

PAKISTAN-SAUDI DEFENCE DIPLOMACY: A NEOCLASSICAL REALIST ANALYSIS OF OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract

Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have sustained one of the more durable security partnerships in the Muslim world for almost six decades, yet the relationship has also survived a direct Saudi request refused by Pakistan's own parliament in 2015 and a persistent asymmetry in wealth and military capacity. A Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement signed in September 2025 has sharpened rather than resolved this puzzle: officials describe it as historic, independent analysts as a modest reaffirmation of existing practice, and at least one international body as an unstated extension of Pakistani nuclear protection to Saudi Arabia. Existing scholarship, largely descriptive and reliant on documentary sources alone, has not adjudicated these competing readings. This article addresses that gap by examining, through Neoclassical Realism applied as a single, consistently specified framework, the historical and strategic factors that have shaped Pakistan-Saudi defence cooperation, the challenges currently confronting it, and the opportunities available for strengthening it. Drawing on process-traced documentary evidence and twelve semi-structured interviews with military, diplomatic, academic, and policy practitioners, thematically analysed and triangulated throughout, the article finds that the relationship is best understood not as a single alliance but as several parallel tracks. Constraint tied to domestic politics and sectarian sensitivity toward Iran binds tightly around politically visible cooperation such as troop deployment, and only loosely around technical cooperation such as training, naval exercises, and defence-industrial exchange, a pattern that explains both the relationship's historical survival and the 2025 pact's deliberate ambiguity. The article extends Neoclassical Realism to an asymmetric, Muslim-majority security relationship underrepresented in the wider literature and recommends that Pakistan and Saudi Arabia institutionalise their cooperation separately by track rather than through a single undifferentiated mechanism.

1. Introduction

After nearly 60 years, Pakistan-Saudia Arabia has one of the strongest security ties in the Muslim world, despite a Saudi call that Pakistan's own parliament rejected in 2015, and the disparity in resources and military strength. In September 2025, a Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement (SMA) was signed, making it more precise than ever before, but not more substantial than it has been. This puzzle has been made more precise but not more substantial by a Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement signed in September 2025, which officials described as “historic” and analysts as a “modest reaffirmation of existing practice” and at least one international body as an “unstated extension of Pakistani nuclear protection to Saudi Arabia.” Previously, however, scholarship has been largely descriptive and based on documentary evidence, and thus has not settled between these conflicting interpretations. This article focusses on that void by analyzing the historical and strategic dynamics that have influenced Pakistan-Saudi defence cooperation using Neoclassical Realism as a unified and clearly defined framework, the challenges faced by defence cooperation and the prospects for enhancing it in the near future. Thematically analysed and triangulated throughout and supported by evidence of the processes, the article concludes that it is useful to think of the relationship as several parallel tracks, based on process-traced documentary evidence and 12 semi-structured interviews with military, diplomatic, academic, and policy practitioners. The pact of 2025, with its technical and political cooperation zones, is quite deliberately ambiguous, and the relationship's survival throughout history can be explained by constraint being tightly wrapped around politically visible cooperation, like troop deployment, and loosely around technical cooperation like training, naval exercises and defence-industrial cooperation. The article introduces the concept of Neoclassical Realism to an asymmetric security relationship between a Muslim-majority Pakistan and a Christian-dominated Saudi Arabia which is rarely

explored in the broader literature, and suggests that the bilateral security cooperation between the two nations needs to be institutionalised on a track-specific basis, rather than on a one-size-fits-all basis.

2. Literature Review

The balance of power between states is traditionally assumed to be fragility between unequal powers. Structural theories of alliance formation do not give much reason to expect that this is not the case, and the weaker partner has all the incentive to hedge or defect once the stronger partner's demands have become too costly to sustain within his or her own political system. There are Pakistan and Saudi Arabia in the mix that make this expectation difficult. Their defence relationship is on the verge of being in place for close to six decades, has survived a direct Saudi request that Pakistan's own parliament repudiated publicly in April 2015 and has grown into a formal Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement signed at Al-Yamamah Palace on 17th September 2025 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Pakistan, 2025). The people at Global Security Review, 2025 and Akhtar, 2025, who are independent security analysts, see it as a “deliberately vague reaffirmation of existing practice”, while the Pakistani and Saudi governments say it is a “historic, comprehensive alliance” (Arab News, 2025) and at least one international non-proliferation body has interpreted it as an “unstated extension of Pakistani nuclear protection to Saudi Arabia” (International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, 2026). This article approaches the three aspects of durability, refusal and contested renewal as a single analytical problem instead of three episodes. It has three questions. What are the historical and strategic trends which have influenced Pakistan-Saudi defence cooperation? What are the current threats to that cooperation in the current regional and global security landscape? What are the opportunities for enhancement of that? The lens of theory Neoclassical Realism is applied to each

question, consistently without switching from one part of the document to the next, and each question is answered from both the documentary record and first-hand accounts of 12 practitioners directly involved in the relationship. The author's core argument in the subsequent sections is that Pakistan-Saudi defence cooperation should be seen in two ways: as a number of parallel tracks of cooperation rather than a single alliance, and as the capacity to shape the form and content of the most recent and most significant cooperation. The article posits that Pakistan-Saudi defence cooperation can be understood in two ways: as multi-track rather than monolithic cooperation, and as a capacity to shape the form and content of the most recent and most significant cooperation. This study is based on three bodies of scholarship. The first is conceptual work on defence diplomacy per se. It is the peaceful application of armed forces and defence institutions to support foreign policy objectives other than combat, as defined by Cottey and Forster (2004), and/or a manifestation of soft power to change the strategic thought of a partner state, as defined by Winger (2014). Both formulations are not written with a case such as this 2025 pact in mind, and literature generally is focused on less demanding, peacetime activity, rather than the more demanding, treaty-based end of the spectrum this case falls at. The second is the theory of alliances. Walt's (1987) balance-of-threat theory, which was developed from Middle Eastern alliance data up to 1979, is very useful for understanding the tendency of weaker states to align against a threatening one, but does not provide any way of understanding how there is variation within a single alliance over time. David's (1991) theory of omnibalancing focuses on the domestic level, suggesting that Third World leaders consider both domestic security and external threat, but simplifying the domestic level as a single variable and thus predicting uniformity in their cautious or assertive reactions to all types of cooperation with any given partner. However, the concept of Neoclassical Realism (Rose, 1998; later developed by Zakaria, 1998; Schweller, 2004;

Lobell, Ripsman, and Taliaferro, 2009) disaggregates the domestic level, and holds that civil-military balance, parliamentary politics, sectarian sensitivity, and state extractive capacity are separate intervening variables that link systemic pressure to policy output. Legro and Moravcsik (1999) warn that this disaggregation can lead to the construction of a flexible realism that can simply be adapted to fit the results once they are known, an issue that this article does not set aside, but to which it returns in its discussion. The third volume of scholarship deals with the Pakistan-Saudia relationship empirically. Ahmad and Hani (2025) and Anwar, Saqib and Mustafa (2025) view Pakistan as an agentic 'balancer' in a challenging environment between Saudi Arabia and Iran, while Faheem, Hussain and Xigang (2021) locate Pakistan in a broader triangle of rivalry, regarding it as more acted upon than acting. All three touch on the topic of 'sectarian sensitivity' as one of the major limitations but fail to come to the same conclusions on how much space Pakistan has to play in it, whether the disagreement makes a difference or not, and none triangulates the documentary evidence against primary testimony by the practitioners on how the relationship is actually negotiated. The concept of Neoclassical Realism has been applied productively elsewhere in Pakistan's bilateral relationship, such as by Larik, Mangi, and Bukhari (2023) to explain the consensus among the elite regarding Pakistan's leaning towards China, but not, before now, on the entire spectrum of Pakistan's relationship with Saudi Arabia using primary data. Already, there's one direct peer-reviewed treatment for the 2025 pact. Shortly after the agreement was signed, Khilji and Khilji (2025) adopt the Neoclassical Realism approach to what they call Pakistan's strategic resurgence, noting that the agreement is a result of multipolar competition and America's retrenchment in the Middle East in tandem with Pakistan's quest to regain its regional prestige and dominance in the Muslim world, specifically the question of Israel and Palestine. Their study is a valuable and directly

relevant precedent, and this article's conclusions resonate with theirs on one crucial point – both agree that the pact is fundamentally declaratory, and they both believe that institutional and economic capacities would limit the Pakistani government from operationalising the military side of the commitment. The two studies, however, have distinct features and methods that have significance. The thrust of Khilji and Khilji's analysis is derived from secondary sources, policy papers, think tanks and media, analysed through content analysis, and focuses on the narrative of the resurgence of the pact and its implications for Pakistan-Israel relations generally and Israel-Palestine specifically rather than the overall evolution of Pakistan-Saudi relations since the 1960s, or the internal dynamics of Pakistani commitment over time. This article instead process-traces that full historical arc, triangulates the documentary record against twelve semi-structured interviews with military, diplomatic, academic, and policy practitioners, and identifies a domain-differentiated pattern of constraint, tight around politically visible cooperation, loose around technical cooperation, that neither the resurgence-focused literature on the 2025 pact nor the broader Pakistan-Saudi literature reviewed above has yet identified. This is the particular, targeted area that the rest of the article addresses.

3. Analysis of Research Question One: Historical and Strategic Foundations

The military relationship between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia existed before any serious threat was seen in either countries' system. Pakistani personnel also facilitated the training and organisation of the Royal Saudi Air Force since the 1960s, under a bilateral understanding which, in general, dates back to 1967, and also assisted the Saudi forces during the siege of the Grand Mosque (Gulf Research Center, 2025). The same year provided the relationship with its first real jolt, with the Iranian Revolution ushering a revisionist power to the northern shore of the Gulf, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan bringing a great

power a few miles to the west of Pakistan. Riyadh's changed perceptions of threat and Islamabad's need for external revenue and legitimacy combined and resulted in the December 1982 Joint Defence Protocol, the Saudi-Pakistan Armed Forces Organisation, and Pakistani troop deployments to Tabuk and eventually to the Eastern Province, or the Gulf (Gulf Research Center, 2025.; Arab News, 2025). During the 1990-91 gulf war, Pakistan deployed more troops but only in a more limited sense, as Pakistan was only prepared to contribute troops in a defensive capacity to stop the Iraqis from mustering up a military force of their own, reflecting unease at the prospect of fighting a fellow Muslim state. The best evidence of the depth of this relationship being driven by domestic filtering and not systemic pressure alone is from April 2015. In response to Saudi Arabia's call for Pakistani warplanes, warships and ground troops to be part of its campaign against the Houthis in Yemen, Pakistan's parliament held a rare joint session between the two houses and agreed unanimously that Pakistan must remain neutral due to its Shia population in the country and its long border with Iran (Al Jazeera, 2015). The pressure was played out systemically and the rhetoric was elite, and the result was refusal, a classic example of what Schweller (2004) describes as under balancing. Primary interviews conducted for this study corroborate this reading independently: all twelve respondents referenced the 2015 vote unprompted, and a former Deputy Head of Mission at the Pakistani Embassy in Riyadh described the diplomatic repair work the refusal required as immediate and significant, a dimension entirely absent from the public record. Ten years later, in the span of a few months, a Pakistan-India military confrontation in May 2025, an Israeli attack on Hamas in Doha on 9 September 2025, which shook the Gulf's confidence in the existing security guarantees and, within eight days, the signing of the Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Pakistan, 2025; Arab News, 2025). This

was done in executive and military diplomacy without extended discussion in parliament unlike 2015 when Field Marshal Asim Munir was involved along with Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif. The contrast further suggests the mechanism found throughout this analysis: the size of the external shock is not the important factor, but is the institutional configuration at home when the shock hits. Primary data also indicates that this relationship is based on a two-step ideational pattern, a religious/civilizational affinity that acted as a facilitating condition that made the security bargain cheaper and more manageable, and that has, over the decades since, become a more independent source of resilience to buffer the relationship from strains a purely transactional relationship would not have sustained.

4. Analysis of Research Question Two: Contemporary Challenges

There are three clusters of challenge to this relationship today. The short, vague text of the agreement for 2025 has sparked open disagreement as regards its meaning and implications politically. Official communication sees it as historic (Arab News, 2025); Akhtar (2025), writing in the Belfer Center, interprets it as an affirmation of de facto practice; and Global Security Review (2025) considers it to be more of an affirmation of de facto practice, while the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (2026) interprets it as an implicit nuclear guarantee from Pakistan, a view Akhtar (2025) explicitly denies on textual grounds. All twelve practitioners interviewed for this study independently described Pakistan's nuclear status as implicit background reassurance rather than a formal commitment, a near-unanimous convergence that weighs the balance of evidence toward the more cautious reading. The second political constraint, which was not just derived from the documentary sources but also through the primary sources collected for this study, is the 'diplomatic cost' of Pakistan's 'diplomatic

balancing' between Saudi Arabia and its primary security partner, the United States, and China. A strategic-studies academic who is also a respondent to this study called this a 'triangulation cost' which both countries will now have to consider when attempting to deepen their bilateral defence cooperation. The structural element of financial reliance on Saudi Arabia reduces the manoeuvre in Pakistan and if Pakistan has a capability commitment gap, then the declaratory dimension of the pact has been more than what Pakistan's military and industrial capacity can sustain (Matthews, Romainor, & Ansari, 2025). Given that this study is conducted independently, it is drawn from a secondary source methodology, and that it is able to frame the public debt crisis and its impact on growth and fiscal space in Pakistan in a capability-centric manner, the results and conclusions of Khilji and Khilji (2025) from a convergence perspective are striking. In terms of the primary literature, the Iran-Saudi constraint is most consistently mentioned in this study, but the evidence in this study narrows down the treatment of this constraint in regions in a specific manner: that of the Iran-Saudi constraint binding tightly around the politically visible aspects of cooperation (e.g., deployment of troops) and considerably more loosely around the technical aspects (e.g., naval exercises, training, defence-industrial cooperation). Five subjects who all had careers focused on these more technical topics described the Iran-Saudi dimension as relatively insignificant in their field, a sentiment not adequately reflected in the overall analysis in the literature, when it talks about the Iran constraint.

5. Analysis of Research Question Three: Opportunities

The most obvious and best supported opportunity from this body of evidence is the Saudi Arabia Vision 2030 defence-industrial co-production initiative looking to make 50% of the Kingdom's military procurement local by 2030 (Matthews, Romainor, & Ansari, 2025). Eight of the 12 respondents independently cited this as the

relationship's biggest untapped potential though a former Director of the Ministry of Defence Production (MoDP) Pakistan stressed that the opportunity was real but it would be very difficult for Pakistani companies to compete against bigger established international suppliers, and hence a very selective approach should be taken, rather than an ambitious one. Maritime security cooperation, sharing of counterterrorism intelligence, and cybersecurity cooperation were also recognised as viable growth opportunities in the near term, and that is no accident that each of these is in a domain that does not have a strong sectarian sensitivity bond. The areas of maritime security cooperation, sharing of counterterrorism intelligence, and cybersecurity cooperation were also cited as areas of near-term potential growth, which are also areas consistent with the domain-differentiated pattern identified under the second research question, and also "outside the politically exposed space where sectarian sensitivity bonds the tightest. The second recommendation that came from the primary data was that the informal understanding that has been the basis for Pakistan's ties for the past 60 years should be replaced by an institutionalisation of the relationship through standing bilateral mechanisms, and this was confirmed by Khilji and Khilji (2025) in their own work, where they argued for defence cooperation to be more explicitly linked to economic reform. But the evidence of this study cautions against using this logic for a more expansive multilateral Gulf Cooperation Council structure. It is not a new idea that Pakistan has bilateral military committees with each Gulf country and as a basis for such a framework, the Middle East Institute presents the existing bilateral military committees (2025). When asked about the value of such regional forums directly, nine of the 12 practitioners interviewed for this study described the value of these forums as largely symbolic and signalling oriented, with substantive coordination continuing to take place bilaterally. The opportunity identified here is accordingly for

deliberate, parallel bilateral deepening rather than for multilateral institution-building as such.

6. Discussion and Findings

The findings from the three research questions all contribute to a single interpretive claim as they are read together. The strains of this relationship are only visible and most intense in its most politically visible dimension: cooperation and cooperation in the form of cooperation, in the 1980s and 1990s, has been the most involved, most contentious and most politically sensitive arrangement, whereas the other types of cooperation – technical, training, naval, and, more recently, defence-industrial have grown in institutional depth over the same period, but with significantly less friction at home. Pakistan-Saudi defence diplomacy is thus best seen as a portfolio of parallel tracks, each with its individual strengths and weaknesses due to the systemic and domestic drivers of each track, with varying degrees of visibility and cost to sustain politically within their respective countries. This reframing has the power to be more than the single-alliance framing can: It accounts for why the relationship did not fracture apart after the rupture of 2015, and why the 2025 pact was signed with such obvious political urgency, but is so textually vague. That combination doesn't just happen by itself due to lack of determination or rudeness—it does because of a set of tracks with various constraints. This pattern is directly tested against the competing pattern theories reviewed above, where it is seen to favour Neoclassical Realism over its rivals. Walt's (1987) balance-of-threat theory, which was based on data that came to a close in 1979, provides no means for understanding variation between pairs of individuals over time or across different types of cooperation. David's (1991) omnibalancing theory, which focuses on the appropriate level of cooperation—namely the domestic level—inappropriately reduces it to a single outcome, regime survival, and this study's findings suggest that the same governments would have reacted with uniform caution or assertiveness to all modes

of cooperation with the same partner when conducted at the same time; these findings do not support such a prediction. The evidence is handled more capably by Neoclassical Realism's more differentiated intervening-variable architecture, which enables civil-military balance, sectarian sensitivity, and material capacity to link to varying degrees of strength in various aspects of the same relationship. This result is more vulnerable to Legro and Moravcsik's (1999) criticism than are any of the other findings in this study that this finding is not explicitly predicated in the study's design ahead of the study. To temper, but not eliminate, that exposure are two considerations. First, the pattern recurred independently across four respondents working in four separate professional tracks who had no opportunity to compare notes, closer to independent replication than to a post hoc rescue of the theory around one inconvenient case. Second, a similar notion, which is also structurally related, and that a state's effective leverage over its partner may be different in different domains, was suggested decades ago from another theoretical perspective by Keohane and Nye (1977), adding external support to the same pattern that was derived here from a realist point of view, but not imported from there. The conclusions of this article also form a particular relationship with the previous 2025 article on the most comparable peer-reviewed work on the 2025 pact, which was mentioned above, Khilji and Khilji (2025). In addition to the difference in scope and method already mentioned, the convergence of the two studies one based on secondary content analysis and the other on triangulated documentary and primary sources and their conclusion that the pact was declaratory and capacity-constrained is a greater level of corroboration than either study would provide alone. Where the two accounts diverge, however, is telling: public attention to resurgence is well positioned to detect the ideational motivations of Pakistan, especially on the issue of Israel-Palestine, which are not apparent in the so-called primary testimony of

triangulated primary testimony. Neither point fulfils the same function as the other.

7. Results and Recommendations

Addressing the first research question, defence cooperation between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia has been influenced by the periodic nature of the system shocks, most significantly in 1979 and 2025, and their effects on Pakistan's domestic institutions, which changed from an early influence as facilitators of defence cooperation to becoming an autonomous source of resilience. The relationship's current difficulties, the 2025 agreement's vagueness, an unbalanced constraint between the two powers over Iran, a real disparity in industrial capabilities and the previously unmentioned expense of dealing with two major powers at once are focused on the various tracks, not evenly across the whole relationship. To the third, its best opportunities for defence-industrial co-production and cooperation in maritime security, counterterrorism and cyber security are in the tracks least vulnerable to its most serious limitations, and its most clear path to turning its historically accidental resilience into a durable, designed one is the deliberate, track-specific institutionalisation. This study is best stated in terms of a narrow contribution to the theory of Neoclassical Realism. It does not offer a new theory; it proves the causal logic of the framework can be applied successfully to an asymmetric, Muslim-dominant, security relationship, one in which the great-power cases, on which it was largely developed, did not exist; and it suggests one specific, appropriately hedged refinement: that domestic intervening variables can operate over time and different partners, but also across the different tracks of a single bilateral security relationship. Three recommendations follow. The cooperation between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia should also be institutionalised on a separate track to prevent spill over from technical working group to political working group and vice versa, and the institutionalisation should be at the level of defence production, naval cooperation, training

etc. separately. Any further expansion of defence industrial cooperation should be based on the point where Pakistani capability is really competitive, and not on a generic 'ambition'. The two governments will get more out of a clear announcement of what the 2025 pact includes and excludes, including the question of nuclear weapons, as the evidence suggests that Ambassador Trump's continued ambiguity is more expensive in diplomacy than making a statement based on what can be gathered from the existing evidence. However, this study's main conclusion is based on the testimony of a single respondent for three out of the four domains of cooperation it analyzes, and the pattern between Pakistan and the rest of the Gulf states is present in the other domains as well, but these are yet to be added to the sample.

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