

EVOLVING NATURE OF PAK-SAUDI RELATIONSHIP

Muhammad Khan and Sidra Khan*

Abstract

Pak-Saudi relations are exclusive, cordial, and strategic. The elementary features of this exceptional relationship are strong religious affinity, bilateral resolve, assured support, and pragmatism. This resilient and all-weather relationship started much before the Kingdom became oil-rich. Since the beginning of the 1950s, Pak-Saudi relations have been witnessing an upward trajectory in all diplomatic fields, including political, economic, social, and strategic cooperation. While attaining dynamism in their bilateral relationship, both countries urge more exclusivity, steadiness, and perpetuity in their relations as reinforcing factors. The role of national institutions of both countries has been commendable in evolving and consolidating their traditional bondage. This paper, therefore, underlines the need that despite changes in the regional and global geopolitical situations, both countries must extend unwavering support to each other on the issues of their national interests, regional security, and sustainable development.

Keywords: Pak-Saudi Relations, Arab World, Strategic, Economic, Bilateralism.

Introduction

The Pak-Saudi relations are based on solid foundations of Islamic ideology and traditional Islamic values. The spiritual affection the people of Pakistan have for the Holy Places (the *Kaaba Tullah* and *Masjid al-Nabawi*) and with the people of the Holy land reinforce the bilateral relationship between both countries. The ideological foundations of Pakistan further contributed to bringing both countries together and their people. Soon after its independence, Pakistan attained an exceptional and very high-ranking political status among the Muslim world. Starting from almost zero in 1947, Pakistan extended political and economic support to many countries in the 1960s. Besides, it developed its armed forces matching the global standards of military professionalism and a high degree of competence. On the other hand, King Abdul Aziz and his successors developed the Kingdom and Saudi nation from a scattered desert region to a modern, dynamic and progressive nation-state.

Pakistan and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia signed a Treaty of Friendship in 1951.¹ As a pioneer treaty, it defined the future direction of the relationship between both states and laid down the formal basis for bilateral cooperation. The treaty also readdressed historical connections, spiritual affiliations, strategic partnerships, and

*Dr Muhammad Khan is the Professor of Politics and International Relations at International Islamic University, Islamabad. Sidra Khan is a PhD Scholar at the School of Politics and International Relations, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad.

social relationships.² In the Middle East, the newly formed nation-states were in turmoil after WW II. Saudi Arabia played a major role in the regional stability, peace, and economic prosperity of the Arab world. From its establishment in the early 1930s to the present day, the Kingdom passed through numerous domestic and external challenges, which were handled with wisdom, national resolve, and deterrence from any external aggression. As a member of the OIC, Pakistan supported Saudi Arabia and the rest of the Arab world in their wars against the Israeli illegal occupation of the Arab land (Palestine). Within the scope of the Treaty of Friendship and other bilateral understandings, Pakistan helped Saudi Arabia to overcome some of the worst domestic upheavals and external security threats it confronted. Pakistan military played a contributory role in the development of Saudi armed forces and cooperation is continuously extended to date. The political leadership of both countries frequently consult each other on regional and global issues in a well-defined cooperative mechanism. On the economic front, there has been mutuality between both states ever since the 1980s.

A Relationship More than Strategic Partners

Late King Abdullah had a great desire for larger unity among the Muslim world. He was also an advocate of establishing strong bondage between Pakistan and the Kingdom. He envisioned the Pak-Saudi relationship as “more than strategic partners and even more than brothers.”³ Both countries stood by each other at most difficult times like wars, conflicts, and natural calamities. Over the years, this relationship has been reinforced by a common faith and cultural affinity. Geographical proximity, the convergence of interests, trade, and commerce further added to the already defined track of connexions. Since the 1950s, both countries have exchanged high-level delegations. Almost all leadership of Pakistan visited the Holy Land in their respective tenures, so did Saudi leadership. Prime Minister Imran Khan paid his first foreign visit to Saudi Arabia, which was reciprocated by Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman in February 2019, adding a new chapter with promising prospects in the bilateral relationship of both countries.

There has existed a distinctive synergy in the bilateral relationship of Pakistan and Saudi Arabia for the last seven decades. This all-weather relationship stood the test of odd days and disturbing times. During almost all crises, Pakistan supported the Kingdom without raising eyebrows, the resolute support. Many Pakistanis are working in various parts of Saudi Arabia as engineers, teachers, doctors, workers, and construction experts. Indeed, Pakistanis working in Saudi Arabia considered it as their homeland.⁴ Upon the occurrence of a shocking 2005-earthquake in northern parts of Pakistan, Saudi Arabia provided \$10 million in financial assistance on a humanitarian basis besides another \$170 million in aid (2010-2012) to rehabilitate the flood victims of Pakistan.⁵

There has been new optimism during the rule of King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman. After fleeting misgiving of the Yemen crisis, both

countries revamped their bilateral relationship on new and progressive lines, as demonstrated during the visit of the Crown Prince in February 2019. During this visit, it was decided to enhance Pak-Saudi bilateralism in politics, diplomacy, military collaboration, economic cooperation; and augment cultural and religious ties. Oil and oil-based products constitute major imports from Saudi Arabia to Pakistan, whereas Pakistan exports food products, chemicals, textile, and leather goods to the Saudi Kingdom. Currently, the volume of bilateral trade between both countries is approximately \$2.5 billion.⁶ In January 2018, both countries reinforced their bilateral economic ties with a preferential trade agreement as per the new Saudi Vision-2030. It is a brainchild of Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman meant to diversify the Saudi economy on modern lines. In the light of this vision, Saudi Arabia is gradually reducing its dependency on black gold.⁷ The Kingdom is in the process of economic diversifications, which includes public and private sectors. The focus is education, health, tourism, infrastructure, and other public sector facilities. The Crown Prince is striving hard to “transform the Kingdom into a global economic powerhouse”, which will benefit the Arab world.⁸

Strategic Foundation of Pak-Saudi Relations

The elementary bases of a strategic relationship between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia are historical, pragmatic, and sentimental. This relationship emerged much before the Kingdom became oil-rich, which rejects the analogy that the economy is defining factor of the Pak-Saudi relationship. The Holy cities, *Makkah* and *Medina*, have been the spiritual reasons for reinforcement of this relationship. On the economic front, Anwar Ali, a Pakistani economist, was Governor of the Saudi Arabian Monetary Agency (Saudi Central Bank) from 1958 to 1974.⁹ Saudi economy was boosted under the able leadership of Anwar Ali, who gave it a new vision and future orientation. Over the decades, Pakistan has had an exclusive status in Saudi strategic calculus, which speaks about their mutual trustfulness and consistent relationship.¹⁰ As defined by a former official of the Kingdom, “Pak-Saudi ties are one of the closest in the world, any two states would ever have.”¹¹

The strategic nature of the Pak-Saudi relationship is further fortified by common geopolitical interests, as Pakistan armed forces are always ready to support Saudi Arabia in case of any external aggression on its soil. From the military archives, it is evident that Pakistan's armed forces have been assisting Saudi Arabia since the 1960s with their physical presence in the Kingdom. They played a key role in the foundation and subsequent training of the Saudi armed forces. Both militaries have had close cooperation and collaboration since the 1970s. Pakistan military trainers are imparting training to Saudi armed forces as nucleus staff. Besides, officers from tri-services of Saudi Arabia are attending military courses in Pakistan military institutions at a mid-career level to the higher level of national security.

There had been a sizable contingent of Pakistan armed forces in Saudi Arabia throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s against any possible external aggression

besides imparting training to Saudi Royal Forces.¹² During Operation Desert Storm, a division-sized Pakistani force was deputed to protect the Holy Mosques and the Kingdom against any foreign invasion. Over 1000 soldiers and officers were sent to various military institutions of the kingdom in 2018 as training staff.¹³ In the same year, Pakistan trained 10,000 Saudi military personnel in different aspects of military training.¹⁴ There has been regular cooperation between the two militaries. While Pakistan supports Saudi Arabia in the military sphere, it always maintained a strict policy of neutrality among all countries of the Arab world.

Recent Developments in Pak-Saudi Relations

Unlike international diplomatic practices in vogue, where states tend to have written agreements and pacts before rendering support, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia back each other without any formal agreement on bilateral, regional, and international issues. Such cooperation has existed in all fields like military, economic and political. In the words of Prince Turki Bin Faisal Al Saud, former Director-General of Al Mukhabarat Al A'amah, the Pak-Saudi relationship is one of the best in the world with no parallel. A high level of trust, perpetuity, and future guarantees in their relations.

While analysing Pak-Saudi cooperation during the Cold War, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was a classical case. Both states cooperated against the Soviet invasion, which resulted in the retreat of Soviet forces from Afghanistan. Indeed, this was the first perceptible Pak-Saudi strategic cooperation at the international level. Being about Pakistan, the Saudi Kingdom "sees Afghanistan as part of the Kingdom's immediate neighbourhood."¹⁵ Similarly, a sequel to the incident of 9/11, strong cooperation by both countries extended for a peaceful resolution of Afghanistan avoiding human losses and damages. There remained a close working relationship between both countries throughout the WoT. Guido Steinberg, a German scholar, wrote that "Pakistan is Saudi Arabia's most vital ally."¹⁶

In 2015, a misgiving developed when Islamabad decided not to take the side of any party in the Yemen conflict. Later, after having understood Pakistan's principled stance, the cooperative mechanism of both countries got further impetus without any ill-feeling. Riyadh understood Islamabad's compulsions of not participating in the Yemen conflict. Besides being neutral in inter-state affairs of Muslim states, active military operations were going on to combat the terrorists all over the country. Pakistan Army had started a decisive military campaign 'Operation Zarb-e-Azb' in the erstwhile FATA area, North Waziristan Agency, where terrorists had their supportive mechanism. Alongside, parallel anti-terrorist operations were going on at the Pak-Afghan border in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan provinces. Simultaneously, intelligence-based operations were going on in entire Pakistan to unearth and destroy the terrorist networks. But the most significant aspect was, Pakistan maintained its neutrality on bilateral predicaments of Muslim states. On its part, Pakistan also offered mediation over the Yemen conflict.

Despite domestic military engagements, Pakistan extended its support to the Saudi government without any absurdity. The mutual understanding between both states led to the appointment of former Pakistani Army Chief General Raheel Sharif as Commander of Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC).¹⁷ IMCTC is an intergovernmental counter-terrorism alliance of Muslim states, primarily focusing on terrorist activities of Daesh (ISIS) in the Middle Eastern region. General Raheel has maintained a balance between member states and those Muslim states which are not part of this alliance. Under the leadership of General Raheel Sharif, IMCTC focuses purely against terrorism without involving in any sectarian conflict, as speculated at the time of its formation. In the wake of its diverse populace, Pakistan cannot afford any prejudices in IMCTC.

The Pakistan military has an unparalleled record of combating the menace of extremism and terrorism.¹⁸ Due to threats of terrorism, the Pak-Saudi military cooperation has enhanced in the last two decades. There have been numerous military exercises where the armed forces of both countries rehearsed drills and procedures to counter-terrorism. Since both countries have complete cooperation at a strategic level, their militaries often participate in joint military exercises and war games. Operation North Thunder was a Saudi-led military exercise conducted in March 2016. Despite its military engagements against terrorism, a contingent of Pakistani armed forces participated in this military exercise in the north of Saudi Arabia.¹⁹

Political Engagement

There have been regular high-level political engagements through visits of heads of states and senior government officials. Prime Minister Imran Khan has visited Saudi Arabia four times since assuming his office. His visit, in May 2021, was aiming at re-setting the bilateral relationship as some misunderstandings took place on some issues. Later, Saudi Foreign Minister visited Pakistan in July 2021 on a two-day official visit.²⁰ He assured complete Saudi support to Pakistan's stance over the long-standing Kashmir conflict. His visit further strengthened the progressive drive in high-level interactions for deepening bilateral cooperation in various fields. King Salman Bin Abdul Aziz visited Pakistan in 2014 as Crown Prince.²¹ It was an extraordinary visit among the lurking crisis over the Yemen conflict.²² Pakistan assured Saudi Arabia of its guaranteed support in any aggression against the Kingdom, particularly the Holy Mosques. In the security domain, Pakistan has a genuine concern about the security of the Kingdom, especially the two Holy Mosques.

Pakistan always plays its role in ending the conflicts in the Middle East. Pakistan has offered to Saudi leadership to mediate or facilitate bringing an end to the Yemen conflict. Indeed, it is in line with its policy of promoting unity among Muslim states.²³ There were media speculations that Pakistani troops in Saudi Arabia deployed at the border with Yemen. Kamal Alam, a scholar of RUSI, even said that these men of the Pakistan Army would employ for the security of the Saudi Royal family.²⁴ Indeed, these all were conjectures since Pakistan clarified that its troops in Saudi Arabia are for

training purposes. Pakistani leadership advocates Pakistan's military assistance to the Kingdom and stands by Saudi Arabia.²⁵

Economic Cooperation

In economic cooperation, Saudi Arabia has been a great source to appendage Pakistan's economy. Many Pakistani expatriates are employed in the Kingdom. They play two roles; first, they contribute to the development of the host country. Secondly, they take part in the economic development of Pakistan by sending remittances back home, which reasonably reduces pressure on the job market of Pakistan. Since the 1960s, Pakistan human resource has started pouring in Saudi Arabia. The estimated numbers of Pakistani expatriates in the Kingdom are more than 2.7 million.²⁶ They work in almost all fields of economy, such as construction, medical, engineering, academics, and the IT sector. Saudi Arabia hired the services of over 1000 highly professional doctors from Pakistan in 2012 alone.

Saudi authorities considered Pakistani doctors and paramedics as highly professional in their job with dedication. "The people in Saudi Arabia feel very comfortable with doctors from Pakistan because of their cultural and historical background."²⁷ The Saudi government has employed thousands of Pakistani nationals as engineers, IT experts, academics, doctors, and high-level executives besides laborers. In an analysis of the Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies, Pak-Saudi bilateral trade in the first half of the 21st century (2002 to 2012) has been over \$30 billion and from 2012 to 2013, trade exchange between both countries remained \$5 billion.²⁸

In the past decade, Saudi Arabia had financially assisted Pakistan without direct commercial interests. It supported Pakistan through direct funding of \$1.5 billion in March 2014, an immense boost for Pakistan's economy besides reinforcing "the country's falling foreign currency reserves."²⁹ Financial experts like Sakib Sherani, former Chief Economist, advocated putting Pakistan's economy through reforms since foreign funding may provide momentary sustenance. Later in 2018, Saudi Arabia helped Pakistan through a bailout package of \$3 billion as the balance of payments and another \$3 billion as deferred payments on oil imports. Pakistan's import of crude oil from Saudi Arabia is over 110,000 barrels per day.³⁰

In October 2018, on the sidelines of the annual Future Investment Initiative (FII) conference, both countries signed several agreements for financial cooperation between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. FII Conference provided unique opportunities for the economic cooperation of all developing states. Prime Minister Imran Khan illuminated the conference about the unusual economic situation facing the developing countries. Through this conference, Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salam projected his Vision-2030 aimed at diversification of Saudi economy away from the traditional oil-based approach. Later in 2020, the Saudi government abruptly stopped the supply of crude oil based on deferred payments and demanded the return of \$3

billion it had deposited as a balance of payments support to Pakistan's economy.³¹ This abrupt change in the attitude of Saudi Arabia was unexpected for Pakistan.

Pakistan has a plan for developing an oil city at Gwadar.³² In this regard, the Saudi government has decided to invest in establishing an oil refinery at Gwadar. It was announced during the visit of Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman to Pakistan, and Saudi experts also visited the site for its feasibility.³³ Likewise, a task force was constituted by the Pakistan government, whose recommendations had already been approved as a foreign-funded project.³⁴ This project, if materialized, will reduce the expenditures Pakistan spends on oil imports.³⁵ Pakistan also sought Saudi support for investment in areas like tourism, coal and gas exploration and IT to which Kingdom has shown interest.³⁶

Contemporary Phase of Pak-Saudi Relationship

With promises and expectations, the two-day official visit of Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman in February 2019 was largely viewed in Pakistan as the beginning of a new phase in the bilateral relationship between the two countries. Under changing geopolitical scenarios and geo-economic developments, both Muslim states have realized their responsibilities to cooperate and work together for the common good of the Muslim world. There are tremendous potentials and opportunities for furthering their relationship to new heights. It includes plentiful natural resources in both countries and a dedicated workforce available in Pakistan. Nevertheless, many crevices in Saudi policies emerged in the later part of 2019 and 2020, obscuring the optimism perceived during the 2019-visit of Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman. The Crown Prince declared himself an ambassador of Pakistan in Saudi Arabia,³⁷ a great gesture and a daring commitment, but later events proved otherwise.

There have been strong bases of the Pak-Saudi relationship for the last seven decades. The Kingdom always supported Pakistan's stance on the Kashmir dispute and all other issues at the regional and global levels. Similarly, Pakistan always supported Palestinians in their legitimate cause against Israel's illegal occupation and other issues confronted by Saudi Arabia and the Arab world. Unfortunately, on India's illegal annexation of occupied Jammu and Kashmir as its union territory in August 2019, there was a cold response from Riyadh. The people of Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK) were put under an indefinite curfew. Widespread violence has deprived them of human rights, which continues even after the passage of two years.

There is a mysterious silence from Riyadh and other capitals of GCC countries against the Indian illegal act. Besides New Delhi's alienation of Indian Muslims through Citizen Amendment Act-2019, Saudi Aramco and Abu Dhabi National Oil Company struck a deal of \$70 billion to establish an oil refinery in Maharashtra, India. This was a pro-Indian act that hurt the feelings of Kashmiris in IIOJK and Indian Muslims. Indeed, Kashmiris and Indian Muslims have expected at least positive

gestures from their Arab brothers. With almost a pessimistic and prejudiced response from OIC, Arab League, and GCC states, India took its illegal acts justified and undertook massive repression against Muslims in India and IIOJK. On the other hand, the Indian diaspora in the UAE and other Arab countries conspires against Muslims and Islam.

On the economic front, Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman has pledged \$20 billion as an investment in Pakistan, thus, opening many new avenues. Upon signing seven MoUs, the Crown Prince said that it is just a beginning, and there will be a gradual increase in Saudi investment in days to come. He stated that “we have been a brotherly country, a friendly country to Pakistan. We’ve walked together in tough and good times, and we continue.”³⁸ From the Pakistani perspective, it is a big investment plan of Saudi Arabia, provided it gets implemented. The Saudi investment for establishing an oil refinery at Gwadar would have made a long-term impact. Through its establishment, crude oil from the Middle East will be transported to Pakistan and exported to energy-deficient Asian countries like China and ASEAN.

Prospects of Pak-Saudi Relationship

After the visits of Prime Minister Imran Khan in May 2021 and Saudi Foreign Minister in July 2021, Riyadh and Islamabad are engaged with a new determination to regain what they lost in the last year. There have been many high-level visits from both sides, which speak of gravity of concern to reconcile the bilateral relationship. Indeed, both countries have historical bondage of mutuality and goodwill towards each other. Saudi Arabia is diversifying its economy, and Pakistan can provide a prospective route and staging place. Gwadar will act as an energy hub between oil efficient and oil deficient countries. Therefore, Saudi investment in establishing an oil refinery at Gwadar will initiate and subsequently boost the economic integration and interdependence between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. It will give Saudi Arabia relevance in the regional geo-economics. Besides, China and Iran have negotiated a \$400 billion deal for economic and security cooperation, which will open new vistas for economic cooperation between China and Middle Eastern states, including the Saudi Kingdom. Since countries like China need energy resources from Saudi Arabia, CPEC provides a secure and shortest route for energy transportation. Pakistan is eager for the participation of other countries in CPEC, and Saudi participation will be a welcoming step.

With the prospective participation of Saudi Arabia in CPEC, another dimension adds up to the geopolitical significance of the long-standing relationship between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia.³⁹ In 2019, the Crown Prince promised that visa-fee for Pakistanis will be reduced up to 50%.⁴⁰ Such a concession will allow maximum Pakistani nationals to perform *Hajj* and *Umrah*. A Saudi delegation headed by Major General Sulaiman Al Yahya, Director General Immigration, visited Pakistan in April 2019 in connection with the ‘Road to Makkah’ project.⁴¹ This facilitation was fully operationalized in 2019 and greatly facilitated Pakistani Pilgrims during *Hajj*. The Wall

Street Journal reported that Saudi Arabia is Islamabad's biggest trading partner in the Middle East.⁴² Apart from economically benefitting the ailing Pakistani economy, an oil refinery and other investments in Pakistan provide prospects for diversification of the Saudi economy. The Kingdom is in the process of economic diversity through the enlargement of investment for securing global markets and sustainable development. Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have been closely cooperating in all spheres. The military and strategic cooperation have been unwavering and the centre of gravity of the entire relationship. The rapidly changing geopolitical scenarios and uncertain security situation in the Middle East warrant further enhancement of Pak-Saudi strategic cooperation.⁴³

Conclusion

Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have an unprecedented relationship, ready to help each other at needed time and space. This partnership is not limited to economic cooperation and investment pledges. It is a commitment in all fields like political, strategic, and military. Saudi Arabia is looking forward to greater military cooperation from Pakistan, mainly owing to the looming threats in the Middle East. Pakistan and Saudi armed forces collaborate at almost all levels, including military training through joint exercises and drills. Apart from strengthening the existing ties, the 2019-visit of Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman has opened many new and long-term avenues for Pak-Saudi relations involving future generations. The foundation of this very relationship will help both countries to reorient their strategic relations keeping in view the rapidly changing geopolitical situation and new alliances in the making.

There is a dire need to strengthen the existing bondage of the Pak-Saudi relationship under rapidly changing regional and global geopolitical scenarios. Strategic relations need new approaches and mechanisms which can supplement the traditional bondage. The steadiness and perpetuity in the Pak-Saudi bilateralism must have wider institutional and people's participation as reinforcing factors. The evolving nature of the Pak-Saudi relationship warrants a new dynamism and diversification through enhanced political engagement, institutional collaborations, and diplomatic overtures. Pakistan and Saudi Arabia can continue extending unwavering support to each other's stance on global and regional issues besides looking after the national interests of each other.

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