

Pakistan's Military Leadership and Defense Diplomacy: Managing Strategic Partnership with Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates

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Abstract

The emerging role of Pakistan's defense diplomacy has catalyzed change in the country, with Pakistan receiving international commendation for its growing effectiveness, signaling positive progress in global perceptions of its military institutions. Viewed through the lens of a partnership between soft and hard power, defense diplomacy is not confined solely to military affairs but extends its scope to encompass both competition and cooperation among states. Pakistan's relations with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are largely dependent on how Pakistan carries out defense diplomacy to manage its alliance, as Pakistan's relations with these states are more defense-oriented. The Pakistan military has changed its course of action and strategic outlook of policies to play a more decisive role in regional and international diplomatic collaboration and security. Therefore, the most suitable approach is to maintain relations with both countries on a strictly bilateral track, setting aside emotional considerations and focusing instead on the state's foreign policy objectives, while effectively managing external factors that may impact these relationships. In this context, the application of defense diplomacy by the Pakistan military is particularly apt, enabling the use of soft power strategies to de-escalate tensions.

Keywords

Alliance Management, Defense Diplomacy, National Interest, Military Leadership, KSA, UAE

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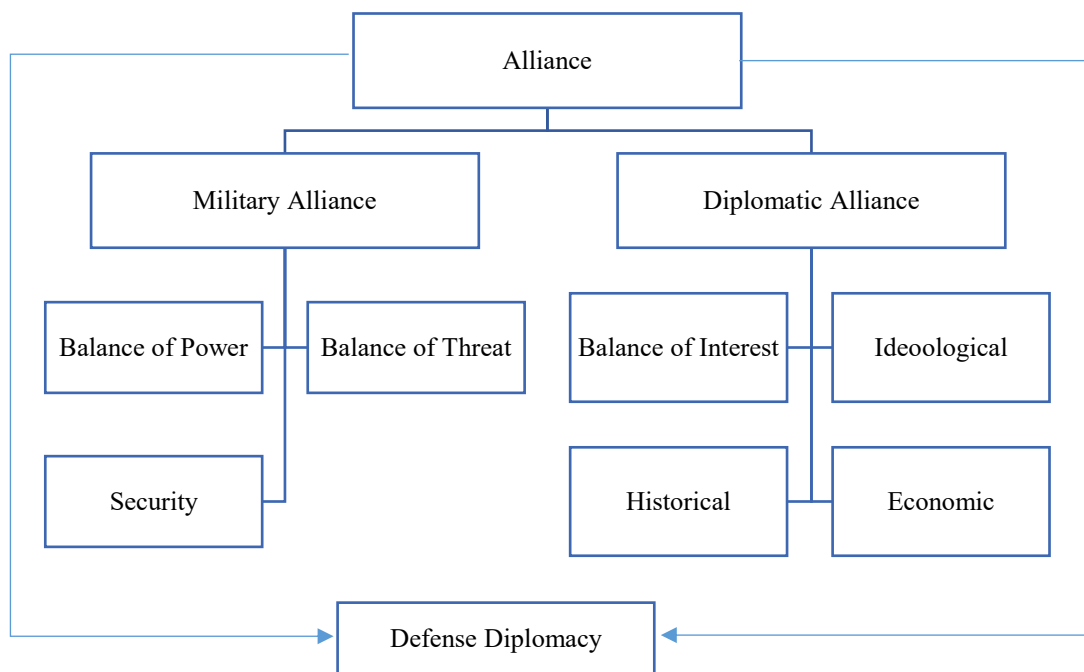
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Introduction

In an era of shifting alliances and regional realignments, Pakistan's defense diplomacy has emerged as a cornerstone of its foreign policy, particularly with pivotal Gulf states like the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). These alliances are not just mere strategic partnerships bound by historical ties, shared religious values, and mutual security interests. Instead, they are lifelines in a geopolitically volatile region. However, it should be noted that the complexities of modern diplomacy demand more than tradition; instead, they require innovation, adaptability, and leadership. As global and regional dynamics shift, these relationships face new challenges and opportunities, particularly with the growing influence of India in Gulf affairs and the increasing reliance of Pakistan on Gulf economic assistance.

Defense Diplomacy plays a significant role in fulfilling a state's diplomatic and security objectives. Given this, Pakistan's military leadership has adopted a more assertive role in managing relationships with old as well as new friends. The all-weather friendship with China, coupled with the strategic competition between the US and China, has brought defense diplomacy to the forefront in safeguarding Pakistan's strategic interests amid newly unsettled regional realities.

In the current geopolitical context, Pakistan's relations with the Gulf States, the warming of ties with Iran, the Taliban's return to power in Kabul, and the US evacuation of its citizens and allies from Afghanistan all hinge on the existence of direct channels of communication between Pakistan and the United States. This article examines the evolving dynamics of Pakistan's defense diplomacy with KSA and the UAE, analyzing the contributions of its military leadership while highlighting the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead, building on recent scholarly work that has emphasized the significance of Pakistan's military engagements in the Middle East (Kamal, 2022). This study seeks to address how Pakistan's military leadership shaped defense diplomacy with KSA and the UAE. What strategic interests drive these military-diplomatic engagements? And how do evolving regional dynamics influence the sustainability of this partnership? To explore these questions, this study adopts a qualitative research design, using historical, analytical, and comparative methods. Primary and secondary data, policy documents, official statements, media reports, and academic sources are analyzed to understand the evolution of Pakistan's defense diplomacy. The focus on KSA and UAE is based on their centrality to Pakistan's regional calculus and the military's prominent role in managing these ties.

Figure 1. Theory of Alliance

Source: Author

Alliances and Defense Diplomacy: A Conceptual Linkage

The question pertaining why states come together to form alliances is not just a unilateral dimension. Apart from the security-oriented objectives, states are also into forming alliances to satisfy the objectives that are based on political, economic, and other domestic and cultural reforms (Dwivedi, 2012). Keeping in consideration the security domain, the concepts of Alliance (see figure 1), Alignment, and Coalition are regarded as the defining elements. Alliance has been regarded as a guarantee or an assurance between states that they would stand by each other in a complex security situation and would assist each other through military power (Dar, 2018). NATO is the most significant example of an alliance, as all NATO members are responsible for the security of member states during a time of crisis.

According to Dar (2018), Stephen Walts has added another dimension, which, according to him, drives states to form alliances. In his view, it was threats that drove state behavior and not just the distribution of power. States can respond differentially to their perceptions of threat. Four possible factors act as a security threat to other states. This includes aggressive power, geographic immediacy, offensive abilities, and offensive intents (Dar, 2018). There is a variation in behavior that states adopt to secure themselves from the threats, depending on the type of alliances they form.

Walts define balancing as allying with others against the prevailing threat. He states that states can adopt balancing behavior in 2 variant ways. First, they may balance the threat by strengthening their own capabilities, a process referred to as *internal balancing*. Second, they may seek out other states with a shared perception of the threat and form alliances with them, a strategy known as *external balancing* (Morgenthau,

1948). To sum up, balancing generally refers to a state's effort to counter a prevailing threat either by enhancing its own military or political capabilities or by forming a military alliance with other states. In contrast, *bandwagoning* is defined as a strategy to preserve basic security concerns by seeking protection from a stronger and even threatening power (Liska, 1963; Schweller, 1994). In this context, the balance of threat theory offers a rational justification for alliance formation.

Another counterargument to the traditionally accepted concepts of the balance of power and the balance of threat is the concept of the *balance of interest* (Liska, 1963). Schweller (2016) challenges the notions of balance of power and threat by acknowledging that states balance to counter threats and to preserve their power and capabilities; however, he disagrees with the idea that states form alliances solely to maintain the status quo. He argues that if states are content with the existing status quo and their current power, then what compels them to engage in war and competition, especially in light of Morgenthau's concept of *maximization of power*? The balance of interest theory illustrates that alliances endure only as long as the interests of the parties are aligned. Once these interests are fulfilled, sustaining the alliance becomes increasingly difficult.

The aspect of alliance management involves planning and coordinating foreign policy preferences, synchronizing military policies, reviewing common interests, and calculating policies and actions during times of crisis (Snyder, 1990). States may exhibit two distinct behavioral phases toward an ally. In the first, both states are aligned on a particular issue or conflict, adopting a common policy and undertaking joint actions. In the second, the allied states find themselves in a conflict of interest, a situation referred to as *intra-alliance politics* or *bargaining*. Here, two options emerge: the first is to consent to the ally's interest, treating it as a common interest, which may result in engaging in a conflict or war for the ally's benefit, even if it does not serve the state's own interests. The second is to take an opposing stance, prioritizing a rational choice in the broader interest of the alliance.

In this context, two key terms apply: *abandonment* and *entrapment*. Reducing the risk of abandonment often increases the risk of entrapment, and vice versa. To avoid abandonment, states may commit firmly to their ally's choices and actions, thereby strengthening the alliance but simultaneously risking entrapment (Snyder, 1990). Entrapment occurs when a state becomes drawn into supporting actions that do not serve its own interests. Conversely, a state may refuse to support its ally on a particular issue that contradicts its own interests, resulting in abandonment. The likelihood of abandonment is influenced by the degree of dependence a state has on its ally, while the risk of entrapment largely depends on the extent of shared interests.

The optimal scenario arises when two states are less dependent on one another and less influenced by each other's policies and actions. In such cases, each state can formulate and pursue its own policies without being constrained by the preferences of its ally. Kenneth Waltz (1967) encapsulates this by noting that flexibility of alignment creates rigidity of strategy. In contrast, when states are highly dependent on an ally for security, defense, or economic support, they become more vulnerable to being shaped by the ally's interests.

The core question that arises here is: what policies should a state adopt to effectively manage an alliance? Diplomacy is regarded as a primary instrument for shaping and maintaining relationships with the rest of the world, with the core objective of achieving maximum gains without resorting to conflict. It is conducted to safeguard the state's interests, sovereignty, and integrity, while ensuring it retains an influential

voice in international affairs. The nature of diplomacy enables states to secure their national interests through negotiation, goodwill, and cooperation, thereby avoiding confrontation. Consequently, the peaceful course of action, diplomacy, remains the top priority in building and sustaining inter-state relations. Conversely, the application of violent means, namely, military force, stands as a measure of last resort. The most effective approach, therefore, is to synchronize diplomacy with defense, using both as complementary tools for managing alliances.

Defense Diplomacy as a Tool of Alliance Management

Traditionally, the role of the military has been associated with the use of force. Although the terms *military* and *defense* differ in their connotations, they are often used interchangeably. The term *military* refers specifically to actions and activities carried out solely by uniformed personnel, whereas *defense* encompasses the functions of the entire defense establishment, including non-uniformed professionals, the defense ministry, and national defense training programs (Muthanna, 2012). As Rogers (2012) aptly stated, Diplomats are just as essential to starting a war as soldiers are to finishing it. You take diplomacy out of war, and the thing would fall flat in a week.

However, *defense diplomacy* cannot be regarded as a wholly separate or independent concept; rather, it is a term born from the amalgamation of two distinct ideas. It is inherently oxymoronic, combining concepts of a seemingly contradictory nature. The word *defense* denotes the employment of hard power or the use of force to achieve a state's objectives and ensure national security. In contrast, *diplomacy* signifies the use of soft power, encompassing goodwill gestures, dialogue, cooperation, treaties, pacts, joint missions, and alliances across military, economic, political, and cultural domains. Merging these two concepts under one framework gives rise to the notion of *defense diplomacy*. Thus, the term refers to the application of soft power policies and the peaceful utilization of military capabilities in cooperative engagements with other states, particularly in multilateral settings (Davar, 2018; Pajtinka, 2016).

Pakistan's Defense Diplomacy

At present, the military operates beyond the traditional domain of the theater of war. Pakistan has adopted an inclusive strategy that integrates hard power, soft power, and smart power in a manner that effectively serves the state's security interests (Rizvi, 2020). In line with evolving global security trends, Pakistan has strategically employed defense diplomacy to enhance its international standing, particularly through bilateral military cooperation with Gulf states, an approach increasingly pursued by rising regional powers (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2021; Usman et al., 2023).

Pakistan maintains deep defense relations with the Arab world and the broader Middle East, playing an active role in providing security to Gulf states (Kamal, 2021). Numerous joint military drills are conducted between Pakistan and its Gulf partners, and Pakistan regularly trains foreign military personnel, with many of its troops stationed in Arab states. Several Pakistani military officials also serve on deputation in these countries. Among Pakistan's most important allies are KSA, Qatar, the UAE, Oman, and Turkey, all of which look to Pakistan for defense assistance in times of crisis. Pakistan has assured KSA that it will defend its territory with full strength and capacity in the event of any threat or foreign aggression.

Pakistan has taken significant steps to strengthen its military relations with KSA and the UAE through various joint military programs, training initiatives, and defense agreements (Khan, 2019). The evolving nature of international military engagement

reflects the modern armed forces contribute not only to defense but also to diplomacy, strategic dialogue, and regional balancing, roles that Pakistan's military is actively fulfilling in its outreach to KSA and the UAE (International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2021).

Military Leadership as a Pivot of Diplomacy

The formulation and execution of foreign policy traditionally fall under the domain of the Foreign Office, with arrangements made to safeguard national interests, territorial integrity, and defense provisions. However, when defense-related agreements are established with another state, military consultation becomes essential (Kinne, 2018). The concept of security has evolved from its traditional framework into a more comprehensive approach, requiring coordinated efforts from both civilian and military sectors.

In addition to the traditional methods of consultation and coordination with the military and intelligence apparatus, growing defense imperatives have positioned the General Headquarters (GHQ) as an autonomous body capable of conducting diplomacy. The office of the Army Chief (COAS) has now emerged as a central pillar of diplomatic engagement, a role it did not occupy fifteen to twenty years ago (Mahmood & Chawala, 2021). There has been a notable increase in visits to GHQ, with the Army Chief holding high-level meetings not only with military counterparts from other countries but also with senior civilian officials. Foreign delegations now appear more inclined to engage on the military front.

Both General Raheel Sharif and General Qamar Javed Bajwa undertook extensive foreign visits, meeting with the civil and military leaderships of various states (Cafiero & Wagner, 2015). In the context of KSA and the UAE, their tenures saw enhanced coordination and collaboration between Pakistan and these countries at the security level. In pursuing foreign policy objectives with these states, priority is often accorded to the military dimension of engagement.

COAS, Defense Diplomacy and Alliance Management: Case of Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

The cornerstone of Pakistan-KSA relations lies in their deep-rooted military cooperation and coordination (Shay, 2018). It was the Kingdom's need for internal security and stability, particularly after the Arab-Israel War of 1967, that necessitated the physical presence of Pakistani troops on Saudi soil, as well as the provision of military training to enhance the Saudi armed forces' capacity to handle security crises (Karim, 2019). This cooperation was later formalized through a series of defense agreements, including the *Deputation of Pakistan Armed Personnel and Military Training* pact (December 1982), the *Military Cooperation Agreement* (July 2005), and the *Provision of Military Training Services Agreement* between the Ministry of Interior of the KSA and Pakistan (May 2007) (National Assembly of Pakistan, 2007). As a result, a significant number of Pakistani military personnel are currently stationed in KSA. According to Defense Minister Khurram Dastgir, approximately 1,671 Pakistani armed forces personnel have been deployed in KSA, followed by 629 in Qatar and 66 in the UAE ("1,671 Pakistani soldiers deputed in Saudi, NA told", 2018).

A critical turning point in this alliance came with KSA's military intervention in Yemen, which sparked considerable confusion and tension between the two states. KSA formally requested military assistance from Pakistan to support its campaign in Yemen. This request, transmitted through the Foreign Office to GHQ, was met with

resistance from Pakistan's military leadership. The GHQ declined the request, citing that Pakistan's national interest did not align with KSA's military engagement in Yemen. At the time, Pakistan was already deeply involved in its own counterterrorism operations and could not afford to divert manpower, resources, and strategic capacity for external conflict. Pakistan's military had only committed to defending Saudi territory in the event of foreign aggression, not to participate in offensive military campaigns (Malik, 2020).

Despite this stance, speculations emerged that some Pakistani troops were still sent to Yemen with the consent of then Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, which, if true, bypassed military consensus. Such unilateral decisions by the civilian leadership on matters of security, without consulting the military, risk disrupting the delicate balance of civil-military relations and undermining the coherence of diplomatic engagement with other states. This incident strained the Pakistan–Saudi alliance and negatively impacted their economic relations.

These misunderstandings were later mitigated when General Raheel Sharif was selected by KSA to lead the Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism (IMAF) (Boone, 2017). Although this appointment was made in his personal capacity, the Pakistan military granted him a No Objection Certificate (NOC) and formally supported his leadership. General Qamar Javed Bajwa also played a pivotal role in mending ties with Arab states. Through personal visits and diplomatic engagements, he helped defuse tensions, reestablish trust, and negotiate mutually beneficial terms. His efforts in alliance management, based on strategic bargaining and reciprocal concessions, were instrumental in the resumption of economic assistance from Arab states to Pakistan (Shoaib, 2020).

On 15 December 2015, KSA announced the formation of the IMAF, a coalition led by KSA and comprising 41 Muslim-majority states. The alliance aimed to counter terrorism and extremism across Asia, Africa, and the volatile Middle East (Rubab, 2017). Pakistan welcomed the initiative, with then-Defense Minister Khurram Dastgir articulating that Pakistan's participation would be grounded in 'shared experience and capabilities' to counter terrorism, exchange intelligence, conduct joint trainings and exercises, and curb terror financing (Rubab, 2017).

An official Pakistani delegation, including the Prime Minister, Defense Minister, COAS, and Director General of Inter-Services Intelligence (DG ISI), visited KSA to confirm Pakistan's participation in the coalition. During the visit, the Prime Minister assured the Saudi leadership of Pakistan's commitment to provide any form of assistance and security support in the event of a defense crisis (Rubab, 2017). However, KSA's request went further; it sought Pakistan's leadership in the alliance. Responding positively, Pakistan endorsed the nomination of former COAS General Raheel Sharif as the commander of IMAF. This move signified a strong gesture of military partnership and led to the enhanced role and presence of Pakistani military personnel in the Kingdom.

Nonetheless, this decision drew mixed reactions. Several regional actors raised concerns about Pakistan's perceived neutrality, while domestic political leaders also questioned the strategic implications. General Raheel Sharif's successor, General Qamar Javed Bajwa, continued to build upon this legacy, emerging as a prominent figure in defense diplomacy. General Bajwa had previously served a three-year deputation in KSA, strengthening his familiarity with the Saudi security landscape. Under his leadership, the frequency and depth of bilateral defense engagements

increased significantly, further expanding the scope of Pakistan–KSA military relations (Karim, 2019).

General Asim Munir, after assuming the role of Pakistan's COAS in November 2022, has played a pivotal role in redefining and reinforcing Pakistan's defense diplomacy, particularly with KSA and the UAE. He made use of his proactive leadership to emphasize strategic partnerships, military capacity-building, and leveraging defense cooperation to support Pakistan's broader economic interests.

General Munir's early official visits to Riyadh in 2023 and 2024 focused on enhancing bilateral defense collaboration. During these visits, he engaged with both military and civilian leadership in KSA, aiming to scale up military training programs, joint ventures, and advisory support, especially in the areas of counterterrorism and strategic operations. He also actively explored opportunities for joint defense production aligned with KSA's *Vision 2030*, which seeks to transform the Kingdom's defense capabilities (Rizvi, 2020). These meetings reaffirmed Pakistan's enduring commitment to Saudi security, with General Munir expressing continued support for Saudi territorial integrity amid regional tensions. This aligns with historical precedents where Pakistan has stationed troops in Saudi Arabia for security purposes, a practice that General Munir has reiterated as part of defense diplomacy strategies (Iqbal, 2024).

It is, therefore, commendable that the consistent efforts of Pakistan's military leadership, alongside KSA's strategic foresight and goodwill, have sustained and advanced mutual trust and assurance between the two nations.

COAS, Defense Diplomacy and Alliance Management: Case of UAE

Pakistan and the UAE share a long-standing history of trade and economic relations that have positively contributed to the development and mutual interests of both states. Alongside its enduring involvement in the security of Gulf States, Pakistan has cultivated strategic relations with the UAE, with particular emphasis on defense cooperation and defense production. Pakistan consistently prioritizes the expansion and strengthening of military ties with Gulf partners. While the UAE possesses one of the most advanced military and defense production capabilities in the region, Pakistan has played a key role in training Gulf military personnel and maintaining an on-ground presence in the region. These factors collectively support and encourage the deepening of defense cooperation between the two nations.

As a result, Pakistan and the UAE have moved forward to enhance collaboration in defense production, joint military training programs, and both formal and informal exchanges of military personnel, ushering in a new dimension in bilateral relations (Arifeen, 2017).

General Raheel Sharif's leadership in combating terrorism, particularly through his role in the Saudi-funded Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC), positioned Pakistan as an ideal military training partner for broader regional security initiatives. This perception was reinforced during the tenure of General Qamar Javed Bajwa, who broadened the scope of military diplomacy by incorporating economic elements, becoming the first military chief to directly link physical security with economic security. He actively promoted economic diplomacy with KSA and the UAE, which led to strategic investments in Pakistan that went beyond the traditional frameworks of aid or bailouts.

General Bajwa strengthened military commitments to both Gulf states while carefully maintaining a balanced approach. He aimed to alleviate concerns from regional players such as Qatar and Iran, who had previously perceived Pakistan's

support for KSA and the UAE as a threat. His approach was not limited to tactical training or aid; rather, it was a holistic strategic framework that combined defense cooperation, economic engagement, and regional diplomacy. The close relationships cultivated between successive Pakistani army chiefs and Gulf leaderships contributed not only to economic support for various Pakistani governments but also helped ease regional tensions, acting as a diplomatic tool to mediate between conflicting Gulf actors and neighboring Iran (Alam, 2020). This diplomatic initiative was complemented by Prime Minister Imran Khan's meeting with the UAE leadership in 2018, during which reports of a financial assistance package emerged to support Pakistan's struggling economy ("Imran Khan meets UAE prime minister...", 2018).

Under General Munir's leadership, Pakistan has also intensified its defense ties with the UAE. His interactions with Emirati leaders emphasized primarily combined military trainings, such as the 'Zayed Talwar' series. He fostered his contribution in mounting Pakistan's role in training Emirati military personnel, predominantly in special operations and air force capabilities. He emphasized nurturing collaboration in emerging defense technologies, including drones and cybersecurity (Iqbal, 2024).

These initiatives align with the UAE's broader goals of modernizing its military capabilities, where Pakistan's expertise in defense training has been highly valued. General Munir's efforts have also complemented Pakistan's broader economic diplomacy, as the UAE remains a key investor and financial supporter of Pakistan during its economic crisis. Recognizing the intertwined nature of economic stability and defense partnerships, General Munir has skillfully used defense diplomacy as a conduit for economic assistance. His efforts have been instrumental in securing financial aid and investments from Gulf states. In 2023 and 2024, Saudi Arabia and the UAE pledged multi-billion-dollar financial support to Pakistan's economy (Qureshi, 2024). This assistance was often linked to assurances of enhanced bilateral defense collaboration and political stability in Pakistan.

By leveraging Pakistan's strategic and military strengths, General Munir has ensured that the country remains relevant in Gulf security dynamics. His leadership underscores Pakistan's value as a seasoned and dependable military partner with extensive experience in counterterrorism and regional security. He has also advocated for Pakistan's active participation in multilateral Gulf security arrangements, such as the IMCTC, as part of a broader strategy to counterbalance the growing defense partnerships between Gulf states and India. Through this comprehensive and forward-looking approach, General Munir has positioned Pakistan as an indispensable security and economic ally in the Gulf region ("General Asim Munir's Strategic Visits: Bridging Gaps with the Gulf", 2024).

Managing External Factors: What's for Pakistan's Defense Diplomacy

Certain factors must be taken into account when analyzing Pakistan's alliance with any state. In the case of KSA, the most critical consideration is the Iran factor. Although Pakistan does not maintain formal security ties with Iran, its relationship with Tehran nonetheless affects Pakistan's internal security dynamics. The Pakistan-Iran border has remained unstable, marked by recurring concerns over alleged Iranian support for terrorism in Balochistan, often in coordination with India. Incidents of cross-border terrorism and espionage have frequently been linked to networks operating from Iranian territory. Notably, Indian spy Kulbhushan Yadav's involvement in terrorist activities in Pakistan was traced back to Iran, further exacerbating mistrust.

Consequently, Pakistan has not enjoyed a peaceful relationship with Iran; rather, a series of misunderstandings has defined their interactions. The historical animosity between Iran and KSA has also complicated Pakistan's diplomatic balancing, as Islamabad has long been perceived to lean in favor of Riyadh. This perception has affected Pakistan's image in the Middle East, leading to accusations of a one-sided foreign policy. Iran, in turn, has expressed mistrust toward Pakistan, which has hindered the development of a more substantial bilateral relationship.

General Qamar Javed Bajwa played a key moderating role in addressing these regional tensions. His visit to Tehran aimed to de-escalate misunderstandings and set the stage for improved bilateral relations. He offered to enhance cooperation with Iran in the defense and security sectors, marking a shift toward a more neutral and balanced defense policy. As a result of Pakistan's defense diplomacy, Iran expressed support for Pakistan's position on the Kashmir issue, an important symbolic gesture. Given the regional sensitivities, Pakistan must continue to maintain a careful balance in its relations with both KSA and Iran, strategically, diplomatically, and economically, to avoid the repetition of past missteps that could jeopardize these crucial partnerships.

Strains in Pakistan-KSA relations also became evident following Riyadh's demand for the early repayment of a \$3 billion loan, of which Pakistan returned \$1 billion (Rana, 2020). The rift was fueled by Pakistan's call for the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to take a stronger stance on the Kashmir issue, which was not well received by KSA. The Kingdom's growing economic engagement with India, now one of its closest economic partners, further complicated the situation. As a result, thousands of Pakistani workers in KSA lost their jobs, many of whom were replaced by Indian labor, exacerbating Pakistan's economic difficulties given its reliance on remittances from the Gulf region.

Despite these challenges, recent developments suggest a mutual willingness to mend bilateral ties. Prime Minister Imran Khan's visit to KSA on May 7, 2021, at the invitation of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, signaled a commitment to reset the relationship. Both sides signed multiple agreements and memoranda of understanding in areas including trade, economy, and environmental cooperation (Prime Minister's Office [PMO], 2021). Before this visit, COAS General Bajwa had also visited KSA and held a meeting with the Crown Prince. According to Pakistan's military, the discussions included matters of mutual interest, regional security, the Afghan peace process, bilateral defense cooperation, and connectivity. It is evident that Pakistan's military leadership played a key role in setting the stage for political reconciliation between the two states.

A similar dynamic is evident in Pakistan's relationship with the UAE. Pakistan and the UAE have shared longstanding defense and economic ties, with specific emphasis on security cooperation, particularly in the naval domain. Pakistan has trained UAE military personnel and participated in joint defense pacts. However, despite these strong military ties, the UAE's broader strategic calculations are heavily influenced by economic interests, particularly its growing partnership with India.

India has emerged as one of the UAE's most important economic partners, with deep investments across various sectors and a large Indian expatriate community holding influential positions. Compared to Pakistani workers, the Indian workforce is generally more skilled and better integrated into the UAE's economy. This gives India considerable leverage in shaping the UAE's foreign policy priorities. Although Pakistan also maintains a significant expatriate presence in the UAE, its community is

primarily concentrated in lower-income, labor-intensive sectors, making its economic influence comparatively weaker.

This divergence explains why the UAE often refrains from publicly supporting Pakistan on sensitive issues such as Kashmir. While assurances may be given behind closed doors, public diplomacy remains limited due to the risk of jeopardizing economic relations with India. General Bajwa's regular visits to the UAE during his tenure were part of a broader effort to rebalance the relationship by clarifying Pakistan's position on regional issues, including the Yemen conflict, and emphasizing Pakistan's potential as both an economic and defense partner (Alam, 2020). Through such engagements, Pakistan's military leadership sought to use defense diplomacy to improve Pakistan's image and reinforce its strategic value.

The growing role of Israel in the UAE's foreign policy also bears significance. The normalization of UAE-Israel relations has introduced a new dimension to Gulf politics. Israel, a close ally of India, exerts indirect influence over the UAE's foreign policy decisions, particularly concerning strategic alignment in the region. The UAE-Israel partnership, formalized in the Abraham Accords, strengthens India's position in the Gulf, given Israel's role as one of India's principal defense partners and the UAE's status as India's third-largest trading partner. With vast Indian diaspora communities, maritime security concerns, and regional energy dependencies, the Gulf has become a central node in India's foreign policy, with growing implications for Pakistan (Luke, 2020).

In light of this changing strategic landscape, Pakistan must approach its relationship with the UAE pragmatically. While Pakistan remains firm on its position of non-recognition of Israel, it must also safeguard its defense-based alliance with the UAE. Managing this alliance requires balancing costs and benefits while preserving national interests. Despite political differences, both countries recognize the mutual value of their defense partnership. Pakistan should continue to pursue its diplomatic objectives with the UAE through defense diplomacy, which provides critical security benefits to the Gulf state and, in return, offers Pakistan potential economic advantages. The most viable strategy for Pakistan is to maintain bilateral relations with both KSA and the UAE, prioritizing state-centric foreign policy objectives and managing external factors that could undermine these partnerships. This is how defense diplomacy, intertwined with economic diplomacy, serves as a pragmatic tool for managing alliances and advancing Pakistan's strategic interests in an increasingly complex regional environment.

The most viable strategy for Pakistan is to maintain bilateral relations with both KSA and the UAE, prioritizing state-centric foreign policy objectives and managing external factors that could undermine these partnerships. This is how defense diplomacy, intertwined with economic diplomacy, serves as a pragmatic tool for managing alliances and advancing Pakistan's strategic interests in an increasingly complex regional environment.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study analyzed Pakistan's evolving strategic partnerships with KSA and the UAE through the framework of defense diplomacy, underscoring the expanding role of military leadership in shaping external engagements. As there is a global transition from conventional threat models to more interconnected and multidimensional approaches in the national security agendas, Pakistan's military

diplomacy also reflects a shift towards broader strategic functions beyond battlefield preparedness.

Pakistan is increasingly pursuing a multi-vector foreign policy in the current era that is marked by complex regional rivalries, transnational threats, and economic interdependence by balancing its engagements with China, Gulf states, and Western actors to maintain strategic flexibility and reduce reliance on any single power. This shift in diplomacy indicates a growing pursuit of strategic autonomy, where military diplomacy is proactive in shaping regional alignments and advancing national interests.

Pakistan Armed Forces, beyond their geographical borders, have become active players in global peacekeeping, counterterrorism collaborations, and humanitarian operations, especially under the UN framework. These efforts contribute to Pakistan's image as a responsible international actor. Moreover, the global experience of dealing with hybrid threats, cyber conflict, and non-traditional security challenges has further widened the scope of defense diplomacy.

For Pakistan, the integration of defense diplomacy into broader foreign policy is not only a strategic necessity but a reflection of evolving state behavior in a rapidly transforming geopolitical landscape. Going forward, the ability of Pakistan's military leadership to engage constructively on the international stage, while balancing internal security demands, will be key to sustaining long-term partnerships and navigating the uncertainties of a volatile region.

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