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Pakistan-Gulf Strategic Partnerships after the U.S. Withdrawal from Afghanistan: Security Diversification, Economic Statecraft, and Regional Recalibration

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Abstract
The US withdrawal from Afghanistan in august 2021 altered the strategic environment in Gulf and South Asia. Pakistan relations with GCC states have become closer with long term military cooperation, strategic dialogue, economic interest, energy interdependence, investment and security coordination. The post US withdrawal from Afghanistan experiences a surge in TTP threat follows by increased tension with the TTA government. The GCC states do not want to disengage from western security architecture but at the same time desire to diversify its security relations. The significant development remains gradual layering of bilateral ties in broader GCC level framework through Pakistan-GCC Joint Action Plan for Strategic Dialogue (2022-2026) and the preliminary Free Trade Agreement marked in 2023. Saudi investment diplomacy and continued financial support, combine with UAE's investment commitments further economic security nexus. In this context, Pakistan-GCC relations have experienced strategic thickening while remaining interest driven, and short of integrated regional security architecture. The study used the methodology of process tracing and systematic content analysis of official documents, policy sources and peer-reviewed literature. The study aims to examine security diversification, economic diplomacy and regional recalibrations. the study contributes the understanding about measures both Pakistan and GCC are taking to strengthen their relations strategically.

Keywords: *Pakistan, the Gulf Cooperation Council, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Afghanistan, strategic diversification, economic statecraft, hedging, energy security, strategic dialogue.*

1. Introduction

The fall of Kabul in August 2021 is broadly believed to be the peak of the two-decades of United States military involvement in Afghanistan. It is also marked the start of the strategic reassessment for GCC and Pakistan. Initially, Pakistan considered Taliban return to power as an opportunity to decrease Indian influence in Afghanistan and therefore, improve its security on western borders. These hopes were soon challenged by the reemergence of Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP). It ensued border tensions, and strained relations with de facto Taliban regime in Kabul. By the end of 2024, TTP increased cross-border hostilities compelled Pakistan to target TTP hideouts inside Afghanistan subsequent exchanges of fire on the border showed instability as a major security concern for Pakistan (Reuters, 2024c, 2024d). These changes also underwrote to a broader reconsideration of Pakistan's regional security partnerships, counting its strategic engagement with the Gulf states.

The GCC states are facing a similar although distinct, set of strategic pressures ensuing the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan. They are questioning about the long-term reliability, permanence and predictability of U.S. security guarantees for the region. In the meanwhile, Gaza conflict after October 2023, drone and missile threat emerging from Yemen and instability in the Red Sea showing vulnerability of ports, energy infrastructure, maritime routes and main urban centers. The present study argues that Gulf States have continued to pursue defense diversification adopting strategic hedging: they remain considerably dependent on U.S. military capabilities while concurrently increasing economic, diplomatic and security relations with China, Europe, Turkey and other Asian States (Parker & Bakir,

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2024). The same strategy shows an attempt to broaden strategic option without vacating existing western security architecture.

In this changing context, Pakistan is located in a particular position. It has nuclear deterrence, considerable military, a long history of consultancy and training relations with GCC armed forces, located at the edge of Arabian sea with a political reputation in Muslim world, thus a great potential security partner.

Simultaneously Pakistan is largely dependent on energy in the Middle East expatriate workers and their remittances Middle Eastern investors to invest in Pakistan to tell to make balance of payment and goodwill. It is not simple military relations and are giving-taking affair. On the other hand, it is a complex interaction in which economic dependency security corporation political bargaining and religious legitimacy exists (Ahmed and Karim, 2024; Nasim et al., 2023).

This relation became an institution particularly in 2022. The gulf States and Pakistan agreed on a joint action plan of strategic dialogue 22-26 that encompasses the security political investment trade energy transport food security health education and culture. In September 2023, GCC and Pakistan sign a free trade agreement that provides an extra layer of institutionalization of bilateral relations. The year of 2024, Pakistan Saudi relation started to gain a momentum in terms of Economic Cooperation and investment: in April 2024, Pakistan's Prime Minister visited Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, that showed the speeding up of the first round of Saudi investment of up to $5 billion. In October 2024 Pakistan Saudi organizations announced 27 memorandums of understanding to the level off 2 billion, which world consequently announced as an emerging portfolio. May 2024 and discuss further trade economic and development corporation (Government of Pakistan, MoFA, 2024a, 2024b; AP, 2024; Reuters, 2024a; WAM, 2025). The main argument of this study is that it is an era of strategic thickening not strategic alliances. In this perspective, security ties remained important, but the most important aspect is that strengthening of defense cooperation, initiate investment diplomacy, financial assistance and shared concerns over regional security. Consequently, in a stretchier form of alignment, with larger strategic depth but without an automatic collective-defense pledge or a integrated command structure.

2. Research Problem

Current works on Pakistan–Gulf relations has mainly studied military collaboration, energy dependency, religious linkages, remittances, and Saudi impact as isolated dimensions of the relationship. Likewise, major post-2021 developments—together with the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, broadening of Gulf defense, Saudi–Iranian rapprochement, maritime security rivalry, and Gulf financial assistance—have normally been studied in isolation. The vital research problem is hence the absence of a unified explanation of how these economic, security, and diplomatic developments interrelated to reshape Pakistan–Gulf relations after 2021. This incoherent approach makes it problematic to explain why, increasing investment, financial assistance, and GCC diplomacy growingly intertwined with security cooperation amid domestic and regional instability. The present paper analyzing this gap by examining these developments as interconnected processes contributive to the strategic deepening of GCC-Pakistan relations.

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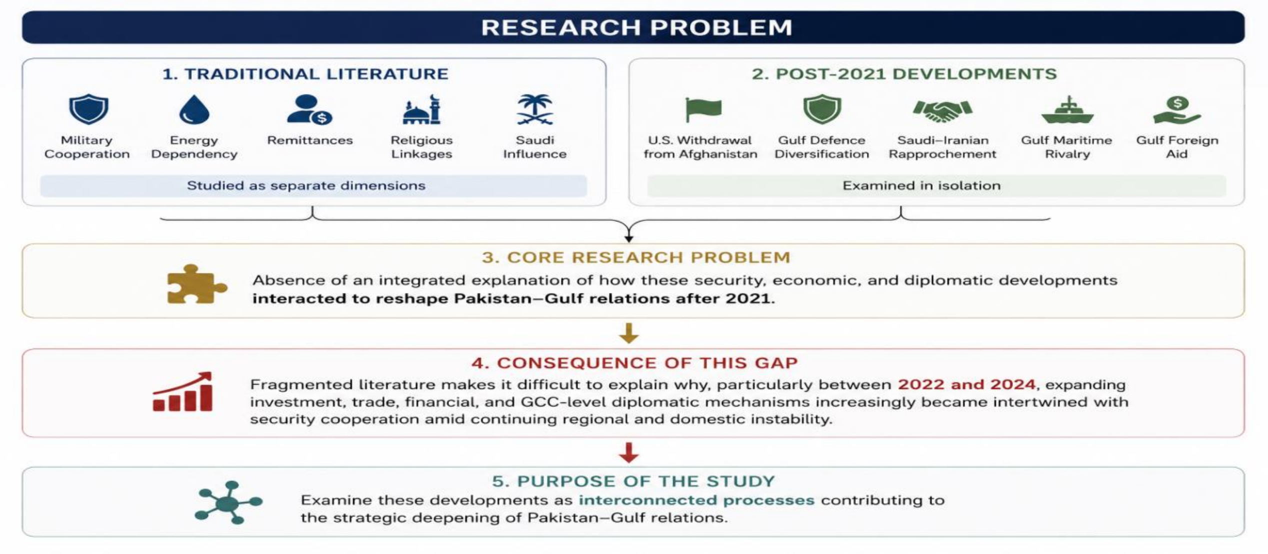

Research Question

(1) How does post US withdrawal from Afghanistan security environment has changed Pakistan's inspirations to be more concerned in the Gulf States matters?

(2) How does regional de-escalation and GCC defense diversification could affect the strategic scope of Pakistan-Gulf cooperation?

(3) What kind of economic and institutional happenings had occurred altered the frameworks of Pakistan-Gulf relations in a notable way, and what limits remained to change the relations into an integrated security structure?

Contribution

The paper explores both theoretical and empirical contributions. Theoretically, it sustains economic diplomacy and security cooperation as conforming dimensions of the strategic collaboration for both actors. This conclusion helps to evade from the common error of equating formal military alliance with strategic thickening. While empirically, this study rearranges the sequence of events such as the withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan, initiation of Free Trade Agreement 2023, Pakistan-GCC Joint Plan of Action, Saudi-Iranian Diplomatic reproachment, economic diplomacy in 2024 and simultaneously tensions escalation on Pak-Afghan borders in late 2024, and high-level visit of Pakistan-UAE in January 2025. All these events though separate seemingly but underlying interconnectedness.

3. Literature Review

3.1 The Pak Gulf Relations: Security, Dependence and Identity

Gulf Pakistan relations show a longstanding history of mutual interactions. Pakistan has extended traditionally diplomatic cooperation, military training, advisory, while the GCC states have given Pakistan employment opportunities, energy supplies, diplomatic cooperation, humanitarian relief, financial assistance and investment. Nasim, Shamim and Ali (2023) are of the view that these relations vary across Oman, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia. All these states have different interests like strategic, foreign policy, and related to geography. However, beside all, Saudi Arabia has been considered as the most vital security partner of

Pakistan. On the other hand, Oman, maintains different maritime historical and people to people contact with Pakistan Baluchistan post. Qatar's relationship with Pakistan has increasingly developed around energy cooperation and expanding diplomatic role in regional affairs. However, such physical interests alone do not fully explain the strength of Pakistan Saudi Arabia relations. Ahmad and Karim (2024) opine that Saudi influence in Pakistan is manifested through education, religion diplomatic engagement, humanitarian assistance, elite networks and kingdom's religious significance in the wider Muslim world. These bilateral relations based on soft power assist cooperation, but they do not remove difference in their national interests. Pakistan, in the meantime maintains workable relations with Iran, balances internal sectarian sensitivities, sustains its strategic partnership with China. It avoids any external military commitments that has not sufficient internal political legitimacy. Therefore, Pakistan's relations with broader GCC region are best understood as a fusion of economic interdependence, strategic cooperation and consistent diplomatic balancing.

3.2 Strategic Diversification in the gulf and the U.S. continuing Role

Bakir and Parker (2024) argue that Gulf states have diversified defense relations to some extent under US led security architecture. The strategy is considered as hedging---In International Relations, hedging is a strategy in which a state evades fully positioning with one major power against another and instead maintains relations with rival powers to guard its interests and reduce risks. US has a distinct position as it possesses military bases in the middle east, intelligence networks, modern weaponry systems, and political relations. Despite this fact, GCC states are interested in pursuing more defense partners for weapon purchase, crisis management and diplomacy. The same tendency can be observed in GCC diplomacy regarding China and Iran. Zhang (2024) opines that China was once a peripheral actor in 2023. However, in Saudi-Iran rapprochement, it provided support in brokering a deal between these two key regional players and became instrumental in bringing stability in this region. Ostovar (2024) is of the view that this Saudi-Iranian détente as a part of larger struggle in the region to resolve conflict with regional Iranian axis of resistance. This detente is a significant in implications to Pakistan. A laxer Saudi-Irani confrontation will give Pakistan more room to improve its relations with both rival states.

3.3 Post 2021 Afghanistan and Pakistan

Studies on post US withdrawal from Afghanistan reveal that there was a less strategic understanding about mediation and political settlement in Afghanistan. Theros (2023) asserts that the peace process failed in establishing an inclusive and broad-based political order. In the same way, Pop and Onel (2023) explain the withdrawal as an ontological security crisis that challenged the consistency of the United States strategic narrative. For Pakistan perspective, nevertheless, the most immediate impact was not as expected increase of regional influence but on the contrary, worsening of border security and the growing threat of cross-border militancy. The gravest challenge in Pakistan-Afghan relations was the consistent resilience of the TTP and their disputed sanctuaries in Afghanistan. In March 2024, Pakistan conducted intelligence-based airstrikes against suspected TTP targets in Afghanistan, in response to suicide bombing and attack on military posts in North Waziristan that killed seven Pakistani security personnels. The airstrikes consequently provoked retaliatory fire from Taliban forces and renewed border tensions (Reuters, 2024b). By January 2025, Pakistan's military leadership had recognized the TTP's existence in Afghanistan and its connections in cross-border attacks as vital sources of bilateral tension. This worsening security environment augmented the strategic importance of diplomatic engagement,

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economic influence, intelligence collaboration, and security coordination with Muslim-majority states capable of upholding channels of communication with Kabul.

3.4 Economic diplomacy and the Institutionalization of Pakistan–GCC Relations

Economic relations establish a significant support of Pakistan–Gulf engagement and have gradually developed strategic import along with security cooperation. Yaghi and Colombo (2024) confirm that Gulf foreign aid has grew outside conventional aid, uniting political, developmental, and reputational objectives. Pakistan is facing balance of payment pressure amplified the strategic importance of financial arrangements such as investment commitments, development, deferred-payment arrangements and central bank credits. In this context, Saudi Arabia extended its multi-billion-dollar deposit with state bank of Pakistan. This highlights how financial support can pay to macroeconomic stability while at the same time strengthening bilateral political and strategic interdependence (Reuters, 2024e).

In its wake economic aspect also became increasingly institutionalize between GCC-Pakistan after 2021. Joint Action Plan for Strategic Dialogue (2022-2026) recognized a formal framework for collaboration across security, trade, politics, investment and other economic sectors. The Pakistan–GCC Joint Action Plan for Strategic Dialogue (2022–2026) established a formal framework for cooperation across political, security, trade, investment, and other economic sectors. Another development took place in the initiative of Free Trade Agreement in September 2023. It provided a framework for reducing trade barriers and increasing institutionalized commercial engagement between GCC and Pakistan (Government of Pakistan, MoFA, 2022; GCC Secretariat, 2023; Government of Pakistan, Ministry of Commerce, 2023). Akram (2024) argues the FTA process as an opportunity to move GCC-Pakistan economic relations away from irregular financial assistance towards a firmer and more structured trade and investment partnership. In a nutshell, these developments represent that economic diplomacy had become an institutionalized foundation of Pakistan-GCC relations, consolidating post-2021 strategic collaboration without creating formal alliance.

3.5 Research Gap

The main research gap is not the lack of a new defense agreement, but the absence of an unified description of how Pakistan's post-2021 Afghan security challenges, Gulf defense diversification, Saudi–Iranian de-escalation, the Pakistan–GCC Strategic Dialogue, the FTA process, and 2024 investment diplomacy together restructured Pakistan–Gulf relations. This study addresses this gap by analyzing these developments as interconnected elements of a broader process of strategic thickening.

4. Theoretical Framework

4.1 Strategies of Realism, Securing and Diversifying

Realism supports and clarifies about why Pakistan and the Gulf states pursue stronger partnerships in the times of ambiguity. Pakistan encounters security challenges along its western borders, economic limitations and persistent animosity with India on its Eastern borders. On the other hand, GCC states face drone and missile threats, regional proxy conflicts, maritime vulnerabilities and uncertainty over external security guarantees. Theoretically, strategic diversification allows these states to reduce security dependence on any single partner without leaving existing alignments. For Pakistan, deeper engagement with the Gulf compliments, rather than replaces, its relations with the United States and China.

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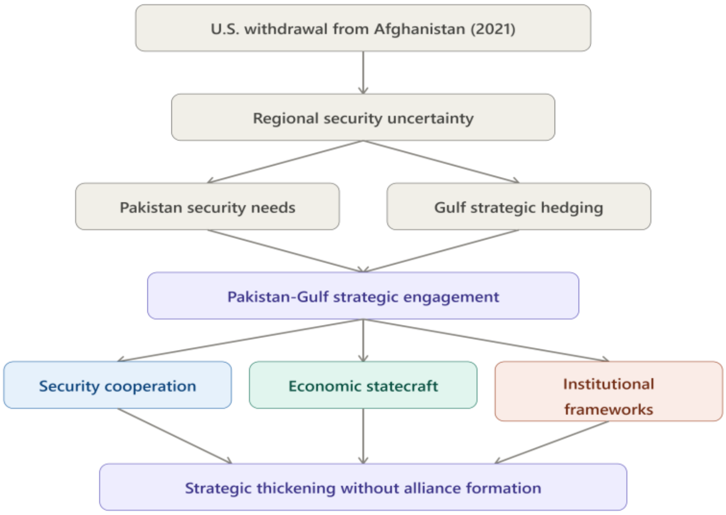

4.2 Complex interdependence and Economic Statecraft

Economic statecraft refers to the use of economic instruments to advance political, diplomatic, or strategic objectives. It further explains the use of trade structures, remittances, energy structures, investment packages and deposits for even security objectives. The significance of Saudi and Emirati aid increased manifold in the face of Pakistan's financial vulnerabilities. Gulf

states create the labor services, agriculture, minerals, logistics, technology and infrastructure partners. Withing the GCC diversification framework, Pakistan can obtain their markets, liquidity, energy, and investment, while in exchange they will be able to get access to a huge pool of labor, agriculture potential, mineral wealth and military expertise from a geopolitically significant state located at the cross roads of South Asian.

4.3 Constructivism, Islamic Solidarity and Political Legitimacy

Constructivism explains the ideational bedrock of Pakistan–Gulf relations outside material interests. These are Islamic identity, religious hub—Makkah and Madina, historical political ties and Pakistan as major nuclear military power contribute the narratives of fraternity and solidarity. Nevertheless, identity enables collaboration rather than determines it. Pakistan has some limitations of national interests and internal institutions regarding the relations with Saudi Arabia. This framework therefore treats Islamic identity as a source of political legitimacy that operates alongside material and strategic interests.

5. Methodology

The study is founded in an interpretivist research philosophy, which assumes that strategic and political realities are socially constructed and are best understood through the interpretation of institutional context, perceptions, meanings and policy choices. This philosophical context advocates the adoption of qualitative methodology, as the paper pursues to explain how GCC-Pakistan strategic relations evolved in response to changing regional economic, security and diplomatic environment rather than to measure these developments statistically. Therefore, the study uses a qualitative descriptive research design, combining structured content analysis and process tracing. Structured content analysis enables the systematic interpretation of recurring patterns, strategic interests, institutional responses and policy positions across selected sources.

The temporal scope of the paper spans from US withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021. The sources are comprised of peer-reviewed articles, official statements, reports of international organizations. And relevant policy studies.

Data Selecting and Coding Process.

The study depends on three types of sources:

The first type of resources cited in this paper are policy documents, GCC Secretariate Statements, press releases, and Pakistan ministry of foreign affairs. The second type of sources are documents related to Pakistan-Gulf relations, Afghanistan-Gulf interactions, gulf drive for security diversification, political and economic developments, as cited in peer-reviewed articles. The third sources is international news commentary originated from credible news outlets, to trace important diplomatic, security and economic developments. The sources are selected by using purposive sampling relevance to the research questions, reliability, and direct contribution to the issue under consideration.

The collected data is analyzed through thematic coding organized through four analytical categories i.e., security cooperation, institutional development, economic statecraft, and broader regional recalibration. In the security domain included defense cooperation, counter terrorism, military engagements, training of the forces, strategic consultation, and other security related interactions. While in economic domain, it refers investments commitments from GCC state for Pakistan, financial assistance, energy cooperation, trade relations. Its interpretations revolve round using economic instrument to advance wider strategic interests. Institutionalization of these security and economic domains aims to establish proper mechanisms of cooperation. It includes primarily, Pakistan-GCC Strategic Dialogue frameworks, Joint Action Plans, Trade Talks, and required institutional provisions. Regional recalibration can be observed in broader strategic environment encompasses Afghanistan security challenge, Gulf security diversification, evolving relations with Iran, and wider chaos in Middle East.

This coding framework allows the study to unify various qualitative evidence systematically and to evaluate how security, economic, institutional, and regional developments interrelated in determining the evolution of Pakistan–Gulf strategic partnerships during the study period.

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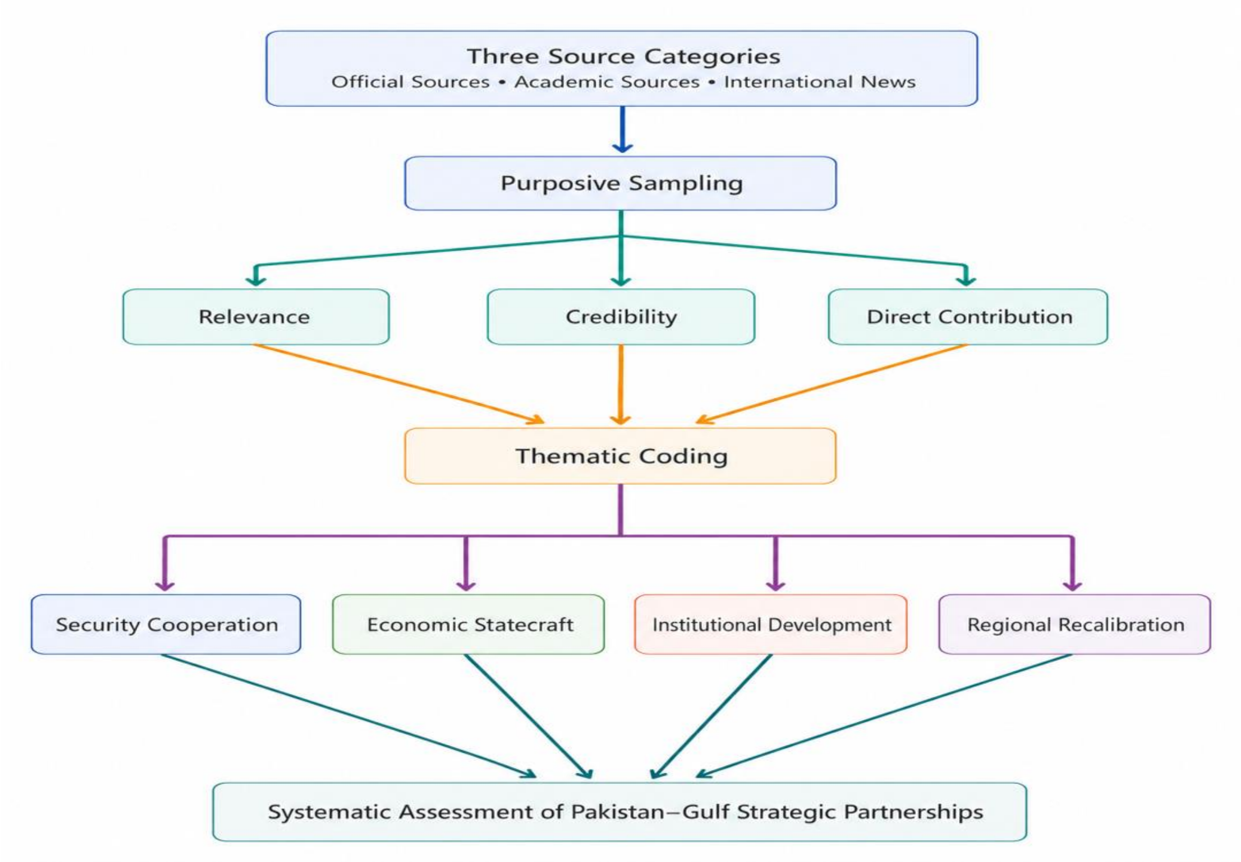

Table 1. Analytical Coding Framework

Analytical Category	**Indicators**	**Evidence Sources**
Security Cooperation	Military training, defense exchanges, counter-terrorism cooperation	Official statements, policy documents
Economic Statecraft	Investment commitments, deposits, trade agreements, energy cooperation	Government reports, economic announcements
Institutional Development	Pakistan-GCC dialogue, FTA process, diplomatic mechanisms	GCC and government documents
Regional Recalibration	Afghanistan security changes, Gulf hedging, Iran-Gulf relations	Academic literature, international reporting

There are two limitations of the study. First, statements and memoranda of understanding of investment may not always be comprehended capital flows and consequently, are observed as a signal of political and commercial purpose and not realized capital flows. Second, defence cooperation is not very clear as equated to economic cooperation. It is thus an unconscious interpretation of the article on the military guarantees, nuclear commitments or integrated command planning whereby there has been no evidence in the public by the cut-off date.

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6. The Development of the Pakistan-Gulf Strategic Partnerships, 2021-January 2025

Table 2. Major Developments in Pakistan-Gulf Relations (2021-January 2025)

Year	Development	Strategic Significance
2021	U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan	Created new security uncertainty
2022	Pakistan-GCC Joint Action Plan	Institutional expansion of cooperation
2023	Preliminary Pakistan-GCC FTA	Economic institutionalization
2024	Saudi and UAE investment commitments	Shift toward economic-security partnership
Jan 2025	Pakistan-UAE leadership engagement	Continuity of strategic dialogue

6.1 The Afghan Shock and Search of Strategy Resilience of Pakistan.

Immediate post-withdrawal period looked to provide a more promising regional environment to Pakistan. The Indian influence was one of the Pakistani worries that was reduced to least by the falling of the U.S. backed government in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, the security dividend futile to come about. The TTP was getting more attacks, Pakistan suspected militants to be based in the Afghanistan soil and there was an increase in border disputes.

Pakistan's cross-border strikes in Afghanistan in March 2024, followed by reactive exchanges along the border, confirmed how fast counter-terrorism pressures could intensify into interstate tensions. This pattern strengthened again in December 2024, when new Pakistani strikes and succeeding Taliban revenge emphasized the unending worsening of Pakistan–Afghanistan security relations soon before the end of 2024 (Reuters, 2024b, 2024c, 2024d).

This decline, though, did not essentially explain a direct military role for the Gulf states in the Afghan security theatre. Their significance persisted chiefly diplomatic, economic, and humanitarian, plus support for stabilization efforts and the keep of channels of political communication with the Taliban. Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE each engaged varying degrees of diplomatic entree and engagement with Afghanistan and its principal political actors. For Pakistan, stronger relations with these Gulf partners therefore contributed to broader **strategic resilience** by expanding diplomatic and economic options in dealing with Afghanistan-related instability, even in the absence of direct Gulf military involvement.

6.2 Saudi Arabia: Economic-Security Partnership to Hypothesis

Saudi Arabia remained Pakistan's most vital Gulf strategic partner. Their enduring security bond has involved advisory cooperation, military training, joint exercises, and Pakistan's involvement in the **Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition**. Though, the most noticeable growth of mutual assistance during 2024 occurred in the economic domain. On 7 April 2024, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif agreed to expedite an primary package of Saudi investment worth approximately **US$5 billion**. This was followed by a high-level Saudi delegation to Pakistan on 15–16 April, led by Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan. The official visit focused on recognizing and progressing investment prospects in sectors including mining, energy, renewable energy, agriculture, construction, information technology, human resources, and exports (Government of Pakistan, MoFA, 2024a, 2024b).

Khalid Al-Falih, Saudi Investment Minister, visited Pakistan on October 2024 further advances private sector projected oriented scopes in mutual relationship. In this visit 27 memoranda of understanding worth of US$ 2Billion were committed to be invested in

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information technology, mining, agriculture, food production, energy and health (AP, 2024). Though the signing of these contracts did not primarily show the immediate recognition of investment, however, it expressed a significant shift in bilateral economic engagements. The recent engagements structured around commercially feasible projects with private sector cooperation instead extending traditional financial support and emergency assistance.

Concurrently, traditional Saudi financial assistance remained important. Saudi Arabia provided a US$ 3 Billion deposits in Pakistan's foreign currency reserves (Reuters, 2024e). The existence of project-based investment diplomacy with continued balance-of-payments funding is logically significant. It proposes that Pakistan–Saudi economic relations were becoming more diversified: Riyadh was reassuring Pakistan to grow into a more attractive destination for investment while at the same time continuing to provide macroeconomic stabilization when required. This mixture of investment promotion and financial support shows the growing role of **economic statecraft** within the broader Pakistan–Saudi strategic partnership.

6.3 United Arab Emirates: Investment, Trade and perseverance in politics

The second vital support of the gulf strategy of Pakistan is the UAE. The two are an merger of a huge Pakistani emigrant community, aviation, logistics, investment, financial and political linkages. In May 2024, the UAE declared its aim to invest $10 billion in the potential areas of the Pakistani economy ensuing a trip made by Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif to President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan (Reuters, 2024a). The statement advanced the inclusive Pakistani struggle of by means of Special Investment Facilitation Council to entice the Gulf investment.

The Presidential visit to 5 January 2025 is particularly timely since the president, Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed, and the Prime Minister, Shehbaz Sharif, will meet in Rahim Yar Khan, it is on the cusp of the study period. The two leaders spoke about collaboration in economic, trade, development and any other aspect and repeated the need to improve the historic relationship (WAM, 2025). By January 2025, then, the UAE-Pakistan relations were obviously the ones of a political and economic appeal, yet they were not identical to a demand that one openly engages in a mutual-defense treaty.

6.4 Qatar, Oman, Kuwait and Bahrain: Not a unitary bilateral, but a plural Gulf

GCC is not a single, unified actor strategically. Qatar for example, has been emerged a significant actor for the provision of LNG, exercise active role in Afghan mediation, and plays a vital role in wider Middle East conflicts for peace building. In the same way, Oman is very vital due to its maritime proximity, historical relations with Pakistan, and active role in regional policy framing. Bahrain and Kuwait also maintain significant labour, financial and political bonds with Pakistan. However, their security alignments and engagements vary with time. As Nasim et al. (2023) appropriately commented that Pakistan's partnership with Gulf states are neither interchangeable nor uniform. It is, therefore, a compulsion for Pakistan to have a port-folio-based approach rather than adopting unifocal engagement with all GCC states. Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia uphold position as major strategic partner, Qatar as energy provider, UAE plays a pivotal role in commercial interactions, Oman assisted in maritime positions, while GCC Secretariate synchronized these varying policies.

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6.5 GCC Layer: Strategic negotiation and first free trade agreement

The gradual consolidation of institutional collaboration between Pakistan and GCC states is the most significant development beyond traditional relations. Pakistan and GCC states approved a Joint Action Plan for Strategic Dialogue (2022-2026) in January 2022. This framework treated a wider range of fields such as trade, investment, food security and agriculture, transport, energy, environment culture, health and education (Government of Pakistan, MoFA, 2023). This institutional arrangement was further consolidated when high-level strategic dialogue was initiated in which senior officials discussed regional security issues and their implementation of agreed framework (GCC Secretariate, 2023). Beside security, economic institutionalization progressed when Pakistan signed a preliminary Free Trade Agreement (FTA) By January 2025, the FTA process signified a strategically significant development, though it had not yet progressed into a fully operational free-trade regime. Its import lay in providing an institutional stage through which Pakistan could enlarge its economic relations with the Gulf beyond individual bilateral arrangements and gradually involve the GCC as a collective economic framework.

6.6 Regional Recalibration

Pakistan–Gulf relations during this period advanced within a swiftly altering Middle Eastern strategic environment. The **Saudi–Iranian rapprochement of March 2023**, enabled by China and headed by earlier negotiation efforts by Iraq and Oman, reduced the intensity of Saudi–Iranian enmity and reinstated formal diplomatic relations between the two regional powers. Zhang (2024) maintains that although China played an important facilitating role, its participation did not change regional agency or fully resolve the primary security dilemma. For Pakistan, this de-escalation was mainly helpful because it reduced the diplomatic pressure to balance between Saudi Arabia, one of its most important Gulf partners, and Iran, its immediate western neighbor. Nevertheless, the Gaza war and the deterioration of Red Sea security from late 2023 onward intricate this trend toward regional de-escalation. Gulf states once again faced grave risks related to proxy conflicts, missile and drone attacks, and disturbances to commercial shipping and energy routes. At the political level, Pakistan's durable diplomatic backing for Palestinian statehood and calls for a armistice broadly allied with the positions assumed by GCC states, making a degree of political convergence. At the same time, the regional crisis increased the importance of maritime sphere responsiveness, energy-route security, air and missile defense, and the diversification of external security partnerships. These developments reinforced the strategic motivations for closer Pakistan–Gulf collaboration; however, by January 2025, they had not resulted in the establishment of a new collective-defense framework involving Pakistan.

7. Findings

The creation of the alliance is not applied and the strategy is meant at tightening of the alliance without founding any alliances. Pakistan-Gulf relations became thicker but not the one based on the alliance. The military relations with Saudi Arabia have always been based on deep historical origins, but the most real institutional change in 2021-2025 was wider: trade negotiation, investment packages, strategic dialogue, financial aid, and ongoing leadership.

7.1 The Integration of Economic Security into Strategic Security

The state national security consideration cannot be separated from its dependence on external financing particularly when state's economic stability closely linked to foreign deposits,

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export markets, energy supplies, remittances and investment. The 2024 Saudi and Emirati investment announcements show that economic security had taken center stage in the Gulf policy of Pakistan. Thus, soon economic factor became compulsory element of Pakistan's national security framework. Consequently, the establishment of SIFC aiming to translate political confidence and diplomatic engagement into a long-term investment in the areas of energy, mining, agriculture, infrastructure and technology. It is an attempt to move far from tentative short-term financial support from GCC states to investment-led economic cooperation. The major challenge is still, its implementation. Attracting foreign investment required bankable projects, regulations, effective contracts enforcement and long-term continuity of economic and investment policies. In the absence of these conditions, merely investment pledges and political commitments cannot be translated into sustainable economic outcomes.

7.2 Bilateral and Functional Nature of Pakistan–Gulf Defense Cooperation

Pakistan has a credible military competence and has longstanding security ties with GCC and Saudi Arabia. However, despite these arrangements, there is no collective defense agreement between Pakistan and GCC states. In the same way, there is no evidence that Pakistan providing a nuclear umbrella to GCC states for security purpose, neither unified military command structure or prearranged rules of engagement. However, Pakistan–Gulf security relations were then better understood in functional terms. Their principal workings comprised high-level defense contacts, intelligence coordination, military training, military training, joint exercises, counter-terrorism, and cooperation in protecting shared strategic interests. This functional framework more accurately reflected the nature and scope of security cooperation.

7.3 Pakistan's Strategic Balancing between Gulf Partners and Iran

Pakistan's relations with Iran constant to institute a structural restraint on any deeper security arrangement with the Gulf states. Pakistan and Iran share a long border, face cross-border militant threats, and own important joint interests in trade, border management, and regional connectivity. These strategic realities and geographical limited Islamabad's ability to track Gulf security assistance in ways that could be alleged as directly hostile to Tehran. The Saudi–Iranian rapprochement of 2023 eased some of the pressures related with Pakistan's traditional balancing between the two regional opponents. Nevertheless, the normalization of diplomatic relations did not remove fundamental strategic rivalry or conflicting regional interests. By January 2025, therefore, the most feasible course for Pakistan was to extend its economic, security and diplomatic partnerships with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states while evading an explicitly anti-Iranian or sectarian positioning. Such an approach allowed Islamabad to expand cooperation with its Gulf partners without needlessly deflation its important bilateral relationship with Iran.

7.4 Maritime and Energy Security as Strategic Priorities

Pakistan's maritime security is thoroughly linked to stability in the Gulf and the broader Arabian Sea. A noteworthy portion of Pakistan's energy imports hinge on sea lanes linking the Gulf with Pakistani ports, mainly Karachi and Gwadar, making the security of adjacent maritime routes a significant economic and strategic apprehension. Likewise, the economies of the Gulf states rest heavily on the continuous movement of energy exports and commercial shipping through critical maritime routes, chiefly the Strait of Hormuz and, in the case of Saudi Arabia, the Red Sea. As Fulton, Sim, and Samaan (2023) contend, Gulf security is increasingly related to the wider Indo-Pacific security background. This rising

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interdependence makes important possibility for applied Pakistan–Gulf assistance in the domains such as naval exercises, maritime sphere, port security, counter-piracy operations, and the defense of critical energy infrastructure. Such cooperation can be extended without unavoidably developing into a formal military alliance.

7.5 GCC Diversity as an Institutional Constraint on Strategic Cooperation

The six member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council share important security, economic and strategic interests, yet they vary significantly in their diplomatic approaches, external partnership and threat perceptions. These changes limit the scope to which the GCC can be treated as a single and fully unified strategic actor. Qatar's stress on arbitration, Oman's preference for impartiality and balanced diplomacy, the UAE's commercial and security engagement, Saudi Arabia's regional leadership role, Kuwait's careful diplomatic position, and Bahrain's security-oriented approach mirror distinct national priorities within the GCC. As an outcome, Pakistan's relationship with the Gulf cannot be understood through a single model of engagement. Pakistan must thus differentiate between bilateral strategic cooperation with Gulf states institutional cooperation and individual with the GCC as a collective organization. Though these two levels of engagement are corresponding, they are not interchangeable. Identifying this difference is essential for precisely assessing the scope and limitations of Pakistan–Gulf strategic cooperation.

7.6 Prospective Trajectories of Pakistan–Gulf Strategic Partnership

From the viewpoint, three broad trajectories could be recognized for the future development of Pakistan–Gulf relations. The first involved deeper economic institutionalization. This rest on the application of Saudi and Emirati investment commitments, more progress toward a Pakistan–GCC Free Trade Agreement, and the development of cooperation in trade, mining, agriculture, energy, infrastructure, and technology. The extent to which these commitments were renewed into operational and financially feasible projects would be a significant indicator of the depth of economic cooperation. The second trajectory concerned the maintenance of functional security cooperation rather than the development of a formal military alliance. Such cooperation was likely to remain fixated on military training, intelligence coordination, joint exercises, maritime security, counter-terrorism, joint exercises, and the protection of shared strategic interests.

The third trajectory involved the possibility of strategic strain. This could emerge if Pakistan–Afghanistan border tensions increased, Gulf–Iran relations declined, or prospects concerning Gulf investment substantially surpassed the actual delivery of financial commitments and projects. The most important indicators were therefore practical rather than verbal. These included the change of memoranda of understanding into funded and working projects, progress towards implementation of a Pakistan–GCC Free Trade Agreement, the continuity of UAE and Saudi financial support, changes in Pakistan–Afghanistan security relations, the scope of military training and joint exercises, and the durability of Gulf–Iran de-escalation amid continuing regional instability.

9. Policy Recommendations

1. Institutionalize Pakistan–GCC Strategic Dialogue

Pakistan should start a consistent and organized strategic dialogue with both the GCC Secretariat and all six member states. Institutional engagement should complement bilateral relations and decrease undue dependence on occasional leader-level meetings. Regular talks including senior officials, technical professionals, and relevant bureaus would promote policy continuity and improve coordination on economic, diplomatic, and security matters.

2. Convert Investment Commitments into Implementable Projects

Investment commitments announced by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and other Gulf partners should be interpreted into clear and commercially viable projects. Pakistan should develop visibly defined project pipelines reinforced by feasibility studies, regulatory guarantees, implementation schedules, and quantifiable performance indicators. Pakistan–Gulf economic partnerships will become sustainable only when political commitments produce tangible including employment, economic outcomes, infrastructure development, technology transfer, and export growth.

3. Prioritize the Pakistan–GCC Free Trade Agreement and Trade Facilitation

Pakistan should arrange the early conclusion and effective application of the Pakistan–GCC Free Trade Agreement. The agreement should be accompanied by reforms in logistics, customs administration, certification procedures, product standards, and export facilitation. Pakistan should also strengthen its competitiveness in sectors with considerable potential in Gulf markets, particularly agriculture, textiles, information technology, professional services, minerals, and food processing.

4. Maintain Focused and Credible Defense Cooperation

Defense cooperation with the Gulf states should remain practical, clearly defined, and consistent with Pakistan's national interests. Priority areas should include military training, counterterrorism, maritime domain awareness, professional exchanges, joint exercises, and cooperation in air and missile defense. At the same time, Pakistan should avoid creating unrealistic expectations regarding automatic participation in regional conflicts, direct war-fighting commitments, or the extension of nuclear guarantees.

5. Preserve Strategic Balance in Relations with Iran

Pakistan should deepen its partnerships with the Gulf states while maintaining functional diplomatic, economic, and crisis-management channels with Iran. A non-sectarian and non-bloc-based foreign policy would provide Islamabad with greater strategic flexibility and reduce the risks associated with regional polarization. Pakistan should therefore avoid allowing its Gulf partnerships to be interpreted as part of an explicitly anti-Iranian alignment.

6. Link Gulf Cooperation with the Stabilization of Afghanistan

Pakistan should encourage Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE, and other interested Gulf states to support Afghanistan's humanitarian stability, political engagement, and verifiable measures against transnational militant organizations. Gulf involvement should be coordinated with regional stakeholders and directed toward diplomatic and economic stabilization rather than the militarization of the Afghan issue. Such cooperation could reduce cross-border insecurity while creating a shared framework for regional stability.

7. Develop Maritime Security as a Shared Strategic Priority

Maritime security should become a central component of Pakistan–Gulf strategic cooperation. Pakistan should expand collaboration with willing Gulf partners in maritime domain awareness, naval and coast-guard training, port security, intelligence sharing, search-and-rescue operations, and contingency planning for the protection of energy and commercial routes. This cooperation would strengthen the security of the Arabian Sea and the wider Indian Ocean while safeguarding critical trade and energy supply chains.

10. Conclusion

Pakistan-Gulf strategic relationships had become obviously more profound since the U.S. departure out of Afghanistan but the form of this propounding was not a formal collective-defense structure. The reversal of the security situation in Afghanistan put Pakistan in more demand of diplomatic and economic strength. Gulf countries, on the other hand, reacted to uncertainty in the region by diversifying and hedging as opposed to quitting the United States. This was the result of parallel pressures that allowed the Pakistan-Gulf cooperation to have more space.

Institutional and economic layering were the best indications of change. The 2023 preliminary FTA provided the relationship with an economic institutional base, Pakistan-GCC Joint Action Plan of Strategic Dialogue developed a general framework of cooperation, the Saudi-Pakistan investment diplomacy started gaining momentum in 2024, the UAE made a significant investment commitment, and Saudi financial assistance was important, including the extension of the deposit in December 2024. In January 2025, the leadership meeting between Pakistan and the UAE affirmed that there was still high level momentum during the final month of the article.

This can be best analytically characterized as strategic thickening: a transition of historically dense and frequently personalized and bilateral relationships into a more structured combination of bilateral security relationships, GCC-level dialogue, economic statecraft and regional hedging. This structure was not finalized and it was separated among the six states of the GCC. Its sustainability was to be realized through action, not words: whether trade deals progressed, investment undertakings were projects, security co-operation remained limited and plausible and Pakistan maintained space to deal with both Afghanistan and Iran. Any evaluation dated after January 2025 is not to go further, but to take into account the causal narrative only up to that date and to exclude the later agreements and crises.

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