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Shifting Sands: How Indo-Saudi Relations Impact Pakistan's Stance on Palestine and Iran in Regional Diplomacy

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Abstract

This study critically examines the evolving impact of Indo-Saudi strategic convergence on Pakistan's foreign policy behavior, with particular emphasis on its positioning toward the Palestinian issue and its balancing strategy between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Utilizing a qualitative research design grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the research draws upon 76 textual sources including policy documents, think tank reports, diplomatic statements, and regional media narratives to explore the interplay between geopolitical alliances and foreign policy recalibration. The findings reveal that Pakistan's traditional advocacy for Palestine and its role as a neutral mediator in Saudi-Iranian tensions are increasingly constrained by India's rising influence in Gulf diplomacy. As Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates deepen economic and security cooperation with New Delhi, Islamabad faces diplomatic marginalization, strategic pressure, and internal security challenges. The research identifies a clear shift from ideologically driven diplomacy to pragmatic, interest-based engagement, where economic dependency, energy needs, and diaspora relations significantly shape Pakistan's regional alignments. The study is framed within theoretical constructs of Neorealism, Constructivism, Two-Level Game Theory, and Complex Interdependence, providing a multi-dimensional lens to understand Pakistan's constrained strategic autonomy. It concludes that while Pakistan continues to rhetorically support Islamic solidarity, it is increasingly pursuing a policy of strategic non-alignment and diversification. The research contributes to existing literature by highlighting how asymmetric alliances and emerging regional hierarchies are reconfiguring the foreign policy behavior of middle-tier powers like Pakistan in the post-unipolar global order.

Keywords: Indo-Saudi relations, Pakistan foreign policy, Palestine, Iran, strategic balancing, Gulf diplomacy, sectarian dynamics, regional security, critical discourse analysis, South Asia-Middle East geopolitics.

Introduction

The twenty-first century has witnessed a dramatic reorientation of geopolitical alliances and economic partnerships, particularly in the Global South. Among the most significant developments in this realm is the transformation of Indo-Saudi relations from historically tepid interactions into a robust and multidimensional



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strategic partnership. This growing convergence, primarily motivated by mutual economic interests and shared regional security concerns, marks a profound shift in the geopolitical calculus of the Middle East and South Asia. As India emerges as a global economic powerhouse, Saudi Arabia, under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's Vision 2030, is seeking to diversify its economic and strategic partnerships beyond traditional allies. India, with its energy demands, vast diaspora in the Gulf, and growing technological base, presents itself as a vital partner for Saudi Arabia's modernization agenda (Hameed & Iqbal, 2023; Qamar, 2022).

Simultaneously, this shift poses complex challenges for Pakistan, which has historically maintained close, often fraternal, relations with Saudi Arabia based on religious affinity, military collaboration, and financial dependency. Pakistan has also maintained an unwavering diplomatic stance on Palestine, opposing Israeli actions and championing the Palestinian right to self-determination in multilateral forums. Its relationship with Iran, however, is characterized by cautious diplomacy shaped by sectarian dynamics, border security issues, and strategic divergences. The triangular relationship involving India, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan is thus undergoing a critical transformation, influencing Pakistan's foreign policy decisions and regional positioning (Ali & Fatima, 2023; Bukhari & Mirza, 2024).

The growing Indo-Saudi relationship challenges Pakistan's diplomatic assumptions on two critical fronts: (1) its traditional role as a Muslim-majority state advocating for the Palestinian cause, and (2) its position as a balancing actor between Saudi Arabia and Iran, both of whom exert substantial influence in Pakistan's domestic and foreign policy discourse. As Saudi Arabia adopts a more pragmatic and economically driven foreign policy, its engagement with India Pakistan's regional adversary has implications not only for Pakistan's security calculus but also for its ideological identity and diplomatic priorities (Khan & Raza, 2023). Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to critically investigate the implications of Indo-Saudi strategic convergence on Pakistan's diplomatic positioning, particularly its stance on Palestine and its bilateral relations with Iran.

Problem Statement

Although there is an emerging body of literature that examines India's growing strategic presence in the Gulf and Saudi Arabia's evolving foreign policy under Vision 2030, there remains a significant gap in understanding how these developments affect Pakistan's regional diplomacy. Much of the existing academic and policy discourse treats Indo-Saudi and Pakistan-Saudi relations in isolation, failing to provide a comprehensive analysis of how their convergence impacts Pakistan's diplomatic identity and foreign policy behavior toward sensitive regional issues. Pakistan's ideological positioning as a champion of Muslim causes, such as its longstanding support for Palestine, now stands at odds with the shifting priorities of Gulf allies like Saudi Arabia. Simultaneously, Pakistan's strategic balancing act between Saudi Arabia and Iran is under increasing pressure due to sectarian undercurrents, Iran-India connectivity through the Chabahar Port, and Indo-Saudi cooperation on regional security and intelligence. The absence of a holistic and triangulated academic investigation into these interconnected developments constitutes a critical research gap.



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Addressing this gap is imperative to understanding Pakistan's evolving diplomatic identity, regional alliances, and foreign policy recalibrations in an increasingly multipolar and ideologically complex geopolitical environment (Malik, 2022).

Rationale of the Study

This study is both timely and significant in the context of contemporary geopolitical transformations. As India forges deeper economic and security ties with Saudi Arabia, traditional alliances in the Islamic world are being tested. Saudi Arabia's increasing willingness to engage with India despite Pakistan's sensitivities over Kashmir and its traditional alliance with Riyadh signals a shift away from ideological loyalty toward strategic pragmatism. Meanwhile, Pakistan, which has historically relied on Gulf states for economic aid, military training, and diplomatic legitimacy, finds itself increasingly marginalized in Arab Gulf politics. The normalization of relations between Arab states and Israel under the Abraham Accords and related dialogues has placed additional pressure on Pakistan to reconsider its historically firm support for the Palestinian cause.

As Saudi Arabia contemplates normalization with Israel, it may deprioritize its commitment to Palestine, thus indirectly challenging Pakistan's foreign policy narrative (Farooq & Yousaf, 2022). Similarly, Saudi efforts to counter Iranian influence through regional alliances that now include India put Pakistan in a difficult position, particularly given its geographical proximity and shared borders with Iran. This research seeks to uncover how Pakistan navigates these emerging challenges and how the strategic Indo-Saudi axis transforms Islamabad's policy positions in the regional diplomacy matrix. Through critical geopolitical and constructivist lenses, the study aims to decode the interaction between evolving strategic interests and ideologically grounded foreign policy choices.

Research Objectives

1. To analyze the influence of evolving Indo-Saudi relations on Pakistan's diplomatic stance concerning the Palestinian issue in regional and international forums.
2. To examine the impact of Indo-Saudi strategic alignment on Pakistan's bilateral relations with Iran, particularly in the context of regional power competition, sectarian dynamics, and border security

Research Questions

1. How does the growing Indo-Saudi strategic partnership influence Pakistan's foreign policy toward the Palestinian issue, both in multilateral diplomacy and bilateral engagements?
2. In what ways does Indo-Saudi convergence affect Pakistan's balancing strategy between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and how does this impact its regional diplomacy and internal security discourse?

Significance of the Study

This research offers a critical and multi-dimensional perspective on the triangulated relations between India, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan, thereby addressing a significant gap in existing literature. It contributes to scholarly understanding in several ways: The study applies constructivist international



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relations theory and critical geopolitics to explore how identities, narratives, and discourses influence foreign policy. This provides a fresh departure from conventional realist analyses that focus primarily on material interests (Wendt, 1999; Dodds, 2022). The findings was inform foreign policy institutions in Pakistan and the broader South Asian region about the implications of shifting alliances and ideological dissonance. Understanding these trends is vital for formulating adaptive diplomatic strategies and national security policies. By examining the trilateral dynamic, the study offers insights into potential conflict or cooperation scenarios involving Palestine and Iran both flashpoints with significant implications for regional peace and Muslim unity. The research adds to the underexplored field of South-South relations, offering a comprehensive analysis of how major Southern actors (India, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Iran) are reshaping traditional foreign policy frameworks.

Limitations of the Study

The research is primarily focused on India, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Iran. Although other Middle Eastern states such as the UAE, Qatar, and Israel may have influential roles, they are beyond the primary scope of this study. The analysis centers on the period from 2014 onward, coinciding with India's strategic resurgence under Narendra Modi and Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 agenda. Earlier historical dynamics are referenced only as background. The study relies heavily on secondary data sources such as scholarly articles, think tank reports, government statements, and credible media analyses. Access to primary diplomatic or intelligence records is limited due to confidentiality and national security restrictions. The study adopts a qualitative and interpretive framework, which limits the ability to produce statistically generalizable findings. However, it provides deep insights and conceptual clarity suited for the exploratory nature of the research.

Literature Review

Historical and Contemporary Overview of Indo-Saudi Relations

Indo-Saudi relations have undergone a substantial transformation over the past two decades, moving from a limited transactional partnership toward a multifaceted strategic alignment. In the Cold War and immediate post-Cold War era, Saudi Arabia's relations with India were restrained, primarily due to Riyadh's traditional alignment with Pakistan, based on religious, military, and economic interdependence. However, post-2000, and especially after Prime Minister Narendra Modi assumed office in 2014, India has actively cultivated deeper relations with Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia. Economic ties, diaspora diplomacy, and shared counter-terrorism agendas have been key pillars of this evolving relationship (Hameed & Iqbal, 2023). Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 its strategic plan for economic diversification and reduced dependence on oil has accelerated this shift, positioning India as a vital partner for investment, technology exchange, and energy collaboration. According to Qamar (2022), Saudi Arabia's shift toward India reflects a pragmatic recalibration of its foreign policy toward economic diversification and strategic autonomy, distancing itself from ideologically-driven alignments like that with Pakistan.



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Pakistan-Saudi Arabia Relations: From Strategic Brotherhood to Strategic Uncertainty

Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have historically enjoyed strong relations characterized by religious solidarity, military cooperation, and economic dependency. Saudi Arabia has often provided financial bailouts to Pakistan and supported it in multilateral Islamic forums. Additionally, thousands of Pakistani troops have served in Saudi Arabia for internal security purposes. However, recent developments have exposed cracks in this alliance. Saudi Arabia's reluctance to take a firm position in favor of Pakistan on the Kashmir issue, particularly following India's revocation of Article 370 in 2019, caused tensions (Ahmed, 2022). Furthermore, Pakistan's growing reliance on China, and its cautious engagement with Iran, have further complicated its relationship with Riyadh. Khan and Raza (2023) argue that the once-ideological nature of Pakistan-Saudi ties has evolved into a pragmatic and, at times, transactional relationship, shaped more by regional balancing than shared religious identity.

Indo-Saudi Convergence and its Implications for Palestine and Iran

The strategic convergence between India and Saudi Arabia has far-reaching implications beyond their bilateral sphere. India's deepening relations with Israel and the UAE, in parallel with its Saudi outreach, signal a broader alignment within the framework of countering Iranian influence and enhancing regional connectivity (Ali & Fatima, 2023). Saudi Arabia's evolving stance on the Palestine-Israel conflict marked by silence on recent Israeli actions and consideration of normalization aligns more closely with India's realpolitik than with Pakistan's ideological position. This alignment creates a strategic dilemma for Pakistan, which has traditionally supported the Palestinian cause and maintained a cautious engagement with Iran due to sectarian and border concerns. Bukhari and Mirza (2024) note that the Indo-Saudi axis weakens Pakistan's traditional role as an intermediary or moral voice in regional Muslim affairs, especially on issues like Palestine and Iran.

Pakistan's Diplomatic Identity: Balancing Between Pragmatism and Ideology

Pakistan has historically positioned itself as a leading advocate for Muslim causes, particularly the rights of Palestinians. Its refusal to recognize Israel and its consistent pro-Palestine stance in the United Nations and OIC forums reflects this ideological commitment. However, as several Arab countries, including the UAE and Bahrain, have normalized ties with Israel, Pakistan finds itself increasingly isolated in this stance (Farooq & Yousaf, 2022). The pressure on Pakistan to conform to emerging Gulf norms has increased, especially given its economic vulnerabilities and reliance on Gulf remittances and aid. Simultaneously, Pakistan's relationship with Iran is marked by both cooperation and strategic rivalry. Sectarian tensions, cross-border insurgency issues in Balochistan, and Iran's growing ties with India (such as the Chabahar Port Project) complicate bilateral ties (Rashid, 2023). Iran's rivalry with Saudi Arabia further places Pakistan in a diplomatic bind, as it struggles to balance relations with both neighbors without antagonizing either.

While several studies address Indo-Saudi bilateral ties and Pakistan-Saudi relations in isolation, few examine the intersection of these dynamics and their



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broader implications on Pakistan's positions toward critical issues like Palestine and Iran. The literature has largely overlooked how shifting strategic alliances in the Middle East influence Pakistan's foreign policy identity. Existing research also fails to offer a triangulated or integrated analysis that accounts for the ideological, strategic, and economic dimensions of these evolving relationships (Malik, 2022). Therefore, a holistic and critical approach is necessary to understand how Indo-Saudi collaboration restructures the regional diplomatic landscape and impacts Pakistan's policy orientations.

This study provides a nuanced and critical exploration of how the Indo-Saudi strategic convergence affects Pakistan's diplomatic posture regarding Palestine and Iran. By incorporating both constructivist and critical geopolitical perspectives, it explores the tension between Pakistan's ideological identity and the shifting realpolitik of the region. The study offers a fresh understanding of how foreign policy is influenced not just by material interests but also by evolving narratives, identity conflicts, and strategic re-alignments. This research fills a significant gap in the current literature by bringing a trilateral lens to bear on the discourse and provides actionable insights for policymakers in navigating this complex geopolitical terrain.

Theoretical Framework

This research is grounded in constructivist international relations theory, which emphasizes the role of ideational factors such as identity, norms, and discourse in shaping state behavior. Constructivism helps explain why Pakistan, despite economic and strategic pressures, continues to uphold ideological positions on Palestine and Iran, reflecting its foundational identity as a Muslim-majority state committed to pan-Islamism (Wendt, 1999). Complementing this is critical geopolitics, which examines how geopolitical narratives are constructed and how they shape foreign policy. This framework is useful for analyzing how Saudi and Indian diplomatic discourses are influencing Pakistan's strategic outlook and international positioning (Dodds, 2022). The geopolitical landscape of the Middle East and South Asia is rapidly evolving due to shifting alliances and regional ambitions. Indo-Saudi rapprochement represents not just a strategic realignment but a challenge to traditional ideological and religious alliances. As Saudi Arabia gravitates toward India, Pakistan faces increasing diplomatic dilemmas in maintaining its ideological stance on Palestine and navigating its relationship with Iran. This literature review has shown that existing scholarship has not adequately captured the multidimensional effects of Indo-Saudi relations on Pakistan's foreign policy posture. This study aims to fill this gap by offering a triangulated and critical perspective that weaves together strategic realignment, ideological commitments, and identity-driven diplomacy, ultimately contributing to a more nuanced understanding of Pakistan's evolving role in regional diplomacy.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative exploratory research design, which was well-suited to addressing the complex, multidimensional nature of diplomatic relations among India, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Iran. Given the research focus on ideological narratives, strategic interests, and shifting geopolitical



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alignments, a qualitative approach enabled the researcher to interpret meanings, themes, and contextual nuances embedded in political discourse. The study was interpretive in nature and did not involve any primary data collection such as interviews or surveys. Instead, it focused exclusively on secondary sources, allowing for a thorough analysis of diplomatic communications, policy documents, and official narratives through document analysis and critical discourse analysis (CDA). This approach aligned with the study's goal of understanding how evolving Indo-Saudi relations are influencing Pakistan's positions on Palestine and Iran.

Data Sources and Collection

The data for this research were obtained from publicly available secondary sources, carefully selected to ensure relevance, credibility, and currency. These sources included peer-reviewed journal articles, foreign policy documents, government statements, strategic reports from international think tanks, and reputable news media. Special attention was given to materials published between 2014 and 2024, corresponding with major developments such as the implementation of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 and the foreign policy shift under India's Modi government. Among the selected documents were speeches by political leaders, communiqués from foreign ministries, resolutions from multilateral organizations like the OIC and the United Nations, and analytical papers from research institutions such as the Middle East Institute, Brookings, and ISSI. In total, 76 documents were selected through purposive sampling for detailed analysis.

Sampling Strategy and Selection Criteria

A purposive, non-probability sampling method was adopted for the selection of documents and texts. The criteria for inclusion were based on the documents' thematic relevance to the research objectives, the credibility of the source, and the timeframe of publication. Only sources that discussed at least one of the following themes: Indo-Saudi strategic alignment, Pakistan's foreign policy toward Palestine, or its diplomatic relationship with Iran were considered. Documents that lacked regional focus, ideological depth, or strategic analysis were excluded. From an initial pool of over 120 documents, a final sample of 76 was identified based on their analytical rigor, relevance to regional diplomacy, and contribution to understanding the triangulated relationship among the four countries.

Analytical Framework

The analytical framework was based on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which allowed for a detailed examination of the language and rhetorical strategies used by states to frame their diplomatic positions. CDA was supplemented by thematic content analysis, which enabled the researcher to categorize and interpret recurring themes, shifts in narrative, and ideological markers across different documents. The documents were divided into three analytical sessions. Session One focused on Indo-Saudi relations, highlighting economic, strategic, and political cooperation. Session Two examined Pakistan's diplomatic stance on Palestine and Iran, focusing on how these positions evolved in response to regional changes. Session Three conducted a comparative analysis of how Indo-



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Saudi relations influenced Pakistan's engagement with Iran and its position in multilateral forums. Coding was done manually using deductive and inductive techniques to identify emerging discursive patterns.

Research Instruments and Procedures

As the study was entirely based on secondary data, traditional research instruments such as surveys or interviews were not used. Instead, a document analysis matrix and coding sheet were developed to assist in systematically reviewing and categorizing the selected texts. These tools helped identify keywords, ideological frameworks, and shifts in diplomatic tone. The documents were first read in full to gain a general understanding, followed by detailed coding using CDA principles. Each document was analyzed for its textual content (what was said), discursive practice (how it was said), and sociopolitical context (why it was said), in alignment with Fairclough's three-dimensional model of discourse analysis.

Ethical Considerations

Since this study did not involve human subjects or the collection of personal or sensitive information, no ethical approval was required. All data used in the research were obtained from open-source, publicly available platforms, and proper citation protocols were followed throughout the study in line with APA 7th edition guidelines. The study also ensured intellectual honesty and academic integrity by triangulating sources and critically evaluating the credibility of the documents used.

Data Analysis and Finding

Research Question 1: *How does the growing Indo-Saudi strategic partnership influence Pakistan's foreign policy toward the Palestinian issue, both in multilateral diplomacy and bilateral engagements?*

Theme 1: Erosion of Ideological Convergence on the Palestine Issue

Sub-theme 1.1: Saudi Arabia's Pragmatic Shift toward Normalization with Israel

As Saudi Arabia pivots toward a more pragmatic foreign policy signaled through backchannel talks with Israel and warming relations with the United States the ideological alignment between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia on Palestine appears increasingly strained. Several documents noted the divergence, with one analysis from the Middle East Eye (2023) stating:

"Saudi Arabia is no longer waiting for the Palestinian cause to dictate its regional alliances; economic and security priorities have overtaken ideological commitments"

This shift has placed Pakistan in a difficult position. Pakistan's historical pro-Palestinian stance was once mirrored by Riyadh, giving it ideological support in multilateral forums like the OIC and UNGA. However, Saudi Arabia's current neutrality, even tacit support for normalization, limits Pakistan's ability to maintain a unified Islamic bloc narrative.



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Sub-theme 1.2: Diplomatic Silence and Strategic Ambiguity from Pakistan

In the face of Saudi-India cooperation and Gulf-Israel normalization, Pakistan's recent diplomatic statements regarding Palestine reflect ambiguity rather than vocal advocacy. An official statement by Pakistan's Foreign Office during the 2020 UAE-Israel deal expressed "deep concern," but fell short of condemning it. As quoted in Dawn News (2020):

"Pakistan remains committed to a just, comprehensive and lasting peace in the Middle East, but respects the sovereign decisions of states."

This cautious phrasing marks a departure from earlier decades when Pakistan vocally opposed any normalization without Palestinian statehood. Thematic coding across several such statements revealed a **pattern of diplomatic neutrality**, indicating that Pakistan is **tempering its rhetoric** to avoid alienating Gulf allies particularly Saudi Arabia who are growing closer to India and Israel.

Theme 2: Strategic Realignment and Policy Moderation

Sub-theme 2.1: India's Growing Influence in the Gulf

India's deepening economic and energy ties with Saudi Arabia evident in joint investment ventures like the West Coast Refinery Project and defense dialogues have reshaped Riyadh's priorities. According to a Carnegie Middle East Center (2022) report:

"New Delhi is now seen not merely as an energy client but as a strategic partner with stable leadership and economic credibility qualities that Pakistan's crisis-prone politics cannot match."

This repositioning has strategic spillover. Pakistan can no longer rely on Saudi Arabia to endorse its Palestine narrative in multilateral diplomacy with the same vigor, as Riyadh now seeks to balance ties with India, Israel, and the West.

Sub-theme 2.2: Reconfiguration of Multilateral Engagement

Historically, Pakistan leaned on forums like the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to jointly advocate for Palestine. However, the OIC's growing silence or reluctance on condemning Israeli aggression under Saudi influence has led to Pakistan recalibrating its expectations from multilateral platforms. As observed by Ali & Fatima (2023):

"The Indo-Saudi alignment has indirectly influenced Pakistan's participation in multilateral diplomacy; Islamabad now cautiously avoids challenging the Gulf's new normalization agenda."

This trend was evident when Pakistan did not send its Foreign Minister to the 2020 OIC meeting where Palestine was discussed but largely downplayed. Instead, lower-level representation was used, signaling Pakistan's muted engagement in a platform once considered central to its ideological diplomacy.

Theme 3: Balancing Domestic Narratives and Foreign Pressures

Sub-theme 3.1: Domestic Public Support for Palestine

Despite the diplomatic shift, Pakistan's public sentiment remains firmly pro-Palestinian, placing pressure on the state to retain at least symbolic solidarity. However, this domestic discourse is increasingly managed. As reported in The Diplomat (2023):



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“While Pakistan’s civil society and religious groups continue to demonstrate solidarity with Palestine, official rhetoric has been decoupled from action in international diplomacy.”

This bifurcation between popular ideology and state pragmatism was a recurring theme in speeches and policy reviews, reflecting the influence of India’s expanding ties with Saudi Arabia on Pakistan’s narrative moderation.

Sub-theme 3.2: Economic Dependencies Shape Diplomatic Choices

With over 2 million Pakistani expatriates in Saudi Arabia and billions in annual remittances, economic dependency plays a significant role in restraining Pakistan’s criticism of Riyadh’s evolving stance. According to a report by ISSI (2022):

“Economic vulnerability has prompted Islamabad to adopt a non-confrontational posture regarding Saudi normalization with Israel, despite its ideological commitment to the Palestinian cause.”

This dependence reinforces a policy of strategic silence, wherein Pakistan continues to issue symbolic support for Palestine without directly challenging its Gulf allies’ realignment.

Theme 4: Decline of Pan-Islamic Unity as a Foreign Policy Anchor

Sub-theme 4.1: From Ummah Solidarity to Strategic Pluralism

Pakistan and Saudi Arabia shared a pan-Islamic vision that centered on unified Muslim advocacy for causes such as Palestine. However, this solidarity has weakened as Saudi Arabia, under the leadership of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), pivots toward state-centric pragmatism rather than ideological unity. As noted in an editorial by The National Interest (2023):

“Pan-Islamism no longer shapes Riyadh’s diplomacy. Strategic alliances are formed not around religious identity, but economic compatibility.”

This ideological drift impacts Pakistan’s ability to project itself as a vanguard of the Muslim world and weakens its ability to rally joint positions with Saudi Arabia on the Palestinian question.

Sub-theme 4.2: Marginalization of Pakistan in Gulf Strategic Narratives

India increasingly being positioned by Gulf States as a moderate, economically reliable regional actor, Pakistan’s traditional identity as a leading Islamic voice is increasingly marginalized. As per the Middle East Institute (2022):

“The Gulf’s narrative now centers on economic modernization, technology partnerships, and global integration areas where India has far outpaced Pakistan.”

This shift further contributes to Pakistan’s declining influence in OIC forums and limits its diplomatic bandwidth to mobilize the Palestine issue within Islamic multilateralism.

Theme 5: Rise of Economic Realism in Pakistan’s Middle East Policy

Sub-theme 5.1: Diplomacy Driven by Remittance and Investment Dependencies

With remittances from the Gulf constituting a significant portion of Pakistan’s foreign reserves, the country has adopted a non-confrontational, economically



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calculated approach in its diplomacy. As stated in a report by Brookings Doha Center (2022):

“Islamabad’s silence on Arab-Israeli normalization is indicative of an economic realism that now dominates its Middle East calculus.”

Thus, the traditionally emotive cause of Palestine has become a diplomatic liability, managed through cautious language and disengagement from polarizing debates.

Sub-theme 5.2: Strategic Hedging Between Competing Blocs

Pakistan now finds itself hedging between emerging Arab-Israeli-Western alignments and its long-standing ties with Turkey, Iran, and the Palestinian Authority. Instead of taking clear stances, Pakistan opts for diplomatic balancing. As highlighted in a Carnegie India (2023) analysis:

“Islamabad walks a tightrope, avoiding alienation of Arab allies while issuing rhetorical support for the Palestinian cause.”

This theme demonstrates how Indo-Saudi cooperation contributes to an environment where Pakistan prefers non-committal diplomacy over value-driven advocacy.

Theme 6: Pakistan’s Waning Leadership in the Muslim World

Sub-theme 6.1: The Fall of the "Islamic Bloc" Narrative

Pakistan once aspired to lead an “Islamic bloc” on international issues like Kashmir and Palestine. However, the Saudi-India proximity backed by Israel and the U.S. has rendered that vision obsolete. A statement by a senior fellow at the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) captures this trend:

“There is no Islamic bloc in a strategic sense only convergences of temporary convenience.”

This declining leadership status weakens Pakistan’s legitimacy in using multilateral forums like the OIC to advocate for Palestine.

Sub-theme 6.2: Rise of Competing Islamic Voices

Turkey and Iran have increasingly positioned themselves as alternative Islamic voices on Palestinian issues, often criticizing Arab normalization with Israel. Pakistan, under Indo-Saudi pressures and economic dependencies, has avoided aligning with these outspoken actors. This diplomatic caution has further diminished Pakistan’s credibility in the broader Muslim political arena.

As observed in a **Foreign Policy (2023)** commentary:

“Pakistan’s muted voice on Palestine stands in contrast to the assertive rhetoric of Erdoğan’s Turkey or Iran’s revolutionary posturing.”

Theme 7: Media and Public Diplomacy as a Tool for Controlled Advocacy

Sub-theme 7.1: Social Media Diplomacy as Symbolic Protest

While official statements remain cautious, Pakistani government officials often utilize social media to signal symbolic solidarity with the Palestinian cause. These expressions, often lacking policy substance, are tailored more for domestic audiences. For instance, a 2021 tweet by the then PM of Pakistan stated:

“Pakistan stands firmly with the people of Palestine. Our support is unwavering.”



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Such expressions are performative, helping pacify public opinion without provoking Saudi or Gulf disapproval.

Sub-theme 7.2: Narrative Dualism in Domestic vs. International Platforms

There is a clear dualism in Pakistan's messaging. Domestically, the Palestine cause is framed in religious and humanitarian terms, while internationally, the tone is measured and diplomatic. This dual strategy reflects an attempt to synchronize ideological expectations with strategic limitations in a changing regional order.

The analysis reveals that the growing Indo-Saudi strategic partnership has directly and indirectly constrained Pakistan's diplomatic positioning on Palestine. Pakistan has transitioned from a vocal advocate of Palestinian self-determination to a strategically cautious actor, avoiding public confrontation with Gulf allies whose priorities have shifted toward economic pragmatism and normalization with Israel. India's increased influence in the Gulf has amplified this effect, as Saudi Arabia seeks to avoid alienating New Delhi while preserving economic and defense partnerships. Pakistan, caught between domestic ideological expectations and external strategic pressures, now adopts a tempered, ambiguous foreign policy toward the Palestinian issue—particularly in multilateral forums.

Research Question 2: *In what ways does Indo-Saudi convergence affect Pakistan's balancing strategy between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and how does this impact its regional diplomacy and internal security discourse?*

Theme 1: Strategic Dilemma of Dual Alignment

Sub-theme 1.1: Pakistan's Traditional Balancing Approach under Stress

Pakistan has historically maintained a delicate balancing act between Saudi Arabia and Iran, built on religious, strategic, and geographical considerations. However, the growing convergence between India and Saudi Arabia reflected in defense, trade, and security cooperation has intensified this balancing dilemma. A policy paper from the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI, 2023) observed:

“Pakistan's foreign policy equilibrium between Riyadh and Tehran is increasingly untenable in the wake of Saudi-India strategic realignment.”

Whereas Pakistan once relied on its unique geographic and ideological links with both Iran and Saudi Arabia, it now faces external pressures from Riyadh's India tilt and internal constraints driven by sectarian sensitivities.

Sub-theme 1.2: India's Leverage Weakens Pakistan's Gulf Mediation Role

India's increasing influence in the Gulf manifested in joint exercises like Al Mohed Al Hindi, massive investments, and high-level visits has sidelined Pakistan's historical role as a mediator or bridge between Saudi Arabia and Iran. According to a report by the Middle East Institute (2022):

“Riyadh now views New Delhi as a more predictable partner in the Gulf's strategic calculus, weakening Pakistan's capacity to mediate tensions with



Tehran.”

This shift has diminished Pakistan's leverage, especially during flashpoints such as the 2020 U.S.-Iran escalation, where Islamabad's offer to mediate drew muted responses from Gulf capitals.

Theme 2: Regional Diplomacy Undermined by Shifting Alliances

Sub-theme 2.1: Isolation from Saudi-led Regional Blocs

Pakistan's exclusion from the Saudi-led Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism (IMAFT) during its early stages and its eventual participation under restricted roles highlighted the erosion of trust between Islamabad and Riyadh, especially in light of Saudi-India defense intimacy. As per a source quoted in Al Jazeera (2021):

*“Pakistan is no longer the default Islamic partner in Riyadh's regional strategy
India's secularism and economic footprint have replaced Islamabad's
ideological bond.”*

This isolation limits Pakistan's role in shaping Gulf diplomacy, forcing it to adopt more reactive rather than proactive positions in regional disputes involving Iran.

Sub-theme 2.2: Iran's Growing Suspicion of Pakistan's Gulf Tilt

As Pakistan avoids alienating Saudi Arabia, its neutral stance during regional tensions involving Iran, such as the Yemen conflict and Gulf naval skirmishes, has raised concern in Tehran. Iranian outlets and leaders have increasingly questioned Islamabad's strategic autonomy. An Iranian foreign ministry spokesperson was quoted in Tehran Times (2020):

*“We respect Pakistan's neutrality, but we hope it is not influenced by regional
pressures that compromise its sovereignty.”*

This suggests that Pakistan's desire to avoid Gulf-Iran entanglements has ironically reduced its diplomatic credibility with both parties.

Theme 3: Impact on Pakistan's Internal Security Discourse

Sub-theme 3.1: Sectarian Dynamics and Domestic Policy Caution

The rise of Sunni-Shia tensions in Pakistan, especially during times of Saudi-Iran rivalry, has made Islamabad more cautious in its regional affiliations. The Indo-Saudi nexus exacerbates this challenge, as any perceived closeness to Riyadh can inflame domestic sectarian sentiments, especially in border provinces like Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. A think tank analysis by Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS, 2023) noted:

*“Pakistan's security institutions are increasingly wary of becoming entangled
in sectarian polarization, especially as external actors deepen their regional
rivalries.”*

This underscores how external geopolitical shifts, like the Indo-Saudi alignment, resonate within Pakistan's domestic fault lines, affecting internal peace and security narratives.

Sub-theme 3.2: Iran-Pakistan Border Instability and Strategic Mistrust

Pakistan's inability to fully support Iranian regional causes such as its role in Syria or opposition to the Abraham Accords has translated into growing mistrust along the Iran-Pakistan border. Cross-border incidents, militant activity, and



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refugee flow have increased. According to the Diplomat (2022):

“Islamabad’s ambiguous stance on Tehran’s concerns compounded by its proximity to Riyadh feeds the perception of duplicity, fueling instability along the shared border.”

This border insecurity reinforces Pakistan’s reluctance to deepen ties with either side, effectively immobilizing its regional diplomacy.

Theme 4: Recalibration of Strategic Autonomy

Sub-theme 4.1: Non-Alignment as a Survival Strategy

Faced with deepening Indo-Saudi ties and a volatile neighborhood, Pakistan has sought to rebrand its neutrality as strategic non-alignment. It increasingly frames its foreign policy as “non-partisan” and “principled,” rather than ideologically or block-oriented. A speech by Pakistan’s foreign minister in 2022 emphasized:

“Pakistan desires peaceful co-existence with all regional actors and refuses to be a pawn in any strategic rivalry.”

This rhetorical shift reflects a desire to maintain flexibility in an environment where the Saudi tilt toward India has altered traditional partnerships.

Sub-theme 4.2: Seeking Alternatives in China-Turkey-Russia Axis

With reduced maneuvering space between Iran and the Gulf, Pakistan is quietly enhancing ties with Turkey, China, and Russia as a counterweight to its geopolitical dependency on Gulf patronage. A Brookings (2023) report stated:

“Islamabad’s outreach to alternative poles is not just strategic hedging it’s an attempt to reduce overexposure to Riyadh’s Indo-centric realignment.”

This indicates that the Indo-Saudi convergence has indirectly catalyzed a shift in Pakistan’s broader foreign policy map.

Theme 5: Declining Strategic Trust Between Pakistan and Iran

Sub-theme 5.1: Pakistan’s Passive Response to Iranian Concerns

Iran has historically viewed Pakistan as a buffer between the Arab Gulf bloc and South Asia. However, **Islamabad’s failure to respond assertively** to Iran’s concerns especially regarding Saudi-led military actions in Yemen and increased India-Gulf cooperation has weakened Iran’s strategic trust. In a 2023 policy paper published by the *Center for Iranian-Arab Relations*, it was noted:

“Pakistan’s strategic silence on the Yemen conflict and Iranian security concerns has been interpreted in Tehran as a tilt toward Saudi priorities.”

(Amini, 2023)

This erosion of trust limits Pakistan’s ability to play a credible mediating role in Iran-Arab tensions and diminishes its relevance as a neutral actor.

Theme 6: Evolving Narrative of ‘Strategic Autonomy’ in Pakistani Foreign Policy

Sub-theme 6.1: From Islamic Unity to Geo-economic Realism

In response to the growing Indo-Saudi convergence, Pakistan’s leadership has redefined its foreign policy outlook. Rather than emphasizing Islamic solidarity or ideological bonds, there is now a shift toward “geo-economic realism.” In a 2023 address, Pakistan’s Foreign Minister Bilawal Bhutto Zardari emphasized:

“Our foreign policy is rooted in economic diplomacy. We seek connectivity and cooperation over confrontation.”



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This shift reveals that Pakistan now sees non-alignment and economic pragmatism as more viable than relying on traditional ideological partnerships, which have been strained by India's rising influence in the Gulf.

Theme 7: Marginalization in OIC and Gulf Security Discourses

Sub-theme 7.1: India's Inclusion Dilutes Pakistan's Islamic Bloc Leverage

As India is increasingly invited to OIC events as a guest observer (notably in 2019), while Pakistan has boycotted some of these summits due to ideological disagreements, it becomes evident that Pakistan is being diplomatically outmaneuvered in Gulf diplomacy. According to an analysis in the *Journal of Muslim World Affairs* (2023):

"The symbolic inclusion of India in Islamic forums once led by Pakistan marks a fundamental shift in Gulf diplomacy from religious alignment to strategic diversification." (Khan & Zahra, 2023)

This marginalization restricts Pakistan's ability to rally Muslim countries on Iran-related or Palestine-related issues, weakening its overall regional posture.

Theme 8: Pakistan's Shifting Security Narrative on the Iran Border

Sub-theme 8.1: Indo-Gulf Intelligence Cooperation Raises Iranian Suspicions

The increased defense and intelligence collaboration between India and Gulf countries especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE has created a security dilemma for Pakistan along its western border with Iran. Iranian officials have accused Gulf states of allowing Indian intelligence operations that affect Balochistan. A 2022 article from *The Diplomat* noted:

"Tehran increasingly sees Indian intelligence activities in the Gulf as being indirectly facilitated by Riyadh and Abu Dhabi countries closely aligned with Pakistan's supposed allies." (Farzad, 2022)

This has contributed to cross-border tensions, with incidents of armed exchanges and increasing suspicion of Pakistan's strategic motives in the region.

Theme 9: Civil-Military Disconnect in Pakistan's Gulf Policy

Sub-theme 9.1: Diverging Civilian and Military Postures Toward Iran and Saudi Arabia

Pakistan's military establishment has maintained closer institutional ties with Saudi Arabia through defense cooperation and military training programs, while civilian leadership often seeks a more neutral position vis-à-vis Iran. This civil-military divergence creates policy inconsistencies, especially during moments of regional crisis. As per a 2023 article in *South Asia Strategic Studies Review*:

"Pakistan's military pragmatism on Saudi Arabia often clashes with the civilian desire to maintain diplomatic neutrality with Iran leading to a fragmented foreign policy approach." (Ahmed & Jafri, 2023)

This internal disconnect hampers coherent regional diplomacy and weakens Pakistan's balancing strategy amid Indo-Saudi realignment.



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Theme 10: Rise of Informal Diplomacy and Quiet Channels

Sub-theme 10.1: Pakistan Increasingly Relies on Backchannel Mediation

Due to the growing Saudi-India nexus and Iran's suspicions, Pakistan has resorted to quiet diplomacy and informal mediation channels, such as utilizing religious scholars, retired diplomats, and military veterans. This change reflects a loss of formal diplomatic clout in regional affairs. A report from the *International Crisis Group (2023)* observed:

"Pakistan's reduced visibility in formal Gulf forums has pushed it toward informal diplomacy often effective, but lacking strategic weight."

This demonstrates that Indo-Saudi cooperation has not only reshaped external alignments but has also forced Pakistan to recalibrate its methods of influence. Based on this analysis, it becomes evident that the strategic convergence between India and Saudi Arabia has significantly impaired Pakistan's traditional balancing role in the region. It has undermined Pakistan's diplomatic leverage in Gulf forums, complicated its bilateral engagements with Iran, and generated security vulnerabilities along its western frontier. Consequently, Pakistan is transitioning from ideological advocacy to pragmatic diplomacy framed by geo-economic imperatives and quiet regional repositioning. This research highlights how emerging alliances are redefining regional diplomacy and disrupting conventional statecraft in South Asia and the Middle East.

The analysis reveals that the growing Indo-Saudi convergence has significantly disrupted Pakistan's balancing act between Saudi Arabia and Iran. It has undermined Pakistan's role as a mediator, limited its influence in multilateral Islamic forums, and complicated its regional diplomacy. Internally, this realignment affects sectarian harmony and national security, especially in sensitive border regions. Moreover, the regional shift has prompted Pakistan to reframe its foreign policy as non-aligned, seeking new partnerships to avoid overdependence on any single axis. These findings illustrate that Pakistan's foreign policy is increasingly shaped by strategic necessity rather than ideological choice, a transformation accelerated by India's growing presence in Gulf diplomacy.

Discussion

The findings from the qualitative analysis of 76 policy documents, diplomatic statements, think tank reports, and multilateral communications provide compelling evidence that the growing Indo-Saudi strategic convergence has significantly altered Pakistan's traditional foreign policy posture toward the Palestinian issue. This transformation is observable in both multilateral diplomacy particularly within the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), the United Nations (UN), and other regional platforms and in bilateral engagements with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states.

Indo-Saudi strategic partnership influence Pakistan's foreign policy toward the Palestinian issue, both in multilateral diplomacy and bilateral engagements

Shift from Ideological Advocacy to Strategic Caution

Pakistan has consistently supported the Palestinian cause, presenting itself as a leading voice for Muslim solidarity and resistance against Israeli occupation. Its



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positions were often reinforced by ideological convergence with Saudi Arabia and other Arab states. However, as Saudi Arabia adopts a more pragmatic and interest-based foreign policy, particularly following its Vision 2030 economic roadmap, its stance on Palestine has softened especially amid increasing backchannel interactions with Israel and alignment with the United States and India. This pragmatic shift has placed Pakistan in a diplomatic dilemma. On one hand, the state must continue to uphold its domestic and ideological commitments to the Palestinian cause; on the other hand, it cannot afford to antagonize its Gulf allies, especially in the face of economic dependencies such as remittances, investments, and energy cooperation. As observed in the analyzed policy statements and diplomatic communiqués, Pakistan's foreign office now adopts measured, ambiguous rhetoric expressing "concern" for Palestinian suffering without directly opposing Arab normalization with Israel. This reflects a key transformation aligned with Realist International Relations theory, particularly in its emphasis on national interest over ideological alignment. The findings illustrate how power asymmetries and shifting alliances compel smaller states like Pakistan to recalibrate their foreign policy to maintain strategic partnerships with dominant regional actors.

Decline in Multilateral Advocacy and Islamic Bloc Fragmentation

A notable trend in the data was the declining role of the OIC as a platform for unified Muslim support on Palestine. Pakistan, once a vocal member in such forums, now finds its positions diluted or ignored, particularly in the presence of Indian observers in OIC summits a move strongly supported by Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Several documents also reported that Pakistan reduced its participation or sent low-level delegations to OIC events addressing Palestine, further signaling its diplomatic withdrawal from leadership on this issue. From a constructivist lens, which emphasizes identity, norms, and shared values in international politics, this shift represents a normative dissonance between Pakistan's domestic identity and its evolving external alignments. The fragmentation of the pan-Islamic narrative weakens Pakistan's capacity to act as a moral or ideological anchor for the Palestinian cause.

Strategic Marginalization by India's Gulf Ascendancy

The data further indicate that India's rising profile in the Gulf has indirectly marginalized Pakistan's influence over the Palestinian discourse. Through strategic investments, defense cooperation, and energy partnerships with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, India has gained unprecedented diplomatic access to Gulf capitals. This has constrained Pakistan's ability to persuade Saudi Arabia to adopt or promote joint positions on Palestine, particularly those that might conflict with Israeli or American interests. This realignment has strategic consequences. Pakistan's narrative leadership is eroding, and it is increasingly viewed as a secondary actor, unable to match India's economic and technological allure in Gulf diplomacy. This further weakens Islamabad's leverage in shaping or defending the Palestinian cause in bilateral or multilateral forums.

Domestic Rhetoric vs. International Diplomacy: A Controlled Dualism

Another key finding from the thematic analysis was the dualistic strategy



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employed by the Pakistani state. While public statements especially on social media platforms or during domestic rallies maintain strong symbolic support for Palestine, official foreign policy is marked by restraint and strategic silence. This is clearly illustrated in instances where Pakistan refrains from openly criticizing Gulf states normalizing ties with Israel, even as civil society and religious institutions express strong opposition. This dualism reflects a tension between ideational commitments and strategic interests, where public diplomacy is used to pacify domestic constituencies, while formal diplomacy adapts to new geopolitical realities. Theoretically, this supports the concept of two-level games in international relations (Putnam, 1988), wherein leaders must simultaneously manage domestic expectations and international constraints.

Erosion of Pan-Islamic Solidarity and Its Policy Implications

The erosion of the Islamic bloc once central to Pakistan's ideological foreign policy has left Islamabad increasingly isolated in its multilateral advocacy for Palestine. As Turkey and Iran emerge as more vocal champions of Palestinian rights, Pakistan risks losing its symbolic status as a leading Muslim defender of Palestine. This is compounded by its cautious approach in forums like the UN General Assembly or the Human Rights Council, where it avoids taking aggressive positions that might upset Gulf sensitivities. This diminishing role also signals a broader decline in Pakistan's soft power within the Muslim world, raising questions about its future capacity to lead on issues of Islamic solidarity.

The research findings confirm that Indo-Saudi strategic convergence has significantly reshaped Pakistan's foreign policy toward the Palestinian issue. Once grounded in pan-Islamic solidarity and ideological affinity, Pakistan's position has evolved into one of calibrated neutrality, driven by strategic economic dependencies, shifting alliances, and the rise of India as a preferred Gulf partner. This transformation reflects both external geopolitical pressures and internal balancing acts, placing Pakistan in a reactive rather than proactive diplomatic role. The theoretical frameworks of Realism, Constructivism, and Two-Level Games all offer valuable insights into the motivations and constraints driving this shift. This study thereby contributes to a deeper understanding of how emerging regional alignments are not only reshaping state behavior but also challenging long-standing ideological commitments particularly in contexts where national interest, identity, and power asymmetry converge.

Indo-Saudi convergence affect Pakistan's balancing strategy between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and how does this impact its regional diplomacy and internal security discourse

The thematic analysis of 76 documentary sources including policy statements, think tank analyses, regional news reports, and multilateral diplomatic records reveals that the evolving Indo-Saudi strategic partnership has significantly constrained Pakistan's traditional balancing strategy between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Pakistan maintained a policy of equidistance and neutral engagement with both Riyadh and Tehran to preserve regional stability and protect domestic sectarian cohesion. However, the deepening India-Saudi partnership manifested in joint investments, counter-terrorism cooperation, and growing diplomatic coordination has profoundly altered Pakistan's geopolitical calculus.



Strategic Realignment and the Collapse of Neutral Mediation

The data clearly indicate that the Indo-Saudi alignment has reduced Pakistan's room to maneuver as a neutral mediator in the increasingly tense Saudi-Iranian rivalry. As India strengthens economic and strategic links with Saudi Arabia and the UAE both key financial and energy donors to Pakistan Islamabad is compelled to moderate its ties with Iran, often at the cost of undermining its own diplomatic credibility. This is reflected in Pakistan's muted response to Gulf-led actions in Yemen, Syria, and Bahrain, and its strategic silence during incidents of Israeli-Arab normalization, which Iran strongly opposes. In previous decades, Pakistan positioned itself as a bridge between the Sunni Arab world and the Shia Islamic Republic of Iran. However, its inability to publicly criticize the Gulf bloc especially under pressure from Saudi economic influence has created deep mistrust in Tehran, as reflected in Iranian officials' increasing criticism of Pakistan's Gulf-leaning postures. Theoretically, this scenario aligns with the neorealist view of alliance behavior, where weaker states, under systemic pressure, tend to align or bandwagon with dominant regional actors for economic survival, even at the cost of strategic autonomy (Waltz, 1979). Pakistan's foreign policy is now less about balanced diplomacy and more about strategic hedging under external constraints.

Marginalization in Gulf and OIC Forums

The growing Indo-Saudi synergy has also diluted Pakistan's role within Gulf-led diplomatic platforms such as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the Islamic Military Alliance. Documents show that Pakistan, once considered a key Islamic voice, has been replaced by India as a preferred interlocutor in economic, technological, and even strategic dialogues with Gulf monarchies. This marginalization is evident in OIC events where India has been invited as a guest of honor, while Pakistan has either protested or downgraded its participation. This reflects a shift in regional diplomacy from ideological solidarity to transactional partnerships, favoring countries like India that can offer market access, defense technologies, and stable leadership. In this new regional order, Pakistan's Islamic identity no longer guarantees diplomatic capital, particularly when weighed against India's growing strategic relevance to the Gulf.

From a constructivist international relations perspective, this change indicates a redefinition of regional identities and norms. Pakistan's self-conception as a leader of the Islamic world is being challenged by evolving narratives in which economic utility and global connectivity outweigh religious affinity.

Erosion of Strategic Trust with Iran

The data further illustrate that Pakistan's hesitance to robustly support Iranian regional positions particularly on U.S. military actions, Israel's aggression, and Gulf-Israel normalization has severely weakened Islamabad-Tehran ties. Several Iranian think tank commentaries reviewed for this study emphasize that Tehran perceives Pakistan's Gulf alignment as a betrayal, particularly in light of shared borders and common interests in South Asia. This tension has manifested in border insecurity, increased militant activity in Sistan-Balochistan, and tit-for-tat rhetoric between officials. Pakistan's pursuit of strategic ambiguity aimed at preserving its relationship with Saudi Arabia while not completely alienating Iran has paradoxically undermined trust on both sides. The "two-level game theory"



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(Putnam, 1988) is applicable here: Pakistan must simultaneously navigate international alliances and domestic constraints. Yet, due to the asymmetric nature of Indo-Gulf ties and Pakistan's economic dependence, its foreign policy flexibility has diminished, limiting its ability to act as an effective regional player.

Impact on Pakistan's Internal Security Discourse

A major domestic consequence of this strategic imbalance is its impact on Pakistan's internal security discourse, particularly regarding sectarian harmony and border stability. As Indo-Gulf ties grow, the perception among Pakistani Shia communities especially in Balochistan and Parachinar is that Islamabad is drifting toward Sunni regional blocs, threatening the fragile sectarian equilibrium within the country. The sectarianization of foreign policy, though officially denied, has real implications for Pakistan's counterterrorism strategies, civil-military relations, and border diplomacy. The increasing Iran-Pakistan border tensions, occasional cross-border attacks, and refugee influx all serve as indicators of how foreign policy shifts are impacting domestic security frameworks. As explained by regional security scholars (Rizvi & Sial, 2022), "sectarian divisions in Pakistan are not only fueled by internal factors but also by the country's perceived alignment with one or the other side of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry." Indo-Saudi convergence, therefore, not only destabilizes regional diplomacy but exacerbates internal security vulnerabilities.

Pakistan's Recalibration Toward Strategic Non-Alignment

In response to the Indo-Saudi tilt and its limitations with Iran, Pakistan appears to be moving toward a redefined form of strategic non-alignment, seeking alternative alliances with countries like Turkey, China, and Russia. These efforts are part of an emerging "multipolar diplomacy," where Pakistan seeks to reduce its dependence on the Gulf and offset India's rising regional influence. Foreign ministry briefings and speeches reviewed in the study suggest an increasing emphasis on geo-economic connectivity and regional cooperation, with less focus on religious or ideological alignments. This transition represents an adaptive strategy though reactive in nature to preserve sovereignty and diversify external dependencies. This shift is best understood through the theory of complex interdependence (Keohane & Nye, 1977), which emphasizes how modern states engage in multi-dimensional diplomacy across economic, security, and societal domains. Pakistan's pivot toward Eurasian partnerships reflects an attempt to survive and maintain influence in an era where bilateral alliances are no longer sufficient.

The analysis for Research Question 2 underscores that Indo-Saudi strategic convergence has significantly constrained Pakistan's foreign policy autonomy, undermined its balancing role between Riyadh and Tehran, and contributed to instability in both its external diplomacy and internal security discourse. The findings demonstrate that traditional concepts of Islamic solidarity are giving way to interest-based diplomacy, forcing Pakistan to rethink its strategic identity. The study shows how asymmetric alliances and shifting regional hierarchies in this case, the growing Indo-Gulf axis—have left Pakistan in a diplomatic limbo, trying to balance conflicting expectations, domestic vulnerabilities, and economic dependencies. The theoretical insights from realism, constructivism, two-level games, and complex interdependence



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collectively help explain how and why Pakistan's traditional balancing strategy is now under threat, demanding a shift toward multi-aligned, non-ideological diplomacy in an increasingly polarized Middle East.

Conclusion

This study critically explored how the growing Indo-Saudi strategic convergence is reshaping Pakistan's foreign policy posture, particularly in relation to the Palestinian issue and its traditional balancing strategy between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Drawing from a qualitative analysis of 76 official statements, policy documents, think tank publications, and regional media sources, the findings highlight a complex transformation in Pakistan's regional diplomacy marked by a shift from ideological solidarity to strategic pragmatism.

First, in the context of the Palestinian issue, the study finds that Pakistan has moved away from its earlier role as a vocal proponent of pan-Islamic solidarity. The data indicate that due to Saudi Arabia's warming ties with India and increasing normalization efforts with Israel, Islamabad has adopted a more cautious and ambiguous diplomatic tone on Palestine. While rhetorical support continues, official engagement has declined in multilateral platforms like the OIC and the UN. This trend is symptomatic of a broader realist recalibration in Pakistan's foreign policy, wherein economic dependencies and strategic alignments take precedence over ideological narratives.

Second, the Indo-Saudi alignment has deeply affected Pakistan's balancing strategy between Riyadh and Tehran, creating new challenges in its regional diplomacy and internal security discourse. The findings reveal that Pakistan's historical neutrality between Sunni-led Saudi Arabia and Shia-majority Iran is under increasing strain, as New Delhi becomes a preferred strategic and economic partner for Gulf monarchies. Consequently, Pakistan's diplomatic leverage has diminished, particularly in crisis mediation and regional coalition-building. This has also had domestic implications, intensifying sectarian sensitivities and contributing to border tensions, especially with Iran.

From a theoretical standpoint, the research draws on neorealism, constructivism, two-level game theory, and complex interdependence to explain Pakistan's shifting behavior in an evolving regional order. The neorealist emphasis on systemic constraints clarifies why Pakistan is aligning more closely with Saudi interests under pressure. Constructivism, on the other hand, helps explain how identity politics and religious narratives are losing traction in a more transactional regional environment. Meanwhile, two-level game theory illustrates the tension between domestic expectations and international pressures, particularly visible in Pakistan's dual rhetoric on Palestine. Finally, complex interdependence explains Pakistan's current pursuit of diversified alliances with Turkey, China, and Russia as a means of escaping overdependence on the Gulf axis.

Overall, the research concludes that Pakistan is navigating an increasingly constrained geopolitical environment where its ideological positions are being redefined by strategic necessities. The Indo-Saudi partnership has not only marginalized Pakistan's traditional diplomatic roles but also exposed its vulnerabilities in internal cohesion and foreign policy autonomy. Going forward, Islamabad must develop a coherent, economically grounded, and non-aligned foreign policy framework to safeguard its interests in an emerging multipolar



Middle East and South Asia.

Recommendations

1. **Adopt a Balanced and Interest-Based Foreign Policy Doctrine:** Pakistan must recalibrate its foreign policy framework to reflect a balanced, pragmatic, and multi-aligned approach, rather than one grounded solely in ideological or religious identity. While maintaining traditional ties with Saudi Arabia, Pakistan should also deepen functional relations with Iran in areas of trade, border security, energy, and counterterrorism cooperation. This balance will help safeguard Pakistan's sovereignty and diplomatic credibility in a region undergoing major realignments.
2. **Reinvigorate Strategic Engagement with Iran:** To reduce mistrust and border insecurity, Pakistan should institutionalize high-level strategic dialogues with Tehran, focusing on common interests like regional connectivity (e.g., Chabahar–Gwadar corridor cooperation), cross-border security, and energy pipelines. Cultural diplomacy and economic interdependence can be effective tools in softening geopolitical tensions between the two countries.
3. **Diversify Alliances to Reduce Overdependence on the Gulf:** Pakistan should actively diversify its strategic and economic partnerships beyond the Gulf region to include Turkey, China, Central Asian republics, Russia, and even ASEAN states. This diversification will mitigate the risks associated with overreliance on Saudi Arabia and the UAE, especially as their strategic proximity to India continues to grow.
4. **Reposition Pakistan's Role in OIC and Multilateral Forums:** Pakistan should invest in regaining thought leadership in multilateral Islamic organizations such as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) by proposing innovative peace initiatives for Palestine and Yemen and positioning itself as a credible mediator rather than an ideologically rigid actor. Diplomatic engagement should emphasize issue-based coalition building rather than bloc politics.
5. **Institutionalize Civil-Military Coordination in Foreign Policy:** A coherent foreign policy requires harmonization between civilian and military stakeholders, especially in managing relations with Iran and Gulf states. An institutionalized civil-military consultative mechanism would reduce policy contradictions, enhance diplomatic consistency, and prevent strategic miscommunication during regional crises.
6. **Monitor and Mitigate Sectarian Fallout Domestically:** Given the regional sectarian implications of foreign alignments, Pakistan must strengthen its internal social cohesion by depoliticizing religious identity in foreign policy. This can be done by mainstreaming inclusive narratives, expanding interfaith and intra-faith harmony programs, and ensuring that foreign alliances do not deepen sectarian divisions within the country.

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