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Keywords: Shifts, PTI, PDM, Pakistan's Foreign Policy

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From Riyadh to Tehran: Foreign Policy Reorientation in Pakistan's PTI and PDM Eras (2018–2023)



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Abstract

This study examines shifts in Pakistan's foreign policy towards Saudi Arabia and Iran during the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) government (2018–2022) and the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) government (2022–2023). It comparatively analyzes how each government managed relations with these two regional rivals and identifies the political, economic, diplomatic, and security determinants shaping policy choices. Using a qualitative case-study approach supported by document analysis, official statements, economic indicators, and secondary literature, the study finds that PTI pursued a calibrated balancing strategy aimed at strategic autonomy and regional mediation, whereas PDM adopted a more pragmatic and economically driven alignment, with greater emphasis on ties with Saudi Arabia amid domestic economic constraints. The findings highlight how leadership preferences, economic vulnerability, regional security dynamics, and external pressures collectively influenced policy recalibration.

Keywords: Shifts, PTI, PDM, Pakistan's Foreign Policy

Introduction

The foreign policy of Pakistan is a tool to protect national interests such as political, economic and security concerns. It has been directed since 1947 by the vision of Muhammad Ali Jinnah who stressed on friendship with everybody and goodwill, aid to oppressed classes, and compliance with the United Nations declarations (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Pakistan, 2025). The policy of Pakistan has changed over the years, depending on the dynamics in the region, the changes in the domestic political arena and new challenges.

During its initial years, Pakistan was experiencing security and financial exposure as they allied with the West under the SEATO (1954) and CENTO (1955), with Kashmir conflict with India being at its centre. In 1960s, Pakistan deepened relations with China, however, the 1971 war and the formation of Bangladesh became an obstacle. Pakistan developed its foreign policy as an independent one under Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in the 1970s when Muslim nations were developing relations and Pakistan began a nuclear program. In the 1980s, the government of the revived Mujahideen under the leadership of General Zia-ul-Haq received U.S. and Saudi support in fighting Soviet invasion, which reinforced U.S. relations with that region, leading to security problems in the long term (Ganguly and Pardesi, 2020).



More challenges were encountered in the 1990s and early 2000s. Nuclear tests in 1998 by Pakistan helped to worsen the Western relations and strategic alliances with China and Muslim nations persisted. After 9/11, Pakistan emerged as a major U.S. partner in the War on Terror, despite the aggravation of relationship tensions with India by events such as the Kargil war (1999) and Mumbai attacks (2008). Since 2010 Pakistan has chosen to spend most of its time on strategic and economic relations with China through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) at the same time retaining the essential ties with the Middle East.

Middle East is very important to Pakistan on the basis of religion, cultural, economic and security reasons. It is home to approximately 4.5 million Pakistanis that remit back home and the region also provides important imports of energy. Both Saudi Arabia and Iran are economically, strategically, and religiously significant, and Pakistan's facilitation of pilgrimages and regional stability seems to be achieved by implementing strategies such as the Al-Ula Accord (2021) and promoting the presence of a Palestinian state (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Pakistan, 2025).

Saudi Arabia and Iran are countries whose relations have changed with changing governments. The PTI (2018-2022) was aiming at a compromise trying to involve both nations and pursuing economic collaboration with Iran under the patronage of Saudi. The PDM (2022-2023) gave more emphasis on economic stabilization, improving and developing relationships with Saudi Arabia and avoiding pragmatism with Iran, as the mediation by China influenced (Khalid, 2025; Haider, 2022).

In the present research, the changing foreign policy of Pakistan to Saudi Arabia and Iran under the PTI and PDM governments is examined in the context of economic, diplomatic, and security interests, and comparatively analyzed in terms of strategic changes in reaction to the regional and global processes.

Research Questions

1. How did the PTI and PDM governments differ in their foreign policy approaches towards Saudi Arabia and Iran?
2. What political, economic, diplomatic, and security factors influenced the shifts in Pakistan's foreign policy towards Saudi Arabia and Iran under the PTI and PDM governments?

Objectives of the Study

1. To compare the foreign policy approaches of the PTI and PDM governments towards Saudi Arabia and Iran.
2. To identify political, economic, diplomatic, and security factors that influenced policy shifts between 2018 and 2023.
3. To assess the economic, diplomatic, and security consequences of these foreign policy changes for Pakistan.

Literature Review

The foreign policies of Pakistan have been developed to track with the changing regional and international forces and also its strategic, economic and political interests. Various research works have explored various aspects of the Pakistan foreign relations, especially the relationship with the Middle East.

It has traditionally been the case that geopolitical imperatives, ideological considerations, economical dependencies, and regional security concerns have influenced the foreign policy of Pakistan. In the epoch of the PTI government led by Prime Minister Imran Khan with a more independent and balanced foreign policy In contrast, the PDM government re-evaluated the

priorities in foreign policy by reviving old alliances, This review cites examples of scholarly works and policy commentaries as well as empirical research that sheds light on the relations of Pakistan with Saudi Arabia and Iran across different political regimes. Using this discussion, this review provides a foundation to comprehend the manner in which and the reason why the foreign policy of Pakistan towards Saudi Arabia and Iran was different under the PTI and PDM regimes.

The Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah principles of peace, goodwill, honesty, and authoritarian support of oppressed nations has been used at various points in Pakistan foreign policy as far back as 1948 when he spoke to the people of Pakistan in the speech. Their initial establishments still influence the diplomatic perspective of the country. This direction is further reinforced in the Constitution of Pakistan by Article 40, which proposes to promote unity with Muslim nations, promote peace, and enhance peaceful settlement of international conflicts. As per these constitutional and historical ideals, the modern foreign policy of Pakistan is to live in cordial relationship with all the states, seek international cooperation, and address the issue of globalization with economic diplomacy. It also seeks to represent Pakistan as a moderate and responsible state in the international community, which is dedicated to sovereignty, non-interference, and peaceful conflict resolution (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025).

The geographical positioning of Pakistan, its sectarian composition domestically and conflicting economic and security agendas have created a fragile balancing act between two opposing powers in the region forcing the state of Islamabad to formulate its foreign policy towards Iran and Saudi Arabia. Iran, a neighbor to the West and an early diplomatic sponsor of Pakistan has strong historical, cultural, religious ties, supported by bilateral cooperation in border security, trade, and energy programs including the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline though ideological divergence following the 1979 Iranian Revolution, sanctions on and militant actions against the shared border and Iranian funding of Middle East wars have limited bilateral interactions. On the contrary, Pak-Saudi relations are supported by robust religious compatibility, economic support, labor mobility, remittance, and military collaboration to the extent that Riyadh is one of the most powerful strategic partners of Islamabad. The economic stability and international status of Pakistan have been improved by Saudi financial aid and military cooperation, including being part of Saudi-led security programs, however, at the cost of a foreign policy that is not independent and a complex level of relations with Iran. The ongoing rivalry between Iran and Saudi places Pakistan in venerable situation since taking sides will result in domestic sectarian violence or diplomatic backlash in the region. As a result, Pakistan has always continued its policy of neutrality and mediation in attempts to maintain ties with both states as well as protecting internal unity, economic stability and national security. Taken as a whole, the literature highlights that the foreign policy that Pakistan applies to Iran and Saudi Arabia is not ideological and is not a fixed policy but rather a pragmatic balancing behavior dictated by distressing structural constraints, regional politics and changing geopolitical realities, whose sustainability remains conditional on Pakistan's capacity to cope with the outside factors and internal politics and sectarian forces (Anwar, Saqib, and Mustafa, 2025).

The foreign policy of Pakistan aims at its strategic positioning to establish good relationships with big powers in addition to enhancing its economic security. The country is attempting to shift towards a rather military-based policy towards one more oriented to introduce more trade, investment, and economic growth. Meanwhile, Pakistan remains close to Muslim nations and they assist it in political alliance, employment of Pakistani laborers, and economic assistance. Collectively, these objectives ensure the way a foreign policy attempts to remain balanced, expand the economy, and remain in touch with the broader Muslim world, (Chawla, 2025).

The author explained that the foreign policy of Pakistan on the nations of Iran and Saudi Arabia was a carefully planned strategy of strategic balancing established under the influences of the structural constraints, regional rivalry, and economic demands. Experts believe that Pakistan is a

state located in a strategic position where both South Asia and the Middle East meet, and its Sunni majority population and large Shia community is the factor that forces Islamabad to adopt a moderated relationship with Tehran as well as with Riyadh in order to maintain domestic unity and independence abroad. This balancing act has become particularly relevant since 2020, as Middle Eastern dynamics evolving around shifting Saudi ICPs gradually, growing great powers rivalry, and growing strategic ties between Pakistan and China have re-taken on fresh significance. The literature points out that Pakistan has had a relationship with Saudi Arabia based on economic assistance, energy generations, labor remittances, and defense collaborations and with Iran, a reserved form of pragmatic thinking that has consistently revolved around border security, restricted trade, and possibly this energy cooperation under the constraints of the international sanctions. Simultaneously, unremitting Saudi Iran rivalry, proxy struggles in the Middle East, and intermittent border conflicts with Iran have made it difficult to ensure that Pakistan does not tilt either way without disadvantaging one party or another. Analysts generally note that the middle-power policy since 2020 in Pakistan can be viewed as a hedge against polarization of the region, the desire not to get involved in external conflicts, the need to protect both economic and security interests, nevertheless, they also express doubts regarding the long-term viability of this strategy in the face of the economic interdependence of Pakistan with Gulf countries, unresolved sanctions against Iran, and uncertain situation in the regional geopolitical environment (Khalid, [2025](#)).

The foreign policy of Pakistan has changed its traditional geopolitical orientation and shifted to geo-economic orientation. Neoliberal ideas enabled this change, which put more emphasis on neoliberal concepts such as trade, investment, connectivity of the region and economic relations instead of emphasizing only on military and security issues. This transition, the authors claim, has created new growth opportunities such as the CPEC project, foreign investment, and cooperation between regions. Nevertheless, they also identify some important problems such as an uneven economic development, reliance on foreign financial institutions and the necessity to reconcile economic objectives with continuing security and political concerns. Essentially, the change makes it important that Pakistan balances its own economic priorities with its own security strategies to attain long-term stability and development, (Jahanzaib and Khan, [2024](#)).

The authors review the foreign policy of Pakistan and its multifaceted relationship with Saudi Arabia and Iran and how the power of rivalry between two players in the region informs the choice of Pakistan on the diplomatic, economic, and security levels. Pakistan aims to be a state that shares balanced relations, ensures the territorial integrity, and domestic stability in accordance with rules of sovereignty, mutual interests, and stationariness as well as non-aggression. It has historical, cultural, and religious relations with Iran, and its relations between both countries have been cooperative in areas of trade and politics, however, this is accompanied by regional tensions, sanctions, and sectarian forces. In a similar manner, the historical connection between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia incorporates economic, military, and religious aspects of the interaction, though the influence of sects and regional antagonism puts pressure on the policy options. In sum, the Pakistan foreign policy can be seen as a thin line act of balancing forces in the interests of national security, economic development and stability in the region in response to external and domestic forces (Raza and Noreen, [2024](#)).

Foreign policy dynamics in relation to shifting between a unipolar and multipolar world through the prism of strategic adjustments by Pakistan. Their work emphasises the reality that the power redistribution in the world affects the relationship between Pakistan and big powers and other regional players and there exists an interplay between the foreign policy of the Pakistan and the shift in global power. They also claim that the foreign policy should shift in Pakistan because of the same global replications of economic and security trends that are also manifested in the relationship the country experiences with the states of the Middle East. A detailed study of this

evidence would enable one to determine how the policymakers in Pakistan arrive at a compromise between the conflicting interests in a very unstable international environment, (Salman, Afridi and Shamsuddin, [2024](#)).

The article by Mahnoor Mansoor and Iram Khalid (2024) is entitled *Understanding Pakistan in the Foreign Policy in the 21st Century: Challenges and Opportunities* and explores the complicated factors that have impacted the foreign policy of Pakistan. They observe that Pakistan is lodged between nuclear giants like China, India, Russia and Iran that is increasingly increasing nuclear programs. The authors elaborate how Pakistan attempts to continue playing with everyone around whilst Iran, Saudi Arabia and China in addition to with United States due to health and peaceful coexistence. The study puts emphasis on the fact that Pakistan is trying to position itself as a soft power and a peaceable country rather than a warmonger in the region. The article provides the recommendations of what Pakistan should do to solve the bleak foreign policy issues of the current time, (Mansoor, M., & Khalid, I., [2024](#)).

The authors suggest that Islamic solidarity, regional stability and strategic cooperation are the foundations of Pakistan foreign policy towards Saudi Arabia and Iran. Pakistan has enjoyed a free and friendly relationship with Saudi Arabia since independence and through religious attachment to the sacred sites up to the joint assistance especially during the nuclear test which took place in Pakistan, as well as economic, defence and political cooperation. Likewise, Pakistan has a long history of cooperative and establishing relations with Iran despite sectarian differences and pressures of geopolitics despite the attempts at regional security, the management of Afghan refugees, trade, provision of energy, and as a diplomatic link between Iran and Saudi Arabia. All in all, the strategy of Pakistan aims to foster Islamic unity, peaceful resolution of conflicts in the region, and prosperity of the area, thus setting the country as a mediator and leader in the Muslim world (Ahmad, Yaqoob, Khan, Waheed, & Mustafa, [2023](#)).

They argue that the policy of Foreign Pakistan has never been a fixed one but has changed over the years because of the varying circumstances and situational changes. Concurring with this viewpoint, there are scholars who have argued that the foreign policy of Pakistan has been influenced by internal and external factors as argued by Yousafzai and Nasser. Grouped in *Challenges and Opportunities to the Foreign Policy of Pakistan in the Contemporary Era* (2023), they clarified that Pakistan is exposed to a complex combination of challenges and opportunities. It also has domestic challenges, including civil-military politics, poor governance, and scarce resources, that undermine its capacity to seek consistent foreign policy goals, and non-traditional security challenges, including terrorism, climate change, and non-conventional warfare, make it even harder to decide on policy. Meanwhile, the authors also note the opportunities created by changing global order and regional economic systems and tell us that it is possible to take advantage of them in case the foreign policy of Pakistan is well synchronized with the national interests. In general, they find that even with major setbacks, there can be proactive strategic reforms and institutional coherence that can help Pakistan make its way through the modern challenges and take the opportunities available to them, (Hussain, Yousafzai, and Naseem, [2023](#)).

Iran and Pakistan have a long-term process of relations based on the Islamic brotherhood, cultural sympathy, and territorial closeness. Iran had also been one of the most consistent partners of Pakistan in the history of the country since 1947 when Iran was the first to acknowledge the nation and which developed into close diplomatic relations, as the visit of the Pakistan Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan and Iran Shah Reza Pahlavi shows. Bilateral relations have over the time included cooperation in the areas of trade and energy and regional security. Among the notable ones are Iran-Pakistan-India (IPI) gas pipeline, Pakistan-Iran Joint Economic Commission, and other trade agreements including the Preferential Trade Agreement (2004). Pakistan has especially relied on Iran as an energy source, but both countries have discussed joining a larger regional

connectivity project, such as the Belt and Road Initiative in China, and possible inclusion in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. Even though it has close historical relations, the obstacles remain because of regional geopolitical forces, U.S. sanctions on Iran, sectarianism in Pakistan, and strategic tensions between India and Saudi Arabia. Border security, counterterrorism, and Afghan stability have continued to be an key aspect of the bilateral agenda, which leads to the pragmatic and multipolarity of modern Pakistan-Iran relations (Shah, [2022](#)).

A mix of regional and world constraints has historically influenced the foreign policy making Pakistan susceptible to the outside pressure and constraining its strategic choices. The Indian-centricity in South Asia, the domestic economic challenges, and complicated relations with major powers as the United States and Saudi Arabia have become the key factors that have shaped its policy decisions. The central themes of the foreign policy of Pakistan are national security, economic growth, peaceful regional set up, and geo-strategic, geo-economic, geopolitics convergence to change the geographic location of Pakistan into an asset rather than a liability. Since 2014, Pakistan has aimed to intensify its strategic relationship with China especially by operationalizing the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) whilst casting off the principle of Strategic Depth in Afghanistan in support of a policy of non-partisanship and respect. The relations with the US are speculative and conditional and are usually under the pressure to resolve counterterrorism and regional stability and relations with Saudi Arabia are historically close owing to religious and economic reasons, but they place some diplomatic restrictions which restrict the freedom of Pakistan in the Muslim world. The foreign policy of the Islamic regime has been mostly consistent with the tenure of Prime Minister Imran Khan as the country adopts a peaceful approach towards its neighboring countries, strategic alliances with China and a cautious approach towards the US, Saudi Arabia and other regional powers. Pakistani foreign policy is a complicated balancing game of safeguarding strategic independence, promoting national interests, and conceiving diplomatic coercion and even seclusion in the regional and international community (Elharathi, Falki, and Shahzad, [2020](#)).

There are many reasons that are critical in the development of foreign policy of any given nation. BiBi and Yousaf ([2020](#)) say that the principle domestic factors that have prevailed in the talent of shaping the foreign policy of Pakistan have been observed to be political leadership, the nature of institutions, citizenry, media, ideology and history. A parliamentary system exists in Pakistan and the Prime Minister plays the center stage, even though the President, Foreign Minister, and Parliament play a role in making decisions. The reaction of the population and the media may influence the policy and the ideologically orientated Islamic policy and the provisions of the constitution, including Article 40 of the 1973 Constitution, give these rules of conduct in the relations with other countries. The authors make it clear that foreign policy is geared toward national interests preservation, international relations, and solving global issues, but in reality, the implementation of domestic political instability and economical constraints tend to compromise the perfect policy dreams explicated in party manifestos. All in all, the foreign policy of Pakistan can be discussed as the result of complicated domestic processes, where the leadership, stability, and ideology are the determinants of the path, (BiBi & Yousaf, [2020](#))

The foreign policy of Pakistan towards Iran in the regimes of Imran Khan was conditioned by some elements of a complex of geographic position, energy requirements, home interests as well as regional security issues. Since Iran is a neighboring state, Islamabad was more interested in ensuring that the region had a stable environment and was in a peaceful mode of living, insofar as the large Shia population in Iran and the stability of governments are concerned. The cultivation of energy symptoms, particularly through the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline, was always a major reason behind the diplomatic interaction, as well as the possibility of improved trade and economic cooperation, with frameworks such as the Preferential Trade Agreement and ECO goals.

Nevertheless, there were a number of impediments that complicated this relationship such as the U.S-Iran tensions, the Saudi Arabian connection with Pakistan, militants and drug trafficking activities across the border and the increasing relationship between India and Iran. Regardless of these obstacles, there were possibilities of mutually beneficial interactions in the form of cultural diplomacy, multilateral interaction with such powers as China and Russia, and the creation of infrastructure to increase the extent of trade connectivity. Khan preferred pragmatism as a balance, utilizing geo-economic and geopolitical opportunities and controlling constraints to reinforce bilateral relations, regional peace, and advance Pakistani national interests in a highly interdependent framework, (Jahanjeeb, 2025).

In the Imran Khan era (2018-2022), the foreign policy of Pakistan regarding Iran was marked by a rational compromise between the regulation of good bilateral relations, and the maintenance of border security. Since the election of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf in 2018, the two countries have experienced a series of high-level diplomacy. Already in October 2018, foreign minister of Iran, Javad Zarif, visited Pakistan, and in December 2018, foreign minister of Pakistan, Shah Mehmood Qureshi did the same. In 2019, the Prime Minister Imran Khan himself paid two visits to Iran, where he met with President Hassan Rouhani and Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader, aiming at supporting the strengthening of trade, economic, and security relations. Among the main projects were the improvement of border management, fight against terrorism, drug trafficking, kidnapping, and illegal financing and development of border areas such as Baluchistan and Sistan-Baluchistan. The two states were determined to undertake practical solutions like the inclusion of new crossings in the borders and the sharing of the Border of Peace, Friendship, and Love. The strategy of Imran Khan was an attempt to preserve steady relations with Iran amid the regional struggles, especially in the Middle East tensions, South Asian security issues and CPEC projects, out of the fear of missing the economic gains, border security and regional security, as the diplomatic activities continued, (Majeed & Rashid, 2025).

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A shift in foreign policy entails a drastic change in the strategies, priorities or approach of a government in dealing with international matters. The government of PTI early delved into more peaceful and co-operative policies by focusing on the use of negotiation and diplomacy rather than confrontation to solve past regional disputes. Recent events however demonstrated that these strategies did not always deliver the desired changes leading to a reactionary and inconsistent foreign policy. These reversal moves caused confusion and undermined confidence in foreign interactions, which points to the difficulties of an effective and sustainable strategy in foreign affairs policy, (Zaman and Mansoor, 2024).

The fact that Pakistan is situated between Saudi Arabia and Iran puts it in an exceptionally challenging strategic situation. Despite the history of deep and culturally based relations, as well as the essential role of the country in the economy of both states, the current conflict between the two giants makes the publicly stated policy of nonintervention in Pakistan a very intricate issue. According to Khan and Sajjad (2023), Pakistan may face grave internal as well as external ramifications in case it moves too far on either of the two poles. Avoiding customer alignment to Saudi Arabia would increase sectarian tensions in the home country and risk Iranian intervention, and being pro-Iran would risk any disruption to Pakistan economic reliance on Saudi aid, investment and energy. Also, the growing strategic partnership between Iran and India only intensifies the security issues faced by Pakistan and increases the chances of misjudgment. Therefore, the delicate diplomatic act of balancing by Pakistan is not only choice but also imperative since neutral position is the only way to achieve economic stability, sectarian conflict, and strategic susceptibility, (Khan and Sajjad, 2023).

Moving a bit aside the argument above, when considering the foreign policy of Pakistan towards Saudi Arabia, it is only pertinent to note that over the ages, Islamabad has had a close point of

convergence with Riyadh. Nevertheless, this classic orientation has been more and more shaped by the wider geopolitical processes in the region and mostly the overall role of Iran. Considering the analysis of Wolf, Pakistan is undergoing a strategic reorientation, which shows a prolonged deterioration of conventional boundaries between it and Saudi Arabia. According to the study Islamabad is quietly decreasing its reliance on the Riyadh owing to the increasing disparities in the regional interests, such as Pakistan not fully backing Saudi stands in major geopolitical matters, and Saudi Arabia becoming increasingly involved in the dealings with India. This re-alignment is further supported by presence of Chinese power which is urging Pakistan to adopt a more balanced stance in the region by increasing cooperation with Iran and Turkey. Therefore, Wolf finds that the old Pakistan-Saudi strategic alliance cannot be maintained in the changing conditions of the region and the world, and the bilateral relationship is bound to proceed towards a distant and weaker version, (Wolf, [2021](#)).

The Pakistan-Saudi Arabia relations have historical, religious, economical and strategic underpinnings which have developed to be one of the longest visions alliances in the Islamic world. Since Saudi Arabia was one of the first nations to acknowledge Pakistan in 1947 to giving the young country financial assistance, military support, and diplomatic assistance the two countries have had each depending on the other and having more similar interests in their strategy. The role of religion has been a major factor since custodianship of Mecca and Medina by the Saudi Arabia has consolidated its position on the Sunni majority in Pakistan, and Pakistan has offered military training and defense aid as well as political alignment with the Kingdom especially when critical events occurred like the Afghanistan War (1979-1989) and anti-terrorism operations. Economic cooperation has continued to be decisive, as Saudi financial aid, energy support, and expatriate remittances keep the Pakistan economy alive, and Saudi infrastructure and energy projects in Vision 2030 are expected to foster these relationships to an even greater extent. Regardless of these good ties, this relationship is fraught with extremely important factors, among them is Pakistan being cautiously neutral regarding the Saudi and Iran conflict, the growth of Saudi relations with India and geopolitical changes in the region which compel Islamabad to juggle its strategic obligations without causing domestic instability. Defense and military collaboration is also one of its pillars, having trained Saudi forces and being involved in security operations like the crisis in Yemen, which demonstrates its long-term strategic interdependence. However, the Pak-Saudi partnership in the 21st century can be seen as resilient; due to overlapping historical, religious, strategic, and economic interests, the future prospects in the field of labor, energy, and infrastructure as outlined in the Vision 2030 have the potential to further strengthen the partnership in terms of stability in the region and Pakistan foreign policy (Anwar, Mustafa, Taimoor, and Akram, [2025](#)).

The article titled: Saudi-Iran Peace Agreement: Regional Implications and Prospects of the deal to Pakistan, which discusses the potential advantages and obstacles the peace deal between Iran and Saudi Arabia holds to Pakistan. The author points out that Pakistan, which has good relations with Iran and Saudi Arabia, will benefit through increased investment, trade, joint production, improved connectivity via the corridors and also joint consortiums. Nevertheless, Hussain also mentions that these opportunities are encouraging, but Pakistan also experiences a number of challenges in the full utilization of these opportunities, (Hussain, N. [2024](#)).

The authors discuss Pakistan-Iran relations as an intricate combination of past and present historical, cultural and even religious connections with a series of security, geopolitical and economic obstacles which remain a problem. Even though there is a supportive base of shared Muslim identity and long-standing bilateral ties by which collaboration between the two countries can be achieved, cross border militancy, sectarian divisions, and regional contests, especially the Iran-Saudi rivalry complicate the relationship. Pakistan can adopt a pragmatic, neutral standpoint,

balancing its relations with Iran and Saudi Arabia, discouraging dialogue, looking cautiously toward economic and energy cooperation, yet most of the projects are currently frozen on mistrust and foreign pressure. Without illegally obtained resources, the authors claim that the sustainable growth would require increased border security cooperation, counter-terrorism action, and improved economic relationships, and ongoing diplomatic and cultural activity, but structural challenges and regional dynamics make growth a slow and volatile process (Khan, Baloch, and Khalid, 2024).Bottom of Form

The descriptions of PDM government by Pakistani newspapers published in two of the most significant Pakistani newspapers, The Dawn and The News International between February and August 2022. The authors applied content analysis to prove the most common narrative based on the findings in editorials. The findings reveal that The Dawn was inclined toward being oppositional at times that can be reflected in the critical tones and evaluations whereas The News International was more neutral and acknowledged that the performance of the government is a complicated issue. This discussion highlights how the media operated in the process of political discourse during a significant period in the history of Pakistan. (Bukhari and Saleem, 2023)

Two very large gaps are represented in the literature review. To start with, the foreign policy of the PTI and PDM governments (2018 to 2023) towards Saudi Arabia and Iran were not properly comparatively studied, although they went in different political ways and priorities. Second, the foreign policy of the PDM government, particularly how it relates to Iran despite its apparent Saudi Arabian tilt is minimal when it comes to research. In general, the majority of current research is rather general or descriptive and lacks the way of how the unique way of working of the two governments influenced their foreign policy decisions, or how the researches explored these new developments through the prism of international relations theories.

Theoretical Framework

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The paper is informed by both Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) and Neoclassical Realism. Neoclassical Realism relates the influence of systemic pressures, including power competition in the region and geopolitical restraints, on the impacts of domestic-level variables to determine state behavior. In the example of Pakistan, Saudi-Iran rivalry is considered to be a major external factor that affects policy decisions.

Foreign Policy Analysis serves as a supplement to this point of view where it highlights the importance of leadership perception, domestic political structure, and economic limitations. The transitions of PTI to PDM, the variations in the politics of the coalition, and changes in the economic conditions are considered to be the intervening variables, which narrow the systemic pressures into actual policy outcomes. Collectively, these structures enable one to perceive continuity and change in the Pakistani foreign policy in a subtle way.

Research Methodology

Research methodology is very important part of the research work as the techniques used in the work are crucial elements of any research to enhance the worth of the study. Both primary and secondary sources have been used in order to accomplish the goals that have been set for this research. The primary aim of this study is to compare the foreign policy approaches of the PTI and PDM governments towards Saudi Arabia and Iran and to identify political, economic, diplomatic, and security factors that influenced policy shifts between 2018 and 2023. In order to get a better understanding of the data that was gathered, the techniques include both descriptive and analytical analysis. In addition, comparison procedures and methodologies are used in order to further enhance the depth of the findings obtained from the research findings.

Significance of the Study

The study will be an addition to the body of literature concerning the foreign policy of Pakistan in the sense that it analyzes two consecutive governments in a very challenging local environment. It provides policy-founded information to the scholarly community, practitioners, and policy-makers who are troubled by the differentiation between diplomacy, economic dependency, and security objectives in a polarized regional context.

Scope and Limitations

The research is limited to 2018-2023 and is specifically tailored in the areas of foreign policy of Pakistan towards Saudi Arabia and Iran. Although the broader regional and global forces are also recognized, the analysis is not extended to the foreign policy in other major powers that can also carry an impact on the foreign policy behavior in Pakistan.

Comparative Analysis and Discussion.

Ideological concern, economic dependence, regional security, and national politics have been a historical factor that defines the relationship between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia and information-seeking relations between Pakistan and Iran. Nonetheless, the change of leadership, geo-political dynamics, and economic susceptibilities of different administrations has resulted in policy priorities that are different in various regimes. The argument in this chapter is that PTI followed the strategy of a cautious balancing policy between Tehran and Riyadh, whereas the PDM government followed the approach of a more pragmatic and institutionally driven one, specifically the increased security and financial involvement in Saudi Arabia without losing any functional diplomatic ties with Iran.

Comparative Foreign Policy Orientation of PTI and PDM Governments

Policies by the PTI government towards foreign affairs were dominated by an approach of strategic independence, non-conformity in regional conflicts and rhetoric of Muslim solidarity. Based on the classic foreign policy stance of Pakistan, the PTI government attempted to balance between Saudi Arabia and Iran without apparent connection with one or the other. This strategy echoed classical realist anxieties regarding the decline of being sucked into local wars especially with the intensifying Saudi- Iran animosity (Walt, 1987; Snyder, 1997).

By comparison, the PDM government was more pragmatic and institutionalized in their foreign policy orientation. Even when the diplomatic ties between Pakistan and Iran were in maintenance, the PDM moot not only focused on restoring the past traditional alliances of Pakistan, particularly with Saudi Arabia, but also in reinforcing them in reaction to acute economic crises and uncertainty over security in the region. This course of action can be discussed in connection with arguments of neoclassical realist, according to which domestic economic pressure and the images of the elite have a strong influence on foreign policy behavior (Rose, 1998).

Pakistan-Saudi Arabia Relations: A Comparative Analysis:

PTI Government's Approach

In the PTI period there was a cordial but a cautious relationship between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. Though Saudi Arabia remained a large contributor of financial aid, remittance, and diplomatic reinforcement, the PTI administration evaded entrenched institutional security obligations. The decision by Pakistan not to be involved in any regional conflict with Saudi Arabia, militarily was a

policy of restraint and neutrality. According to scholars, such a strategy was designed to conserve the capacity of Pakistan as a mediator in the Muslim world, as well as avoid worsening the relations with Iran (Rizvi, 2019; Abbas, 2021).

The economic relations of this time were quite transactional with a little development towards the long-term structural cooperation. Though the top-level visits took place, the lack of official security or financial systems were positive indicators of flexibility as opposed to an entanglement in alliances.

PDM Government's Approach

The quality of Pakistan-Saudi Arabia relations began to change under the PDM government. Achievement was shifted towards symbolic cooperation and an institutional way of strategic engagement, especially in the aspects of security and economic investment. One can explain this change in terms of regime survival and economic statecraft whereby states that face the risks of financial constraints also look externally to find alliances to stabilize the domestic situation (Mastanduno, 1997).

The PDM government was engaged in an active search of coordinated economic partnership, investment patterns, and increased military collaboration with Saudi Arabia. The strategy showed the urgent and economic requirements of Pakistan and the developing security perspectives of Saudi Arabia in the region. Contrary to the cautious balancing of PTI, PDM strategy showed readiness to restructure themselves to greater depth of strategic alignment though with diplomatic precautions against Iran.

Comparative Assessment

In comparison, the PTI strategy had been based on strategic impartiality and ideological placements where the PDM government had pursued pragmatic, interest-based approach with priority on the level of institutionality and economic rehabilitation. This deviation highlights how domestic political economy and leadership perceptions play out in influencing foreign policy decisions.

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Pakistan-Iran Relations: A Comparative Analysis:

PTI Government's Approach

The PTI policies towards Iran were premised on the principles of friendly cooperation, control of borders, and prudent economic relations. The PTI leadership promoted peaceful co-existence and dialogue in the region by focusing on the geographical and cultural closeness of Pakistan and Iran. According to academic literature, the strategy was based on the fact that Pakistan has long been concerned about the stability of its borders to the East in Balochistan and the risk of regional spillover consequences of the Middle East conflicts (Khan, 2020; Fair, 2022).

Regardless of the diplomatic involvement, the international sanctions against Iran and the financial restraint of Pakistan posed structural challenges to the economic cooperation. Thus, the relations between Pakistan and Iran under PTI were diplomatically good but lacked substantive content.

PDM Government's Approach

The PDM government mostly maintained the PTI-era relations with Iran, where diplomatic continuity and the establishment of confidence were central focus. It, however, emphasized more on institutional discourse, parliamentary and regional security consultations. This is a

constructivist approach to diplomacy with a cumulative interaction and institutionalization which leads to trust-building (Wendt, 1999).

Although this economic cooperation was limited, the PDM government was more willing to ensure that the relationship between Pakistan and Iran was not harmed by the closer relationship that Pakistan had with Saudi Arabia. This two-level diplomacy explains that Pakistan tried to handle asymmetric relations without arousing any strategically significant reaction.

Comparative Assessment

Both governments exhibited continuity in their approach towards Iran, with differences primarily in diplomatic intensity rather than strategic direction. PTI emphasized symbolic balance, while PDM pursued more structured engagement to mitigate the implications of its Saudi-centric policies.

Cross-Case Comparative Discussion

The comparative results identify 3 broad trends. First, there was more fluctuation in the Pakistani policy towards Saudi Arabia between PTI and PDM which was an indication of economic dependence and evolving calculations of regional security. Second, Iran was a relatively stable policy which was restrained by structural and geopolitical considerations. Third, the direction of change in leadership affected the level of institutionalization, but not the two basic goals of foreign policy.

In theory, these outcomes indicate neoclassical realism, which states that systemic pressures are mediated by domestic factors like leadership preferences and the state of a given economy (Lobell, Rapsmann, and Taliaferro, 2016).

Policy Shifts are influenced by factors.

The changes in the policy of the Middle East in Pakistan were conditioned by a number of factors. Domestically, a decisive influence was played by economic crisis, coalition politics and change of leadership. Locally, Saudi–Iran competition, the Gulf security issues, and the oscillating power relations urged Pakistan to redefine its foreign policy. The degradation of Western involvement in the Middle East added to the strategic value of partnerships in the region internationally.

Implications for Pakistan's Foreign Policy

The comparative analysis indicates that the foreign policy of Pakistan continues to be influenced more by expediency-driven aspects of economics and security needs instead of the ideological obligations. Although maintaining balance is a fundamental approach, the emphasis on selective alignment over the past few years is suggested by the PDM period where domestic considerations require it. This also has a backlash on the credibility of Pakistan as a mediator and the long term strategic independence of the country.

Findings of Discussion

As shown in this chapter, the foreign policy that Pakistan is dealing with Saudi Arabia and Iran during the rule of PTI and PDM governments is one that exhibits a mix in continuity and change. PTI developed a cautious balancing policy with the focus on neutrality and on diplomatic flexibility whereas the PDM government pursued more pragmatic and institutionalized policy especially towards Saudi Arabia, although the relationship with Iran was stable. The findings are relevant to the research questions because they explain the commonalities between domestic politics,

economic restrictions, and regional geopolitics to grasp the formulation of Pakistan Middle East policy. The chapter forms the basis of the final chapter, which will evaluate more general theoretical and policy implications.

Conclusion

This paper examined the foreign policy of the PTI (2018-2022) and PDM (2022-2023) governments towards Saudi Arabia and Iran with the aim of establishing the difference in policies, the drivers of these changes, and the economic, diplomatic, and security implications. With the help of comparative foreign policy analysis and neoclassical realists, the study shows that the Middle East policy of Pakistan of that time is the result of the interplay of domestic political factors, economic limitations, policies of the leaders, and the security pressures of the region.

The conclusion shows that even though the main foreign policy goals of Pakistan were to achieve stability in the region, strategic independence and economic insecurity, the approach and priority of the governments was notably different between the PTI and the PDM governments. The PTI administration adopted a moderating compromising policy, focusing on neutrality in the Saudi-Iran conflict, rhetorical political proselytizing of Muslim unity, and foreign policy and diplomatic pliability. This policy was aimed to maintain the independence of Pakistan and not entangle in the conflicts of the region which represented normative and identity-based agendas as well as the strategic interests.

On the other hand, the PDM government became more practical and economically interested, especially in its relationships with Saudi Arabia. In the harsh economic vulnerability and the internal political demands felt back at home, the PDM leadership emphasized economic diplomacy, institutionalization of security cooperation and rejuvenation of the traditional alliances. Although this led to increased interaction with Saudi Arabia, the PDM government also continued other functional relationships with Iran via further diplomatic contacts and confidence building actions which emphasizes the pragmatic instead of exclusionary policy orientation.

The paper also finds that domestic economic reasons, change of leaders, coalition politics, and governance priorities were most powerful in the progression of policy change between the years 2018 and 2023. These results affirm the arguments of the neoclassical realists who suggest that only international systemic constraints could not help explain the outcome of foreign policy but the variables at the domestic level moderate and distort the external constraints. Meanwhile, constructivists insights are used to understand how diplomacy, institutional interaction, and normative positioning contribute to the asymmetric relationship management.

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