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Pakistan-Saudi Arabia Relations during PPP & PML-N Governments (2008-18): An Analysis

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Abstract

The evaluation is critical concerning the state of Pakistan-Saudi relations during their democratic tenures of the Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) and the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N). From 2008 until 2018, the timespan was a time of asking a lot of questions, ranging from the Arab Spring, changing equations in Middle Eastern countries, and various changing security concerns that were all impactful in engaging countries in this regard. PPP relations (2008–2013) under ideological differences were largely limited to Delhi in form of diplomacy. Distantly, Pakistan is also found in a rather cautious foreign policy stand, again in the context of a turmoiled neighborhood. PML-N (2013–2018) relationships became more active again, arguments being that they were mostly based on historical personal ties, ties on economic cooperation, and Pakistan’s very careful balancing act in Yemen and the more general Indo-Saudi rivalry. The analysis is based on political developments as well as on diplomatic and economic linkages with military cooperation regarding the continuities and changes of their bilateral relations.

Keywords: Pak-Saudi relations, Yemen war, Economic relations, Pakistan foreign policy toward Saudi Arabia.

INTRODUCTION

In this article there is a Critical Analysis of Pakistan-Saudi Arabia Relations between Pakistan Peoples' Party PPP from 2008 to 2013 and the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz PML-N from 2013 to 2018. Within a conclusion, these shifting realities in terms of foreign policy priorities diplomatic engagement; economic cooperation security collaboration under the two governments are going to highlight the evolving nature of bilateral relations. And that Saudi Arabia formed the focus of both the governments as a strategic partner but with entirely different approaches and viewpoints, as a result of different domestic political contexts, leadership styles of the governments and regional developments. Assessing the impact that each of these governments in shaping the depth and direction that the relationship takes in addition to how extraneous factors such as those posed by the Arab Spring, changing Gulf dynamics and regional rivalries would influence Pakistan's position in a bilateral framework with Saudi Arabia. Such a comparative picture analyses these two political times and why this article

pursues meaningful conclusions considering the consistency, strengths and limitations of Pakistan's foreign policy toward Saudi Arabia throughout this decade
Research Methodology

This study relies on a qualitative methodologies-the descriptive and analytical approach-to analyze the Pakistan-Saudi Arabia relations primarily under the PPP government and, later, under the PML N rule, spanning almost a decade, that is, from 2008 to 2018. This study is based on the primary as well as secondary sources. Primary resources would include official government statements, speeches, policy documents and Parliament records in record while secondary sources included academic journal articles, books, newspaper reports as well as credible online publications. Analytic-historical method has been used for interventions in assessing important turning points, including the effect of domestic political leadership on foreign policy decisions. These comparisons show the difference and the continuities of both PPP and PML-N administrations regarding foreign policy orientations. The study also sets the context of this bilateral relationship against the backdrop of wider regional movements such as the Arab Spring, the Saudi-Iran rivalry, and the Yemen conflict

Analysis from 2008-2013

Positive and Negative Aspects

In June 2008, the PPP-led government under Prime Minister Yousaf Raza Gilani along with Co-Chair Asif Ali Zardari succeeded in getting a deferred oil payments agreement with Saudi Arabia "all possible assistance" pledged by King Abdullah. This was aimed at helping Pakistan navigate efforts to overcome its energy and balance-of-payments crisis (Hussain S. , 2008) . The concession ensured that Pakistan would be able to import oil under stable prices during a very unstable period. It also showed that Saudi Arabia would provide enduring support despite economic turbulence. Moreover, President Zardari's first official visit to Riyadh in November 2008 culminated in a royal banquet at the palace symbolism of strong diplomatic ties including discussions about "security of both the countries. King Abdullah eased immediate fiscal pressures by pledging all possible assistance.

This concession ensured Pakistan would be able to import oil under stable prices during a very unstable period. It also signaled enduring Saudi support even in times of economic turbulence. Zardari's first official visit to Riyadh in November 2008 culminated in a royal banquet symbolizing strong diplomatic ties that included discussions on "security of both the countries". The renewed engagement was publicly endorsed by the Saudi Finance Minister's participation in the "Friends of Pakistan" forum. In addition, low-key military cooperation has continued although there were high-level meetings between the leadership of the Pakistan military and senior Saudi defense officials during Zardari's visit (News D. , 2008) . High-level diplomatic gestures like Ambassador Ali Asiri's meeting with Zardari in Islamabad reinforced the rhetoric that "the Kingdom accords the highest priority to Pakistan's friendship" (Masood, 2008) .

Inspite of all positives relationship was weighed down by significant strains in 2008. Leaked U.S. diplomatic cables highlighted distrust among Saudis which included King Abdullah's view of

President Zardari as "the 'rotten head' infecting the whole body," to favor former PM Nawaz Sharif over Zardari's PPP all along. As a result, Saudi financial assistance and oil subsidies were restricted, with Pakistani diplomats announcing that "not a drop of that promised concessional oil was delivered and far below the usual \$300 million annual aid". Such skepticism developed mostly out of PPP's perceived association with Iran evidenced in pursuance of the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline further concerning Riyadh. Indeed, while high-level visits were undertaken the results were modest there were no large economic packages or long-term investments from Saudi Arabia as a result and Pakistan became heavily reliant on IMF assistance by November 2008.

In 2009 the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia raised the economic assistance to Pakistan under the government of the Pakistan People's Party. Early in 2009 it granted an initial \$100 million credit facility for the import of urea fertilizers and extended another \$80 million soft loan for the completion of the Neelum–Jhelum hydroelectric project thereby injecting more into agriculture and energy development in Pakistan (Bhutta , 2019). Other Saudi funding included ongoing thin diplomatic and developmental cooperation of \$172 million loan agreements for fertilizer import \$100 million and reconstruction in tribal areas \$72 million (Hassan M. , 2012) .However, some significant shortcomings continued to exist despite the financial assistance.

The Saudi deferred oil payments facility was announced late in 2008 and is still waiting for the provision. Pakistan now relies only on other Gulf suppliers like Kuwait. Although Saudi Arabia provided soft loans there was no long-term fuel financing arrangement or assistance to address Pakistan's larger economic problems. Thus, the State Bank has reported continuous stress in terms of balance of payment well into the year 2009. Moreover, PPP's neutral stance on Iran especially its pursuit of the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline continued to generate distrust among the Saudis while Riyadh held suspicion toward the increasing influence. While development funds poured, strategic hesitancy and regional alignment issues inhibited goodwill transformation into a deepening multifaceted partnership (Ahmad K. , 2019).

In an answer to the bitterly devastating floods in Pakistan of 2010, Saudi Arabia borders on the largest single donor with almost US\$100-105 million. This was supplemented by US\$361.99 million in combined government and public contributions, making it the foremost aid donor (Shah S. , 2010). The Saudi King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Centre stretches out its limbs to deploy hospital units, food and shelter across the affected areas (Haroon A. I., 2020) . In November 2010, Saudi Arabia pledged USD 400 million as rehabilitation support for damages caused by floods against the Pakistan Development Forum. This was extended to rehabilitation of infrastructure damages in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Sindh (Tribune E. , 2010) . This widespread financial and humanitarian advancement buoyed Pakistan's recovery and wove it further into the net of aftercare Riyadh had begun requiring as a dependable strategic partner during times of national emergencies. Saudi Arabia, providing big assistance during the 2010 Pakistan floods, donated more than US\$361.99 million, the biggest donation made anywhere in the year.

It was very evident from the US cables that the Saudi confidence in the Zardari-led PPP government was shaky, as the Saudi leadership saw Zardari as Shi'i leaning, corrupt, incompetent and subsequently reduced financial assistance to Pakistan accordingly (Leaks , 2010). Pakistan, while formally pursuing engagement with the United States, delayed the much-needed Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline-which the PPP backed but eventually abandoned under external (U.S.) pressure causing consternation in Riyadh. Yet, under the guise of negotiations, there was no FTA with the GCC nor had any headway been possible with the JEC/JBC which showed the unrealized potential economically. Pakistan relied heavily on Saudi oil aid and remittances. This dependency portrayed a structure of economic dependency rather than showing the real picture of diversification and sustainable growth highlighting entire dependency was based on individuals and an informal military link but without a strategic policy framework to institutionalize this kind of cooperation (Karim, 2019) . Thus, it gave a cause for criticism not being proactive but simply being reactive, as autonomy and broad-based engagement beyond the transactional military-economic exchange were seen as lacking.

Saudi Arabia has not only remained with its resolved humanitarian approach but also saw the major aspect of humanitarian relief operation which includes hosting of mirpur khas under king Abdullah command, where it was delivering goods like 2500 blankets, 1000 tents, and 4000 food baskets as a response to the rampant disaster said to have devastatingly affected close to 9 million people in Sindh during Aug-Sep 2011 (Nugmanova , 2022) . Supplies airlifted included tents, food, dates and medicines, provided by the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Centre, as well as field hospitals set up in Thatta and Muzaffargarh (Tribune E. , 2019) . Some NGOs of Saudi Arabia, including the Islamic International Relief Organization played an active role, being one of the avenues of brotherhood established between both the countries. These would add to the agricultural productivity of Pakistan and infrastructure rehabilitation, especially in Malakand and tribal regions. Soft loans, economic cooperation, development and rehabilitation of economic activities have helped most of the rural population stabilize their livelihoods after the onslaught of monsoon devastation. Bilateral trade remained steady during 2011 on the one hand, and remittance flows maintained by Saudi Arabia propped up foreign reserves on the other hand. Diplomatic engagement remained strong as Pakistani and Saudi officials worked together in the Friends of Democratic Pakistan and recovery measures (Hassan M. , 2012).

Flood aid came in but it was largely disaster reactive rather than a strategic partnership's structured or sustained strategic partnership. Saudi Arabia obstinately denied repeated requests for a long-term extension of credit for oil while insisting on a brief payment window of just 30 days for crude imports. The approval by Islamabad of requests for the extension of deferred payment terms made by it in 2011 did not elicit a response and further aggravated the liquidity crisis faced by Pakistan State Oil (Bhutta, 2012) .Saudi lending did not move toward the desperately needed Pakistani areas of energy or infrastructure. Keeping an eye on the persistent Iran–Pakistan gas pipeline may have alienated Riyadh further aggravating Mistrust of a strategic dimension. An absence of high-ranking state visits or strategic agreements did not allow for new

arrangements on security or trade. Without transactional relations for either side, no long-term collaboration would grow from aid and disaster relief. Such dynamics weakened Pakistan's ability to access developmental investments based in Saudi Arabia. The failure of the PPP to build Saudi confidence in its policy commitment stifled the upward movement of the relationship.

In July 2012, during his visit to Saudi Arabia, Prime Minister Raja Pervaiz Ashraf sought deferred payment for Saudi oil, which would facilitate the imports of up to 25% of Pakistan's crude on credit, ensuring active energy diplomacy. By and large, Saudi Arabia was among very few countries open to the credit arrangements showing historic bilateralism. In continuation with its tradition, Pakistan carried on its soft loans in the year for agriculture, including continued support for fertilizer imports from earlier agreements. In August 2012, the Pakistan–Saudi Joint Ministerial Commission convened in Islamabad, with Commerce Minister Makhdoom Amin Fahim and his Saudi counterpart reaffirming cooperation in trade, agriculture and technology. The meeting focused on forging a bilateral understanding concerning the import of Saudi expertise. Trade volumes remained solid, thus making the fertilizer and food sectors of Pakistan gain from Saudi Arabia's enduring economic support. Saudi remittances often remained steady, with over 2 million Pakistanis already taken to the kingdom, thus being a critical source of foreign currency earnings. The humanitarian cooperation was pursued through lesser known smaller projects implemented low-profile manner in remote areas under the existing development credits. The Saudi embassies and Pakistan's mission worked jointly in business and investment outreach deliberately to build mutual trust in economic activities. Though it has been attempted, Saudi Arabia declined Pakistan's request for extension for deferred oil payments and preferred to retain the existing 30-day credit window. The president, Asim Hussain, accepted that no formal groundwork or relevant paperwork was attached to the request, which undermined its efficacy.

This denial further aggravated, pushing the Pakistan State Oil into a liquidity crisis that further worsened energy shortfalls (Bhutta, 2012). The much-anticipated Saudi oil financing was unavailable last, but the Pakistan relied on high-cost commercial imports. Bilateral economic initiatives had mostly remained status quo without any significant investment made or energy sector cooperation established. The Joint Commission held a session in August only left recommendations no major projects or binding agreements took shape. According to civil society and industry sources, the stalled initiatives in agriculture and IT cooperation also suffered a lack of follow-up. PPP's relentless pursuit continued to disturb Saudi officials about the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline, thus preventing much deeper Saudi strategy investment. No major diplomatic milestone or high-profile visits happened in this situation during 2012.

Analysis from 2013-2018

Positive and Negative Aspects

After congratulating Nawaz Sharif after the May elections of 2013, Saudi Arabia's ambassador expressed hopes for "continual progress and prosperity" in bilateral relations (Press, 2013). The right protocols were given to Naswaz on his private Umrah visit to Saudi Arabia in August 2013,

which might have been an indication of high esteem from Riyadh, the bestowing of the highest order of reception being in person by Prince Khalid al-Faisal (Recorder , 2013). At that time, King Abdullah personally greeted Nawaz and prayed for his success, thus displaying warmth on the royal front. The apostolic visit extremely conferred the importance of Saudi recognition of political assertion and stability in Pakistan under the PML-N government. In 2013, during the UN General Assembly the Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud Al-Faisal remarked that Saudi Arabia considered Pakistan “an important country in the Islamic world” and would be expecting “a rejuvenated Pakistan” under Nawaz (Fayyaz, 2013) . The two leaders reiterated the friendship based on mutual faith and shared positions during that UNGA. On his courtesy call in August 2013 to Pakistan, the Saudi ambassador listened to Sharif offer assurance his Government will elevate the bilateral relations to strategic heights mentioning remittances of \$3.7 billion from 1.5 million Pakistanis (Desk, 2013).

Discussions relating to commerce and economy increased with the emergence of common interests in trade, investment and energy cooperation. The Neelum-Jhelum hydropower project received a loan of \$100 million from the Saudi Fund for Development in 2013. Sharif wanted to increase business community involvement in Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. In turn, the Saudis made declarations regarding deepening cooperation beyond remittances, specifically regarding trade, energy and investment. With coverage from Saudi and Pakistani outlets, the tone of the diplomats started getting warm. Within their joint counterterrorism and defense mechanisms the Pakistani and Saudi officials clearly emphasized bilateral ties (Express, 2015) . These measures indicated a clear strategic reset for the sake of common security and development objectives. Some changes occurred in public opinion toward the Saudi collaboration trust in it had risen. Saudi statements, such as royal receptions and high-level communications, were pivotal to the realization of projects late in 2014 and beyond. Invitations, investments and protocol were combined to reinforce renewed confidence.

It is a very modest encroachment and obviously a positive one it is not equal to the institutionalized projects. Formalized bilateral investment and trade talked but not signed leaving anything meaningful. The Saudi concerns over Pakistan protecting the two Holy Mosques got underway however, actual troop deployment or security contours were not defined. Pakistan’s balancing act towards Iran intending to act as mediator spurred cautious Saudi optimism but was not an unequivocal alignment. Internationally, Saudi Arabia had extended the warmth of diplomacy but nothing concrete was going on throughout 2013 regarding sustained investment in the power and petrochemical sectors. Remittances continued to occupy center stage, but capital flows to infrastructure investment did not materialize. Engagement between the business communities did not yield formal industrial MOUs or joint ventures. It left financial cooperation requests by Pakistan for deeper energy discourse only at exploratory discussions.

Saudi ambassadorial praise "force for stability" in the cables differed from other Saudi ambassadors' ambivalence, which reflected internal Saudi divisions. While a protocol was restored, a security pact and military exercise were not committed in 2013. Regional security

cooperation on terrorism was nothing but talk and no plan at working level. Hopes were again dashed in 2013 for more Pakistani troops in Saudi Arabia. Thus, the 2013 achievement was more symbolic and preparatory and less about delivery. Without institutional agreements, the relations might revert to high protocol but low substance. The promises on business and energy were on paper rather than in action. The cautious approach of Pakistan regarding Yemeni conflict and balancing with Iran restricted Saudi gains in confidence. Critics say that early year strategy of PML-N in these matters was more optics-heavy and there was slow transition to facts in reality.

It was February 2014 when Crown Prince Salman bin Abdul Aziz came to Islamabad and was received with warmth, symbolizing that executive-level warmth between the two countries.

In March, a grant/loan amounting to \$1.5 billion was given by Saudi Arabia to Pakistan to shore up foreign exchange reserves and to fund energy and infrastructure projects. The immediate effect was felt when the rupee reached the height of 97.4 to a dollar, which strengthened up from 105. The money was given to the Pakistan Development Fund, an avenue for channeling aid into development (Reuter, 2014). This "unconditional" assistance helped the fiscal plan of PML-N and stabilized the reserves. In parallel, Saudi Arabia negotiated a deferred oil-payment facility of \$12-15 billion over 3 years to guarantee continuous fuel supply. This was viewed as Saudi Arabia's vote of confidence in Nawaz Sharif's handling of the economy. In return, Pakistan reaffirmed its support of Saudi positions in Syria, thus breaking the PPP-era neutral stance. Pakistan joined in forming the IMCTC coalition led by Saudi Arabia, signaling the growing strategic alignment. Diplomatically, the atmosphere was very positive, with Crown Prince and PM meeting several times amid high-level visits.

The two countries discussed defense relations, including potential sales of JF-17 Thunder to Saudi Arabia. Pakistani missions legalized about 900,000 Pakistani workers in Saudi Arabia in early 2014 (Affairs, 2014). Various forms were available regarding labor rights and consular assistance. Saudi loans integrated the energy and infrastructure planning in tune with the PML-N's economic vision. High-trust diplomacy symbolizes Nawaz Sharif's personal relationship with the Saudi leadership. The remittance flows were still strong from a Pakistani diaspora of approximately 1.5 million. This year contributed to restoring Pak-Saudi relations on a proactive strategic level. The 2014 package signified renewed, tangible commitments beyond verbal goodwill. Confidence in Pakistan's economic management was visibly reinforced.

Concrete MOUs on infrastructure or broad investment were not signed in 2014, despite visits by prominent officials. Saudi energy financing was oriented to short-term assistance rather than long-term structural infrastructure partnerships. Pakistan's siding with Saudi Arabia against Syria and its opposition to Iran only alarmed Tehran and made the jumpy balancing act of Islamabad even more difficult. There were rumors about Saudi Arabia's pressure on Pakistan to send troops to Yemen, which the military refuted by denying troop dispatch by August 2014. Though Pakistan reiterated that it stood with Saudi territorial integrity, it refused to send troops, which further agitated Riyadh. Limited government options were imposed as a result of backlash in Parliament and civil society against the deployment of troops.

In 2014, even after some speculation, arms deal such as the JF-17 project remained un-finalized. Worker legalization was sporadically implemented only some 900,000 received legal status while many others remained limbo. Pakistan failed to convert its empowering posture into substantial Saudi FDI. The aid provided by Saudi Arabia was sizeable, yet did not seem to be increased substantially with the long-term vision for sustained development. Domestic critics cautioned that the PML-N sacrificed Pakistan's neutrality for immediate Saudi interests (Sial, 2016). Saudi aid appeared reactive to the condition of the Pakistani economy rather than a mechanism in the deep strategic partnership. The structural energy crisis circular bill, load shedding wasn't addressed, irrespective of the short-term inflows. However, security cooperation and joint exercises had 2014 not been formalized. Pakistan's broader Middle East strategy encountered fragmentation, with Tehran uneasy and Riyadh cautious.

In March 2015, an official trip by PM Nawaz Sharif to Saudi Arabia since assuming office was consummated by meeting King Salman, Defense Minister Mohammed bin Salman, and his Crown Prince, among others, as it were a kind of coming together in strategic and diplomatic terms (News D., 2015). These meetings reiterated Saudi acknowledgment because of Pakistan's backing in the regional security picture of both those Holy Mosques-with specific reference to threats to them. They were also concerned about the threat posed by Yemen to the Gulf States. These arguments between them confirmed welcoming Ankara's pledge to strengthen co-operation on intelligence, defense and counter-terrorism. Pakistan had taken an immediate step for humanitarian action by air and naval vessels in evacuating about 1,800 citizens as a result of the escalation of conflict in Yemen. PIA flights along with two Pakistan Navy frigates PNS Aslat, PNS Shamsheer were part of the operation. While there were many built expectations toward Pakistan under Saudi pressure, Pakistan, however, held diplomatic balance by simply emptying its nationals and yet remained constructively engaged. In April 2015, Pakistan's military chief General Raheel Sharif visited Riyadh, where they reached an understanding that Pakistan would defend the territorial integrity of Saudi Arabia and its Holy Cities (Warraich, 2016). Nawaz Sharif supported all of Saudi Arabia's efforts to condemn the Houthi overthrow in all quarters both in the UN and domestically.

It is now true that Parliament adopted a resolution regarding Pakistan's symbolic "neutrality" and expressed keen interest in Saudi borders. Security cooperation deepened when Pakistan participated in joint counter-terror exercises like Al Shihab held in 2015. The military and ISPR underscored their mutual commitment to silence global extremist money channels to support terrorism in 2015. Saudi diplomats first praised Pakistan's performance towards regional stability and were considered a critical partner. Even during international pressure, PML-N still focused on organized evacuations for citizen safety. The strategic importance that Pakistan attached to its expression on the integrity of Saudi Arabia without troop commitment showed careful diplomacy. Parliamentary clarity over Yemen policy is demonstrating democracy and restraint. Humanitarian assistance in Yemen earned Pakistan accolades worldwide. Joint military exercises made mutual security alignment clear. Emergency evacuation engendered

goodwill across the region. Such support from Pakistan received accolades from the highest echelons in Saudi Arabia.

Pakistan remained firm against deploying soldiers in Yemen under a Saudi-led military coalition despite repeated requests raising concerns in Riyadh over reliability. Riyadh openly threatened to reevaluate its military and economic relationships with Islamabad on that account. The PML-N government, for some time, debated whether to deploy troops and even called an APC, but eventually, no consensus or commitment was forged (Manan, 2015). Saudi fears about Pakistan's neutrality were derived from apprehensions that Pakistan might be tilting toward Iran. General Raheel's visit did ease relations, but no authorization was given regarding troop deployment to assist Saudi Arabia in Yemen. Doubts arose over military deployment in troubled times. The Parliament's symbolic resolution on Yemen was not enough to placate Riyadh. Economic relations stagnated as the Saudis rethought long-term aid packages pending some alignment from Pakistan. Political pressure stirred in Pakistan to meet Saudi military demands was rumored. Saudi media coverage and signals emanating from the Kingdom displayed escalating exasperation. Reassessing soft loans by Saudi Arabia included a review, contingent upon alignment in Yemen. Pakistan's evasion raised questions about its strategic worth in Gulf affairs. Backlash from locals over proposed troop deployment bruises credibility of the government. Parliament's neutrality clause does not allow flexibility for the state during a regional crisis. Counterterrorism remained fine, but the broadest defense commitments were withheld. The balancing act of Pakistan might have jaded trust with Riyadh. No troop support, hence deepened military relations postponed. Overall strategic partnership is limited by the lack of deployment. Evacuations may have been good, but military abstention overshadowed goodwill.

In January 2016, Mohammad ibn Abdullah Al Ayish, assistant defense minister of Saudi Arabia, visited GHQ to confer with Gen. Raheel Sharif regarding the regional security and defense coordination (Syed, 2016). This was followed by a late-night visit by Saudi Defense Minister Prince Mohammed bin Salman to the Army HQ in August 2016, further deepening the "strategic relationship" (News D., 2016). "Thunder of the North" joint exercises that took place in March widened cooperation, with PM Nawaz Sharif and COAS Sharif watching exercises between Pakistan and Saudi forces (Express, 2016). Pakistan committed its resources in favor of Saudi territorial integrity, establishing a strategic security line of communications. Pakistan formally became part of the Saudi-led Islamic Military Counter-Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC) and later appointed Gen. Raheel as its commander.

Training exchanges were institutionalized: Pakistani trainers worked with Saudi Special Forces in October 2015–2016. An aura of loyalty was created for Pakistan. Coordinated intelligence and counter-terror collaborations also lent a lot to the above. Diplomatic signals such as high-profile meetings for defense purposes and exercises assume that trust is coupled with security cooperation. These links moved Pak-Saudi military cooperation to heights hardly reached in any previous decades.

Though there were numerous defense visits, no announcement was made regarding any new financial aid grant during the year 2016. The Saudi commitment concerning repayment or extending deferred oil payments remained unclear without any confirmation of deliveries. The appointment of Raheel Sharif as IMCTC command reflected the past momentum without any real initiative of Saudi-funded capacity-building. As Pakistan affirmed alignment in an abstract form with Saudi Arabia's strategic build-up, there were still absent actual troop deployment proposals, prompting a re-evaluation by the Saudi leadership. The joint exercises, while visible, did not materialize into formal military pacts or arms deals. Too much dependence on military cooperation risked pushing aside the economic and energy engagement. With the lack of high-profile visits by the PM or the Crown Prince, the scope of diplomacy is also limited. No new MoUs or investment agreements were signed in the year 2016. Pakistan's fiscal vulnerabilities continue to remain, with no new loans from Saudi Arabia adding to reserves under pressure.

Muhammad bin Salman brought Raheel Sharif, a former COAS of Pakistan, to head the IMCTC, which also signified a powerful trust in the leadership of Pakistan. In the very first week of January 2017, Gen. Raheel Sharif was appointed the first commander of the Islamic Military Coalition (Times , 2017). This gesture was an outright invitation to Islamabad for commitment toward counterterror cooperation following the attendance of Pakistan's defense minister and army chief at the inaugural meeting for IMCTC in Riyadh in November 2017 (Shahid K. K., 2017). Saudi accommodations included allowing Pakistan maneuverability of engagement levels "defined according to both countries' capabilities and resources," which indicated respect for the dissimilar diplomatic culture and would now probably involve a depth bilateral relationship in addressing joint requirements (Yousaf, 2017). Pakistani military advisers, including PAF pilots and trainers, had begun support to Saudi forces formally enhancing the joint operational capability. High profile Saudi defense visits Prince Mohammed bin Salman cemented a strong security dialogue with Pakistan. Saudi financial backing continued Pakistan remained a key recipient of deferred oil payments, stabilizing energy imports and forex reserves. Institutional cooperation expanded within GCC trade and labor frameworks, benefiting Pakistani workers in Saudi Arabia.

No joint combat or troop deployment was permitted under the terms of engagement of the IMCTC, which allowed Pakistan to limit its participation. Again, economic cooperation was not characterized by any major new financial packages, nor were any large-scale investments or fresh loans announced in 2017. In the meantime, promised projects like the Gwadar oil refinery or petrochemical investments remain firmly in the planning phase (Hincks, 2019). The Saudi side did not assist with counterterror operational work significantly during the coordination of the 2017 Lahore bombings (Pedia , n.d.) . The strategic ambiguity of Pakistan balancing between Saudi Arabia and Iran resulted in a diplomatic hedging confined, therefore, not allowing for a deeper strategic alignment. Lacking a troop presence was a chance for Pakistan to develop trust overtly through deployment. No large Saudi investment in infrastructure or energy was viewed in the books in 2017.

By the beginning of 2018, approximately 2,600 troops had been deployed for training and advisory roles in Saudi Arabia under a security agreement dating back to the mid-1970s (Khan K. D., 2018) . In January 2018, high-level diplomatic visits to Riyadh during which Nawaz and Shahbaz Sharif strengthened political and security ties that underscored the mutual interests of their two nations. Saudi Arabia also demonstrated its financial trust by cash depositing \$3 billion into the stabilizing account of Pakistan's foreign exchange reserves in 2018 (Kiani, 2021). Bilateral dialogues were subsequently extended to trade, energy, education and tourism in 2018, broadening the cooperation format. The Saudi leadership's revived oil facility was thus seen as a "keen support" for Pakistan's economy. The political gestures reinforced Saudi approval of PML-N's pro-Saudi alignment and Middle East policy. Army chief visits and diplomatic missions reinforced security collaboration and forward strategy in the Gulf.

Though announced the deferred oil payment facility took time to be operationalized with actual deliveries commencing only in July 2019 (News A. , 2021) . The \$3 billion cash deposit faced repayment and rollover problems, and Pakistan eventually returned \$1 billion because of wider economic constraints (Rana, 2020) . Pakistan made underutilizing of the oil facility accessing less than \$1 billion out of the \$3.2 billion quota in the first fiscal year (Rana, 2020). In 2018 notwithstanding the deployment of troops, no new strategic defense agreements or arms deals were signed. Critics pointed out that the PML-N's overtly Saudi-favoring approach particularly at the expense of Iran may have compromised Pakistan's regional balancing act. Although the deferred oil deal was purportedly agreed upon the conditions transparency and long-term guarantees remained ambiguous giving rise to doubts at home. The economic support was short-term or one-off with no prospects of making a corresponding amount of institutionalized investments in energy or infrastructure. Issues pertaining to labor welfare have often kept the limelight on the ill-treatment of Pakistani workers in the Saudi justice system.

Conclusion

The period from 2008 to 2018 was a watershed decade period in Pakistan-Saudi Arabia relations. This period has been subject to destabilizing events in the region, tides of geopolitics, and a change in the domestic political landscape of Pakistan. Under the short-lived PPP government (2008-2013), the two countries maintained bilateral relations characterized by coldness and unease, resulting from a more cautious, independent approach to foreign policy in the face of events like the Arab Spring, as well as the Middle East's violent currents. The PML-N government (2013-2018) would favor active engagement with Saudi Arabia, promoting bilateral economic cooperation, furthering defense ties and alignment with Riyadh's regional priorities, even while trying to maintain neutrality, particularly in regard to the Yemen conflict. The analysis concludes that while continuity has been firmly made in Pakistan-Saudi relations by both strategic as well as historical imperatives, the degree and tone of bilateral cooperation were accessed and influenced strongly by factors such as the ruling party's ideological leanings, leadership preferences, and foreign policy priorities by the party in power in Pakistan.

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