

Pakistan-Saudi Arabia Strategic Relations: An Assessment

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Introduction

Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have maintained religious, economic, social, and security ties for the last sixty-seven years. The two Islamic states established diplomatic relations shortly after Pakistan emerged as an independent state and have remained friendly since then, though their relations experienced occasional periods of strain. Strategic and economic cooperation between the two states deepened as human capital requirements of Saudi Arabia and Pakistan's need for economic assistance brought the two countries closer. Continuity in their relations and the role both countries have played in the wider Islamic world has made this relationship a special one. The two countries continue to regularly hold consultations at the highest political level on regional and global security issues, while pursuing independent policies based on their respective national interests.

Since 1960s, a number of factors pushed Pakistan and Saudi Arabia closer to each other. Initially these new bonds were strengthened due to the growing role of Pakistan in Persian Gulf security, and Pakistan's attempt to seek new regional allies after the 1971 war with India. During 1980s, Afghan war against the Soviet forces opened new avenues for cooperation. Generous Saudi economic assistance allowed Pakistan to weather international economic sanctions which were imposed after it conducted nuclear tests in 1998. Since then, the two countries have maintained good relations which have endured various domestic crises. Their relations have also survived geostrategic changes at the regional and the international level. These include improvement in Saudi-Indian relations, the end of the Cold War, and recent Iran related tensions.

While exploring the factors that have kept Pak-Saudi relations strong over the years, the article addresses the following two questions: How political, economic and military relations between the two countries developed in the last sixty-seven

years? How the regional security issues have impacted their relations in the past, and how they are likely to shape Pak-Saudi bilateral relations in future.

Strategic context and Political Relations

Bilateral relations between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan were established soon after Pakistan emerged as an independent state in 1947. In 1951 both countries concluded a 'Treaty of Friendship',¹ which laid the foundation for a wide-ranging strategic, political, military and economic cooperation in coming decades.

Political relations between the two nations got a boost with the visit of King Saud Bin Abdul Aziz to Pakistan in 1954.² The lasting landmark of that visit is a township in Karachi called 'Saudabad' which was established with Saudi aid and named after the visiting king. In the same year both countries also held extensive consultations on regional security. Pakistan was contemplating entry into the regional security alliance known as Baghdad Pact. Saudi Arabia, like other Arab nations was apprehensive of this US backed regional pact because it considered it an attempt to divide the then unified Arab world. Saudi Arabia however, supported Pakistan's decision, as it understood that Pakistan sought security against its larger rival, India. King Saud in a letter to Ghulam Muhammad, Governor General of Pakistan (then Head of the State), in June 1954, went on to say, "We will be happy if Pakistan will be stronger no doubt. Pakistan's strength is our strength and if the Jews attack on the holy land then Pakistan will be in the front of the defenders of the Haramain (the two holiest sites for Muslims in Mecca and Medina) as it was promised." But once Pakistan signed the Baghdad Pact in 1955, Saudi embassy in Pakistan, in a press release, in September 1955, termed it a "stab in the heart of the Arab and Muslim states"³ and called on Pakistan to withdraw from the pact.

This public disagreement strained the relationship between Pakistan and the Kingdom. Saudi Arabia expressed its displeasure by quietly warming its ties with India. King Saud visited India for two weeks in November-December 1955.⁴ He expressed support for the Indian Muslims during the visit and called for a leading role for India in the international politics. Both countries also vowed to expand bilateral cooperation in political and economic fields.

Nonetheless, political exchanges between Karachi (the then capital of Pakistan) and Riyadh continued, albeit at a slow pace. President Ayub Khan in his visit to Saudi

Arabia in 1960 opened a new chapter in the bilateral relations as strategic interests of both nations had by then gradually converged.⁵ Saudi Arabia invited skilled and unskilled manpower from Pakistan, as its increasing oil wealth had created employment opportunities in construction industry and other sectors for which additional workers were needed. This growing need of human capital in Saudi Arabia mitigated the impact of Pakistan's close alignment with the West. Thus when in 1965 war broke out between India and Pakistan, Saudi Arabia was one of the leading nations who supported Pakistan morally and materially. Crises in Egypt and Yemen in the early 1960s brought to fore limitations of Saudi military forces. Saudi Arabia then sought Pakistan's assistance in bolstering its defense forces.⁶

In April 1966 Saudi monarch Faisal Bin Abdul Aziz paid a state visit to Pakistan. During his visit he re-affirmed support to Pakistan. The joint statement issued on the occasion called for implementation of "right of self-determination of the people of Jammu and Kashmir in accordance with the United Nations resolutions".⁷ Moreover, both countries discussed prospects for holding the First Islamic Summit during the same visit. This visit also opened up new avenues for cooperation in the fields of defense and economy.⁸

During Pakistan's war with India in 1971 and the internal political crisis that led to separation of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), Saudi Arabia provided Pakistan much needed political support. The Kingdom did not recognize the new state of Bangladesh for a long time out of respect for sentiments in Pakistan over its dismemberment. Saudi Arabia also convened Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers at Jeddah, in February 1972, and expressed 'deep sorrow' over the unfortunate events of December 1971.⁹

In early 1970s Pakistan's foreign policy was reoriented by Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto after he came to power on August 14, 1973. He gradually shifted Pakistan's foreign policy towards non-alignment, and made bilateralism the foundation of Pakistan's relations with the Middle Eastern states.¹⁰ In major policy statements the government declared that Pakistan had shifted its strategic focus to West Asia and the Gulf region as it sought to strategically rebalance Pakistan after the tragic loss of East Pakistan.¹¹

In October 1973, Arab-Israel war shook the Middle East. Pakistan declared that an attack on the Arabs was akin to attack on Pakistan,¹² and rendered material and

military assistance to the Arab brethren. It cooperated with Saudi Arabia at the United Nations and other forums in its efforts to free Muslim territories including Al-Quds from Israeli occupation. Later on third Islamic Summit was held in Lahore (Pakistan) in February 1974 which was jointly hosted by Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. This summit helped in creation of suitable environment for recognition of Bangladesh as an independent state and Pakistan and Saudi Arabia both announced their recognition of Bangladesh in February 1974.¹³ From then onwards bilateral relations remained steady.

The 1976 visit of King Khalid bin Abdul Aziz was a high mark in bilateral relations of the two countries. He laid the foundation stone of King Faisal Mosque in Islamabad that has been constructed with Saudi funding.¹⁴ Later on, during the era of President Zia-ul-Haq bilateral relations between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia further strengthened. President Zia held regular consultations with Saudi leadership on the major international and strategic issues. At the time of occupation of Holy Kaaba by the extremists, in 1979, President Zia expressed deep concern at the situation and assured Saudi leadership of all possible cooperation in resolving the crisis.¹⁵

The war in Afghanistan, in the 1980s, became a major catalyst for converging interests of the two countries. Saudi Arabia and Pakistan co-operated to bolster Afghan resistance forces (Mujahedeen) against the invading Soviet military. The Saudi Kingdom provided full support to Pakistan on its position over Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. During the visit of Crown Prince Fahd bin Abdul Aziz in December 1980, Saudi Arabia declared that its security was linked to that of Pakistan. Saudi Arabia and Pakistan cooperated in a multilateral effort of Afghan Jihad against Soviet Union.¹⁶ Saudi Arabia provided financial support to the Jihad being fought by Afghan Mujahedeen under guidance of Pakistan's intelligence personnel. Saudi Arabia also mobilized support in the Muslim world at large for Afghan Jihad and fighters from Middle Eastern countries were motivated to join forces with the Afghans.¹⁷

The bilateral relations between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia however came under stress during Gulf crisis of 1990. Saudi Arabia requested Pakistan to provide assistance in the form of military equipment such as tanks and armored vehicles to fight Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Pakistan hesitated at first due to domestic political constraints,¹⁸ which generated some tension in the relations between the two

countries. Pakistan subsequently went ahead and offered to send troops to guard the holy places in the Kingdom.¹⁹ Meanwhile, both countries continued to align their foreign policies on Afghanistan during this period. Along with United Arab Emirates Pakistan and Saudi Arabia were the only countries which gave diplomatic recognition to Taliban regime in Afghanistan. For Pakistan, the Taliban regime represented stability in the war torn neighboring Afghanistan.²⁰ For Saudi Arabia the support for a Sunni regime in the backyard of Shiite Iran was a strategic maneuver in its ongoing regional rivalry with Tehran.

In 1998 Saudi Arabia provided political and economic support to Pakistan after it conducted nuclear tests in response to Indian tests. Similarly, during the era of President Musharraf, political ties further deepened. The war in Afghanistan after 9/11, once again converged the interests of both states to a common agenda. They continued to hold regular consultations regarding the on-going war, threat of Al-Qaida and regional stability. The visit of King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz to Pakistan in early 2006 was a milestone in the bilateral relations. During the visit leadership of both countries reviewed entire spectrum of bilateral relations and explored new avenues for cooperation and collaboration in various fields.

King Abdullah expressed support for stability and prosperity of Pakistan and stressed on maintenance of peace in South Asia.²¹ Saudi King's call for peace and stability in the sub-continent was a manifestation of transforming Saudi policy in South Asia. From historic support to Pakistan on Kashmir dispute in the conflict with India, to calling for peace between the two countries signified a strategic shift in the Saudi policy and signaled its desire for improving relations with India.²²

In 2008 Pakistan was faced with political instability and underwent transition to civilian rule after the elections and removal of General Pervez Musharaf from power. Saudi Arabia joined a multilateral group for mobilizing support for stabilization of Pakistan and pledged political and economic support for it.²³ But regional competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran accelerated in the ensuing years resulting in increased sectarianism within Pakistan. Pakistan sought to remain neutral and avoided taking sides in this regional competition. Pakistan also made overtures towards Tehran to gain confidence of both the states in order to play a conciliatory role between the two regional rivals.²⁴ Pakistan's attempt at pursuing regional stability and balancing its ties between Saudi Arabia and Iran,

however, did not bear any tangible results and strained historically close bilateral relations with Saudi Arabia.

As the Arab spring ushered in political uprisings in the Middle East, and concerns for internal stability increased, Saudi King dispatched his special emissary Prince Bandar bin Sultan bin Abdul-Aziz to Pakistan in March 2011. Pakistan assured Prince Bandar of its support for Saudi efforts to stabilize the region, and the situation in Bahrain in particular.²⁵ In order to stabilize the situation in the Persian Gulf region Pakistan provided manpower comprising retired military personnel to the tune of 2500 men to bolster security forces and law-enforcement agencies of Bahrain.²⁶

After new elections in Pakistan in 2013, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's government reinvigorated bilateral ties with Saudi Arabia. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia also shifted focus of its foreign policy towards Asia in an attempt to advance its regional interests in the wake of emerging Iran-US rapprochement. To expand its outreach, Saudi Foreign Minister, Saud Al Faisal visited Pakistan in January 2014 and delivered a special message from King Abdullah about "friendship, cooperation and a commitment to stand by each other under all circumstances" to Pakistani leadership. Both countries also announced their support to each other on regional issues including Syria and Afghanistan and decided to expand bilateral cooperation.²⁷ The trend of high-level political exchanges between the two countries has since continued.²⁸

Crown Prince Salman bin Abdul Aziz Al-Saud visited Pakistan in February 2014. The Leaderships of both countries held extensive consultations to strengthen existing ties, and expanding bilateral relations and vowed to work together for international peace and stability.²⁹ In a major diplomatic breakthrough Saudi Arabia won Pakistan's support for change of Assad regime in Syria. Earlier, Pakistan had remained neutral and counseled restraint and dialogue but now the joint statement called for "the formation of a transitional governing body with full executive powers enabling it to take charge of the affairs of Syria"³⁰, which signified a shift in Pakistan's policy.³¹

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif continued these bilateral exchanges and visited the Kingdom in July 2014. During his meetings with the visiting premier, King

Abdullah, while lauding historically close ties between the two countries was reassured that 'Saudi Arabia would always stand by Pakistan.'³²

Military Relations

Starting from their first bilateral defense pact Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have remained steadfast military allies. Saudi Arabia's defense needs, in the 1960's, led it to establish comprehensive relations with Pakistan. In the subsequent decades, these relations further matured and deepened manifold.

During 1960s strategic interests of both nations became aligned after instability in the Middle East increased. Arab-Israel war of 1967 and military battles on border with South Yemen highlighted the shortcomings of Saudi Arabian security forces. Pakistan had a large standing professional army that had successfully engaged a much bigger enemy in 1965. Saudi Arabia had a small conventional military force which lacked necessary capabilities to cope with emerging challenges of internal and external security. Being a Muslim nation, Saudi Arabia began to look up to Pakistan as a natural choice for providing training and other professional assistance to its military forces. In August 1967, following Arab-Israeli war, a high powered Saudi delegation led by Minister for Defense and Aviation visited Pakistan. After in-depth talks an agreement for technical cooperation in the fields of defense and civil aviation was concluded. This agreement focused on military training and bilateral exchanges of military advisors.³³ Since then Pakistan has opened its military training facilities for Saudi defense personnel. Moreover, military officers from Pakistan were sent to the Kingdom for raising and training the Royal Army and Air Force. According to official record more than 8255 members of Saudi defense forces have received training in Pakistan since 1967.³⁴

During Saudi Arabia's border tensions with South Yemen in 1969, some Pakistani pilots reportedly flew fighter aircraft of Royal Saudi Air Force and provided air support to Royal army. Similarly, pilots of Pakistan air force flew war planes during 1973 Arab-Israeli war, and in other skirmishes on Saudi borders.³⁵ A battalion of Pakistani troops was also positioned along the Saudi frontier with Yemen. Moreover, around 15,000 regular troops of Pakistan army were stationed in Saudi Arabia during 1970s and close to a brigade strength of combat troops were placed close to Israeli-Saudi-Jordanian border during the period.³⁶

Pakistani military presence in the Kingdom further increased in the 1980s after Saudi Arabia requested assistance for enhanced military assistance. A 'Protocol Agreement' was concluded for 'Deputation of Pakistan Armed Forces Personnel and Military Training' in December 1982.³⁷ Then two divisions (around 20,000 troops) of Pakistan army were stationed in different regions of the Kingdom to ensure security.³⁸ One armored brigade was deployed in Tabook from 1982 to 1988.³⁹ Most of Pakistani military units were however deployed in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province where most of Kingdom's oil fields were located. This was done to ensure security of oil fields and mitigate threats of internal uprisings fueled by suspected Iranian revolutionaries. Some units of Pakistan Air Force (PAF) contingent were also deployed in Saudi Arabia during the 1980s. PAF was stationed on the northern shores of the Gulf coast in the areas between the oil fields and head of the Gulf where Iraq and Iran were locked in a military stalemate after months of fighting.⁴⁰

As strategic ties with Pakistan had strained after 1991 Gulf war Saudi Arabia reduced its reliance on Pakistani troops for its security and stability. But both soon realized the importance of the other for security of their respective states. Since then they have explored new avenues for defense cooperation. In 2001, they commenced a joint program for development of small weapons and ammunitions.⁴¹ In 2005, both countries concluded a new 'Military Cooperation' agreement for defense collaboration. An agreement between Pakistan's ministry of Interior and Saudi government focusing on providing military training services to civilian component of Saudi security forces was also signed.⁴²

Pakistan continues to train Saudi defense personnel. From 2004 Pakistan army and Saudi land forces have also commenced joint exercises called the 'Al-Assam'. First two exercises of this series, Al-Assam I & II, were conducted in Pakistan in 2004 and 2006. While, Al-Assam III was held in Saudi Arabia in 2009. In 2011, three week long exercises focusing on enhancing the combat capabilities of Saudi troops in counter-terrorism operations in a low-intensity conflict environment were conducted in Pakistan.⁴³

Saudi Arabia also recently expressed interest in purchase of Al-Khalid tanks and JF-17 thunder fighter aircraft being jointly produced by Pakistan and China in Pakistan.⁴⁴ Discussions between the two countries are underway presently.⁴⁵

A decision to purchase tanks and jet fighters from Pakistan would not only boost Pakistan defense industry it will also bring the two friendly countries even closer. In late April 2014, Pakistani army chief, General Raheel Sharif was a guest at a large military exercise, 'Sword of Abdullah' conducted by Saudi Arabia to showcase its military prowess.⁴⁶ The visit signified close cooperation between the military forces of the two countries.

Economic relations

In addition to strong strategic and diplomatic ties the two countries have maintained good economic relations. Pakistan has received generous economic and financial assistance from Saudi Arabia, at times of crises, in the last four decades. Pakistan has been a major recipient of Saudi economic assistance from early 1970s. From 1973-1980 Pakistan received \$502 million as loan at critical junctures. For example in 1979-80, as Pakistan was struggling to meet its international financial obligations, Saudi Arabia provided special assistance of \$200 million.⁴⁷ As noted before the Kingdom had also provided financial support for Afghan jihad which was disbursed through Pakistan, and also pledged economic support for stability of Pakistan.

In 1998 international community imposed economic sanctions against Pakistan after it conducted nuclear tests. In those critical times Saudi Arabia once again helped Pakistan by providing free oil facility for four years till 2003. For first two years 80,000 barrels per day were provided, while 40,000 barrels per day were provided for the remaining period.⁴⁸ This facility was worth \$3.4 billion and accounted for 23 percent of Pakistan's oil imports. This facility helped stabilize Pakistan balance of payment crisis as well.⁴⁹

After the devastating earthquake in northern Pakistan, Saudi Arabia came forward and announced an aid package of \$573 million for relief and rehabilitation efforts of the effectives. Saudi Arabia in fact institutionalized its assistance by establishing an organization called, 'Saudi Public Assistance for Pakistan Earthquake Victims'.⁵⁰ After major floods in 2010, the Kingdom announced aid package of \$105 million⁵¹ and became the largest international donor to Pakistan, enabling it to meet the challenges caused by this humanitarian disaster.

In recent years, Saudi Arabia has deposited cash with State Bank of Pakistan to stabilize Pakistan's depleting foreign currency reserves and depreciating rupee. In 2009, Saudi Arabia had placed \$200 million in State Bank of Pakistan in order to support the Pakistani rupee.⁵² In March 2014, again, Saudi Arabia deposited \$1.5 billion with State Bank of Pakistan.⁵³ In tandem with these financial bailouts, the Kingdom has also provided various soft loans over the years. In 2009, a credit of \$100 million was provided to import urea fertilizer from the Kingdom.⁵⁴ Similarly, for assisting construction work on Neelum-Jhelum Hydropower Project a soft loan of \$80 million was also announced.

In February 2014, during the visit of Crown Prince Salman bin Abdul Aziz al-Saud, both countries inked agreements on providing new soft loans to Pakistan under this arrangement the Saudi Kingdom would provide Pakistan \$125 million for importing urea fertilizer from a Saudi company.⁵⁵ Moreover, a soft loan of \$58 million will be made available through 'Saudi Fund for Development of Pakistan' for Golen Gol Hydropower project in Chitral.⁵⁶

From mid-1970 Pakistanis had begun migrating to Saudi Arabia in search of employment. Saudi Arabia required human capital to meet requirements of a growing economy. Pakistan has since exported skilled, semi-skilled and un-skilled workers to Kingdom. Saudi Arabia has been an attractive destination for Pakistani workers because of it being a Muslim country and also due to presence of holy places of Islam in the Kingdom. The Pakistani expatriates are working in construction sector, service industry, and oil industry among others. Currently there are 1.5 million Pakistani expatriates in Saudi Arabia making significant contribution to Saudi economy.⁵⁷ These Pakistanis are performing their role in the development of Kingdom as accountants, engineers, doctors, teachers, workers etc. They also contribute remittances to the tune of \$4 billion to the home country's which are arguably the most reliable source of foreign exchange for Pakistan.⁵⁸

Bilateral trade between the two countries is also around \$4 billion.⁵⁹ Pakistani exports to Saudi Arabia are only approximately \$488 million.⁶⁰ It mainly exports rice, vegetables, garments, fabrics, sports good, carpets, and various other textile products to Saudi Arabia. While Saudi Arabia exports petroleum products, chemical products, and dates to Pakistan. Saudi Arabia has long been a leading investor in Pakistan. In recent years Saudi investments has, however, been declining. This is largely due to the security situation and political instability in Pakistan.

Over the last five years, Saudi foreign direct investment (FDI) in Pakistan was around \$270 million,⁶¹ which does not reflect the real potential of the country. During the visit of Crown Prince Salman bin Abdul Aziz al-Saud, in February 2014, avenues for expanding Saudi investment in various sectors including oil and gas, mining, energy, IT, telecoms, food and agriculture were explored. Pakistan invited Saudi business community to invest in Pakistan as it offers a very attractive 37 percent annual dividend on foreign investments.⁶²

In order to institutionalize bilateral economic cooperation and strengthen mutual coordination and linkages, Pak-Saudi Joint Ministerial Commission (JMC) was established in May 1974. JMC process is at the core of efforts to expand commercial cooperation between the two countries. Ten sessions of JMC have been held in Riyadh, most recent in April, 2014.⁶³ Both sides discussed new opportunities for cooperation in various fields as Pakistan sought Saudi investments in infrastructure building, trade, banking, information technology, and telecommunications.⁶⁴

Conclusion

The strategic setting of the bilateral relations between Islamabad and Riyadh has evolved over the decades. Pakistan has valued its relations with Saudi Arabia because Saudi Arabia has a unique and central position in the Muslim world. For Saudi Arabia, Pakistan's increasing role in Gulf security from 1960's onwards was re-assuring, as Pakistan was not viewed by the Kingdom as a regional rival. Moreover, the military deployment of Pakistani inside the Kingdom when the latter perceived threat to its security helped to restore internal stability and enhance its defense capability against potential aggressor. Meanwhile, Pakistan has been able to weather economic and political pressures of strategic competition with India, while maintaining peace with Saudi regional rival Iran.

Pakistan is the second largest Muslim, (in terms of population) armed with nuclear weapons and has nearly half a million strong trained conventional military forces. Geographically it is at the cusp of Persian Gulf and Middle East. It therefore, commands attention in the region. Saudi Arabia possessing one of the largest oil reserves in the world and home to the two holiest many sites in the Islamic world

exercise considerable influence among Islamic states. Cooperation between the two countries is for their mutual benefit.

The recent re-invigoration of bilateral ties at political, military and economic levels indicate that both countries will continue to closely cooperate on strategic and regional security issues in the Middle East and Afghanistan. At the same time, the Iran centric regional developments will keep the both countries engaged. The two countries, however, will have to work on to smoothly navigate growing Saudi-Indian bilateral ties in security arena. The mutual strategic and economic compulsions that had initially brought Saudi Arabia and Pakistan together will enable them to meet the challenges of future and maintain co-operation in economic, military and political arenas.

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