



**RESEARCH PAPER**

**Pakistan's Strategic Resurgence: A Neoclassical Realist Analysis of the Saudi-Pakistan Defence Pact in a Changing Middle East**

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**ABSTRACT**

The purpose of the research is to examine the factors that resulted in the strategic resurgence of Pakistan in the context of broader security dynamics of Middle East. As a result of this deal, Pakistan has gained diplomatic visibility and strengthened its ties with Palestine symbolically. This study utilizes a Neoclassical Realist framework to demonstrate that systemic pressures and domestic factors shape the resurgence of Pakistan. The study utilizes qualitative methods to analyse policy papers, think-tank reports, and media reports through content analysis. The findings reveal that the Saudi-Pakistan Defence Pact has increased Pakistan's regional visibility and strategic significance. It has resulted in new security partnerships and support for the Palestinian cause. The pragmatic approach of Pakistan has been limited due to the power imbalance in the Israel-Palestine conflict and constraints within domestic factors, i.e. economy and governance. Pakistan must construct a foreign policy that bridges ideological premises with a practical engagement with Muslim states for strategic resurgence with a view to restoring lost economic, political and cultural prestige.

**KEYWORDS** Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Defence Pact, Israel-Palestine Conflict, Neoclassical Realism, Middle East, Muslim-World Diplomacy

**Introduction**

One of the most significant regional developments of 2025 is the strategic resurgence of Pakistan. Geographically, Pakistan is situated at the junction of South Asia and West Asia. Throughout history, Pakistan has been dependent on its external patrons, i.e., the US and China. Additionally, the country has never become a regional power, which means it does not influence the world's politics. On September 17, 2025, the Saudi Pakistani Strategic Mutual Defence Pact was announced by the Pakistani Prime Minister, giving a fresh dimension to Pakistani regional diplomacy. The pact was signed after Israel's strike on Qatar in early September 2025. The incident added to Gulf Arab fears regarding regional security and fuelled existing beliefs that traditional external security guarantors were not fully trustworthy. The agreement states that "any aggression against either country shall be considered an aggression against both". From the statement, it is expected to bolster joint deterrence against threats and expand defence cooperation in several other domains (Reuters, 2025).

Pakistan's relations with the Muslim countries and the changing security architecture of the Middle East reflect a pragmatic approach of Pakistan in dealing with the Middle Eastern states (Brookings Institution 2025; Atlantic Council 2025).

The Defence Pact was forged at a meeting in Saudi Arabia in September 2025 between the Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and the Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman (MBS). Saudi Arabia is looking for a range of security assurances apart from the US. Pakistan wants to consolidate its defence diplomacy. It wants to do this under the banner of national rejuvenation. Pakistan's role as a resurgent power can be influenced after the

signing of the defence pact. This defensive strategy can influence political dynamics in the Middle East, such as the Israel–Palestine conflict and reassessment of alliances among Muslim majority states (Belfer Centre, 2025; Reuters, 2025; Yaseen, et. al., 2023).

According to Khan and Ahmad, Pakistan has always supported Palestinians. Pakistan has long supported an independent Palestinian state and will not recognize Israel until a two-state solution is negotiated. As a result, the defence agreement reinforces Pakistan's ideological identity and strategic ambitions, connecting domestic revivalism with global agency through a strategic partnership. Saudi-Pak defence pact indicates Pakistan's revival as a military power and its enhancement of a leadership role in the Muslim world (Khan & Ahmad, 2019).

Neoclassical Realism has been used to draw an analysis of how the external environment of Pakistan, i.e. systemic pressures, changing shifts in global polarity, regional rivalries, and internal environment, i.e. perceptions, security needs considerations, and identity politics, shaped Pakistan as a regional power in the Muslim World. According to the study, Pakistan's strategic resurgence through the deal is a result of systemic opportunities emerging from U.S. retrenchment and multipolar competition, as well as the domestic aspiration for revival of prestige and strategic relevance.

### **Literature Review**

The Saudi Arabia-Pakistan relationship has been central to the strategic dynamics of Southwest Asia for decades. The research carried out in international relations and Middle Eastern studies shows that their cooperation can't be reduced merely to aid and defence training; there are religious, commercial, and security components to the collaboration (Javaid & Musarrat, 2020). Since the mid-1970s, Saudi Arabia has funded Pakistan. In return, Pakistan aids Saudi Arabia militarily. The military forces of Saudi Arabia are trained, and the economy's vital installations have been protected by them. These mutually beneficial arrangements established a strategic partnership that can quickly adapt to changing regional and global circumstances.

### **Pakistan's Historical and Ideological Orientation**

The stance of Pakistan regarding Israel and Palestine has been most ideologically fixed in terms of Foreign Policy. Because of its religio-political identity, Pakistan opposes Israel as the broader Muslim world does. Pakistani leaders have frequently associated the backing of Palestine with moral rationale and Islamic unity. According to Khan and Ahmed, this alignment suits Pakistan's strategic interests as it can result in stronger relations with the Arab states and access to the Gulf aid and remittances. (Khan & Ahmad, 2019)

According to Al Rasheed, Pakistan's pro-Palestinian positions have been employed to counterbalance against the West. Pakistan's foreign policy has always been around morality and religion. the country has established an ideological justification for military assistance from the U.S. after balancing against it. As a result, the Palestine policy of Pakistan cannot be viewed too religiously. It relies on mixed reasoning: moral identity and practical necessity (Al Rasheed,2021).

### **Saudi Arabia's Geopolitical and Religious Role**

Saudi Arabia's foreign policy has fluctuated between pan-Islamism and pragmatic statecraft throughout history. Scholars like Al-Rasheed (2021) point out that Riyadh must articulate the balancing act. On the one hand, the Kingdom modernises its discourse economically, politically and socially towards its people. On the other hand, it has an identity as custodian of Islam's two holy mosques. It keeps a balanced approach by coordinating with the West and normalising with Israel. According to Al-Rashed, Saudi backing of Palestine is

perhaps more symbolic than anything else, but is moderated by balancing between regime-security matters and other geopolitical imperatives

As such, the Saudi-Pakistan relationship is located within a hierarchy of interconnected interests where both countries seek to assert Islamic solidarity without offending their Western partners. The partnership prospers as it offers each state the possibility of Islamic unity without engaging in a military conflict with either Israel or Iran (Al-Rasheed, 2021).

### **Defence Cooperation and Symbolic Politics**

According to Kamal, defence agreements between Muslim states have various purposes. defence agreements of Muslim states, bilaterally or multilaterally, among themselves are basically a tool of some reassurances and rhetorical deterrence rather than an operational military one. When they issue joint statements, conduct military exercises or attend defence summits, countries are creating symbolic messages. The Saudi-Pakistan defence agreement, by itself, comes to signify some meaning. It indicates soft power that serves as an inspiration not only for Muslim states but also for the West, indicating Islamic solidarity (Kamal, 2022).

According to Kamel, reassurances from state actors alone rarely provide the ability to influence the balance of power unless they are associated with institutional mechanisms, joint command structures and funding. Understanding the difference between rhetorical unity and material capacity helps us to interpret any defence pact meaningfully.

### **Global Power Competition and Multipolarity**

Various research discusses the Saudi Pakistani defence alignment in a multipolar world. According to Zahra (2023), both states are adjusting their foreign policy considering the declining unipolarity of the US and the arrival of China as a strategic alternative. Pakistan's continued involvement with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 to diversify its economy reveals the two states' quest for greater autonomy under global governance (Zahra, 2023).

According to experts from Atlantic Council (2025) and Brookings Institution (2025), the defence pact must be seen as strategic hedging – creating a range of options rather than diverting from the West. Pakistan has been cut off from Afghanistan since the Taliban took control in 2021. It has completely lost influence over Kabul. The situation in the Middle East continues to worsen. The new alliance adds a new dimension to the region's power balance. And it complicates the U.S. strategy and Israel's normalisation drive. (Atlantic Council 2025; Brookings Institution, 2025)

### **Nuclear Deterrence and Regional Stability**

Several studies examine how Pakistan's nuclear capability is impacting perceptions of deterrence and stability in South and West Asia. Pakistan's nuclear doctrine was initially developed to counterbalance Indian conventional and nuclear threats, and not to extend its shield beyond South Asia (Arms Control Association, 2023; Youns, et. al., 2025). However, nuclearization has granted political power to Pakistan, especially in the Muslim world. The detrimental dynamics of nuclear-armed adversaries, according to the International Institute for Strategic Studies, stem from their perception, not parity. Instability typically occurs due to misperceptions, not imbalances (IISS,2021)

Feroz Khan, in his book "Eating Grass: The Making of the Pakistani Bomb", reveals how the sanctions, isolation, and pressure on Pakistan cemented its nuclear option. According to Khan, external aid had helped Pakistan preserve its nuclear autonomy, deterrent credibility

and ability to extract concessions. This deterrent credibility makes the Saudi-Pakistan pact's collective defence posture strong and provides robust guarantees against the actual use of a nuclear weapon (Khan, 2012; Khan, et. a l., 2019).

### **Regional and Symbolic Implications**

The Brookings Institution (2025) and the Belfer Center (2025) highlight the fact that the defence pact may end up having more political than military repercussions for the Israel–Palestine conflict. The deal enhances Palestinian diplomatic presence and implies the solidarity that will raise the political price of coercion against Palestinians. Belfer Center (2025) comments that for a symbolic expression of solidarity to transform into real defence or reconstruction assistance, a large-scale coordination effort is needed.

The reviewed literature has identified three themes. Firstly, scholars refer to a long-standing ideological affiliation shared by Pakistan and Saudi Arabia that is based on common Islamic solidarity and commitment to the Palestinian cause, which has acted as a moral basis and legitimation of their relationship (Khan & Ahmed, 2019; Al-Rasheed, 2021). The second theme identifies the pattern of strategic pragmatism, as the two states use the rhetorical support for unity not just to assert their Muslim identity, but also to deal with their dependencies on great power states and navigate regional rivalries involving Iran and Israel and Turkey (Bukhari et al., 2025; Zahra, 2023; Muzaffar, et. al., 2017). Thirdly, authors use the rhetoric of collective defence and alliance diplomacy for mere political signalling but not operational military actions. Such deterrence, termed by the authors as symbolic deterrence. Through this event, Pakistan assures the world of its support for the Muslim cause. It shows how Pakistan wants to be seen. As the world becomes more multipolar, Pakistan is looking to leverage this for its agency. This agency is inflated as multipolarity is on the rise in states with material capacity (Kamel, 2022; Brookings Institution, 2025). However, the literature is missing an argument that these influences came together to create the emergence of Pakistan. However, literature lags in how these symbolic, ideological and strategic factors shape Pakistan's resurgence in contemporary times.

### **Theoretical Framework: Neoclassical Realism**

Neoclassical Realism is used to explain the revival of Pakistan through the Saudi–Pakistan Defence Pact and its implications for the Israel–Palestine Conflict. Neoclassical realism addresses the discrepancies between structural realism, which emphasises the global power system, and classical realism that centres on domestic politics, views of leaders, and state-society relations (Rose 1998). The current framework provides a better understanding of how systemic pressures, such as multipolarity and great-power competition, interact with domestic political imperatives and elite perceptions to shape foreign policy behaviour.

### **Structural Pressures and Systemic Constraints**

According to the neoclassical realist school of thought, Pakistan's resurgence in regional affairs is mainly attributed to systemic change; the rise of a multipolarity featuring China's ascent associated with US decline as unipolar hegemon, Russia's strategic resurgence, and the Gulf states' pursuit of autonomy efforts to expand their regional influence (Taliaferro, Lobell, & Ripsman, 2009). In contemporary times, the Saudi-Pakistan defence pact acts as a balancing mechanism. Both states aim to enhance security and diplomatic leverage by reducing dependence on Western guarantees. For decades, Pakistan has swung between the US side and regional isolation. Saudi Pakistan Defence Pact will enhance the role of Pakistan as a dominant player beyond South Asia. As a result of this defence pact, Pakistan will balance relations with China and United States of America, by taking leverage of both states and will act as sole deterrent in the Middle East region by protecting the interest of the marginalized communities. (Brookings Institution, 2025).

## Domestic Drivers and Leadership Perceptions

According to Neo Classical Realism, Systemic Pressure does not influence state behaviour alone. Domestic choices i.e. leaders' perceptions, masses expectations, bureaucracy play an important role in influencing state behaviour. In the context of Pakistan, domestic factors have greatly influenced the decision-making bodies by actively framing policies that are in domestic bodies interest. Saudi- Pakistan Defence Pact give Pakistan an opportunity to gain political legitimacy domestically as well as internationally. Moreover, from the defence pact, Pakistan will draw economic support from the Gulf countries, strengthening its economic conditions. Similarly, Saudi Arabia's leadership is seeing it as an opportunity to diversify security partnerships and consolidate regional influence at a time of uncertain U.S. commitment. Leadership plays a huge role in the decision-making of both states. Pakistani military planners see the defence deal more on a geopolitical lens. It is seen as a vehicle for Pakistan's strategic revival. One way to regain regional resurgence is through security relations with the Muslim world. Saudi leaders regard the alliance as a hedge, strengthening their autonomy against Iran, Turkey and the West (Atlantic Council, 2025).

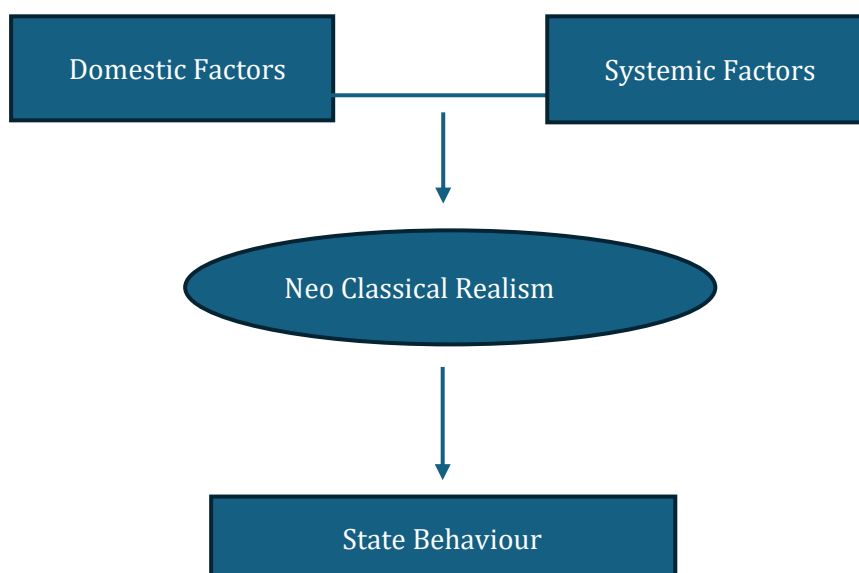


Figure 1: Theoretical Framework

## Ideational and Symbolic Dimensions

According to Neoclassical Realism, ideational and normative motivations deserve explicit recognition. According to some analysts, the defence deal has a symbolic dimension for Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. It arises from their Islamic solidarity and support of Palestine. This will enhance the domestic justification and as a result Pakistan's claim to Muslim leadership. However, these shared moral and religious commitments may also restrict state's freedom in foreign policy. They must act according to the public's hope when it comes to addressing Muslim issues like the Palestine issue. (Kamel, 2022; Al-Rasheed, 2021).

## Implications for Regional Order

Using neoclassical realism, the Saudi-Pakistan pact is a multifaceted one. It aims to achieve balance in this region, showing autonomy from the West. In Pakistan, it assists leaders in reinforcing their positive image and political legitimacy domestically. It also emphasises solidarity and revival of the Islamic identity. To sum up, all this indicates that the foreign policy of Pakistan is taking a new, stronger phase with a focus on regaining its influence, managing its weaknesses and stepping forward to take the lead in changing regional dynamics.

## **Materials and Methods**

This research uses a qualitative case study design based on Neoclassical Realism that combines systemic pressures, domestic politics, and ideational level analysis to explain a country's foreign policy. Using Content Analysis, the study is conducted in thematic form by conducting analysis from various themes i.e. Islamic resurgence, Identity, deterrence, Islamic Unity. These themes are examined from various secondary sources, which are gathered from authentic sources like academic journals, reports from think tanks, statements from government officials and well-known international media reports published between 2019 and 2025. Brookings Institution, RAND Corporation, Belfer Center, Atlantic Council, Reuters, etc., were selected for their strong analysis and current relevance of strategic issues. A content analysis method was utilised to find common themes of resurgence, identity, Islamic unity, and deterrence in the literature.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Pakistan's Strategic Resurgence in a Multipolar Order**

The Saudi–Pakistan Defence Pact (2025) signifies Pakistan's strategic resurgence in a shifting Middle East and South Asia power architecture. With the lens of neoclassical realism, this revival is seen to be a product of the interaction of systemic pressures along with domestic-level constraints. Pakistan has decided to formalise a defence agreement with Saudi Arabia as it believes the West is becoming unreliable. It also perceives that a multipolar regional order is emerging; as a result, states with diversified alignments will benefit (Rose, 1998; Schweller, 2004).

Pakistan's engagement in Gulf security politics on the systemic level marks a revival at the regional level after almost a decade of careful diplomacy. The pact will allow Islamabad to balance its deeper ties with China under the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) with renewed engagement with traditional Gulf partners. In terms of the Neoclassical Realist Expectations, states seek to adapt to changing structural constraints by selectively aligning with other states and hedging strategically (Rahim, et. al., 2018; Lobell et al, 2009; Muzaffar, et. al., 2018; Shah, et al., 2020).

### **Strategic Autonomy and Islamic Identity Diplomacy**

This agreement enhances Pakistan's defence strength and can also facilitate economic and energy cooperation. It symbolises the commitment of Pakistan towards collective defence of the Muslim World and will aid in the Muslim cause, especially the Palestinian humanitarian issue. The agreement states that "any aggression against either country shall be considered an aggression against both". As indicated by Kamel, these pacts do not have their origin in any existing or possible future military cooperation, either at the operational level or in intelligence sharing. Instead, they mostly stand as mere declarations of deterrence and solidarity (Kamal, 2022).

Pakistan's foreign policy mixes two main ideas — Islamic identity and national security — to gain support and credibility both inside the country and abroad. By building a strong relationship with Saudi Arabia, Pakistan uses the idea of Muslim unity to increase its importance and influence in the Muslim world. Moreover, Pakistan will use it as a bargaining chip with major powers i.e. China and United States of America to strengthen political stability within the Middle East.

### **Implications for the Israel–Palestine Conflict**

Saudi- Pakistan Defence Pact has major implications for the Israel-Palestine issue. According to Khan and Ahmad, this defence pact will strengthen Collective solidarity of

Muslims with the Palestinians. The agreement states that any aggression against either of the state may be considered as an aggression against both states. However, this rhetoric statement can be applied on the dynamics of South Asia. In the context of Israel, this is merely symbolic in nature. And it reflects solidarity with the Palestinians for the injustices and atrocities they are facing from Israelis. In practicality this statement does not have links that either of the state would attack Israel directly. According to Zahra, just expressing support for Gaza doesn't really make a difference on the ground. Because Israel is much stronger than Palestine, and it also gets strong support from the U.S. and Europe, any unity or alliance among Muslim countries has limited real power to change the situation. So, while such agreements or alliances may look politically strong and send a message of solidarity, they don't yet have the military or strategic strength needed to improve conditions in Palestine (Zahra, 2023)

### **Regional Rivalries and Strategic Hedging**

This deal will also change Pakistan's ties with Iran, Turkey and Qatar, bringing cooperation and competition. Iran sees the alliance between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan as possibly trying to counterbalance its influence in the Gulf, which may compel asymmetric responses and further engagement with rival powers (Malik, 2022). Turkey has a long history of NATO membership and Islamic diplomacy. Turkey is likely to regard the agreement as an opportunity for mediation, as well as view it as a sign of its marginalisation in the Gulf in terms of geopolitics.

Qatar believes the agreement shows the importance of staying neutral and following a balanced foreign policy — one that keeps good relations with the West while also being able to handle challenges within the region. For Pakistan, this is important because it acts as a “swing state” — a country that can connect different political or ideological sides and bring them together for mutual benefit when needed.

### **Symbolism and Limitations of the Defence Pact**

The agreement may enhance the status and visibility of Pakistan in the Muslim world, but it does not deliver anything substantial in operational terms. It mainly works like a political signal, and it does not act as a military alliance with clear obligations or command structures. As Neoclassical Realism shows, domestic capacity constraints, i.e. the level of public debt is close to 80 per cent of GDP, GDP growth is around 2.5 per cent, and over 40 per cent of the population is below the poverty line, reflect deep domestic constraints. The weakened state institutions, shrinking fiscal space for defence modernisation, and poor policy execution limit Pakistan's ability to convert rhetoric into sustained foreign policy output (World Bank, 2024; Shafqat, 2021). Pakistan's resurgence, in the current circumstances, should not be viewed as an attempt to re-establish itself as a regional military power; rather, it is merely a way to enhance confidence and revive importance. The actual benefit of the pact will depend on the ability of Pakistan and Saudi Arabia to transform the guarantees into long-term cooperation, i.e. joint training, defence production, and coordinated positions on Palestine and regional issues. The findings reveal that the Saudi-Pakistan Defence Pact has increased Pakistan's regional visibility and strategic significance. It has resulted in new security partnerships and support for the Palestinian cause. The pragmatic approach of Pakistan has been limited due to the power imbalance in the Israel-Palestine conflict and constraints within domestic factors, i.e. economy and governance. In general, the agreement explained Pakistan's desire to be more involved in the Muslim world, but carefully managing the hegemonic competition between the global powers.

### **Conclusion**

In a nutshell , Pakistan's resurgence in regional affairs is mainly attributed to systemic change; the rise of a multipolarity featuring China's ascent associated with US

decline as unipolar hegemon, Russia's strategic resurgence, and the Gulf states' pursuit of autonomy efforts to expand their regional influence (Taliaferro, Lobell, & Ripsman, 2009) and domestic choices i.e. leaders' perceptions, masses expectations, bureaucracy. In contemporary times, the Saudi- Pakistan defence pact acts as a balancing mechanism. This agreement enhances Pakistan's defence strength and can also facilitate economic and energy cooperation. It symbolises the commitment of Pakistan towards collective defence of the Muslim World and will aid in the Muslim cause, especially the Palestinian humanitarian issue. Similarly, Saudi Arabia's leadership is seeing it as an opportunity to diversify security partnerships and consolidate regional influence at a time of uncertain U.S. commitment. (Brookings Institution, 2025; Reuters, 2025).

The agreement offers the Palestinians symbolic support but is largely rhetorical on the Israel-Palestine issue. Al-Rasheed and Kamal claims that such expressions of solidarity would not produce any significant results, in the absence of institutional mechanisms and joint strategies. This shows larger gap between the political rhetoric and coordinated acts of the Muslim world.

### **Recommendations**

Pakistan must adopt a cautious balanced policy to take maximum advantage of Saudi-Pakistan Defence Pact. Building closer relations with Saudi Arabia should not negatively impact Pakistan's relations with regional players., i.e. Iran, Turkey, Qatar. Pakistan's defence diplomacy needs to be linked with economic reforms so that defence cooperation with countries can help Pakistan to advance trade, investment and technology in its region. Consequently, the agreement will serve for both states beyond geopolitics. It will serve as Pakistan's longest economic and strategic development.

Pakistan should take advantage of its renewed diplomatic position to play a more prominent role in the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). As a result of such multilateral cooperation in the OIC, Pakistan can enhance practical cooperation among Muslim states in defence production, counterterrorism, humanitarian assistance, and other areas. This will help Pakistan play its role as a bridge between different Muslim countries and promote collective action on the Palestinian cause and regional peace.

Overall, Pakistan should signal careful deterrence by responsibly showcasing its defence capabilities. Such a balanced stance should help Pakistan emerge as a stable, moderate and reliable player in the Middle East and South Asia (Shah & El-Dahan, 2025; RAND, 2025; RUSI, 2025).

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