Times*, July 16, 2018, <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/425437/Iranian-military-chief-s-first-visit-to-Pakistan>.

(43) Khurram Abbas, "Passive Mediation in Persian Gulf Conflicts: An Analysis of Pakistan's Peace Initiatives," *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies*, 13: 4, 2019, 604–620, <https://doi.org/10.1080/25765949.2019.1682306>; Huma Yusuf, "A Neutral Posture," *Dawn*, May 20, 2019, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1483427>.

limitations of this new reset.⁽⁴⁴⁾ At the same time, the geopolitical cost of antagonizing Iran has become too great for Pakistani decision-makers, and a return to the traditional hostile posture of the 1990s is increasingly untenable. And unlike their predecessors, Pakistan's current decision-makers are ready to follow this path even at the risk of damaging relations with Riyadh.⁽⁴⁵⁾

3.2 Indian–Saudi Relations

Since the mid-2000s, the relationship between India and Saudi Arabia has strengthened and deepened considerably. Prior to that, Riyadh's posture towards India was largely ambivalent due to the latter's closeness with the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Indian political support for Iraq during the first Gulf war did not help the cause of Saudi–Indian ties, and bilateral engagement never assumed strategic significance. This changed with King Abdullah's state visit to India in 2006, where he was the guest of honor at India's Republic Day ceremony.⁽⁴⁶⁾ This trip reflected newfound Saudi appreciation for India's rising global profile and its emergence as one of the world's largest economies and, thus, a growing market for Saudi energy exports.

At present, India imports an estimated 800,000 barrels per day of crude oil from Saudi Arabia. With the termination of India-specific waivers from the US allowing it to import oil from Iran in 2019, Saudi oil exports to India were expected to rise even further.⁽⁴⁷⁾ In addition, there are nearly 2.5 million Indian expatriate workers (approximately the same number as

(44) Aamir Saeed, "Gas Pipeline Project 'Impossible' Under US Sanctions, Pakistan Tells Iran," *Arab News Pakistan*, May 11, 2019, <http://www.arabnews.pk/node/1495251/pakistan>.

(45) Zahid Shahab Ahmed and Shahram Akbarzadeh, "Pakistan Caught between Iran and Saudi Arabia," *Contemporary South Asia* 28: 3 (2020): p 336–350, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09584935.2020.1779181>.

(46) Zahid Shahab Ahmed and Stuti Bhatnagar, "Gulf States and the Conflict between India and Pakistan," *Journal of Asia Pacific Studies* 1:2, 2010, 259–91, https://www.humanitarianlibrary.org/sites/default/files/2014/02/8_Zahid.pdf.

(47) Amir Handjani, "Saudi Arabia Has Big Plans in India," *Foreign Policy*, May 10, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/05/10/saudi-arabia-has-big-plans-in-india/>.

Pakistan) in Saudi Arabia, who send back nearly US\$11 billion worth of remittances annually.⁽⁴⁸⁾

Saudi cooperation with India in the security sphere has also been growing. Beginning with the talks held in Riyadh in 2010 between the then Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and King Abdullah, both sides agreed to follow a roadmap to boost bilateral cooperation. This led to the first Saudi–Indian Joint Committee on Defense Cooperation (JCDC) meeting in 2012, designed to boost defense exchanges and military-to-military contacts. The JCDC has held four meetings since then. Building on these engagements, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Defense Cooperation was signed in 2014 during a visit by now King Salman (then minister of defense) to India. The agreement proposed joint exercises, Indian training of Saudi forces, and sharing of defense-related information.⁽⁴⁹⁾

Further evidence of enhanced defense engagement came when General Manoj Mukund Naravane, Indian Chief of the Army Staff (COAS), visited Saudi Arabia in 2020 and delivered a lecture at the King Abdul Aziz Military Academy.⁽⁵⁰⁾ General Naravane was the first Indian COAS to ever visit Saudi Arabia. In 2022, the Saudi Land Forces chief reciprocated by visiting New Delhi. This was also the first time a Saudi top security official had visited India.⁽⁵¹⁾ For decades, Pakistan has been the Saudi point of contact for security

(48) Press Trust of India, “At 18 Million, India Has the World’s Largest Expatriates Population,” *NDTV.com*, January 16, 2021, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/at-18-million-india-has-the-worlds-largest-expatriates-population-2353313>.

(49) Ankit Panda, “India and Saudi Arabia Sign Defense Cooperation Pact,” *The Diplomat*, February 27, 2014, <https://thediplomat.com/2014/02/india-and-saudi-arabia-sign-defense-cooperation-pact/>.

(50) Snehash Alex Phili “What India, Saudi, UAE Look to Gain from Gen. Naravane Trip, a First by an Indian Army Chief,” *The Print*, December 8, 2020, <https://theprint.in/defence/what-india-saudi-uae-look-to-gain-from-gen-naravane-trip-a-first-by-an-indian-army-chief/562866/>.

(51) Raghav Bikhchandani, “Saudi Arabia Land Forces Commander’s Visit to India a Historic First, Says Defence Ministry,” *The Print*, February 15, 2022, <https://theprint.in/diplomacy/saudi-arabia-land-forces-commanders-visit-to-india-a-historic-first-says-defence-ministry/832975/>.

and defense-related issues in South Asia. Accordingly, the deepening Saudi–Indian security partnership has been viewed with considerable skepticism in Pakistani political and security circles.

Against this backdrop, Riyadh's foreign policy stance towards Pakistan and India has begun to shift. Saudi Arabia's traditional support for Pakistan's position on Kashmir has changed. Certainly, during Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman's state visit to India in 2019, the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Adel Al-Jubeir refused to accept India's claim of Pakistani involvement in the suicide attack on Indian forces in Kashmir. Al-Jubeir's statement was received with great excitement by the Pakistani government and public.⁽⁵²⁾ Yet when India abrogated the special status of its administered part of Kashmir in August 2019, the reaction from Saudi Arabia, against Pakistani expectations, was rather muted. Saudi Arabia expressed concern over the developments in Kashmir but largely disregarded Pakistan's demands to hold a special session of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) foreign ministers on Kashmir.⁽⁵³⁾

4- Pakistani–Saudi Ties Under Imran Khan

Bilateral ties took a new turn after the election of Imran Khan in July 2018. Khan, a cricket World Cup-winning captain, a one-time playboy, and a renowned philanthropist, dabbled at the margins of Pakistani politics for more than twenty years but failed to make a noticeable impression in the first

(52) "Saudi FM Shuts Down Indian Journalist, Refuses to Condemn Pakistan," *Dunya News*, February 20, 2019, <https://dunyanews.tv/en/World/479359-Saudi-FM-shuts-down-Indian-journalist-refuses-condemn-Pakistan>.

(53) Shubhajit Roy, "Jammu and Kashmir Issue: Malaysia, Saudi Cite UNSC Resolutions, US Calls for Restraint," *The Indian Express*, August 9, 2019, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/jammu-and-kashmir-issue-malaysia-saudi-cite-uns-resolutions-us-calls-for-restraint-5890224/>; Adnan Aamir, "Saudi Arabia Pulls Support for Pakistan as Kashmir Tiff Widens," *Nikkei Asia*, August 10, 2020, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Saudi-Arabia-pulls-support-for-Pakistan-as-Kashmir-tiff-widens>.

fifteen years of his political career. He was generally shrugged off as a retired cricket star trying his luck in politics.⁽⁵⁴⁾ In the first three elections he contested, Khan only won once, and no other member of his party was elected.⁽⁵⁵⁾ Yet as the populace suffered from rising corruption and poor governance under the PPP and the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), political space opened up for a third force. In 2011, he relaunched his political career at a major political gathering.

Khan's rhetoric, which draws heavily on populist tropes castigating the corruption and monopolization of power by PPP and PML-N, began to gain traction. Khan was also able to exploit the growing discontent over the dynastic nature of the PPP and PML-N in politics — the two parties remain fiefdoms of the Bhutto and Sharif families, respectively. In addition, Khan's message gained popularity among the educated middle classes and the country's youth, and it is fair to say that he elevated young people as an electoral force in Pakistan's politics for the first time.⁽⁵⁶⁾ Banking upon the support of these constituencies, Khan was able to form a provincial government after the 2013 elections and a national government after the 2018 elections.

Imran Khan's rise to the center of the political scene was a populist triumph in Pakistani politics. As prime minister especially, he has spearheaded the

(54) Aatish Taseer, "'He Is Trying to Play a Very Difficult Game': The Once and Future Imran Khan," *Vanity Fair*, September 12, 2019,

<https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2019/09/the-once-and-future-imran-khan>. For more insight about Imran Khan's personal life and politics, see Christopher Sandford, *Imran Khan* (London: HarperCollins, 2009); Imran Khan, *Pakistan: A Personal History* (London: Bantam Press, 2011), and Shahid Javed Burki, "Imran Khan's Political Rise," *ISAS Insights*, December 27, 2011, <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/149-imran-khanocos-political-rise/>.

(55) Ihsan Yilma and Kainat Shakil, *Imran Khan: From Cricket Batsman to Populist Captain: ECPS Leader Profile Series #6* (Brussels: European Center for Populism Studies, 2021), <https://www.populismstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/ECPS-Leader-Profile-Series-6-2.pdf>.

(56) Maya Tudor. "Renewed Hope in Pakistan?" *Journal of Democracy* 25: 2, 2014, 105–18. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2014.0031>.

institutionalization of populist themes and narratives in Pakistan's domestic and foreign policy realm.⁽⁵⁷⁾ Populist ideas such as “the state of Medina” and “countering Islamophobia” that Khan championed at home were also brought to Pakistan's foreign policy under his leadership. While political developments on the Pakistani side signalled a new foreign policy approach, the rise of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman on the Saudi side also heralded major changes in Saudi domestic and foreign policy.

4.1 Changing Civil-Military Relations

Parts of the Western media and Imran Khan's opponents at home have argued that his political rise reflects the backing he received from the Pakistani military. Since both PPP and PML-N governments have long sought to clip the wings of the military, so the theory goes, Pakistan's security establishment looked to Khan's political party as a counterweight.⁽⁵⁸⁾

There might be some truth to this, but arguably more important for the present analysis is the fundamental shift in the tenor and tone of civil-military relations under Khan. Between 2008 and 2018, civil-military relations in Pakistan were turbulent, but under Khan's tenure as prime minister, they stabilized. With growing interpersonal trust and policy coordination between the prime minister and army chief, some analysts labeled Pakistan's system as a hybrid regime.⁽⁵⁹⁾ Khan's former confidant and party leader Makhdoom Javed Hashmi contends that the rapprochement reflects the longstanding

(57) Prashant Rastogi, “The Articulation of Discourse in Populism: Understanding 21st Century Pakistan,” *E-International Relations*, January 5, 2021, <https://www.e-ir.info/2021/01/05/the-articulation-of-discourse-in-populism-understanding-the-case-of-pakistan-in-the-21st-century/>.

(58) Colin Cookman, “A Tilted Playing Field: What Pakistan's Electoral Shifts Could Mean for Imran Khan's Government,” *War on the Rocks*, August 1, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/08/a-tilted-playing-field-what-pakistans-electoral-shifts-could-mean-for-imran-khans-government/>.

(59) Ejaz Hussain, “Civil-Military Relations and the Extension: How Hybridity Was Consolidated,” *Naya Daur*, December 2, 2019, <https://nayadaur.tv/2019/12/civil-military-and-the-extension-how-hybridity-was-consolidated/>.

personal accord between Khan and Pakistan's military.⁽⁶⁰⁾ Hashmi alleges that Khan collaborated with the military to pave the way for the ouster of Nawaz Sharif's government in 2017.

However, from interviews I conducted with various serving and non-serving military officers at various levels, there is a sense that Khan's support in the military is institutional.⁽⁶¹⁾ This was apparent in the vehemence with which the army chief defended the government's tough economic measures in 2019.⁽⁶²⁾ In addition, the decision by the prime minister to extend General Bajwa's term as army chief by three years shows that the two men retain a good working relationship, unlike in past administrations in which relations between the military and civilian leaderships generally soured soon after the election of a new government.⁽⁶³⁾

4.2 Positive Engagement with Saudi Arabia

Traditionally, the Sharif family has served as Saudi Arabia's sherpa in the Pakistani political landscape. However, after the Yemen War, and as the Sharif family's ties with Qatar and Turkey deepened, relations with members of the Saudi royal family frayed. Khan thus offered Saudi Arabia the chance to develop new links with the Pakistani political leadership. Army Chief General Bajwa likely facilitated contact between the Saudi leadership and Khan, who almost immediately reached out to Saudi Arabia on coming into office. As the country faced a financing gap of more than US\$12 billion, Khan's government sought Saudi Arabia's help. As a result, the Kingdom agreed to

(60) "Dharna Was Gen Shuja Pasha's Brainchild, Alleges Javed Hashmi," *Dawn*, April 6, 2015, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1174163>.

(61) Interviews with Pakistani officials in London and Riyadh, Personal. August 2018 to July 2019.

(62) Baqir Sajjad Syed, "Army Chief Defends Govt's Tough Economic Measures," *Dawn*, July 4, 2019, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1491994/army-chief-defends-govts-tough-economic-measures>.

(63) Umair Jamal, "What Army Chief General Bajwa's Term Extension Means for Pakistan," *The Diplomat*, August 22, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/08/what-army-chief-general-bajwas-term-extension-means-for-pakistan/>.

provide Pakistan with a US\$6 billion aid package — US\$3 billion in balance-of-payments support and a one-year deferred payment option of up to US\$3 billion for oil imports.⁽⁶⁴⁾

This financial aid package signaled a warming of bilateral ties but also gave Saudi Arabia substantial leverage over Pakistan, whose economy was reeling from declining export values, a worsening investment climate and a deteriorating balance-of-payments situation.⁽⁶⁵⁾ Moreover, it came only after the prime minister made a point of showing up to the Future Investment Initiative (FII) summit in Riyadh in October 2018, which many of the world's leading corporate and political figures had decided to pull out of in the wake of the murder of Jamal Khashoggi.⁽⁶⁶⁾ The decision by the prime minister to attend the FII earned him goodwill among Saudi policy-makers, something he lacked in his initial attempts at outreach. Imran Khan's willingness to support the Saudi leadership during a difficult period, and Saudi financial aid to Pakistan's economy, improved relations.

Bilateral ties were strengthened further as the Saudi crown prince embarked on a trip to Pakistan in February 2019. During this visit, the Saudi leader announced an investment package worth US\$20 billion that included the construction of an oil refinery at the port of Gwadar, which also happens

(64) Kamran Haider and Ismail Dilawar, "Pakistan Secures \$6 Billion Aid Package from Saudi Arabia," *Bloomberg*, October 23, 2018, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-10-23/pakistan-says-saudi-arabia-agrees-to-6-billion-support-package>.

(65) Mohib Iqbal, "Out of Balance: Pakistan's Economic Crisis," *The Lowy Institute Interpreter*, October 8, 2018, <https://www.loyyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/out-balance-pakistan-economic-crisis>.; Daniel F Runde, "An Economic Crisis in Pakistan Again: What's Different This Time?" *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, October 31, 2018, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/economic-crisis-pakistan-again-whats-different-time>.

(66) Jessica Algot, and Patrick Wintour. "UK and US Pull out of Saudi Event over Alleged Murder of Jamal Khashoggi," *The Guardian*, October 18, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/oct/18/liam-fox-pulls-out-of-saudi-event-over-alleged-of-jamal-khashoggi>.

to be a major node in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor.⁽⁶⁷⁾ Even more important was the formation of a Supreme Coordination Council to streamline bilateral engagement and facilitate Saudi projects within Pakistan in 2019. This visit was a unique high moment in the relationship, and it could be argued that bilateral ties had finally recovered from the strain caused by the Yemen War. However, this newfound constructive engagement proved to be short-lived.

4.3 Bilateral Ties in Crisis

In August 2019, India revoked the special status of the State of Jammu and Kashmir in its constitution and made it a formal part of the Indian Union. This development provoked a strong reaction from Pakistan, which loudly appealed to the international community to pressure India. Although Riyadh registered its concern, it did not condemn the Indian government's move owing to Saudi Arabia's extensive economic and security ties with India.⁽⁶⁸⁾ Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Riyadh a few months later, indicating that the Saudis had decided to stay above the fray and instead focus on strengthening bilateral ties with India.⁽⁶⁹⁾ In contrast, Turkey—whose relations with Saudi Arabia had soured in recent years—strongly supported Pakistan's position even at the expense of its relationship with India.⁽⁷⁰⁾

(67) Eram Ashraf, *Economic Visions and the Making of an Islamabad-Beijing-Riyadh Triangle: Assessing Saudi Arabia's Role in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor* (Riyadh: King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies, 2020).

(68) Aya Batrawy, "Indian Business Ties Underpin Muted Arab Response to Kashmir," *Associated Press*, August 16, 2019, <https://apnews.com/article/ap-top-news-india-global-trade-qatar-international-news-50c0012ce1c445db955a09b86732ce69>.

(69) Archana Chaudhary, "India's Mode to Meet King Salman in Saudi Arabia," *Bloomberg*, October 24, 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-10-24/india-pm-modi-to-meet-king-salman-in-saudi-arabia-on-oct-29>.

(70) Nayanima Basu, "Erdogan Support for Pakistan on Kashmir at UN an Outcome of Downswing in India-Turkey Ties," *The Print*, September 26, 2019, <https://theprint.in/diplomacy/erdogan-support-for-pakistan-on-kashmir-at-un-an-outcome-of-downswing-in-india-turkey-ties/297376/>.

Pakistan and Saudi Arabia approached the brink of a diplomatic crisis when Pakistan agreed with Turkey and Malaysia to hold a summit in Kuala Lumpur to address issues concerning the Islamic world.⁽⁷¹⁾ Qatar and Iran were invited to the conference, which Saudi Arabia increasingly saw as an attempt to set up an alternative to the Saudi-led OIC and thus a challenge to its leadership. Uncharacteristically, Saudi Arabia resorted to quite forceful diplomatic arm-twisting to pressure Pakistan to withdraw from the proposed Kuala Lumpur summit. Dependent upon Saudi economic support, Pakistan had few options and was forced to withdraw.

In the short run, Saudi Arabia had successfully translated its hard economic power into political leverage over Pakistan's foreign policy decision-making.⁽⁷²⁾ Yet, in exercising that leverage so forcefully, Saudi Arabia arguably overreached, triggering a debate in Pakistan about the constraining effect of Saudi influence and the country's unhealthy dependence on its erstwhile close partner and ally. Pakistan's withdrawal from the conference eased tensions, but the episode soured relations at the leadership level and saw several bilateral communication channels closed off.

As ties with Saudi Arabia became tense, Pakistan's relationship with Turkey blossomed, as did the personal chemistry between Prime Minister Khan and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. During his February 2020 visit to Pakistan, Erdoğan managed to buttress his already high popularity in Pakistan with his full-throated support for Islamabad's

(71) Ayaz Gul, "Pakistan, Turkey, Malaysia to Jointly Launch Anti-Islamophobia TV," *Voice of America*, September 26, 2019, <https://www.voanews.com/south-central-asia/pakistan-turkey-malaysia-jointly-launch-anti-islamophobia-tv>.

(72) Umair Jamal, "The Kuala Lumpur Summit 2019 Shows Pakistan's Diplomatic Subservience to Saudi Arabia," *The Diplomat*, December 24, 2019, <https://thediplomat.com/2019/12/the-kuala-lumpur-summit-2019-shows-pakistans-diplomatic-subservience-to-saudi-arabia/>.

stance on Kashmir.⁽⁷³⁾ The personal chemistry between the two leaders also reflected their shared style of Islamist populism, centered on the notion of an Islamic Renaissance, an approach pioneered by Erdoğan that Khan explicitly sought to emulate.⁽⁷⁴⁾

The shared approach was also reflected in the decision by Pakistan's state broadcaster in 2020 to air a wildly popular Turkish TV series glorifying the Ottoman Empire, celebrated in Turkey as emblematic of the country's return to global standing and increasing willingness to stand firm against Western countries. Prime Minister Khan's personal endorsement of this TV series indicated his support for the leitmotif of the Islamic Renaissance and, by implication, the Turkish claim to leadership of the Islamic world.⁽⁷⁵⁾

Riyadh likely perceived these symbolic politics in a similar light and as an attempt by Islamabad to realign with alternative power centers in the Islamic world, damaging the relationship further. Not long after, Saudi Arabia scrapped its financial package to Pakistan and called in its US\$3 billion loan.⁽⁷⁶⁾ Pakistan was able to repay US\$2 billion of the loan by procuring additional Chinese financial support.⁽⁷⁷⁾ This crisis was further exacerbated in August 2020 when Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi publicly chided Saudi

(73) Sibel Morrow and Faruk Zorlu, "Kashmir as Important to Turkey as It Is to Pakistan," *Anadolu Ajansı*, February 14, 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/-kashmir-as-important-to-turkey-as-it-is-to-pakistan-1733770>.

(74) Ihsan Yılmaz, "Erdoğan's Political Journey: From Victimised Muslim Democrat to Authoritarian, Islamist Populist," *European Center for Populism Studies*, February 9, 2022, <https://www.populismstudies.org/erdogans-political-journey-from-victimised-muslim-democrat-to-authoritarian-islamist-populist/>.

(75) Sadaf Haider, "What Is Dirilis Ertugrul and Why Does Imran Khan Want Pakistanis to Watch It?" *Dawn Images*, May 9, 2020, <https://images.dawn.com/news/1183827>.

(76) Ahmed Al Omran, "Saudi Arabia Forces Pakistan to Repay Loans in Diplomatic Spat," *Financial Times*, August 13, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/49d24c4b-345e-492b-8a8f-c1a550173ee1>.

(77) "Pakistan Returns \$1 Billion of Saudi Arabia's Soft Loan, Officials Say," *Dawn*, December 17, 2020. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1596109>.

Arabia for failing to support Pakistan on the Kashmir issue and floated the idea of convening like-minded Muslim states outside the orbit of the Saudi-controlled OIC.⁽⁷⁸⁾

According to media sources, Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman rebuffed efforts by General Bajwa to stabilize the relationship in the wake of the foreign minister's comments.⁽⁷⁹⁾ Pakistan's policy leadership read the situation with alarm, concerned that the entire program of Saudi financial support might be at risk. As a result, a whole-of-government effort was launched to mend fences, with senior government, military and civil society leaders meeting with the Saudi ambassador to calm tensions and restore communication between the two sides.⁽⁸⁰⁾ Furthermore, in a goodwill gesture, the government-appointed Molana Tahir Ashrafi, head of the Pakistan Ulema Council, as the prime minister's special envoy for the Middle East. Known for his close connections to the Saudi royal court, Ashrafi was given the task to plead Pakistan's case among the Saudi leadership, with the foreign ministry taking a back seat on this matter.⁽⁸¹⁾

4.4 Rapprochement

These efforts seemed to produce the desired stabilization in relations, paving the way for Imran Khan to visit Saudi Arabia not once but twice in 2021. The visits suggested a personal rapprochement between Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman and Prime Minister Imran Khan had been established. As a result of these developments, the Supreme Coordination Council, set up in 2019 but somewhat sidelined in the meantime, was revived

(78) "Qureshi Asks OIC to Stop Dragging Feet on Kashmir Meeting," *Dawn*, August 6, 2020. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1572857>.

(79) "Pakistani-Saudi Ties in Trouble as Army Chief Fails to Meet Crown Prince," *The Quint*, August 19, 2020. <https://www.thequint.com/news/world/pakistan-saudi-ties-trouble-army-chief-snubbed-by-crown-prince-mbs-significance>.

(80) "Ambassador Al-Malki Discusses Saudi-Pak Relations with Punjab Leadership," *Arab News Pakistan*, August 15, 2020, <https://www.arabnews.pk/node/1719801/pakistan>.

(81) "Maulana Tahir Ashrafi given Additional Charge of Middle East Affairs," *The Express Tribune*, October 22, 2020, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2269502/maulana-tahir-ashrafi-given-additional-charge-of-middle-east-affairs>.

to strengthen coordination.⁽⁸²⁾ Furthermore, Riyadh provided a new US\$3 billion line of credit for Pakistan's State Bank to shore up the country's beleaguered currency.⁽⁸³⁾ However, in a major shock for Pakistan, the Saudi government decided to shelve its proposed oil refinery in the port of Gwadar and floated the idea of relocating the project to Karachi, the center of oil supply in Pakistan, instead.⁽⁸⁴⁾ The Saudi decision indicates that while the period of acute tensions has passed and relations have recovered, Riyadh now sees the relationship primarily in transactional terms.

This recovery in the bilateral relationship needs to be viewed in the context of political changes on the domestic and regional levels. Domestically, the Pakistani government has realized its foreign policy limitations and continued dependency on Saudi Arabia in the face of growing internal and external challenges of a political and economic nature. Particularly with the economic problems created by the COVID-19 pandemic, the importance of expatriate remittances — while always critical — has only increased. Pakistani expatriates in Saudi Arabia sent home US\$7 billion in 2021, underscoring the Kingdom's centrality to Pakistan's economy.⁽⁸⁵⁾ Even if it stands resolutely by Islamabad on the foreign policy front, Turkey cannot match Saudi Arabia's level of economic importance for Pakistan. Regionally, the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan and Pakistan's increased strategic relevance in the wake of this development have compelled both countries to coordinate their actions on the Afghan file once

(82) "Saudi Arabia, Pakistan Sign Agreement to Establish Saudi-Pakistani Supreme Coordination Council," *Arab News Pakistan*, May 9, 2021, <https://www.arabnews.pk/node/1855561/pakistan>.

(83) Erum Zaidi, "Saudi Arabia Deposits \$3 Billion in Pakistan's Central Bank," *The News International*, December 5, 2021, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/914141-saudi-arabia-deposits-3-billion-in-pakistan-s-central-bank>.

(84) Adnan Aamir, "Pakistan's Gwadar Loses Luster as Saudis Shift \$10bn Deal to Karachi," *Nikkei Asia*, June 13, 2021, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Pakistan-s-Gwadar-loses-luster-as-Saudis-shift-10bn-deal-to-Karachi>.

(85) "Remittances Exceed \$2bn for 12th Straight Month with Highest Inflows from Saudi Arabia, UAE," *Dawn*, June 10, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1628615>.

more.⁽⁸⁶⁾ The shared outlook on this issue was critical in their collaboration in convening an emergency meeting of the Foreign Ministers of the OIC in Islamabad in December 2021.⁽⁸⁷⁾

Conclusion

The current trajectory of Pakistani–Saudi ties remains positive, but structural issues have seen the traditionally close and strategically special relationship become more guarded and transactional (albeit still mostly amicable) in recent decades. The historical weight of the Kingdom as the land of the Two Holy Mosques has less influence in the face of Saudi reluctance to champion Muslim causes and to back Pakistan on crucial issues of concern in its relations with India.⁽⁸⁸⁾ The large pool of goodwill towards Saudi Arabia within Pakistan accumulated since the time of King Faisal has dwindled significantly. This leaves Saudi Arabia with little soft power to influence Pakistani decision-makers through appeals to public opinion, leaving it with hard power alone, which, when exercised forcefully as in 2019–2020, only serves to alienate Pakistanis further. The Kingdom's traditional supporters within Pakistan were religious groups, and a changing Saudi Arabia is no longer eager to support such elements, leading to further erosion of its image.

Meanwhile, Riyadh's leverage over Islamabad is likely to remain considerable for some time, as Pakistan remains economically unstable. Saudi Arabia is critical for Pakistan's longterm development and economic

(86) Interview with Saudi and Pakistani Officials, Personal. December 2021.

(87) Mariana Baabar, "Pakistan Hosts OIC's Council of FMS Session Today," *The News International*, December 18, 2021, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/917712-at-ksa-s-initiative-pakistan-hosts-oic-s-council-of-fms-session-today>.

(88) "Turkish President Erdogan Emerges as the Most Popular Muslim Leader in Gallup International Annual Index of Global Leaders–Gallup International End of Year Survey 2019," *Gallup Pakistan*, <https://gallup.com.pk/post/28692>.

progress. On the other hand, Pakistan's leverage on (and importance to) Saudi Arabia in the security domain has weakened. Even though Pakistani troops are still stationed on Saudi soil, these deployments are of minor strategic value and even were they to be withdrawn, it would not alter Riyadh's strategic balance much. All in all, then, Pakistani–Saudi relations are defined by their pronounced asymmetry.

While a new government took power in Pakistan in April 2022 after Imran Khan's ouster as prime minister, his time in office casts a long shadow over politics and exemplifies many of the tensions and contradictions in the relationship that are bound to continue. Pakistan's economic dependence on Saudi Arabia will remain an effective check on Pakistan's engagement with Iran. Imran Khan's version of Islamist political populism did harm the bilateral relationship, but even he was forced to trim his sails in challenging Riyadh, given Pakistan's perennial economic woes and its tendency to look towards Saudi Arabia for economic support.

Furthermore, Pakistan's military leaders will remain the primary channel for Pakistani–Saudi political communication. This institutional dynamic, coupled with the military's political role in Pakistan, will impose checks and balances on the political decisions taken by the new government of Mian Muhammad Shahbaz Sharif and all future governments. Therefore, only a future decline in the military's political agency could totally upend Pakistan's ties with Saudi Arabia.

About the Author

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