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Abstract

Pakistan and Saudi Arabia's relations have been historically substantial in the economic, political, strategic, and cultural spheres. Both countries have shared diplomatic platforms at bilateral, regional, and global levels, including the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). Saudi Arabia has traditionally been the major exporter of petroleum and a crucial market for Pakistani services and products. The study is an attempt to evaluate the recent trends and the phenomenal changes that have undergone and the dynamics of the new emerging shifts in Saudi-Pakistan relations. The worsening relations between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan provide an opportunity for India to expand its influence in the Gulf region and counter Pakistan's narrative on Kashmir at different international forums. It has further been assumed that India seeks to materialise new opportunities for the expansion of strategic objectives while trying to reduce Saudi security dependence on Pakistan.

Keywords: Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Bilateral Relations, India, Organisation of Islamic Cooperation

Introduction

The paper investigates Pakistan-Saudi Arabia relations and their impact on India. It also examines the recent trajectories in Saudi-Pakistan relations and how they benefit India. Saudi Arabia has been a dependable and trustworthy ally, standing with Pakistan on all significant international problems. It has continuously defended Pakistan's position on Kashmir in all international forums and at times of national crisis, including the 1965 or 1971 wars, backing the Afghan Jihad after the USSR invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, and in the difficult times following Pakistan's nuclear testing. Whenever Pakistan has experienced a natural disaster, whether an earthquake or floods, Saudi Arabia's help has been unwavering.¹ Pakistan's importance in the Muslim world, in general, and in the Middle East, in particular, is phenomenal. It has nuclear weapons and a strong army, besides being an Islamic Republic.

Pakistan is considered to be a significant player in the Middle East. If Pakistan had refused to join, the 'Islamic Alliance' might have been declared stillborn.² That has been considered to be important for the two major Muslim powers in the world, Iran and Saudi Arabia. At the same time, it is very difficult for Pakistan to strike a balance between the two rival countries. This paper assesses the new dynamics that

¹ Kasuri Khurshid Mahmud, *Neither a Hawk Nor a Dove - An Insider's Account of Pakistan's Foreign Policy*, Penguin Books Limited, London, 2015.

² Omer Aslan, "Pakistan: Balancing Between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The Shah, Ayatollahs, and Kings.", Ankara, 2017.

have surfaced between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia in the recent past. The foreign policy choices of Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have been mentioned contextually in this piece. A historical approach to their relations has been employed to see the development of the relations between the two countries, including some trajectories, and inclinations that these two countries have had in the past. An analytical method has been used to assess the dynamics of the relations between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan also to see the possible impact of these dynamics on India.

Pakistan came into existence in exceptionally tough conditions, having endured the pain of the Indian Subcontinent's Partition and the burden of caring for millions of immigrants from India.³ Saudi Arabia was among the first states to recognise Pakistan's unique status in the Islamic world. Four years after Pakistan's formation, the two countries signed a friendship treaty.⁴ Saudi Arabia saw a partner in Pakistan that is militarily strong and has no interest in interfering in the affairs of the Middle Eastern region. The kingdom also saw a fundamental basis for accelerating the relationship-based, formed, and driven-by a commonly shared Islamic character.⁵ Both countries have shared interests and have worked jointly at bilateral, regional, and international forums, including the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation. Over time, Saudi Arabia has developed strong ties with Pakistan about its security needs, and, simultaneously, Pakistan's monetary needs were being taken care of by Saudi Arabia to a large extent. Aside from that, they both share the same vision of the Arab-Israeli conflict and its resolutions.

Pakistan has held a very distinctive image in the Muslim world for being the only declared Muslim nuclear country with one of the biggest armies. The Pakistani army often serves Saudi Arabia. The newly created Islamic Military Counterterrorism (IMAFIT), a Muslim military coalition led by Prince Mohammad Bin Salman, is headed by former Pakistani Army chief, General Raheel Shareef, with the membership of 41 countries, including Pakistan. Former Saudi Intelligence Chief, Prince Turki bin Faisal, once described the Saudi-Pakistan relations as "probably one of the closest relationships in the world between any two countries."⁶

Formation

A centuries-old brotherly relationship that is deeply rooted in religious faith, shared history, and mutual support exists between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. The relationship

³ Javid Husain, *Pakistan and a World in Disorder: A Grand Strategy for the Twenty-First Century*, Palgrave Macmillan Texas: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

⁴ "From the Past Pages of Dawn: 1967: Fifty Years Ago: Pak to Train SA Forces," DAWN.COM, 8 August 2017, available at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1350196>, accessed on 27 December 2021.

⁵ Roy Shubhajt, "Explained: Why Long-Time Allies Pakistan and Saudi Arabia Are Drifting Apart," *The Indian Express*, 26 August 2020, available at <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/reading-the-pakistan-saudi-rift-6564787/>, accessed on 27 December 2021.

⁶ Sib Kaiffee, "Saudi-Pak Ties: 'One of the Closest Relationships in the World,'" *Arab News Pakistan*, 17 February 2019, available at <https://www.arabnews.pk/node/1453546/pakistan>, accessed on 27 December 2021.

is characterised by cooperation in all areas and joint involvement in global and regional issues that affect the Muslim Ummah, especially the Middle East.

The relations between Saudi and Pakistan have a history, dating back to the pre-partition era, when Saudi Arabia, at the request of the Muslim League, sent aid to Bengali Muslims. After the partition, the relations between the two countries took on a new shape, given the Muslim identities of both countries. After Pakistan's establishment, the first visit by any monarch to Pakistan was His Majesty King Ibn Abdul Aziz, who had taken the reins of the kingdom after his father's death in 1953. The first manifestation of the friendship between the two countries was the establishment of a township near Karachi City called "Saudabad," named after the visiting personage.⁷ The colony established with the help of Saudi aid reflected the concern of the Saudi leaders over the post-partition condition of Pakistan, following mass migration. During the 1965 war, Pakistan received moral and material support from Saudi Arabia. King Faisal also provided full support to Pakistan for its position in Kashmir. On August 7th, 1967, the defense minister of Saudi Arabia, Prince Sultan bin Abdul Aziz, signed the defense agreement with his Pakistani counterpart, Vice-Admiral A.R. Khan, enhancing Saudi Arabia's defense capability.⁸ As a result, nearly 15,000 Pakistani troops were deployed to the kingdom. Pakistani pilots flew Royal Saudi Air Force fighters to thwart a South Yemeni intrusion of the Saudi border in 1969. The Organisation of Saudi-Pakistani Armed Forces in December 1982⁹ was established, which further strengthened the defense ties between the two countries. A brigade of Pakistani troops has since been stationed in Saudi Arabia, in Tabuk and Khamis Mushahid. When Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in the early 1990s, Pakistan sent out a regiment to Saudi Arabia.¹⁰ In practice, these deputations established a special relationship between Pakistani security forces and the Saudi aristocracy.

For decades, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have had close political, economic, and security connections. Because of their strong interpersonal connections, Saudi royals and Pakistani civil-military elites have built on their existing relationships. Saudi Arabia's relationship with Pakistan peaked during the Indo-Pak war in 1971. According to contemporary reports, Saudi Arabia condemned India's action as "treacherous and contrary to all international covenants and human values" and found no justification for the Indian aggression other than "India's desire to dismember Pakistan and tarnish its Islamic creed."¹¹ It was one of the most challenging times for Pakistan. Saudi Arabia is reportedly said to have given armaments and equipment to Pakistan, including a loan of 75 planes.¹² It stood firmly behind Pakistan and provided every kind of moral, material, and diplomatic support to it at the regional as well as at the international level

⁷ Naveed Ahmad, "Pakistan-Saudi Relations," *The Middle East* 35, no. 4, 1982, pp. 51-67.

⁸ Ibid (n 4).

⁹ Sial Safdar, *Emerging Dynamics in Pakistani-Saudi Relations*, Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre, 2015.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Shubhajit (n 5).

¹² Safdar (n 9).

to help Pakistan regain its lost image, tarnished because of its use of military might against its East Wing (now Bangladesh). Saudi Arabia also extended loans to Pakistan, enabling it to acquire arms worth approximately one million dollars by 1977, consisting of US-made F-16s and Harpoon missiles.¹³ Financial support from Saudi Arabia assisted Pakistan to recover from the strain of losing its East Wing. Saudi Arabia is said to have withheld recognition to Bangladesh until Pakistan gave a go-ahead call.¹⁴ Saudi Arabia also firmly supported Pakistan in carrying on talks with India in the aftermath of the 1971 war.¹⁵

The establishment of the Pakistan-Saudi Ministerial Commission in May 1974, during Aziz Ahmed's (Pakistani Minister of State for Foreign Affairs) visit to Riyadh, represented a step forward in the institutionalisation of Saudi-Pakistan relations. This commission meets in Riyadh and Islamabad and is dedicated to the enhancement of trade and cooperation between the two countries.¹⁶ The schism between the Pakistan People's Party and the nine main opposition parties (Pakistan National Alliance) over alleged rigging in the second general election led to the military coup and Zia ul Haq's ascension to power. Saudi Arabia attempted to mediate between the then government and the Pakistan National Alliance. Despite the change of government from a civil to a military regime in Pakistan in July 1977, relations between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia remained intact. This bilateral cooperation also sped up with additional stress placed on ideological and political alliances between the two countries' governments.¹⁷ It was during the late 1970s, when General Zia ul Haq became the President of Pakistan, that the relations between the two countries became more stable.

The Afghan war of the 1980s signified the highest point in Saudi-Pakistan collaboration. In December 1980, the visit of Crown Prince Fahd to Pakistan solidified the ties with President Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq's government (1977–88). During this visit, King Fahd openly linked Saudi Arabia's security with Pakistan's. In 1990, Pakistan, at the request of Saudi Arabia, sent 5000 troops to aid Saudi Arabia in the wake of the Kuwait invasion by Iraq. Then, in the mid-decade, it was Afghanistan that brought Saudi and Pakistan closer. They both chose to help the Taliban government secure a better position in the Sunni Muslim bloc.¹⁸

Since 2001, events in Afghanistan have highlighted the intersection of Pakistani and Saudi strategic interests. The outcome of the Taliban insurgency, the fate of the Al-Qaida, and regional stability were issues of deep concern to both countries.¹⁹ Although most Pakistanis believe their country maintains a stable relationship with Saudi Arabia,

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ "Embassy of The Islamic Republic of Pakistan," *Embassy of Pakistan*, available at <http://www.pakembassyksa.com/paksrel.aspx>, accessed on 30 November 2021.

¹⁷ Safdar (n 9).

¹⁸ Kaiffee (n 6).

¹⁹ Marvin G. Weinbaum and Abdullah B. Khurram, 'Pakistan and Saudi Arabia: Deference, Dependence, and Deterrence', *Middle East Journal* 68, no. 2, 2014, pp. 211–28.

the kingdom has never been referred to as an all-weather friend, like China.²⁰ With ups and downs, the relations between the two countries were going right until recently.

Saudi-Pakistan relations have remained largely cordial under nearly all of Pakistan's military and political regimes. The Saudis, on the other hand, did not fully trust the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) government (2008–13), owing to the party's so-called anti-security and secular image, as well as due to the Saudi government's skepticism of President Asif Ali Zardari's Shia background.²¹ The disclosures in classified papers revealed by Wikileaks mentioned that Saudi Arabian King Abdullah referred to Pakistan's President Asif Ali Zardari as "the greatest obstacle" to the nation's prosperity. In one of the documents about Zardari, Abdullah wrote, "When the head is rotten, it affects the whole body."²² Saudi disbelief in the ruling party's political leadership grew when Zardari decided to sign a gas pipeline agreement with Iran on 31st January 2013.²³ During this time, however, defense and military ties between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan remained strong. In 2011, Pakistan's then-chief of army staff, General Kayani, described Saudi Arabia as "the most important country for Pakistan."²⁴ A year after Osama bin Laden's assassination and NATO air raids on the Salala border post in Pakistan's tribal areas had strained Pakistan's relations with the US.²⁵

In Pakistan, Muhammad Nawaz Sharif took power after the Zardari government (2013–2018). During his political exile, he lived in Saudi Arabia with his family. He was drawn to the country and pursued personal relationships there. Nawaz Sharif's government was able to kickstart the then Saudi-Pak relations. He was seen by Saudi Royalty as 'Saudi's man in Pakistan'²⁶. As a result, they desired to strengthen a relationship that had become strained because of the PPP government's policies, decisions, and proclivity toward Iran.²⁷

On 22nd May 2013, the Saudi government strengthened its ties with Pakistan's friendly government and announced a \$15 billion bailout package to address the country's energy crisis.²⁸ It was the same type of bailout package that Saudi Arabia provided to Pakistan in 1998 when the Nawaz government was facing economic sanctions. As a result, the Nawaz government began reviewing previous government policies and

²⁰ Weinbaum and Khurram.

²¹ Sial Safdar, *Emerging Dynamics in Pakistani-Saudi Relations*, Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre, 2015.

²² "Pakistan-Saudi Relations Appear Strained in Leaked Cables," CBS NEWS, 29 November 2010, available at <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/pakistan-saudi-relations-appear-strained-in-leaked-cables/>, accessed on 27 December 2021.

²³ Safdar (n 9).

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Benish Khan and Muhammad Iqbal Chawla, 'Religion, Spirituality and Foreign Policy Dynamics: A Case Study of Relations between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia', *Journal of the Research Society of Pakistan* 57, no. 1, 2020.

²⁷ Aslan, "Pakistan: Balancing Between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The Shah, Ayatollahs, and Kings."

²⁸ Khan and Iqbal Chawla, "Religion, Spirituality and Foreign Policy Dynamics: A Case Study of Relations between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia".

reversed many decisions made by the PPP government.²⁹

The 2018 general elections in Pakistan brought Imran Khan to power, and he delivered his first speech in Saudi Arabia on September 23, 2019, on the eve of the country's National Day. He said, "Saudi Arabia has always stood with Pakistan in difficult times and the Pakistani government and its people highly acknowledge it."³⁰ Imran Khan also kept the Saudi-first policy and visited the kingdom several times.³¹ After taking the oath of office as Pakistan's Prime Minister (PM) on 18th September 2018, he embarked on his first official visit to Saudi, where he met with Saudi Prince Mohammad Bin Salman in Jeddah.³²

In 2019, Prince Mohamad Bin Salman visited Pakistan and was greeted and driven to the hotel by Prime Minister Imran Khan himself. During the visit, he oversaw the investment of 20 billion US dollars in Pakistan and announced the release of more than 2000 Pakistani prisoners languishing in Saudi Jails.³³

Contours in the Relations

Saudi Arabia has been playing a crucial part in Pakistan's political and economic constancy by fulfilling its energy requirements and premium, which add important portions to Pakistan's national income. In 2013, "remittances from Saudi Arabia grew by a ten-year compound annual growth rate of 24% and reached \$ 3.8 billion".³⁴ Today, Saudi tops among the remittances sending the list of countries for Pakistan at \$4.5 billion annually, followed by UAE.³⁵

For the last couple of years, Pakistan has been trying something different to get out of its economic, diplomatic dependence, and reliance on Riyadh by diversifying relations within the Muslim world.³⁶ The vulnerability of Pakistan provided an opportunity for Saudi Arabia to manage the affairs of Pakistan; for decades, they have managed Pakistan's foreign policy and have developed profound stakes in the country's local

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ "Pakistan PM Imran Khan Congratulates Saudi Arabia on 88th National Day," *Khaleej Times*, 23 September 2018, available at <https://www.khaleejtimes.com/international/pakistan/pakistan-pm-imran-khan-congratulates-saudi-arabia-on-88th-national-day>, accessed on 27 December 2021.

³¹ Khan and Chawla (n 28).

³² "Imran Khan Chooses Saudi Arabia for 1st Foreign Visit as Pakistan PM," *The Hindu*, 18 September 2018.

³³ Gul Ayaz, "Saudi Crown Prince Concludes Landmark Pakistan Visit," *Voice of America*, 18 February 2019, available at <https://www.voanews.com/a/saudi-crown-prince-concludes-landmark-pakistan-visit/4791766.html>, accessed on 15 August 2021.

³⁴ Weinbaum and Khurram, "Pakistan and Saudi Arabia: Deference, Dependence, and Deterrence."

³⁵ "Remittances to Pakistan up to \$2B for 10th Month in Row," Anadolu Agency, 12 April 2021, available at <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/remittances-to-pakistan-up-2b-for-10th-month-in-row/2206213>, accessed on 15 August 2021.

³⁶ Weinbaum and Khurram (n 34).

politics.³⁷ Locally, much of this has ensued through lobbying measures to achieve pockets of influence in political-party squads and procuring the backing of Islamists for Riyadh's type of Islam as a mainstay of the Muslim World.³⁸ Pakistan, as a Sunni Muslim majority state and the only state founded on religious grounds, felt an affinity for Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia's goodwill gestures in the shape of loans, remittances, donations, accords, and treaties have elevated its position of prominence in Pakistan's domestic affairs.³⁹ Saudi sponsorship of Pakistan's madrasas stems from Saudi Arabia's anti-Iran goals and its desire to dominate the type of Islam taught and practiced in Pakistan, which is primarily Sunni Islam. Following two landmark events in 1979—the Islamic revolution in Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan—Saudi influence in Pakistan rose significantly. While the Iranian revolution strengthened Saudi motivations to exert control over Sunnism in Pakistan, the Soviet-Afghan war provided the Saudis with a vehicle to do so through madrasa financing.⁴⁰

The amount of Saudi involvement in Pakistan's political matters is summed up in a cable mentioned in WikiLeaks. The Saudi ambassador to Pakistan says, "We in Saudi Arabia are not observers in Pakistan, we are participants".⁴¹ Saudi Arabia, like Americans, has intervened in the affairs of Pakistan at times, generally behind the curtains, as advocates and brokers in Pakistan's local political matters. Saudis, in addition to charitable and religious groups, have also provided financial support to broad sectors of Pakistan, including even to the well-connected military and political establishment personnel.⁴²

However, Pakistan is keen on trying to lessen its dependence on Saudi Arabia over time, and therefore, reduce Saudi effect on its local politics and foreign policy. It has thus sought to significantly reposition its foreign policy, whereby it can pursue its ambitions free of Saudis' preferences.⁴³ There has always been an Iranian factor in the political dynamics of the Middle East. Iran is considered as a foremost antagonist by Saudi Arabia in West Asia. The Saudi Iranian enmity is being felt throughout the West Asian province, from Syria to Yemen.⁴⁴

Since the early 1970s, the Islamic Republic of Pakistan's officials of all stripes have

³⁷ Ahmad (n 7).

³⁸ Ibid 37.

³⁹ Kim Ghattas, *Black Wave : Saudi Arabia, Iran and the Rivalry That Unravelling the Middle East* (USA: Henry Holt and Co., 2020), pp. 107–8.

⁴⁰ Jafferlot Christophe, "Transnational Sunnism and Saudi Arabia's Influence," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 15 November 2017, available at <https://carnegieendowment.org/2017/11/15/transnational-sunnism-and-saudi-arabia-s-influence-pub-75208>, accessed on 29 November 2021.

⁴¹ Weinbaum and Khurram (n 34).

⁴² Vahid Brown, "The Salafi Emirate of Kunar; Between South Asia and the Arabian Peninsula," in *Pan-Islamic Connections: Transnational Networks Between South Asia and the Gulf*, ed. Jafferlot Christophe; Laurence Louer, Oxford University Press, New York, 2018, pp. 91–116.

⁴³ Weinbaum and Khurram (n 34).

⁴⁴ "Expert: Diverging Interests Threaten Saudi-Pakistan Historic Relations," *Middle East Monitor*, 24 September 2020, available at <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200924-expert-diverging-interests-threaten-saudi-pakistan-historic-relations/>, accessed on 27 December 2021.

maintained a delicate balance between Iran and Saudi Arabia, avoiding, at all costs, being embroiled in intra-Arab crises. There were expectations on Pakistan from both Iranian as well as Saudi's sides for an alliance, but Pakistan chose to be neutral. The necessity of remaining neutral was because "Saudi Arabia is a very important relationship, while Iran is a neighbour".⁴⁵ Pakistan has carefully controlled its relations with all parties in the past, including the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the Iraq-Iran War, the Kuwait Invasion, the Iranian nuclear program, as well as the current expressions of the Iran–Saudi rivalry. The whole discourse can be summed up in this quote by Omar Aslan, "The 'Islamic Alliance' will continue to meet in the future, but Pakistan will not allow its military to be used against Iran or any other entity outside the kingdom. While Pakistan is aware of the danger, it will not even withdraw its ambassador from Damascus and retain cordial relations with Iran. Pakistan will increase its troop presence in Saudi Arabia to protect the royal family and to accommodate Saudi demands, but it will continue to import Liquefied natural gas (LNG) from Qatar and pursue greater trade ties with Iran. And such unflinching realism has always benefited Pakistan, as the country is much too valuable to be surrendered to "Kings and Ayatollahs".⁴⁶

Pakistan's refusal to send troops to Yemen added a new dimension to the bilateral relations between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. Despite the countries enjoying strong military ties with Pakistan, regularly providing troops and military training to Saudi Arabia, Pakistan chose to remain neutral in Yemen's war.⁴⁷ Yemen's civil war, which began in 2012, was supported by Saudi Arabia and eight other predominantly Sunny Arab states. They launched an air campaign intended to defeat the Houthis (supposedly backed by Iran), eradicate Iran's influence in Yemen, and reinstall Hadi's government.

Pakistan did not send troops to Yemen because of two possible reasons. Firstly, the emergence of consensus among Pakistan's military and political institutions and civil societies against this move, which in turn formed the public and media opinion. Secondly, the sectarian spillover in the state; emerging internal security actions and concerns. Especially those taken after the deadly attack on the Peshawar school on 16th December 2014; regional activities, together with China, which asked for the development of cordial relations with Pakistan's close neighbours, including Iran; and its commitment towards neutrality and non-interference in its Middle East foreign policy, paved the way for the consensus.⁴⁸

Besides the Yemen crisis, Pakistan's tie-up with regional genomic countries like Turkey and Iran added fuel to Saudi apprehensions. With Pakistan and Iran eager to overpower territorially linked, rebellious Baloch people, both countries have an enticement to keep bilateral relations tension-free. The lives of the people in this region are dominated

⁴⁵ Aslan, "Pakistan: Balancing Between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The Shah, Ayatollahs, and Kings."

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Javid Husain, *Pakistan and a World in Disorder: A Grand Strategy for the Twenty-First Century*, Palgrave Macmillan, Texas, 2016.

⁴⁸ NK Bhatia, "Pak Saudi Relations: Is It Beginning of The End | Indian Defence Industries," India Defence Industries, 8 September 2020, available at <https://indiandefenceindustries.in/saudi-pak-relations-beigning-of-end>, accessed on 26 December 2021.

by a culture that is distinctly non-Arab and more Turko-Persian. As a result, aside from Islam, they share many common bonds.⁴⁹ A big reason Riyadh is dissatisfied with Islamabad is the increasing closeness between Pakistan and Iran. Pakistan's relationship with Iran, on the other hand, is not just a reaction to Saudi Arabia's growing ties with India. Iran shares a border with Pakistan, and Pakistan's large Shia community frequently travels to sacred Shia sites in Iran for religious pilgrimages. Since 2012, Pakistan has also depended on Iranian power (electricity), as the latter provides electricity to the bordering rural areas of Pakistan which are not connected to its central electricity grid. Iran, unlike Saudi Arabia, condemned India over Kashmir. As the US war in Afghanistan has ended, Iran has emerged Pakistan's ally, as both countries seek a stable Afghanistan and desire a Kabul that regards both Islamabad and Tehran positively.⁵⁰

In contrast to Pakistan's necessities and inclinations, Saudi-Arabia also has some tendencies that harm bilateral relations. Some of them are:

The Rise of Hyper-Nationalism in Saudi Arabia

Nationalism as an Ideology is on the upsurge, relishing an international resurrection that has turned into a political creed of contemporary times. It is true for most of the world, like in Saudi Arabia. Nationalism for Saudi Arabia was seen to be inconsistent as an ideology, for decades, because of the religiously dominant identity of the kingdom. The religious identity helped the domain to generate a feeling of unity and legitimise the rule through sermons of the clerics, where obedience to the King was emphasised. There was a common fear among the previous rulers that if nationalism got promoted, there would be the risk of questions about political representation and responsibility enhancement. They considered it an antithesis to absolute monarchical governance.⁵¹

Today, the scenario has changed. The religious identity does not shape the unity of the kingdom anymore; it contradicts the vision of the leaders.⁵² The kingdom has carefully devised a new brand of nationalism that aims at getting younger leadership in power and giving reforms a new impetus. This nationalistic discourse has been used to mobilise the support of the youth and invariably reduce the sway of the religious establishment. This discourse has helped the kingdom in the consolidation of its power. In the Middle East region, this brand is giving harder nationalist edges to Saudi actions. Prince Mohammad Bin Salman's (MBS) rise to power is also associated with

⁴⁹ Gilani Syed Ali Nawaz, "Turkey-Pakistan Friendship: From Past to Present | Daily Sabah," *Daily Sabah*, 13 February 2020, available at <https://www.dailysabah.com/op-ed/2020/02/13/turkey-pakistan-friendship-from-past-to-present>, accessed on 26 December 2021.

⁵⁰ Sahar Khan, "The Downward Spiral In Pakistan-Saudi Arabia Ties," *Srimson*, 2020, available at <https://www.stimson.org/2020/the-downward-spiral-in-pakistan-saudi-arabia-ties/>, accessed on 26 December 2021.

⁵¹ Bohl Ryan, "Saudi Arabia's Hyper-Nationalism Is Here To Stay," *The National Interest*, 18 August 2019, available at <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/saudi-arabia's-hyper-nationalism-here-stay-74076>, accessed on 26 December 2021.

⁵² *Vision 2030*. (n.d.). Retrieved 20 December 2020, available at <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa>, accessed on 26 December 2021.

this nationalism; the cry of which is ‘put Saudi Arabia first’.⁵³ It is this nationalism that governs the foreign policy and actions of Riyadh now.

Prince Mohammad Bin Salman is using every pragmatic opportunity that will help Saudi Arabia to consolidate power in any way, strategically and economically to gain supremacy.⁵⁴ It is in this context, we see some decisions that seem unconventional to the kingdom’s traditional policies, like easing the Arab-Israeli conflict and keeping a more neutral approach towards the issue of Kashmir. During his visit back in 2018, MBS pledged to invest in India, as he sees the evolving Indian economy as an excellent place to invest in.⁵⁶ Hence, keeping a stance that will hamper its economic interest is undesirable for Saudi Arabia. Both the MBS of Saudi and Mohammad Bin Ziyad (MBZ) of UAE deem themselves as the heads who can bring a new epoch in their respective states. This pragmatic approach is annoying many Saudi allies, including Pakistan. MBS’ ‘*Vision 2030*’ for economic diversification is the driving force behind all these policies. The vision, as defined by its official website, mentions, “To ensure the country’s progressive future, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has established a vision based on three pillars: a dynamic society, a thriving economy, and an ambitious nation that capitalises on the country’s unique competitive advantages.” Saudi Arabia’s regional status and stature enable it to play a leading role as the “heart” of Arab and Islamic nations; the kingdom will leverage its investment power to build a more diverse and sustainable economy; and, finally, the kingdom will leverage its strategic location to connect the three continents: Africa, Asia, and Europe.”⁵⁷

Riyadh’s Changing Position on Kashmir

Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have meticulously cooperated in OIC’s functioning. The conjunction of a broad understanding and mutual interest in international and regional affairs, particularly such grounds as the Palestinian fight against Zionism and Al-Quds, have borrowed the Saudi-Pakistan equation of durability and strength that have few equations around the globe.⁵⁸ Saudi Arabia has sustained on a firm sequence in the way set by the architect of contemporary Saudi Arabia, the late Shah Faisal. It has usually adopted a situation of restraint and moderation on matters which often invoked a response of emotional force in some Middle Eastern quarters.

⁵³ Alhussein Eman, “Saudi First: How Hyper-Nationalism Is Transforming Saudi Arabia – European Council on Foreign Relations,” European Council on Foreign Relations, 19 June 2019, available at https://ecfr.eu/publication/saudi_first_how_hyper_nationalism_is_transforming_saudi_arabia/, accessed on 26 December 2021.

⁵⁴ Banafsheh Keynoush, *Saudi Arabia and Iran: Friends or Foes?*, Palgrave Macmillan (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 13–14.

⁵⁵ Stephan Roll, “A Sovereign Wealth Fund for the Prince: Economic Reforms and Power Consolidation in Saudi Arabia,” *German Institute for International and Security Affairs* 8, no. July 2019, pp. 1–36.

⁵⁶ Eman, (n 53).

⁵⁷ Vision (n 52).

⁵⁸ Kaiffee (n 6).

The position over Kashmir at the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC), formed in 1990 when the militancy in Jammu and Kashmir had started. While the OIC has been giving out statements since the insurgency began, it did not impact India⁵⁹. After the abrogation of Article 370 in Kashmir⁶⁰, Pakistan has striven hard to raise condemnations against the move with OIC's help. To Pakistan's astonishment, UAE and Saudi Arabia dispensed statements that were more nuanced than severely critical of New Delhi.⁶¹

Over the last year, Pakistan has attempted to stir sentiments amongst the Islamic states, but only a few of them — Malaysia, Iran, and Turkey — have come to openly criticise India.⁶² There was a palpable sense of Pakistani frustration with Saudi Arabia and the UAE for not allowing the OIC forum to be used for unnecessary anti-India activism following India's decision to alter the status of Jammu and Kashmir.⁶³ Erdogan, real to his foreign policy persona, was attempting to fish in troubled waters in the aftermath of the Indian abrogation of the Kashmir autonomy.⁶⁴ The relations between the two countries started deteriorating quickly, commencing in February 2020 when Saudi Arabia shunned a demand by Pakistan to organize a special conference of the Council of Foreign Ministers of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation.⁶⁵ Pakistan never let down its demand, asking to use the OIC to pressurize India on the Kashmir issue. The 5th August 2020 statement of Shah Mehmood Qureshi bears witness to that. In this context, Saudi Arabia ruled out its loan package for Pakistan.⁶⁶ The Chief of Army Staff of Pakistan arrived in Saudi Arabia to mitigate the differences and give the relations a fresh start. What happened there between him and Saudi leadership has not been made public. Saudi Arabia wants good relations with India, given National Security Advisor Ajit Doval's visit to Saudi Arabia in October 2019 and clarification of its stand regarding India's internal security matters.⁶⁷ Riyadh subtly conveyed that it understands India's position on Kashmir and considers it to be a matter of its administrative jurisdiction. Saudi's stance on Kashmir has gradually changed with changing circumstances.⁶⁸

The growing ties of Saudi Arabia and India is something that itches Pakistan due to the humiliation that Pakistan had to face after the latter's skirmish with the Indian Army

⁵⁹ Quamar Muddassir, "The Geopolitics of OIC Activism on Kashmir," *The Financial Express*, 12 July 2015, available at <https://www.financialexpress.com/defence/the-geopolitics-of-oic-activism-on-kashmir/2288676/>, accessed on 26 December 2021.

⁶⁰ *The Article of the Indian Constitution* provided special autonomy to the erstwhile Jammu and Kashmir state.

⁶¹ Aamir Adnan, "Saudi Arabia Pulls Support for Pakistan as Kashmir Tiff Widens," *Nikkei Asia*, 10 August 2020, Retrieved 15 August 2021, available at <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Saudi-Arabia-pulls-support-for-Pakistan-as-Kashmir-tiff-widens>, accessed on 26 December 2021.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Muddassir (n 59).

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Aamir Adnan, "Saudi Arabia Pulls Support for Pakistan as Kashmir Tiff Widens."

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ NK Bhatia, "Pak Saudi Relations: Is It Beginning of The End | Indian Defence Industries."

⁶⁸ Aamir Adnan, "Saudi Arabia Pulls Support for Pakistan as Kashmir Tiff Widens."

over Balakote strikes and the Pulwama attack in February 2019. Despite Pakistan's opposition, the then Indian Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj was made the guest of honor at the conference held by OIC on 1st March 2019.⁶⁹ Besides this, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain have conferred the highest civilian award upon Indian PM Narendra Modi in recent years.⁷⁰ The keynote speech at Riyadh's Future Investment Initiative Summit was delivered by PM Modi, where they also formed the India-Saudi Strategic Partnership Council.⁷¹ All this happened in the backdrop of the abrogation of Jammu and Kashmir's autonomy and Pakistan's craving for global support. These happenings gave the impression to the world community that the Gulf countries and the Saudi sided India in the move.

Saudi-Pakistan Rift: India's benefits and losses

After the Narendra Modi-led Bharatiya Janata Party government came to power in 2014, India's West Asian Policy witnessed tremendous growth. Since 2014, India has focussed on the vital power centres of West Asia like Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Israel, and Iran. The Prime Minister's visits paved the way for more significant ties with the region. He was awarded the highest civilian awards between 2018 and 2019 by several West Asian countries like Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain, Palestine.⁷²

Prime Minister Narendra Modi delivered a speech at the Future Development Initiative (FII) in the Capital, Riyadh in his recent visit to Saudi on 29 October 2019. The Saudi Kingdom announced an investment of 100\$ billion during this visit.⁷³ Several Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) were signed during the visit in various areas, including civil aviation, energy, defense, security cooperation, launching RuPAY⁷⁴ and the regulation of medical products, which will help further strengthen cooperation across sectors.⁷⁵ The tour was remarkable because it happened amid the abrogation of Jammu and Kashmir's autonomy, which left Pakistan in awe and asking for international

⁶⁹ "NSA Ajit Doval Visits Saudi, Apprises Crown Prince of Kashmir Situation," *The Quint*, 3 October 2019, available at <https://www.thequint.com/news/politics/nsa-ajit-doval-visits-saudi-apprises-crown-prince-of-kashmir-situation>, accessed on 26 December 2021.

⁷⁰ "UAE to Give Modi Highest Civilian Award," *The Hindu*, 18 August 2019, available at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/uae-to-give-modi-highest-civilian-award/article29127910.ece>, accessed on 2021.

⁷¹ "Narendra Modi Announces Formation of India-Saudi Strategic Partnership Council," *The Hindu*, 29 September 2019, available at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-saudi-form-strategic-council/article29826191.ece>, accessed on 26 December 2021.

⁷² Shreya Upadhyay, "Modi in Saudi Arabia: Upping the 'Look West' Game," *The Diplomat*, November 2019, available at <https://thediplomat.com/2019/11/modi-in-saudi-arabia-upping-the-look-west-game/>, accessed on 26 December 2021.

⁷³ "Joint Statement on Visit of Prime Minister of India to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia," 2019, available at https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/31982/Joint_Statement_on_Visit_of_Prime_Minister_of_India_to_the_Kingdom_of_Saudi_Arabia, accessed on 26 December 2021.

⁷⁴ *RuPay* is an Indian multinational financial services and payment service system, conceived and launched by the *National Payments Corporation of India* on 26 March 2012.

⁷⁵ Joint Statement on Visit of Prime Minister of India to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

support. In February 2014, Saudi Arabia and India signed a defense cooperation agreement in New Delhi. The agreement allows for the “exchange of defense-related information, education and military, and cooperation in hydrography to security to logistics”.⁷⁶

It alarmed Pakistani policymakers and strategists, who consider that deepened Saudi-India ties could enable India to achieve strategic parity with the Muslim and Arab worlds in relation to Pakistan. Saudi Arabia has invested heavily in Indian infrastructure and oil projects, while India has also amplified its cooperation in counterterrorism efforts with Gulf nations.

The relations with India are essential for Saudi Arabia too, which aims at diversifying its oil-based economy to different sectors like tourism, manufacturing, and technology. The cry for reforms in economic as well as in cultural sectors has been echoing in the kingdom over a period. The focus of reforms is encouraging tourism, making Foreign Direct Investment easy by removing obstacles, developing the entertainment industry, cutting electricity and water subsidies, and starting an anti-corruption campaign. In the “Ease of Doing Business global rankings, Saudi Arabia is now ranked 62,” with a more enhanced score over 2018.⁷⁷

Today’s Saudi- India relations have gone beyond the traditional spheres of energy-oil trade. With the goodwill of the leaderships of both the countries, now moved to new sectors and spheres like counterterrorism, maritime security, defense, strategic oil reserves, science and technology, and so on.

At His Majesty King Salman’s request, Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi visited Riyadh on October 28-29, 2019, and signed the Strategic Partnership Council Agreement, recognising India as one of the Kingdom’s Strategic Partner Countries under “Vision 2030” with a high-level partnership council. During the visit, eleven Memorandums of Understanding and Agreements were signed, including ones on small and medium-sized companies, the launch of the Rupay card, diplomacy training, and stock market collaboration. PM addressed at the Third Future Investment Initiative Summit during his visit.⁷⁸

The major issues concerning both the countries remain persistent: cross-border terrorism for India and missile attacks on oil facilities for Riyadh. This was a significant issue taken by and agreed upon during MBS’s visit to India in February 2019, when the national security advisor level- Comprehensive Security Dialogue and Joint Working Group on Counterterrorism were set up.⁷⁹ Both the states face multifaceted security intimidations on both the air, land, sea, and as well as in cyberspace. The dialogues

⁷⁶ Safdar (n 9).

⁷⁷ “Doing Business 2020–Sustaining the Pace of Reforms,” The World Bank, 24 October 2019, available at <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2019/10/24/doing-business-2020-sustaining-the-pace-of-reforms>, accessed on 26 December 2021.

⁷⁸ *Ministry of External Affairs*; 2020, January 31. Retrieved on 24 September 2021, from available at http://www.mea.gov.in/Saudi_Arabia_Bilateral_Jan_2020, accessed on 26 December 2021.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

happening regularly at the NSA level could help both the countries discover new spheres of cooperation along with the already flourishing bilateral tasks.⁸⁰

However, being a significant military power in the Middle East and utilising billions of riyals every year on arms procurements, it cannot counter threats arising from different fronts like Houthi militias, who are well-trained guerrillas. India has the potential to help Saudi in fighting these threats through joint military training exercises.⁸¹ At the same time, Saudi Arabia has some interests in the Indian Ocean region, boosting maritime security cooperation would help both countries.

For India, the developing relations with Saudi and other Arab countries means strangulation of Pakistan's ambition of raising the Kashmir Issue at different international forums, including the OIC. Given Indian sensitivity and expanding strategic relations, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have gradually softened their stance on the Kashmir issue.⁸² India has made significant progress toward strengthening ties with the OIC, as evidenced by India's invitation to attend the 46th OIC Foreign Ministers' Meeting in the United Arab Emirates in February 2019 as a "guest of honour".⁸³ Pakistan had made a splash in response to India's invitation. Still, both Saudi and the UAE, who have emerged as India's most crucial regional allies in the Gulf in recent years, had dismissed Pakistan's objections.⁸⁴ With Pakistan and China using different tactical games against India, it needs to be vigilant and ready for any happening.⁸⁵

The Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Iran visit in 2016 had set the stage for the development of India-Iran ties when the two countries finally put up money to build and operate Chabahar and committed itself to developing a rail link from there to Zahedan.⁸⁶ The Chabahar project, signed in 2003, had been a manifestation of traditional powerful India-Iran bonds. It has provided India with an alternative route to Afghanistan. India lost this project in the backdrop of cutting oil imports from Iran, probably tilting towards Saudi Arabia. It is a lost opportunity for India.⁸⁷ It was seen as

⁸⁰ "NSA Ajit Doval Visits Saudi, Apprises Crown Prince of Kashmir Situation." <https://www.thequint.com/news/politics/nsa-ajit-doval-visits-saudi-apprises-crown-prince-of-kashmir-situation>.

⁸¹ Rajagopalan Rajeswari Pillai, "India-Saudi Security Ties Getting Stronger," *The Diplomat*, 19 February 2021, available at <https://thediplomat.com/2021/02/india-saudi-security-ties-getting-stronger>, accessed on 26 December 2021.

⁸² Quamar Muddassar, "*The Geopolitics of OIC Activism on Kashmir* ." <https://www.financialexpress.com/defence/the-geopolitics-of-oic-activism-on-kashmir/2288676/>.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Bhatia, (n 48).

⁸⁶ Madiha Afzal, "The Pakistan-Saudi Arabia Relationship Hits a Bump in the Road: What Happened, and What Lies Ahead," Brookings Institution, 2020, Retrieved on 7 July 2021, available at <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/08/24/the-pakistan-saudi-arabia-relationship-hits-a-bump-in-the-road/>, accessed on 26 December 2021.

⁸⁷ "Lost Opportunity: On India Losing Chabahar Project," *The Hindu*, 15 July 2020, available at <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/editorial/lost-opportunity-the-hindu-editorial-on-india-losing-chabahar-project/article32083532.ece>, accessed on 26 December 2021.

a way to the Middle East as well as to Afghanistan. However, it is a win-win situation on the other side. Saudi Arabia is looking for heavy investments in India, which is good news. Besides investment, the Indian Diaspora will also grow rapidly because of growing relations.⁸⁸

While Iran claims to fund this project through its resources, it appears to have embarked on the Chabahar-Zahedan project with confidence borne from an imminent deal with China for a 25-year, \$400 billion strategic partnership on infrastructure, connectivity, and energy projects. In a world where connectivity is seen as the new currency, “India’s loss could well become China’s gain, and New Delhi must watch this space, created by its exit, closely”.⁸⁹

The Saudi-India relationship is on a rising trajectory. Saudi Arabia satisfies India’s oil demand by sending eight lakh barrels per day, replacing Iran as an oil source after the sanctions imposed by the United States of America. Furthermore, the friendship has stimulated outside the purview of traditional oil to comprise enormous Saudi investment in various economic sectors of India like mining, petrochemical, and infrastructure sectors. “Saudi Aramco’s bid to purchase a 20 percent stake in Reliance Industries oil-to-chemicals business is considered one of the largest ever foreign direct investment deals in India”.⁹⁰

The Saudi-India ties have been on an upward trajectory, as it has a big market and resources that any country will need. In 2019, India’s economy was seven times bigger than Pakistan’s. Despite suffering catastrophic effects as a result of the pandemic, with its GDP contracting by a record 23.9 percent in the April-June quarter, India’s massive market of 1.3 billion people and expanding energy needs would likely continue to make it an attractive destination.⁹¹ The numbers speak for themselves: annual bilateral trade between India and Saudi Arabia is \$27 billion, while trade between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia is only \$3.6 billion.⁹² As a result, India has been named as one of eight partner countries in the Kingdom’s Vision 2030.⁹³ The difference could not be starker: India is a reliable economic partner, but Pakistan is still reliant on Saudi Arabia for financial assistance. Saudi cannot think of losing such a big market that can help it diversify its economy.

⁸⁸ “INDIA-SAUDI ARABIA BILATERAL RELATIONS,” Ministry of External Affairs, 2020, available at https://www.mea.gov.in/Portal/ForeignRelation/Saudi_Arabia_Bilateral_Jan_2020.pdf, accessed on 15 November, 2021.

⁸⁹ “Lost Opportunity: On India Losing Chabahar Project.” <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/editorial/lost-opportunity-the-hindu-editorial-on-india-losing-chabahar-project/article32083532.ece>

⁹⁰ Promit Mukherjee; Alexandra Ulmer, “Reliance to Sell 20% Stake in Oil-to-Chemicals Arm to Saudi Aramco,” *Reuters*, 12 August 2019, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-reliance-stakesale-saudiaramco-idUSKCN1V20FG>, accessed on 26 December 2021.

⁹¹ Afzal (n 86).

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

Discussion and Conclusion

The long-standing relations between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan have not ended, nor likely to end anytime soon. Although the relations have taken a different turn in recent years. While Pakistan, on the one hand, seeks to reduce its reliance on Saudi Arabia's oil, Saudi Arabia, on the other, seeks to diversify its economy through its "Vision 2030," which necessitates a pragmatic approach to foreign policy on its part. Pakistan is not actively participating in Saudi Arabia's regional hegemony game because it does not want to deteriorate relations with its immediate neighbours, such as Iran and Turkey. The clash of interests between these two historic allies is putting a strain on their relationship. But the fact remains that both countries are interdependent, and breaking ties will result in losses for both. Pakistan has more to lose than Saudi Arabia, and it is aware of this. On this pretext, the Chief of Army Staff and Prime Minister Imran Khan visited Saudi Arabia to restore normalcy to the relationship on 7th May 2021. The strained relations between the brotherly countries are not suitable for the Muslim world. If Pakistan wants to draw attention to the Kashmir issue, it will have to secure the support of other Muslim countries.

Meanwhile, it is an opportunity for India to strengthen its ties with Saudi Arabia while simultaneously isolating Pakistan in Muslim organisations worldwide. India's interests in the Middle East are both historical and material. This is an opportunity that India must fully take advantage of, as this region is strategically very crucial for India. India has a chance to seize geopolitical opportunities in the Middle East, such as the deterioration of ties between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia and a shift in Middle Eastern actors' perceptions of India's stature, to press for a resumption of Indian engagement with the area. India is trying to capitalise on these strained relations by projecting itself as a reliant alternative to the growing security needs of Saudi Arabia. The Saudi-Pakistan rift has emerged along the changing geopolitical scenarios in the region, providing India with an opportunity to project its strength in defense, providing technical assistance to the GCC countries. The GCC countries are also looking at India as a contingent power in their diversification drive, trying to reduce their dependence on western powers, which is supplanted by the diminishing role of the United States in the region. The cracks in relations between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan have appeared. It is now up to India to make the best of the situation, which is challenging. India has more to gain from the relationship. It is not just for the Kashmir problem, but there are many strategic, economic, cultural, political, and diplomatic benefits associated with this. The newly emerged Taliban angle can also impede India's way. The fact that the Saudi-Pakistan-China triangle has not been fused is a significant advantage for India in this conflict. How well India takes advantage of this will determine the future of the region.