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Russia and Pakistan in the Middle East: Approaches to Security in the Gulf

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This report is the result of a collaborative study performed by the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC) and the Strategic Vision Institute (SVI). The report is devoted to analyzing the role of Russia and Pakistan in Middle Eastern processes as well as the two states' policies in the Persian Gulf subregion. Experts determine the areas in which the strategic and diplomatic interests of the two states converge. This work also examines Russian and Pakistani positions towards regional competition, influence of external actors and prospects for cooperation in the sphere of security in the Persian Gulf.

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Introduction

This report is the result of a collaborative study performed by the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC) and the Strategic Vision Institute (SVI). The dynamics that both Russia and Pakistan face from the Middle East and the Persian Gulf are of particular importance in identifying areas where the strategic and diplomatic interests of both countries converge. This report includes two papers authored by RIAC experts, Julia Roknifard and Grigory Lukyanov, on the Russian side and SVI researcher, Mohammad Waqas Jan, on the Pakistani side.

Julia Roknifard and Grigory Lukyanov analyse Russian policies towards security issues in the Persian Gulf. In addition, Russian authors presented a history of rapprochement between the positions of Russia and the Gulf States in this area within the context of Russia's «return» to the Middle East. Wakas Jan examines Pakistan's foreign policy and its growing role in the Middle East security system, which is determined by the region's geopolitics. He demonstrated the need for the arrangement of new foreign policy guidelines for Pakistan, due to recent changes in the great powers' policy path and their influence on the regions of South Asia and the Middle East.

Russia and Pakistan are traditionally considered potential intermediaries when it comes to defusing tensions between the Gulf monarchies and Iran. Islamabad's traditionally neutral stance was a deciding factor in 2019, when Saudi Arabia unofficially selected Pakistan as an intermediary in the talks on the problems between the Gulf monarchies and between Tehran and Riyadh. Pakistan's strategic neutrality puts it in a favourable light. Since Russia and Pakistan maintain working contacts with all actors, they could advance joint proposals on improving the situation in the Persian Gulf.

As it is discussed in the papers, both Russia and Pakistan's role within the security architecture of the region has been to maintain stability first and foremost. As such, both countries' approach has been to preserve the status quo, rather than radically alter it. This approach stands in marked contrast to the US's role for instance, which, even though it is also premised on promoting stability, imposes certain transformational demands on which US support and assistance remain conditional. In comparison, both Russian and Pakistani support is neither based on any such conditions, nor tied to any overarching policies of intervening directly in the socio-political and economic systems of Middle Eastern countries.

Instead, their relations are based on a long history of diplomatic ties that have maintained a shared socio-economic affinity. One stems directly from the region's close geographic proximity to both Russia and Pakistan which in itself pre-dates the modern international system. These ties, when approached via a possible multilateral framework (such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), for instance), have immense potential in helping mediate existing tensions within the region. Both Russia and Pakistan, by drawing on their own bilateral relations with the Middle East's major powers, can thus play a key role in arbitrating existing disputes and tensions, such as the ongoing rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia to help bring about greater stability and less uncertainty.

1. Russia and Security in the Persian Gulf

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1.1. Russia and the Monarchies of the Persian Gulf: A History of Security Rapprochement

Russia has long-standing connections with the Arab monarchies of the Persian Gulf. Back in 1926, the USSR was the first state to establish official bilateral relations with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The Soviet Ambassador to Saudi Arabia Karim Khakimov, dubbed “the Red Pasha” by the Arabs, was a personal friend of King Abdulaziz al Saud. With the subsequent repressions in the USSR and the execution of Khakimov in 1938 after his return to Moscow, the Saudi monarch cut relations with the USSR. During the Cold War, Russia had limited contacts with the Gulf monarchies, which had become key players on the oil market. That largely determined the region’s importance for the United States.

The Iranian Revolution in 1979 caused to United States to rethink its strategy of relying on Saudi Arabia and Iran. The Gulf monarchies continued to be included in the U.S. “security umbrella.”¹ The situation began to heat up when Soviet troops entered Afghanistan that very same year. The Gulf countries saw this as the USSR attempting to gain access to the Persian Gulf. And the assurances of Soviet diplomats that the USSR had no such intentions were not well received by the Gulf countries and the United States.

The establishment of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC, now the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf) in 1981 was a landmark event on the road towards the rapprochement of the Gulf monarchies. The abovementioned factors (the Soviet troops entering Afghanistan and the success of the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran) forced the Arab monarchies to form a bloc that was not so much economic and integrational as it was military and political. The GCC countries strove to form a relatively independent regional security system. However, the process proceeded extremely slowly due to the smaller Arab states opposing the leading role of Saudi Arabia, long-standing territorial disputes and “different approaches to assessing potential threats.”²

The 1990–1991 Gulf War was indicative of the failed attempt to build a security system in the Persian Gulf that would be independent of external actors. The GCC states proved incapable of effectively siding with Kuwait and protecting it from Iraqi aggression, and this circumstance laid bare the failure of the previous approach. It bolstered the trend of the Arab monarchies and the United States coordinating their security efforts, with the United States becoming the key security provider in the Gulf. Consequently, the Gulf states found themselves, on the

¹ Aksenenok A., Makhmud O. Russia – GCC Relations After the Signing of the JCPOA with Iran // RIAC. March 17, 2017. URL: <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/Russia-GCC-Relations-After-the-Signing-of-the-JCPOA/>

² Karpenko E. A. Forming a Collective Security System of the Countries – Members of the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf. Dissertation for the degree of Ph.D. in History. 07.00.15 Moscow, 2006. URL: <https://www.dissercat.com/content/formirovanie-sistemy-kollektivnoi-bezopasnosti-stran-chlenov-soveta-sotrudnichestva-arabskik>

one hand, declaring a boycott on Israel and, on the other hand, counting on the “security umbrella” of that country’s chief strategic partner, the United States. This could not but leave an imprint on the further weakening of the Arab monarchies’ support for the Palestinian cause and their opposition to Israel. The GCC countries stepped back from the confrontation, largely leaving it to their Arab partners from the League of Arab States, for instance, Egypt.

With the collapse of the USSR, Moscow set about restoring official relations with several states, key among which was Saudi Arabia. By that time, the Afghanistan factor was no longer relevant, since the USSR had withdrawn its troops from the country in 1989. What is more, during the final years of the USSR, and certainly after the appearance of the “new” Russia, the authorities abolished the practice of persecuting the clergy and religious groups. The liberalization of ideological life and reintroduction of the freedom of religion, which also extended to Russian Muslims, also had a positive impact on the perception of Russia in Muslim Arab countries. A landmark event in Russia’s relations with these countries came in 2005, when it was granted observer status in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. However, the Middle East was not a priority for the new Russian elite of the 1990s in terms of establishing a military presence. For a long time after the collapse of the USSR and the end of the Cold War, the military-political leadership of the “new” Russia did not see the practical benefits of expanding its presence in the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA) by building new facilities, nor did it want to maintain a presence there at the level of the 1960s–1980s. The Gulf states were perfectly happy with this approach, as they no longer saw Moscow as a threat to their security. Moscow instead started to focus increasingly on the fight against terrorism.

Against the background of protracted military conflicts in the North Caucasus (in Chechnya and in Dagestan) and the increased threat of international terrorist organizations operating both in Russia and in MENA countries, establishing effective comprehensive interaction in security and counterterrorism with both traditional and new partners became a promising area of Russia’s Middle Eastern politics in the 2000s–2010s.³

These new partners include Israel and Saudi Arabia, with which diplomatic relations were restored only after the collapse of the USSR.⁴ Nevertheless, interactions with the region’s states on security issues were mostly limited to bilateral (and less frequently multilateral) consultations between relevant agencies, exchanging information and developing the legal framework for combating crime. The key obstacles here are the lack of mutual trust, institutional foundations and unity in approaches to understanding key concepts and categories. It is unclear what is considered terrorism and who are considered terrorists. This

³ Lukyanov G. Russia’s Military Presence and Security in the Middle East after the Start of the Military Operation in Syria // RIAC. October 2, 2019.

URL: <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytiks-and-comments/analytiks/voennoe-prisutstvie-i-politika-bezopasnosti-rossii-na-blizhnem-vostoke-posle-nachala-voennoy-operats/>

⁴ International Terrorism is the Common Enemy of Russia and Israel // International Affairs editorial board. December 15, 2018.

URL: <https://interaffairs.ru/news/show/21256>

is typical not only for Russia's relations with the countries of the region, but also for relations between other global and regional powers and international organizations.

Russia's return to the Middle East as a full-fledged actor is often associated with its involvement in the Syrian conflict at the request of the legitimate Syrian government in 2015. However, the desire to restore, preserve or rebuild ties with the principal actors in the region had long been there. Russia only started to pursue a more measured policy with regard to the Middle East during Vladimir Putin's second term as president.

1.2. Russia's "Return" to the Middle East

Russia's priorities changed radically in 2015, when, at the invitation of the official government of the Syrian Arab Republic (SAR), Russia deployed troops in the country to fight the Islamic State (IS) international terrorist organization (which has been declared a terrorist organization and is banned in Russia).⁵ Despite the differing stances of Russia and Saudi Arabia (the key GCC actor) on the Syrian issue, the joint fight against terrorism and extremism was preserved as one of the key areas of Russia's cooperation with the Gulf monarchies. Following the fourth round of the GCC–Russia strategic dialogue in Moscow in May 2016, the parties announced their intention to continue the collective fight against terror through the implementation of the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy.⁶

Coordination with the Gulf countries was stepped up following Russia's "return" to the Middle East in 2015. This development coincided with the need to stabilize oil prices. The OPEC+ format and the reduction of oil production contributed to the rapprochement on other issues on the international agenda. 2017 saw the historic visit of King Salman bin Abdulaziz al Saud to Moscow. During his return visit to Riyadh in 2019, President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin said, "Our countries interact in resolving topical international and regional problems. We are working jointly within the framework of the UN, the G20 (which Saudi Arabia will chair in 2020) and the strategic dialogue between Russia and the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf."⁷

In 2017, Russia took a neutral stance on the matter of the GCC crisis and the blockade of Qatar by other Gulf monarchies, primarily Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. At the time, Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov said, "The countries [...] should engage in talks, abandon ultimatums and seek a mutually acceptable solution. Concerns should be considered, and means of addressing these concerns on a mutual basis should be found, and I

⁵ From Russia with Support // TASS.
URL: <https://tass.ru/spec/syria>

⁶ Kosach G., Melkumyan E. Possibilities of a Strategic Relationship Between Russia and Saudi Arabia // RIAC. Analytical Brief No. 6. August 2016.
URL: <https://russiancouncil.ru/upload/Russia-SaudiArabia-policy-brief-6-en.pdf>

⁷ Latikhina G. Putin Listed the Goals of Moscow–Riyadh Cooperation // Rossiyskaya Gazeta. October 14, 2019.
URL: <https://rg.ru/2019/10/14/putin-nazval-cel-sotrudnichestva-moskvy-i-er-riada.html>

am confident that it can be done.”⁸ Escalating tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran proved to be another key challenge. The influence of the United States is of great significance here, particularly after the country withdrew from the JCPOA.

Under these circumstances, regional powers began to consider two possible intermediaries, Russia and Iraq. Baghdad has the advantage that the agreements between Tehran and Riyadh hold critical importance for it. However, both Saudi Arabia and Iran doubt that Iraq is at all capable of acting as an authoritative intermediary, which effectively ruled out this option. Russia, on the other hand, has both the authority and the political and diplomatic resources required to de-escalate the situation. However, the political price of Moscow’s providing such a service might turn out to be high.

The 2016 Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation defined the Middle East as a region whose problems are directly relevant for Russia, and external interference was noted as one of the reasons for the current regional problems.⁹ Initially, Syrian issues outweighed such objectives as expanding Russia’s economic ties or preventing the spread of extremist ideologies and terrorist activities into neighbouring states and Russia. The objective of Russia’s presence in the region was to improve its image in the Middle East and consolidate its role as a balancing external actor.

Some believe that Russia is filling the “geopolitical vacuum” in the Middle East created by the policies of the United States starting with the Obama Administration (2009–2017). In this context, Russia is presented as a great power that takes part in the power struggle among the states in the region.

The Middle East has become an arena of interactions with the West, primarily the United States, as well as a promising market for Russian heavy industry products, particularly military equipment. Among the heavyweights working in the region are Rosatom (with projects in Iran, Turkey, Jordan and Egypt), LUKOIL (Iraq) and Gazprom (Turkey).

Even though the previous U.S. administration had declared it was pulling U.S. troops out of the Middle East, its presence in the region was one of the factors that prompted Moscow to plan its attempts to establish a regional balance of power more carefully. Moscow also kept an eye on other indicators of the West’s military interference in regional affairs. For instance, the U.S. military budget earmarks increasing amounts to the Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO), promising to reach an all-time high of \$175 billion in 2020–2021. The OCO budget and the U.S. presence in the Middle East are not transparent, and there is no guarantee that the United States will follow through on its declared intention to reduce its participation in foreign conflicts. It is thus all the more important that Russia carefully plan out its strategy in the Middle East.

⁸ Lavrov: The Qatar Crisis Can be Settled by Discussing Mutual Concerns // TASS. 22.09.2019.
URL: <https://tass.ru/politika/4586005>

⁹ Executive Order No. 640 of the President of the Russian Federation. On Approving the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation // Presidential Executive Office. November 30, 2016.
URL: <http://kremlin.ru/acts/bank/41451>

Vladimir Putin started making official visits to the Middle East during his second term in office, and relations with Syria were a priority. For example, after it had secured contracts for the delivery of oil and the development of gas fields, Russia wrote off \$9.78 billion of Syria's outstanding \$13.4 billion debt.¹⁰

Being at the crossroads of many hotbeds of unrest, Russia has been afforded the opportunity to act as an intermediary or, at least, to declare itself as such. Russia is a desirable partner for regional powers thanks to its ability to effectively balance between conflicting parties, for instance, in the Arab–Israeli conflict, the confrontation between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and during the peak of hostility between Iran and Israel. To some extent, this has made Russia a successful example of an objective, independent player that takes the interests of the main regional actors into account. This image has earned Moscow the goodwill of regional players that are seeking a counterbalance to the interference of external forces and a mediator for resolving their intra-regional issues.

Russia thus has a strategic advantage in the Middle East. Despite the fact that Moscow has fewer resources for projecting its power far beyond its borders, Russia's new image following the collapse of the Soviet Union has paved the way for its return to the game as a "fair" intermediary that respects both the sovereignty of other states and the needs of the region.

Strategically, Russia's ability to turn the tide of the war in Syria in favour of the current Syrian government proved that it is a powerful force to be reckoned with. Similarly, Moscow's diplomatic efforts to settle the Syrian conflict within the context of the so-called Astana process, which includes the active participation of local actors (Turkey and Iran), helped boost Russia's image as a fair arbiter on the international stage.

China's primarily economic participation in regional affairs forces Russia, in turn, to take the interests of yet another influential extra-regional actor into account. It would be fair to conclude that Russia is balancing between strategic and economic interests on the one hand, and the resources at its disposal on the other.

1.3. Russia's Stance on the Escalation in the Persian Gulf

The active role that Russia played in the Iran nuclear deal was one of Moscow's most important regional, and indeed global, political initiatives. This is because, as the crisis developed, it gained global significance. However, despite certain statements that Russia and Iran became strategic partners during the process, the two states should not be taken solely as such. Ultimately, Russia's support for Iran should still be considered through the prism of Moscow's own interests.

The crisis that broke out in the Persian Gulf in May 2019 when Iran first announced that it was suspending compliance with some of its commitments under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (the JCPOA) demonstrated that the problem of Iran's nuclear programme actually includes a broad range of factors and interests. The actors that influence Iran (the United States in particular) are concerned

¹⁰ Arsyukhin E., Bogdanov V. Russia Writes off 10 Billion of Syria's Debt // Rossiyskaya Gazeta. January 26, 2005.
URL: <https://rg.ru/2005/01/26/asad-siria.html>

with nuclear non-proliferation, but this is not their only, or even major, concern. Similarly, the current escalation cannot be reduced to Iran's 40-year-long confrontation with the United States. Russia kept a close eye on developments throughout the talks on Iran's nuclear programme and after the decision of the United States to withdraw from the nuclear deal, especially since it now strove to present itself an active regional actor.

Russia still adheres to the stance that Iran should not have nuclear weapons, as it would both damage the non-proliferation regime and destabilize the entire region. The decision of the United States to pull out of the JCPOA, coupled with the subsequent escalation in the Gulf, confirmed the fact that Russia's concerns were not groundless.

Iran is Russia's neighbour in the Caspian, which means that all of the above-listed issues directly affect Russia's interests in the south. On the other hand, Iran's special geopolitical role in the Middle East determines Russia's desire to build, if not strategic, then at least maximally constructive relations with its southern neighbour.

Both countries base their foreign political doctrines on counteracting the United States – Russia on a global scale and Iran on a regional scale.¹¹ In this sense, they can indeed be called strategic partners, since they seek to prevent the international order that has been emerging after the Cold War from descending into unipolarity. And they both want to protect the interests of less influential actors, whose voice should also be taken into account in resolving regional and global issues. This position was partially reflected in the examples of military cooperation between the two countries. One example of this is Russia's use of the Iranian air base in Hamadan to carry out attacks on facilities in Syria in August 2016. This event had symbolic significance, since Iran had essentially considered the deployment of foreign troops on its territory taboo following the period of quasi-colonial control of the Soviet Union and the United Kingdom in the 20th century.

Another example of Russia–Iran cooperation appeared in 2019, when strategists attempted to guess Moscow's reaction to the possible escalation of the situation in the Gulf. In July, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation and the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Iran signed a memorandum of understanding aimed at expanding military ties between the two countries.¹² The agreements included military exercises in the Persian Gulf, which are essentially a legal pretext for Russia's presence in the potential hotbed of unrest. Certainly, the Russo-Persian Treaty of Friendship of 1921, which Russia still considers to be in force, provides a legal framework for Russia to deploy troops in Iran in the event of a foreign intervention. However, the above example indirectly demonstrates that the sides are at least take some action in the event that the situation escalates today.

¹¹ Trenin D. Russia and Iran: Historic Mistrust and Contemporary Partnership // September 8, 2016. URL: <https://carnegie.ru/2016/08/18/russia-and-iran-historic-mistrust-and-contemporary-partnership-pub-64365>

¹² Suchkov M. Intel: How Russia is deepening military ties with Iran to counter the U.S. // Al-Monitor. July 30, 2019. URL: <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/07/intel-russia-deepening-military-ties-iran-counter-us.html>

At this stage, it is important that Russia has essentially warned that it will not remain idle should the growing tensions between Iran, its Arab neighbours and the United States threaten regional security. Russia has also expressed that it is inadmissible to conduct policies of “exclusion of any stakeholder for any reason” in its recent Collective Security Concept for the Persian Gulf.¹³ This could also open up prospects for Russia, Pakistan and the regional states to interact in the field of civilian use of nuclear technologies. However, the existential interest of Islamabad in preserving all the advantages associated with its own military nuclear program is an obvious obstacle to cooperation in this direction. This prevents Pakistan, a non-member of the the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), from acting as a role model.

The rumours that Moscow is ready to provide Tehran not only with the S-400 anti-aircraft missile systems, but also with T-90 tanks and Su-30 fighters (deliveries of which formally contradict the poorly implemented “nuclear deal”) can be seen as an attempt to support an alternative regional order to the one offered by the United States. The delivery of S-400s to Turkey, despite the vehement objections of the United States and NATO, only serves to emphasize Russia’s determination to achieve its goals, including with respect to Iran. If the JCPOA does indeed die away, restrictions on deliveries of heavy weapons to Iran will be lifted.

Russia has clearly indicated that it does not want to see any escalation in the Middle East beyond in the hotbeds that already exist there. Moscow would thus like to present itself as an actor that offers the region more attractive ideas, even though it also pursues its own interests there – interests that naturally go beyond supporting Iran.

Iran’s full-fledged return to the oil market was one of the most important outcomes of the Iran nuclear talks. The suggestion that Russia has become the main beneficiary of the failure of the JCPOA, since its collapse neutralizes Iran as a competitor, is an oversimplification and does not reflect the view of the situation held by experts and the government.¹⁴

Russia understands that Iran’s trade in oil and gas is largely oriented towards the Asia Pacific, while Russia’s principal clients are in Europe. Additionally, Iran’s industry will require major investment to bring production and export capacities to a level that is sufficient to compete with Russia.¹⁵ Both countries are interested in an oil market that is stable in terms of both supply and price.

At the same time, Russia is considering alternative projects that would help keep Iran’s principal clients in Asia instead of creating competition for the European market. The main example is various modifications of the Iran–Pakistan–India

¹³ Presentation on Russia’s Collective Security Concept for the Persian Gulf Region // Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. July 23, 2019.
URL: https://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3733593?p_p_id=101_INSTANCE_cKNonkJE02Bw&_101_INSTANCE_cKNonkJE02Bw_languageId=ru_RU

¹⁴ Kozhanov N. Will Russia benefit from a failed Iran nuclear deal? // Aljazeera. July 18, 2018.
URL: <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/russia-benefit-failed-iran-nuclear-deal-180616173815567.html>

¹⁵ Khlebnikov A. Iran, Russia, and the impact of US sanctions // Middle East Institute. July 17, 2019.
URL: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/iran-russia-and-impact-us-sanctions>

gas pipeline. The project has been under consideration since 1996, but the parties only transitioned to substantive discussions in 2008. Russia's Gazprom has expressed interest in investing in the pipeline. The company was also engaged in talks on the possibility of participating in the development of the South Pars gas field in Iran, which would increase its weight in the promising project in the uppermost part of the field. In 2019, Russia again took part in talks on an updated version of the project between the same two points but via an alternative route, although Russia proceeded with caution, since, for both economic and political reasons, Moscow would prefer India to officially confirm its participation first.

Since all the parties are geared towards such a pragmatic and non-politicized objective as ensuring energy security, the project would help balance the actors in the Middle East and South Asia, given Russia's strategic relations with India, and its interest in bolstering cooperation with Pakistan and diversifying energy transportation routes from Iran.

Russia's other interests include attracting investments, particularly from the Persian Gulf. This is the reason why, despite supporting Iran's retaliatory strike against the United States, Moscow attempts to preserve its relatively neutral image by balancing between Iran, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Israel. For the same reason, a clear strategic partnership between Russia and Iran will be seen as a departure from this image, which is unlikely to serve Russia's interests.

The preferred scenario for Russia would be to maintain the status quo after the successful implementation of the JCPOA, which would allow Iran to resolve its (mostly economic) domestic issues and preserve the stability of its political regime without another Middle Eastern state descending into unpredictability. In this case, Moscow will be able to keep the adversaries from a direct military confrontation, maintain oil deliveries and thus market stability, and possibly even advance its security concept among the actors in the region.

Russia's cooperation with some of the states in the region (for example Iran and Turkey) in infrastructural or industrial projects can be seen as another sign of regional actors attempting to advance their own vision of the new world order. Although this may well be a tactical move of limited duration. This does not mean that Russia does not strive to establish geopolitical alliances in the region, quite the opposite. But whenever it is presented with an opportunity to choose between long-term ties on the one hand and preserving its image as a neutral and fair actor within the current international legal framework on the other, Russia invariably opts for the latter. However, despite the tactical nature of the alliances that Russia is currently building, the fact that they have a certain ideological orientation and are supported by major resources may be a cause for concern among American strategists and thus prompt countermeasures.

2. Pakistan and the Changing Dynamics of Great Power Politics in the Middle East

2.1. A Historic Overview of Pakistan's Role in the Middle East

Mohammad
Waqas Jan

Pakistan as an Islamic Republic is arguably considered as one of the only three modern states founded along the lines of religious identity,¹⁶ although the *raison d'être* of its creation by Pakistan's founding fathers was socio-economic and political. This is unquestionably substantiated by the fact that all the religious political parties of the British India vehemently opposed the creation of Pakistan. M.A. Jinnah, collectively acknowledged as 'Father of the Nation', didn't bear any semblance of a religious leader. Since the creation of the state, Pakistan's national identity, despite being that of a secular state, has been centered not only around the representation of the Muslims of the South Asian region, but more generally it has been focused on the identification of the broader pan-Islamic ideal of the Muslim 'Ummah'. This, for instance, is considered to enshrine the role of the country in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation of which Pakistan is a founding member and that is now predominantly under Arab influence and led by Saudi Arabia. Pakistan's Islamic identity is also being misconstrued from its vocal support for the Palestinian cause since 1947, as well as its continued refusal to extend diplomatic recognition to Israel.¹⁷ Pakistan's identification with the broader Muslim World has largely framed its relations with states across the Middle East and Persian Gulf regions.¹⁸ Pakistan's religious identity has textured from the movement of PNA (Pakistan National Alliance) against Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's government (1971-1977), but more vigorously from the ruthlessly dictatorial regime of General Zia-Ul-Haq (1977-1988).

The fact remains that the Middle Eastern region has historically and quite notoriously served as a major site of rivalry between world powers due to its geo-strategic importance as one of the world's primary sources of energy. Holding the world's largest proven concentration of hydrocarbon reserves,¹⁹ the entire region's politics has a direct impact on global economic growth and stability. Influencing and managing political developments has thus remained pivotal for international and regional powers throughout modern history. Starting from the British Empire's hegemonic hold during the Post-World War II era, the United States' unilateralism in the aftermath of the Cold War, and both Iran and Saudi Arabia's competing attempts at playing the role of regional hegemons, the entire

¹⁶ The other two being Israel and Iran. It is worth noting that there exists a burgeoning debate regarding Pakistan's inception and the extent to which the state while being secular was arguably premised on championing the ideals of a distinct 'Islamic identity. For a cogent exposition of this discussion see: Nasr S.V. *Islam in Pakistan in Political Islam: Revolution, Radicalism, or Reform*. Boulder, Colorado, Lynne Rienner, 1999.

¹⁷ Mustafa Z. *Recent Trends in Pakistan's Policy Towards the Middle East // Pakistan Horizon*, Vol 28, №4, 1975. P. 3; Cohen S.P. *The Idea of Pakistan*. New York, Brookings Institution Press, 2004. P. 25.

¹⁸ Sarwar Khan A. *Pakistan's Foreign Policy in the Changing International Scenario // The Muslim World*, Vol. 96, №2, 2006. P. 238.

¹⁹ Gupta E. *Oil Vulnerability Index of Oil-Importing Countries // Energy policy*, Vol. 36, №3, 2008. P. 1195.

region's geo-politics even to this day is defined by instability and rivalry along some of the world's most divisive fault-lines.

The region's complicated geopolitics has compelled Pakistan to adopt a nuanced approach to international relations with third countries of the region. This approach has involved managing its own historic relations based on Cold War's political and ideological assumptions and ideological considerations at one end, and the reality of trade and economic cooperation. Based on these dynamics, this paper argues that even though Pakistan's foreign policy towards the Middle East has been shaped by a series of complex historical processes, it is currently undergoing an important transformative process. This process while based on the shifting dynamics of super-power politics is closely intertwined with the evolving dynamics of the international status quo. An international status quo that while precariously perched on the cusp of change, points to a broad-ranging shift from a unipolar world order to a multipolar one.

Situated at the crossroads of South Asia and the Middle East, Pakistan's geo-strategic position has allowed it to play a key role within both these regions throughout its history. This role has historically been tied to its very identity and *raison d'etre* as a homeland for the Muslims of the South Asian sub-continent. Forming the very basis of the two-nation theory, this aspect is also inherent in Pakistan's self-avowed ideal of being part of a pan-Islamic World.²⁰

Pakistan's celebration of its identity is subsequently manifested in its close affinity with the Muslims of the Middle East. This for instance has been evident right from 1947 when building on its credentials as a newly independent Muslim-led State, Pakistan took the lead in supporting the decolonization struggles of several other Muslim majority States in the region. These included countries such as Libya, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Somaliland, Eritrea and Palestine, with all of whom Pakistan has espoused a shared sense of solidarity.²¹

The case of Palestine, for instance, has received continued attention from Pakistan based on these considerations. This has been evident since Pakistan's first Foreign Minister, Muhammad Zafarullah Khan rose as one of the strongest supporters of the Palestinian cause when the issue was first raised at the UN.²² As a corollary to its support to the Palestinian cause, Pakistan's refusal to extend diplomatic recognition to Israel has also since remained a defining feature of its Middle East policy. It was based on these reasons that Pakistan continued to lend logistical and military support to the Arab coalitions throughout the Six Day War in 1967, the 1973 Ramzan War,²³ and the Palestinian intifada of the late 1980's led by the PLO. It was also one of the first countries to recognize the sovereignty of the Palestinian authority in 1988 and has since regularly called out Israel for its violent suppression of the Palestinian cause.

²⁰ Cohen S.P. *Shooting for a Century: The India-Pakistan Conundrum*. Washington DC, Brookings Institution Press, 2013. pp. 13-14; Pirzada *Pakistan and the OIC*. pp. 14-15.

²¹ Qureshi K. *Pakistan and the Middle East // Pakistan Horizon*, Vol. 19, №2, 1966. P. 158.

²² Mustafa Op. cit. P. 3.

²³ Ahmad Dar S. *The Ramzan War and Pakistan // Pakistan Horizon*, Vol 29, №2, 1976. P. 59-63.

While Pakistan's support for the Palestinian movement represents one of the clearest reflections of the more Country's religion-driven policy approach towards the Middle East, of its policy towards the Middle East, there has nevertheless also been a predominance of geo-political considerations that have shaped the trajectory of its approach to the region. These in turn are tied to a broad range of issues that are directly related to Pakistan's more strategic, politico-economic and security objectives, as well as the changing dynamics of great power politics. This includes Pakistan's long-standing rivalry and animosity towards India, as well as its turbulent relations with the United States both of which have had profound impact on its overall foreign policy. In this respect, the Cold War certainly impacted Pakistan's foreign policy strategy vis-à-vis the Middle East. The 1955 CENTO agreement signed between the United States, Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan and the United Kingdom stands as a case in point.²⁴

Enshrined within the legacies of the Truman Doctrine, US foreign policy approach to the region then was largely aimed at containing the communist threat from the Soviet Union. The US found a valid ally in Pakistan which in turn considered American economic and military support to be vital to counteract the existential threat posed by India. It was based on these considerations that, in addition to the CENTO agreement, Pakistan took part in a slew of other anti-communist pacts such as the 1954 SEATO agreement and a major bilateral agreement with the US in 1959.²⁵ However, the alliance with the US, which had been built over years of close ties, proved ineffective for Pakistan as the US remained unwilling to get embroiled in Pakistan's two subsequent wars with India in 1965 and 1971. As it became evident in the 1971 war, the US was considerably wary of getting dragged into a larger conflict as a result of the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation that had been signed between India and the Soviet Union.²⁶

Instead, what these alliances had done was to reinforce Pakistan's relations with the Soviet Union and its allies in the region such as Egypt, Iraq and Syria. These rifts had already widened during Pakistan's support for French and British forces during the Suez crisis in 1956,²⁷ as well as the downing of a US spy plane over Soviet territory in 1960, which had been covertly stationed in Pakistan under the above agreements with the US.²⁸

Nevertheless, despite these setbacks, Pakistan's participation in pacts like CENTO had allowed it to forge strong ties with Turkey and Iran which in 1964 led to the formation of the Regional Cooperation for Development (RCD). In the framework of the agreement, the three countries explored the possibility of forging stronger military ties by creating a joint arms industry, possibility which, however, did not

²⁴ Khan Pakistan's Foreign Policy in the Changing International Scenario. P. 235.

²⁵ Akbar Kundi M. US Pakistan's Relations under Khan 1958-69: Impact on South Asia // A Research Journal of South Asian Studies Vol. 24, №2, 2009. P. 199.

²⁶ Wolpert S. India and Pakistan: Continued Conflict or Cooperation? Berkeley, University of California Press, 2010. P. 34.

²⁷ Qureshi Op. cit. p. 159.

²⁸ Hussain N. Pak-Russia Relations: Lost Opportunities and Future Options // Journal of Political Studies, Vol. 19, №1, 2012. P. 82.

materialize. The creation of RCD also resulted in Iran and Turkey lending material and logistical support to Pakistan in its subsequent wars with India.²⁹

In the case of Iran, even though the ruling Shah refrained from getting directly involved in South Asia's volatile politics, moral and political support was still offered to Pakistan in its conflicts with India during that time.³⁰ His solidarity and sympathies towards Pakistan were even more apparent during the 1971 Indo-Pak war in which Pakistan suffered the loss of its Eastern Wing. Commenting on his willingness to intervene militarily on behalf of Pakistan, the Shah was quoted as acknowledging that Pakistan's integrity was vital for maintaining stability along Iran's Eastern frontier³¹ where it shares a 780km border with Pakistan.³²

At the same time, Pakistan also developed strong relations with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Despite the Kingdom defining Pakistan's close ties with Iran as 'a stab in the heart', both countries experienced a steady convergence of strategic imperatives during this era.³³ These included the signing of a bilateral defense agreement in 1967 which involved the training of Saudi Military officers as well as the exchange of advisors between both countries.³⁴ Over the years military ties between both countries have expanded significantly with Pakistani forces directly engaging in the Kingdom's defense on a number of occasions.

For instance, in 1969, it was Pakistani pilots who flew Saudi Air force fighter jets that were used to repel invading Yemeni forces in the Kingdom's South. During this conflict, about 15,000 Pakistani troops were stationed in Saudi Arabia including a combat battalion near the Israeli-Jordanian border towards the country's Northwest.³⁵ Since then, Pakistani troops have regularly been stationed in the nearby city of Tabuk, as well as in Khamis Mushait in the South near the Yemeni border.³⁶ The Organization of Saudi-Pakistani Armed Forces which was set up in 1982 and headquartered in Riyadh has also served a key role in further formalizing and building on these ties between the militaries of both countries. This was further evident in 1990, when Saddam Hussain's invasion of Kuwait prompted Pakistan to send 5000 troops for Saudi Arabia's defense.³⁷

The same can be said for a number of Gulf States where the Pakistani military has been closely involved in training and assisting in the development of these countries' military infrastructure and related capabilities. Pakistan's armed forces were stationed in key states such as Bahrain, Qatar, Oman and the UAE all of which comprise of a significant portion of Pakistan's troop deployments overseas.³⁸

²⁹ Mustafa Op. cit. P. 3.

³⁰ Alam S. Iran-Pakistan Relations: Political and Strategic Dimensions // Strategic Analysis, Vol. 28, №4, 2004. P. 529.

³¹ Mustafa Op. cit. P. 9.

³² Sial S. Emerging Dynamics in Pakistani-Saudi Relations. Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre, 2015. P. 4.

³³ Weinbaum M.G., Khurram A.B. Pakistan and Saudi Arabia: Deference, Dependence, and Deterrence // Middle East Journal, Vol. 68, №2, 2014. P. 212.

³⁴ Sial S. Op. cit. P. 1.

³⁵ Weinbaum M.G., Khurram A.B. Op. cit. P. 213.

³⁶ Sial S. Op. cit. P. 1.

³⁷ Weinbaum M.G., Khurram A.B. Op. cit. P. 214.

³⁸ Khan A. 1,671 Soldiers Deputed in Saudi Arabia // The Nation, 2018.

Yet, despite these strong military ties built over decades of cooperation, Pakistan has refrained from embroiling itself within some of the Middle Eastern region's most divisive conflicts. Fueled in part by the super-power politics that have increasingly coalesced around Saudi Arabia's growing rivalry with Iran, these conflicts have contributed to making the situation increasingly complex.

This is best exemplified, for instance, by the currently ongoing civil war in Yemen, in which Saudi and Emirati Armed forces have been directly engaged in a military conflict with Iranian backed Houthi rebel forces. Pakistan has firmly pursued a strategy of disassociation from the conflict and neutrality vis-à-vis the actors involved, with its Parliament unanimously adopting a resolution affirming its neutrality. However, amidst mounting pressure from the Saudi and UAE governments Pakistan has had to acquiesce to their demands, on the condition that its troops remain within Saudi territory in an exclusively defensive capacity. As a result, there are currently around 1700 Pakistani soldiers stationed in the Kingdom,³⁹ with Pakistan's Retired Army Chief General Raheel Sharif, heading a Joint Islamic Military Alliance set up to fight terrorism.

Divided between Saudi Arabia's role as the spiritual leader of the Sunni Muslim world at one end,⁴⁰ and Iran directly equating its security with the preservation of its Shiite ideology at the other,⁴¹ the sectarian undertones driving the Saudi – Iran rivalry carry with it the grave danger of spilling over onto Pakistan's already complex security challenges at home.⁴² Specifically regarding Pakistan's own domestic security challenges emanating from terrorism, Pakistan has remained extremely wary of being drawn into the Saudi – Iran rivalry. This in particular is anathema to Pakistan's espoused ideal of playing a defining role in preserving the unity of a Muslim World, which it believes is already under attack from a broad range of geo-political, economic and even socio-cultural challenges.

2.2. The Impact of Great-power Politics within the Region

As discussed in the previous section, Pakistan's contribution to the security architecture of the Middle East has been more geared towards preserving rather than radically altering the prevailing status quo. This is evident in the key role its military ties have played in the defense of a number of Arab states including Palestine during times of upheaval. Thus, shaped by the region's geo-politics throughout its history, Pakistan's restraint comes not only from the more ideological considerations of its self-espoused Islamic identity, but also from its own economic and military limitations relative to the strength and role of the world's major powers. This for instance, includes the near hegemonic role played by the United States in the region.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Weinbaum M.G., Khurram A.B. Op. cit. P. 212.

⁴¹ Alam S. Op. cit. P. 527.

⁴² Weinbaum M.G., Khurram A.B. Op. cit. P. 215.

Given that more than 60% of the world's oil reserves is concentrated within the region⁴³, it comes with no surprise that the securitization of energy supplies has been one of the primary factors influencing Middle East's geopolitics. Yet, while the US's role as a regional hegemon and as a primary broker of power has remained largely unquestioned since the end of the Cold War, its self-purported impact of serving as a stabilizing force within the region has remained highly controversial.

US primary goals in the region have been widely accepted as being centered on four main objectives. These include maintaining energy security, preventing nuclear proliferation, curbing the threat of terrorism and ensuring the security of Israel.⁴⁴ The US has self-professed that role before its influence was cemented across the region, and global oil security was repeatedly disrupted by numerous events pertaining to the region's volatile politics. These included the 1973 oil embargo, the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), and the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait.⁴⁵ This narrative entails that these disruptions had thus necessitated US interventions for promoting greater stability both in the conduct of regional politics and for global financial markets.

However, even though the US has subsequently achieved hegemony as apparent in its unbridled unilateralism over the last three decades, this has not necessarily translated into greater stability through which it has justified its involvement. This was evident in how the US was unable to prevent oil prices from reaching historic highs during the early 2010's as a direct consequence of its invasion of Iraq and continued sanctions on Iran, hence disrupting the free flow of oil since the 1990's.⁴⁶

In fact, there are numerous arguments detailing how the US, instead of curbing domestic instability in the region, has probably stoked it.⁴⁷ The same was recently opined by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which blaming US interventions in the Middle East, stated that: "the surge in terrorist threats in Iraq and the Middle East as a whole are largely the result of external unlawful military intervention in the internal affairs of states in order to address selfish geopolitical objectives."⁴⁸

Nevertheless, despite such widespread criticism, not much has changed over the last decade. This is evident, for instance, in how even after a series of ill-planned interventions in Iraq, Libya and Syria, the US still wields immense hard and soft power capabilities in the wider region.⁴⁹ This stands in contrast to the capabilities of the other architects of the region's security architecture such as the rest of

⁴³ Gupta E. Op. cit. P. 1195.

⁴⁴ Glaser C.L., Kelanic R.A. *Crude Strategy: Rethinking the Us Military Commitment to Defend Persian Gulf Oil*. Washington DC, Georgetown University Press, 2016. P. 79.

⁴⁵ Gause F.G. III *Challenged Hegemony: The United States, China, and Russia in the Persian Gulf*. Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2018. 256 Pp; Paper, \$29.95, *Political Science Quarterly* Vol. 134, №1, 2019. P. 153.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Oskarsson K., Yetiv S.A. *Challenged Hegemony: The United States, China, and Russia in the Persian Gulf*. Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2018. P. 177.

⁴⁸ Charap S. *Is Russia an Outside Power in the Gulf?* // *Survival*, Vol.57, №1, 2015. P. 160.

⁴⁹ Mason R. *Challenged Hegemony: The United States, China, and Russia in the Persian Gulf* // *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 72, №3, 2018. P. 529.

the P5 as well as other external stakeholders such as Pakistan. Instead, it's the US's economic and security interests which it shares with a broad range of states from Israel to Saudi Arabia that continue to dominate the prevailing status quo.

These shared interests are in turn clearly evident in the recent escalation of tensions with Iran. Stemming from American unilateral withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), to the most recent move of designating Iran's elite Revolutionary Guards Corp as a terrorist organization, the US's concerted efforts at isolating the Iranian regime have continued unabatedly in the attempt to consolidate its position as a regional hegemon. Aimed at crippling Iran's economy by significantly limiting its oil exports, one of the US's primary objectives has been to deter Iran from developing Nuclear weapons that would otherwise significantly alter the region's balance of power. A balance which, under the prevailing status quo, favors two of the US's closest allies in the region, namely Israel and Saudi Arabia.

The JCPOA, which was implemented through the concerted diplomatic efforts of the P5, EU and Germany, had previously aimed at significantly rolling back Iran's nuclear weapons program through the implementation of IAEA safeguards. In return, Iran was to be granted relief from the broad ranging sanctions imposed on its economy. The deal, which was widely hailed as historic, has marked its recognition among numerous precedents in international cooperation. It was even hailed as being better than the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty in certain aspects.⁵⁰ However, President Trump's decision to withdraw from the treaty and re-impose sanctions, by pointing to the fact that the agreement was "one-sided"⁵¹ has cast considerable uncertainty over the region. In addition to raising tensions across the US's foes and allies alike, it has also led to soaring global oil prices, leading to widespread instability.

While the US's hard-line stance on Iran has been applauded by both Israel and Saudi Arabia, it has left its European allies, as well as China and Russia (who are also signatories to the JCPOA) considerably worried over its repercussions for the wider region's peace and security.⁵² This also includes countries such as Pakistan which have at direct stake in the region's security architecture. This was evident in the official statement issued by Pakistan's Foreign Office in the wake of the White House announcement regarding the JCPOA. It stated that: "Pakistan believes that International Treaties and Agreements concluded through painstaking negotiations are sacrosanct. Arbitrarily rescinding such agreements will undermine confidence in the value of dialogue and diplomacy in the conduct of international relations and the peaceful resolution of disputes."⁵³

⁵⁰ Fitzpatrick M. Iran: A Good Deal // *Survival*, Vol. 57, №5, 2015. P. 49.

⁵¹ Iqbal A. Trump Tears up Iran Nuclear Deal, Revives Sanctions // *Dawn*. 09.05.2018.
URL: <https://www.dawn.com/news/1406529>

⁵² World Leaders React to US Withdrawal from Iranian Nuclear Deal // *Al-Jazeera*. 09.05.2018.
URL: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/05/world-leaders-react-withdrawal-iranian-nuclear-deal-180508184130931.html>

⁵³ MOFA, Press Release, news release. 09.05.2018.
URL: <http://mofa.gov.pk/pr-details.php>

The Foreign office statement, while tacitly criticizing the US's unilateral action, went on to acknowledge Iran's compliance with the treaty. This was in line with Pakistan's long-standing position on endorsing Iran's use and acquisition of nuclear technology for peaceful purposes.⁵⁴ Citing Pakistan's official stance on the issue it stated: "We had welcomed the JCPOA when it was concluded and hope that all parties will find a way for its continuation, especially when the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has repeatedly verified Iran's compliance."⁵⁵

Pakistan's concerns over the US withdrawal from the JCPOA thus emanate directly from its destabilizing impact on the precarious balance it has maintained between its relations across the region. As discussed earlier in this paper, one of Pakistan's key challenges throughout its history has been to maintain its relationships with both Iran and Saudi Arabia without getting embroiled into their long-standing rivalry. The JCPOA, with its backing of the world's major powers, had allowed Pakistan to maintain the rationale behind its policy of neutrality without upsetting its long-standing ties with Saudi Arabia. This, for instance, was evident in 2015 when Saudi Arabia had first requested military assistance from Pakistan during the Yemeni conflict. This was also when the JCPOA was being negotiated with Iran, and global opinion towards the signing of the deal was largely in its favor. Hence, even though Arab rulers had threatened Pakistan for not joining the Saudi led alliance, Pakistan was able to side with the wider international consensus stemming from the JCPOA when denying the Saudi request. Moreover, Pakistan's development of close economic ties with China too had ensured that Pakistan would be ready to balance any economic or diplomatic fallout from upsetting ties with Saudi Arabia.⁵⁶

These dynamics, however, have changed drastically as US foreign policy under the Trump administration has radically altered its approach towards Iran. In clear support of the Israeli and Saudi positions, US efforts at isolating Iran have further emboldened both these countries. These tensions have also escalated considerably after the US's mobilization of its Naval Strike Groups towards the Persian Gulf, while Iran continues to look towards Pakistan for all the diplomatic support it can offer. This has thus made it increasingly difficult for Pakistan to defy Saudi Arabia and the US both at once. Not to mention Pakistan's own economic difficulties that make the country's dependence both on Saudi Arabia and the US heavier: with the former, it is vital for Pakistan to secure deferred payments at concessional rates for oil imports, while with the latter, Pakistan seeks approval, given the US strong influence in the IMF.

⁵⁴ Sajjad Syed B. Pakistan Backs Iran over US Nuclear Deal Row // Dawn, 01.09.2018.
URL: <https://www.dawn.com/news/1430289>

⁵⁵ MOFA, Press Release. Op. cit.

⁵⁶ Yousaf K. Defying Royal Request: China Helped Pakistan 'Weather the Storm' over Yemen // The Express Tribune, 27.04.2015.
URL: https://tribune.com.pk/story/876495/defying-royal-request-china-helped-pakistan-weather-the-storm-over-yemen/?__cf_chl_jschl_tk__=e4e0388743184fbc8f6eb2c34b418b15a1164abe-1578995000-0-AcPz4ZKisBVg6LK0YoWDP4UL7Xp36B0RuO7gwV_4NrfN9GaiAOqAd8m6luOoRbY7sf0NqmhKubztAfDzUzLcgY4wsXJWgEIEt8C46P0IMr5aq9IEC3-zndJBzECptZV0mr-75mN7veBSPcXxlVqAtwk7xN4g5_TTIgFg33Fuv7vX19XuKk2Bf5DTezdfXbyf_GOVkQg6SgtB9Dc6YCFtI89t65UH5c39wUCdzuKkFN032rtr0i0ktakpCcq7rDR2Px_VzhPZMBTzi_j28EvkNFRt4d5ImCLkLh7SHBgM_igGspvOG0ikMBHoOrG1C53bnpOIhWSHbeGN9ubfSViO4X224qKcn3Nf5V8pgg7wZSN2iHQeeqXa4QzKtEIBw

2.3. A Shift in the Region's Status Quo?

Hence, coming back to Pakistan's complex role in balancing the Middle East's security architecture, its objectives have remained difficult to implement as a result of Pakistan's own volatile relations with the US.

For instance, with the exception of Pakistan's stance on Iran, there are a number of areas in the past in which American, Saudi and Pakistani interests have all converged together towards a common goal. These include to an extent all three countries' shared objectives in Afghanistan. Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United States had all played a key role in supporting the ouster of Soviet forces at the hands of Mujahideen during the Afghan War in the 1980's.⁵⁷ Two decades later both Saudi Arabia and Pakistan again played a crucial role together in eliminating Al-Qaida's influence in Afghanistan during the US led War on Terror.⁵⁸ Even today as the US seeks a complete withdrawal of its forces from Afghanistan, Pakistan has been called upon to play a defining role in helping negotiate a lasting peace by lending diplomatic and military assistance, a move that is also supported by Saudi Arabia.

However, these shared interests with respect to both Pak-US and Pak-Saudi relations are currently experiencing certain strains related to the shifts in both the global and regional status-quo. Three main factors corroborate this argument: first, Pakistan is forging closer economic ties with China as its relations with the US once again deteriorate under the Trump administration. Second, the US's recent decision to cut back military and economic aid and block reimbursements to Pakistan under the Coalition Support Fund have set a new low in relations between both countries. Finally, the development of closer military and strategic cooperation between the US and India, which is of particular relevance for Washington as it seeks to contain the rise of China, is also altering Pakistan's geo-political calculus for the region.

Similarly, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia's relations are also at risk of deterioration as the Kingdom seeks to develop closer military ties with India.⁵⁹ While the two countries still remain bound by a long history of political, economic and socio-cultural ties, Saudi Arabia's more aggressive approach to regional dominance has led Pakistan to re-think its own role within the Middle East's security.

In addition to Pakistan's relations with the US and Saudi Arabia, there is also the key role being played by both China and Russia as they seek to challenge the long-standing geopolitics of the region. As mentioned earlier, China's rise as a major challenger to US influence has played a key role in Pakistan's foreign policy calculus. China's \$63 billion pledge for helping develop the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) as part of its Belt and Road Initiative, has served as a major catalyst for promoting greater economic interdependence, peace and stability between the Middle East, Central Asian and South Asian regions.⁶⁰ These

⁵⁷ Weinbaum M.G., Khurram A.B. Op. cit. P. 214; Khan A. Op. cit. P. 243.

⁵⁸ Sial S. Op. cit. P. 6; Khan A. Op. cit. P. 243.

⁵⁹ Sial S. Op. cit. P. 6.

⁶⁰ Ibid. P. 5.

developments clearly signal a shift in the traditional geopolitical architecture of the Asian region, where China in its growing ability to challenge US unilateralism has managed to further build its relations with Pakistan across a series of shared objectives.

One of these objectives for instance consists of the inclusion of Iran as a key player in the region's emerging energy framework. China has been a long-time supporter of the Iran-Pakistan Gas Pipeline, and was widely expected to aid in its construction.⁶¹ Even though this project has yet to materialize because of the wide-ranging sanctions imposed on Iran, China has repeatedly highlighted Iran as being a crucial part of its Belt and Road Initiative. Thus, China's desire to foster greater integration and stability and serve as a more stabilizing influence in the region has proved instrumental in reducing tensions between Iran and Pakistan, specifically in lieu of the latter's close ties with Saudi Arabia.⁶²

Similarly, both Pakistan and Russia are exploring new avenues of cooperation based on the shifting status quo of the region. Whereas, Russia's approach to countering US influence within the South Asian region had been largely characterized by its long-standing relations with India, Russia has recently begun to explore new opportunities to develop closer ties with Pakistan as well.⁶³ This has been partly attributed to the US developing closer military ties with India in its bid to tap into India's lucrative defense contracts over which Russia has enjoyed considerable exclusivity since the Cold War.⁶⁴

The case of Iran is of equal importance to Russia. Iran, just like it is for China, stands as Russia's largest trading partner in the region.⁶⁵ Its energy ties with Iran, extending beyond the realms of oil and gas, are also based in part on close cooperation in the fields of Nuclear energy. Russia's development of the Bushehr Nuclear Power plant stands as a case in point.⁶⁶

Similarly, the recent inclusion of both Pakistan and India as full members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), can be seen as a further indicator of how a multi-lateral approach to economic and security cooperation is taking shape throughout the Central and South Asian regions. From a conflict resolution perspective, one of the many merits of the SCO being argued is to show how Russia and China as the region's major power brokers can play an influential role in mediating the age-old rivalry between India and Pakistan.⁶⁷

⁶¹ Shah S. China to Build Pipeline from Iran to Pakistan // *The Wall Street Journal*, 09.04.2015.
URL: <https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-to-build-pipeline-from-iran-to-pakistan-1428515277>

⁶² Chaziza M. China-Pakistan Relationship: A Game-Changer for the Middle East? // *Contemporary review of the Middle East*, Vol. 3, №2, 2016.

⁶³ Pant H.V., Shah K.M. South Asia's Changing Geopolitical Landscape // *Orbis*, Vol. 63, №1, 2019. pp. 19-20.

⁶⁴ Dasgupta S., Cohen S.P. Arms Sales for India: How Military Trade Could Energize Us-Indian Relations // *Foreign Affairs*, march/april, 2011.
URL: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/india/2011-02-18/arms-sales-india>

⁶⁵ Oskarsson K., Yetiv S.A. Russia and the Persian Gulf: Trade, Energy, and Interdependence // *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 67, №3, 2013. P. 386-387.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* P. 386-387.

⁶⁷ Shahab Ahmed Z., Ahmed S., Bhatnagar S. Conflict or Cooperation? India and Pakistan in Shanghai Cooperation Organisation // *Pacific Focus*, Vol. 34, №1, 2019.

However, both Russia and China despite being deemed as strategic competitors by the US's 2017 National Security plan, lack the kind of hard and soft power capabilities that the US exercises throughout the region.⁶⁸ This holds particularly true in the Persian Gulf and Middle Eastern regions where even though both countries continue to test and probe the limitations of US hegemony, their concerns are largely confined within the limited scope of their own objectives. For China, which is now the largest importer of energy resources from the region, these objectives are limited mainly to maintaining its trade and energy relations. For Russia, this extends to maintaining certain hard power and arms trade relations amidst the volatile geo-politics encompassing states such as Iran and Syria.⁶⁹

2.4. Pakistan Amidst a New Global Status Quo

Coming back to Pakistan's role in the Middle East, this paper has shown how its approach has been guided in principle by mostly remaining neutral in the internal conflicts of the region. This has been carried out primarily with an attention of ensuring stable economic and trade ties, while also promoting unity and cohesion across its purported view of a pan-Islamic World. However, despite its desire to do so, Pakistan has had to take sides time and again based on its ever-changing dynamics of both the regional and wider global status quo. These include its changing relations with countries such as Iran and Saudi Arabia as the dominant powers within the region, as well as Pakistan's relations with the region's external power brokers such as the US, China and Russia.

Yet, building on the last point that was touched upon in the preceding section, Pakistan's long-standing ties with key players within the region have allowed it to develop considerable soft and hard power capabilities. While these capabilities pale in comparison to those projected by the US, Pakistan's influence is still rooted along longstanding ideological and socio-cultural ties in addition to its economic and strategic relations with these states.

Therefore, external powers such as Russia and China are presented with a unique opportunity of making to make further inroads into the region through closer cooperation with Pakistan. By leveraging Pakistan's already established ties to the region, both countries can help use Pakistan's influence to fill the gaps in their projected power capabilities. On the economic front, these can include the development of joint trade and infrastructure projects modeled along the lines of for instance, the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor. Russia's inclusion in this component of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) framework can help it form a direct link to the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf Regions, as an alternative to its existing routes via the Caucasus.

Similarly, enhanced relations in arms trade and defence sector can also be used to develop synergistic goals to be pursued in the region. These can include setting up mutually beneficial defense agreements comprising of joint training and arms development, or simply greater intelligence sharing to help set up a platform to

⁶⁸ Mason R. Op. cit. P. 529.

⁶⁹ Ibid. P. 529.

build more enhanced military relations.

Thus, as evident in the re-shaping of the last decades' power dynamics the world over, the prevailing era of US unilateralism while still remaining as strong as ever, seems to have nevertheless peaked as it encounters a diverse range of challenges within its established spheres of influence.⁷⁰ Particularly with respect to the Middle East and Persian Gulf regions, while these dynamics are still perhaps in their nascent stages, the implications of these changes still merit serious consideration. This holds especially true for Pakistan which has historically remained an important stakeholder in the region's evolving security architecture.

⁷⁰ Buzan B. A Leader without Followers? The United States in World Politics after Bush // *International Politics*, Vol. 45, №5, 2008.

3. Conclusions and Opportunities for Russia–Pakistan Security Cooperation in the Persian Gulf

- **Security in the Persian Gulf should be based on the politics of inclusivity and take accounting of the interests of other parties.**

Exclusivity policies are fraught with serious risks. In addition to the GCC states, the region also has two regional actors, Iraq and Iran, that directly influence security in the Gulf. **The development of a formula for including them in the sub-regional security architecture should become part of the future solution.** Under the Collective Security Concept for the Persian Gulf proposed by Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, “Russia maintains traditionally friendly relations with all the Gulf countries without exception, and advances interaction with them on the basis of equality and mutual respect. We are convinced that forming an inclusive architecture of peace and security would guarantee a dignified and secure future for all the region’s countries and peoples which need a positive agenda now more than ever.”⁷¹ In this respect, Pakistan could contribute to the development of a collective security concept for the Persian Gulf and lend it diplomatic support.

- **It would be worthwhile for Russia and Pakistan to explore opportunities for developing Persian Gulf cooperation within the SCO.** Moscow and Islamabad could hold joint naval exercises in the Persian Gulf, either separately with Iran, or within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). The proposal put forward by the United States to establish a special patrol that would ensure navigation security and monitor the situation in the Persian Gulf is controversial, since Washington is a party to the conflict. Therefore, this essentially anti-Iranian initiative did not find support of some of the United States’ allies, including the European Union. **Russia and Pakistan should maintain their neutral stances in relations with the conflicting Gulf states.**
- **Either together or individually, Russia and Pakistan could promote the ideas of peaceful nuclear energy, non-proliferation and a WMD-free zone in the Persian Gulf – and the Middle East in general – since the parties believe it necessary to ensure security and stability in the region.**

In accordance with the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, Moscow consistently advocates “the creation of zones free from nuclear weapons and other types of weapons of mass destruction, primarily in the Middle East.” This would create a different atmosphere and could be the key to convening a regional conference. There are several countries in the Middle and Near East that have nuclear warheads deployed in their territories. The “Iran dossier” is a special factor of regional and global security. The United States’ withdrawal

⁷¹ Russia’s Collective Security Concept for the Persian Gulf // Russia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs. 23.07.2019.
URL: https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/international_safety/conflicts/-/asset_publisher/xIEMTQ3OvzcA/content/id/3733575?p_p_id=101_INSTANCE_xIEMTQ3OvzcA&_101_INSTANCE_xIEMTQ3OvzcA_languageId=en_GB

from the JCPOA largely destabilized the situation. However, Iran continued to comply with its commitments in the following year, which was repeatedly confirmed in the IAEA reports. Russia, Pakistan and the Gulf states could sign treaties on developing and using civilian nuclear technologies.

- **It would be worthwhile for Russia and Pakistan to coordinate their efforts in the fight against terrorism when interacting with the Gulf states.** When it comes to the fight against terrorism, Moscow and Islamabad are discussing their positions with the Gulf countries in different formats. Exchanging experience and information between interested parties could have a positive effect in terms of building confidence among the sides. The countries should work on the possibility of holding a joint exercise in the area. Cooperation between the Russian and Pakistani militaries has already begun, the parties holding counter-terrorist activities as part of the Friendship war games. **Russia, Pakistan and the Gulf countries could sign a treaty on combating terrorism, arms trafficking, illegal migration, drug trafficking and organized crime.**
- **Terrorism or the maintenance of vital energy supply lines that emanate from the region, are just some of the issues that represent a clear convergence of interests for both countries with respect to their role and approach to the Middle East and Persian Gulf regions.** It is also this geographic proximity that amplifies both Russia and Pakistan's concerns in regard to the region's most prevalent security issues which can have disruptive repercussions on their respective national territories. This explains the coincidence of their views on their role in the regions of the Middle East and the Gulf subregion and the commonality of interests in developing an approach to them. Especially considering how these issues that have characterized this region as a major flashpoint. Both Russia and Pakistan's emphasis on maintaining stability within the region can also be understood within this context.
- **Both countries' shared security concerns regarding terrorist threats, can lead to greater cooperation stemming from intelligence sharing to further increasing joint training and military exercises with a focus on special operations.** Hence, barring their own tumultuous relationship since the mid-1950s, barring minor exceptions, there are several potential opportunities for Pakistan and Russia to cooperate in the Middle East and Persian Gulf regions. The recently held *Druzhba* exercises held between both countries' militaries stand as a genuine case in point that can be further built on and expanded regarding their scope and overall participation. Similarly, the emerging threat posed by ISIS which is threatening to expand into Afghanistan and South Asia presents a major challenge to both countries which can and should be addressed collectively. Russia's experience and intelligence gathered from fighting the terrorist network in Syria is likely to prove valuable for Pakistan which itself has become battle-hardened from fighting off a number of similar non-state actors from its own territory.
- **Strengthening regional infrastructure connectivity has a positive impact on developing regions of the world.** Pakistan's recently developed Gwadar Port

which is situated less than 600 km from the vital Straits of Hormuz forms a crucial node of the BRI's maritime network. Russia, by integrating the Eurasian Economic Union [EEU] with the BRI, has already started to benefit from the BRI's improved regional connectivity over the Central and Eurasian landmass. The opportunity to further extend that connectivity to the Indian Ocean Region in cooperation with Pakistan could serve as a game-changer for its approach to the Middle Eastern and Persian Gulf regions. Beyond the more obvious strategic implications, such cooperation could help a further development of a future energy supply corridor. The corridor is aimed at investing in some of the world's most promising developing regions straddling South Asia, the Middle East and even to a certain extent Africa and overall, the initiative fosters greater regional connectivity.

- **By building on both Pakistan and Russia's goals of fostering stability throughout these regions, both countries can help lay the groundwork for a long-term mutually beneficial partnership.** This partnership can help leverage both Russia and Pakistan's geographic proximity and historical socio-cultural affinity with the Middle East and Persian Gulf regions into a highly pragmatic and workable relationship that can help address many of the challenges that both Russia and Pakistan face in the region. In essence, it can further translate both countries geo-strategic strengths into geo-economic prosperity especially keeping in mind the increasingly multi-polar nature of the overarching world order.

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Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC) is a non-profit international relations think-tank on a mission to provide policy recommendations for all Russian organizations involved in external affairs.

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Notes

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