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Saudi Arabia and Pakistan - strategic alliance

Shaul shay

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Saudi Arabia and Pakistan have long maintained a strong strategic relationship. The Saudi-Pakistani relationship is a vast and dynamic web of cooperative linkages, age-old bonds of friendship.¹

The two countries work together extensively at the international level, within the framework of several bilateral, regional and global organizations including the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC).²

Saudi Arabia is the biggest exporter of oil and petroleum products to Pakistan, while Saudi Arabia has been a key market for Pakistani goods and services.³ Saudi Arabia, which hosts 1.9 million Pakistanis, tops the list of countries with highest remittances to Pakistan over \$4.5 billion annually.⁴

Pakistan has traditionally maintained that its bilateral relationship with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is its most important diplomatic relationship.⁵

According to the annual GFP (Global Fire Power) review, Pakistan is currently ranked 13 out of 133 countries on the list of military strength.⁶ With one of the largest armies in the world and as the only declared nuclear power in the Muslim world, Pakistan has maintained a unique position and works closely with Saudi Arabia.

Pakistani military personnel frequently serve in Saudi Arabia and its last army chief, General Raheel Sharif, now heads an Islamic army coalition based out of Riyadh.⁷

The Pakistani Inter-Services Public Relations agency said on February 17, 2018, that a contingent of troops will be stationed in Saudi Arabia on a "training and advisory mission."⁸

The announcement followed a meeting between Saudi Arabia's Ambassador, Nawaf Saeed Al-Maliki, and Pakistan Army Chief Gen Qamar Javed Bajwa at General Headquarters Rawalpindi. The contingent will join Pakistani troops that are already stationed in Saudi Arabia and will not be deployed outside the Kingdom.⁹

Pakistan's Defense Minister Khurram Dastagir, revealed that Pakistan is training some 10,000 Saudi soldiers but he did not offer further details about the presence of such a high number of Saudi soldiers on Pakistan's soil, and the nature of training being imparted. Dastagir, was giving a policy statement in the Pakistan senate on a recent government's decision to send 1000 additional troops to Saudi Arabia.¹⁰

Saudi Arabia and Pakistan's nuclear weapons program

Saudi Arabia has long aspired to achieve nuclear capacity of its own, in order to counter Iran's atomic ambitions. Saudi Arabia hasn't hidden its ambition, openly stating to the U.S. as early as 2009 that it would also seek capacity if "Iran crossed the threshold." In May 2012, former senior U.S. diplomat confirmed for the first time that Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah explicitly warned that if Iran obtains nuclear weapons, Saudi Arabia would seek to do so as well¹¹.

Saudi Arabia has had missiles capable to deliver warheads since the late 1980s. In the late 80's Saudi Arabia has secretly bought dozens of CSS-2 ballistic missiles from China. The warhead of the missile can be nuclear or conventional, and the range is 3,000 km. The estimate in 2017 was that Saudi Arabia has fewer than 50 missiles CSS-2. In summer 2013 it has been reported that a new Saudi CSS-2 base with missile launch rails was completed¹².

Saudi Arabia has little nuclear infrastructure of its own and it could rely on its close ally, Pakistan, that has a history of proliferating nuclear technology and equipment. Saudi Arabia provided generous financial support to Pakistan that enabled the nuclear program to continue, especially when the country was under sanctions. For example, in the early 1970's Pakistan received 2.5 billion USD, mainly from Libya and Saudi Arabia, to support their nuclear program¹³.

Saudi cooperation with nuclear power Pakistan has been a source of speculations about the kingdom's ambition. It has long been rumored, that in return for bankrolling the Pakistani nuclear weapons project, Saudi Arabia has a claim on some of those weapons in time of need.¹⁴

There are three main versions:

- Future Pakistani assistance would not involve Pakistan supplying Saudi Arabia with a full nuclear weapon or weapons, however, Pakistan may assist in other important ways, such as supplying sensitive equipment, materials, and know-how used in enrichment or reprocessing.
- Saudi Arabia can purchase nuclear weapons from Pakistan which are ready for delivery to the kingdom. Saudi Arabia possesses missiles capable of delivering nuclear warheads.
- Pakistan openly granting "nuclear umbrella". This means commitment to respond to a foreign force posing an existential threat to the Saudi dynasty and the Islamic holy places.¹⁵

It has never been proved though, nor has it ever been clear how such a deal would work.

Pakistani troops deployment in Saudi Arabia

Pakistan has recently announced that it is sending troops to Saudi Arabia on a “training and advice mission,” without specifying the exact number of soldiers and the role the soldiers will play there.

There are already 1,379 Pakistani servicemen deployed in Saudi Arabia, most of them are from Pakistan Army, along with a few Pakistan Air Force (PAF) and Pakistan Navy (PN) officials, according to security sources.

Pakistan Army announced the deployment decision after a meeting between Chief of Army Staff General Qamar Javed Bajwa and Saudi Ambassador to Pakistan Nawaf Saeed al-Maliki at the army headquarters in the eastern Pakistani city of Rawalpindi on February 15, 2018.¹⁶

It came after General Bajwa paid a three-day visit to Saudi Arabia earlier in February 2018 and met with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and Commander of Ground Forces Lieutenant General Prince Fahd bin Turki bin Abdulaziz.

Some sources claimed that the Pakistan army is sending a brigade of combat troops to shore up Saudi Arabia’s vulnerable southern border from reprisal attacks mounted by the Houthis in Yemen. The brigade will be based in the south of the Kingdom, but will only be deployed inside its border.¹⁷

Saudi Arabia has been pushing Pakistan since 2015 to take part in the Saudi led coalition's military campaign against the Houthis in Yemen. Pakistan’s parliament, however, has decided against the deployment of Pakistani forces to avoid backlash from sizeable Pakistani Shia Muslim community (about 20% of the Pakistani population) and deterioration in relations with neighboring Iran, which is supporting the Houthis in Yemen.¹⁸

The current policy shift comes as former Pakistan Army chief, General Raheel Sharif, is the current head of the so-called Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC), which is based in Riyadh. Sharif has already won Bin Salman's trust and convinced Pakistani military officials to further expand military ties with Saudi Arabia.

The deployment of Pakistani troops would not be the first in relations between the two states. Pakistan has long been involved in protecting Saudi Arabia:

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- *Pakistan helped formation of the Royal Saudi Air Force (RSAF) in the 1960s and trained its first jet fighter pilots. Pakistani combat pilots also flew RSAF British Lightning fighter jets during the al-Wadiah conflict between Saudi Arabia and the People's Republic of South Yemen in 1969.*
 - *Pakistani combat troops assisted Saudi forces in suppressing the Grand Mosque seizure, which occurred between November and December 1979.*
 - *Under a bilateral security cooperation agreement struck in 1982, Pakistan has accepted to help Saudi Arabia with military training, defense production and joint military exercises. Nearly 15,000 Pakistani troops were posted in Saudi Arabia throughout the 1980s.*
 - *Forces from Pakistan were based in Saudi Arabia during the first Gulf War when the kingdom feared attack by Saddam Hussein. Up to 13,000 Pakistani troops and 6,000 advisors were posted in Saudi Arabia during the first Persian Gulf War in 1991. Most were recalled after the war ended in 1988 – but a smaller contingent stayed on.¹⁹*
 - *Pakistani troops have frequently taken part in maneuvers inside Saudi Arabia alongside Saudi Armed Forces.*
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Pakistan and the war in Yemen

Riyadh has urged Pakistan to back its military campaign in Yemen with troops and equipment. Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen and increased tensions with Pakistan's neighbor Iran, has led many in Islamabad to urge caution in cultivating this relationship further.

Up to a quarter of Pakistanis are Shiite, and that proportion is reflected in the armed forces and Islamabad has been reluctant to concede to the Saudi demands fearing a political backlash at home.

In 2015, the Pakistani parliament voted to turn down a request by Saudi Arabia to join its coalition fighting the takeover of Yemen by the Houthis and their allies. Members of Pakistan's parliament opted instead for a neutral stance on the Yemen conflict, fearing it would jeopardize their efforts to balance relations with the kingdom and Iran.

At the time, the Pakistani military was also wary of any involvement in a foreign war because its forces were overstretched fighting Pakistani Taliban and other extremist groups in the north-western tribal areas and elsewhere within the country's borders.

In December 2017, Islamabad expressed grave concern over a ballistic missile attack against Saudi Arabia from Yemen. Pakistan's Foreign Ministry said the government "strongly condemns the attack, and commends the timely action by Saudi forces to destroy the missile, preventing any loss of lives." Pakistan demands that Yemeni rebels stop attacking the Kingdom, the ministry added.²⁰

Under pressure from Riyadh, Pakistan will provide troops to Saudi Arabia to help guard its vulnerable south, close to the border with Yemen. The troops to be dispatched will be an operational deployment, aimed at protecting installations against terrorism and repelling any incursion into Saudi Arabia.²¹

If the latest deployment of Pakistani troops to Saudi Arabia goes ahead it would be a sign of a marked improvement in ties between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia since the low point of 2015.

The Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism (IMAFT).

Pakistan is one of 41 members at the Saudi-led Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMAFT) which was launched by the Saudi Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman, in 2017.

Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman held a ministerial meeting of the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC). Pakistani Defense Minister Khurram Dastgir represented Pakistan at the first meeting of the IMCTC in Riyadh on November 26, 2017.

Former **Pakistan army chief, retired Gen, Raheel Sharif**, arrived to Saudi Arabia in April 2017, to assume the command of IMAFT.²² Gen Sharif was lauded at home for leading Operation Zarb-i-Azb that centered on North Waziristan, once considered the hotbed of terrorism, but his decision to serve the Saudi-led alliance has been severely criticized.

The coalition (IMAFT) was envisaged to serve as a platform for security cooperation, including provision of training, equipment and troops, and involvement of religious scholars for dealing with extremism.²³

Saudi defense forces spokesman Gen Assiri said that the alliance wasn't restricted to confronting terrorist organizations like the militant Islamic State group and Al Qaeda. He said the coalition could, at the request of a member, move against rebel groups and militias posing a threat to member countries such as Yemen's Houthis, which are supported by Iran.²⁴

The alliance is governed by a council of defense ministers of the member states. The Joint Command Centre is located in Riyadh.²⁵

Pakistan Arm's sales to Saudi Arabia

More than 20 major public and over 100 private sector firms are engaged in manufacturing defense-related products in Pakistan. While major defense products are manufactured by the armed forces-run Pakistan Ordnance Factories, Pakistan Aeronautical Complex, Heavy Industries Taxila, National Radio Telecommunication Corporation and Karachi Shipyard & Engineering Works, the private sector firms produce small supportive equipment only.²⁶

Saudia Arabia is the largest importer of Pakistani arms, and has purchased small and medium conventional weaponry worth millions of USD. The National Assembly Defense Production Committee was briefed at Parliament House by Lt Gen Omar Mahmood Hayat, chairman Pakistan Ordnance Factories (POF). During the current fiscal year, POF has secured export order worth \$81 million, and Saudi Arabia remains the biggest importer of arms and ammunition from Pakistan,” said Hayat.²⁷

Saudi "Vision 2030" and Pakistan

The "Vision 2030 "has a mandate to forge closer partnerships with foreign countries. No doubt, Pakistan has enjoyed warm relations with Saudi Arabia since the birth of the country. The relations are rooted in the centuries-old religious, cultural and commercial links between the two peoples. Moreover, the relationship is also based on shared Islamic ideals.

Saudi Arabia and Pakistan work closely within the framework of “Saudi Vision 2030.” The two countries have unexploited proven mineral resources. Thus, investment in geophysics and other mining-related disciplines will pay huge dividends in the long run.

The Saudi interest in mining industry is there to stay and Pakistan has the human resource to provide for such a demand. The" Vision 2030 "offers Pakistan an opportunity to upscale its manpower export to more skilled and managerial levels, inevitably boosting its foreign remittances. The close ties between Riyadh and Islamabad will provide more opportunities for cooperation within the "Vision 2030".

Military and security discussions

Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman Bin Abdulaziz, who also acts as Defense Minister, received Chief of Staff of the Pakistani Army General Qamar Javed Bajwa on February 5, 2018, in Riyadh. Crown Prince Mohammad and General Bajwa discussed issues of mutual interests with particular focus on military relations and how to develop them. In this context, there is talk about the possibility of Pakistan sending military troops to the Kingdom.²⁸

The meeting was attended notably by Saudi Assistant Defense Mohammad Al-Ayesh, Chief of Staff of the Saudi Armed Forces General Abdulrahman Bin Saleh Al-Bunyan, Commander of the Royal Saudi Land Forces (RSLF) Lt-General Prince Fahd Bin Turki Bin Abdulaziz and Military Adviser to Defense Minister Major-General Engineer Talal Al-Otaibi.²⁹

Saudi Deputy Defense Minister Mohammed bin Abdullah Al-Aysh on December 12, 2017, met with Pakistani Defense Minister Khurram Dastgir to discuss bilateral ties and defense cooperation. During the meeting in Islamabad, Dastgir reiterated Islamabad's commitment to safeguarding Saudi territorial integrity and the Two Holy Mosques.³⁰

On October 16, 2017, Pakistan Army Chief Gen Qamar Javed Bajwa met with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, on the sidelines of an 'anti-terror' conference organized by the Saudi Defense Ministry in Riyadh. The meeting with Crown Prince Salman came a little over two months after General Bajwa hosted Saudi Deputy Defense Minister Mohammad Bin Abdullah Al-Aysh in Rawalpindi, where Saudi domestic security was discussed in detail.

Joint military exercises

The multinational Joint Exercise "Gulf Shield-1" (March - April 2018)

The Joint Gulf Shield-1, military exercise, which was organized by Saudi Arabia Ministry of Defense lasted for a month. Tens of thousands of soldiers from 23 countries arrived in the Kingdom to join the exercise, which is considered the largest in the region in terms of the number of participating countries and the equipment used. The exercise aims to raise military readiness in the region, modernize joint mechanisms and enhance coordination and cooperation with joint military and security integration. .³¹

Pakistan was the leading contributor in the Exercise, both in personnel and assets, which are reflective of strong bilateral defense relations between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. Pakistan's Prime Minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi accompanied by Minister for Defense Khurram Dastagir and Chief of Army Staff Gen. Qamar Javed Bajwa arrived to witness the joint military exercise 'Gulf Shield-1'.³²

The Pakistan Navy Ships Tippu Sultan, Himmat and Pakistan Maritime Security Ship Basol headed by Mission Commander Commodore Muhammad Faisal Abbasi, Commander 25th Destroyer Squadron (Comdesron-25) arrived at Port Jubail, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) to participate in Joint Tri-Services Exercise Gulf Shield-1 being organized by Royal Saudi Armed Forces (RSAF).³³

Elements from Pakistan Navy Special Services Group and Pakistan Marines also participated in the exercise as part of the land contingent of all three Services of Pakistan Armed Forces. A Pakistan Navy Long Range Maritime Patrol (LRMP) P3C aircraft also participated in the exercises at sea.

The Joint Naval Exercise "Naseem Al Bahar XI" (February 2018)

The Joint Naval Exercise Naseem Al Bahar XI was conducted in Saudi Arabian Waters, between Pakistan Navy (PN) and Royal Saudi Naval Forces (RSNF). Current Exercise is 11th of Naseem Al Bahr Series. Since the inception of biennial exercise Naseem Al Bahr in 1993, it has matured as an advanced level maritime exercise involving almost all facets of naval forces. The level of participation from both sides signifies the trust and mutual confidence which prevails between the two brotherly countries.

The Joint PN – RSNF Naval Exercise Naseem Al Bahr is aimed on enhancing interoperability and sharpen the tactical proficiency in Counter Piracy, Anti Air & Surface Warfare and Mine Countermeasure Warfare. These exercises will help in developing synergy in operations against asymmetric, air, surface and mine threats. On completion of harbor phase, second phase of the Exercise included joint naval operations at sea.

The exercise comprised of a series of harbor activities to provide synergy in different domains of naval operations. It also afforded opportunity for both navies to conduct operational planning for the joint naval operations to be conducted in subsequent sea phase of the exercise. Mission Commander of Pakistan Navy and Exercise Director from RSNF closely monitored and supervised the training activities.

Conduct of Joint Maritime Exercise between Pakistan Navy and RSNF in present geo-political milieu assumes great significance and will go a long way in enhancing bilateral relations between the two countries.

Concurrently, Pakistani and RSNF Marines were also engaged in Joint Marine Exercise "Aff'aa Al Sahil".

Pakistan – Saudi Arabia joint exercise "Aff'aa Al Sahil"

The joint special operation forces maritime exercise Aff'aa Al Sahil, was held in February 2018, in Karachi. The exercise, being held between Special Forces of Pakistan Navy and the Royal Saudi Naval Forces, included a series of land and harbor drills. Aff'aa Al Sahil is a bilateral exercise being conducted annually between the two sides since 2011.³⁴

Exercise Aff'aa Al Sahil aimed at enhancing interoperability and sharpening the tactical proficiency in countering maritime human trafficking, piracy and terrorism. The exercise will help in developing synergy in operations against asymmetric and conventional threats.³⁵

Exercise Al-Saman 6

On October 26, 2017, the Pakistani Army concluded Al-Saman 6, a three-week military exercise with the Saudi Royal Land Forces. Drills included use of live ammunition, ambushing, combat patrolling and special training on how to deal with IEDs, under commanding officer Lieutenant General Akram Al Haq from the 30th Corps of the Pakistani Army.³⁶

Saudi Arabia and Pakistan's land forces held joint-exercises

Saudi Arabia and Pakistan's land forces held in October 2017, a joint-exercise in the northwestern region of the Kingdom. The Saudi Land Forces and their Pakistani counterparts took part in the joint drills in the presence of the commander of the kingdom's North-West Region, Maj. Gen. Dhafer bin Ali Al-Shehri.³⁷ The joint operations aimed to exchange military and combat expertise and to develop units and increase their field readiness, director of operations of the northwestern region Brig. Gen. Yusuf Khairallah al-Shahrani said.

"The Islamic Republic of Pakistan and its army have a long history with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Saudi Royal Land Forces. We have a common history of brotherhood and mutual trust," Brig. Gen. Mohammed Aref from the Pakistani army said at the ceremony.

Multinational exercise - 'Thunder of the North' in Saudi Arabia

In February 2016, armed forces from 20 countries, including Pakistan, conducted maneuvers in northeastern Saudi Arabia that the Saudi Press Agency (SPA) described as one of the world's biggest military exercises.

Troops from Malaysia, Turkey, Egypt, Morocco, Jordan and Sudan as well as Pakistan participated in the 'Thunder of the North' exercise, which involved ground, air and naval forces.

Summary

Saudi Arabia has becoming increasingly militarized under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, ramping up military spending, leading a military expedition in Yemen and increasing large-scale parades and training. Both Pakistan and Saudi Arabia share strong military ties. Pakistan is one of the 41 members of the Saudi-led Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC) that is being headed by Pakistan's former army chief, the retired Gen Raheel Sharif.

Saudi military is well-equipped with advanced European and American arms, but the kingdom's combat forces are not experienced and preform with limited success in the war against the Houthis in Yemen. Saudi Arabia hopes that the Pakistani Army would support to upgrade their ground forces operational capabilities.³⁸

Saudi Arabia had after the start of offensive against Houthi militia in Yemen (2015) asked Pakistan for troops deployment. However, due to domestic pressure the Pakistani government did not then commit any troops for Yemen war. The Saudi request was then politely declined on the pretext of military's extensive involvement in Operation Zarb-i-Azb against Islamic militants in Pakistan.³⁹

Pakistan has declared its neutrality in the conflict between Riyadh and Tehran, but in reality Islamabad is picking the Saudi side in the conflict.

Thousands of Pakistani troops will be deployed in 2018 to Saudi Arabia to help train and advise the kingdom's military, but the decision has led to a backlash in Pakistan with many fearing "mission creep". Islamabad did not clarify the number of troops who will be sent to Saudi Arabia but the "contingent" will join other Pakistani troops based in the kingdom.

Even if the Pakistani troops aren't physically involved in an attack in Yemen – the fact that Pakistan is bolstering Saudi defense domestically naturally makes Pakistan an integral part of the Saudi camp.

The two countries are progressing toward a comprehensive defense relationship and expanding cooperation in strategic planning.⁴⁰ If the latest deployment of Pakistani troops to Saudi Arabia goes ahead, it will be a sign of improvement in ties between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia and other Arab Gulf states since the low point of 2015.

Notes

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10,000 Saudi soldiers being trained in Pakistan, Middle East Monitor, February 19, 2018.⁴

⁵ Kunwarkhuldune Shahid, How deep ties with Pakistan's military helped Saudi purge, Asia Times, November 16, 2017.

⁶ https://www.globalfirepower.com/country-military-strength-detail.asp?country_id=pakistan

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- ¹² Ballistic and Cruise Missile Threat, June 2017, by NASIC (National Air and Space Intelligence Center).
- ¹³ <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2012/06/10/the-pak-saudi-nuke-and-how-to-stop-it>
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- ²¹ Baqir Sajjad, Raheel leaves for Riyadh to command military alliance, Dawn, April 22, 2017.
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- ²⁹ Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and military cooperation, Tactical Report, February 6, 2018.
- ³⁰ Saudi Arabia, Pakistan discusses defense cooperation, Arab News, December 12, 2017.
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