Saudi Arabia and Pakistan have long maintained a strong strategic relationship. The Saudi-Pakistani relationship is a vast and dynamic web of cooperative linkages, age-old bonds of friendship.  

The two countries work together extensively at the international level, within the framework of several bilateral, regional and global organizations including the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC).

Saudi Arabia is the biggest exporter of oil and petroleum products to Pakistan, while Saudi Arabia has been a key market for Pakistani goods and services. Saudi Arabia, which hosts 1.9 million Pakistanis, tops the list of countries with highest remittances to Pakistan over $4.5 billion annually.

Pakistan has traditionally maintained that its bilateral relationship with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is its most important diplomatic relationship.

With one of the largest armies in the world and as the only declared nuclear power in the Muslim world, Pakistan has maintained a unique position and works closely with Saudi Arabia.

Pakistani military personnel frequently serve in Saudi Arabia and its last army chief, General Raheel Sharif, now heads an Islamic army coalition based out of Riyadh.

The Pakistani Inter-Services Public Relations agency said on February 17, 2018, that a contingent of troops will be stationed in Saudi Arabia on a “training and advisory mission.”

The announcement followed a meeting between Saudi Arabia’s Ambassador, Nawaf Saeed Al-Maliki, and Pakistan Army Chief Gen Qamar Javed Bajwa at General Headquarters Rawalpindi. The contingent will join Pakistani troops that are already stationed in Saudi Arabia and “will not be deployed outside the Kingdom”, the statement read.
Pakistan’s Defense Minister Khurram Dastagir, revealed that Pakistan is training some 10,000 Saudi soldiers but he did not offer further details about the presence of such a high number of Saudi soldiers on Pakistan’s soil, and the nature of training being imparted. Dastagir, was giving a policy statement in the senate on a recent government’s decision to send 1000 additional troops to Saudi Arabia.9

Saudi Arabia and Pakistan's nuclear weapons program

Saudi Arabia has long aspired to achieve nuclear capacity of its own, in order to counter Iran’s atomic ambitions. Saudi Arabia hasn’t hidden its ambition, openly stating to the U.S. as early as 2009 that it would also seek capacity if “Iran crossed the threshold.” In May 2012, former senior U.S. diplomat Dennis Ross confirmed for the first time that Saudi Arabia’s King Abdullah explicitly warned that if Iran obtains nuclear weapons, Saudi Arabia would seek to do so as well. Saudi Arabia has had the missile technology to deliver warheads since the late 1980s.10

Saudi Arabia has little nuclear infrastructure of its own and it could rely on its close ally, Pakistan, that has a history of proliferating nuclear technology and equipment. Saudi Arabia provided generous financial support to Pakistan that enabled the nuclear program to continue, especially when the country was under sanctions. Saudi cooperation with nuclear power Pakistan has been a source of speculation about the kingdom’s ambition. It has long been rumored, that in return for bankrolling the Pakistani nuclear weapons project, Saudi Arabia has a claim on some of those weapons in time of need.11

There are two main versions:

- Future Pakistani “assistance would not involve Pakistan supplying Saudi Arabia with a full nuclear weapon or weapons, however, Pakistan may assist in other important ways, such as supplying sensitive equipment, materials, and know-how used in enrichment or reprocessing.
- Saudi Arabia has purchased nuclear weapons from Pakistan which are ready for delivery to the kingdom and that it possesses missiles capable of delivering nuclear warheads.

It has never been proved though, nor has it ever been clear how such a deal would work.

Pakistani troops deployment in Saudi Arabia

Pakistan has recently announced that it is sending troops to Saudi Arabia on a “training and advice mission,” without specifying the exact number of soldiers and the role the soldiers will play there.

There are already 1,379 Pakistani servicemen deployed in Saudi Arabia, most of them are from Pakistan Army, along with a few Pakistan Air Force (PAF) and Pakistan Navy (PN) officials, according to security sources.

Pakistan Army announced the deployment decision after a meeting between Chief of Army Staff General Qamar Javed Bajwa and Saudi Ambassador to Pakistan Nawaf Saeed al-Maliki at the army headquarters in the eastern Pakistani city of Rawalpindi on February 15, 2018.12

It came after General Bajwa paid a three-day visit to Saudi Arabia earlier in February and met with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and Commander of Ground Forces Lieutenant General Prince Fahd bin Turki bin Abdulaziz.
Some sources claimed that the Pakistan army is sending a brigade of combat troops to shore up Saudi Arabia’s vulnerable southern border from reprisal attacks mounted by the Houthis in Yemen. The brigade will be based in the south of the Kingdom, but will only be deployed inside its border.13

Saudi Arabia has been pushing Pakistan since 2015 to take part in the Saudi led coalition’s military campaign against the Houthis in Yemen. Pakistan’s parliament, however, has decided against the deployment of Pakistani forces to avoid backlash from sizeable Pakistani Shia Muslim community (about 20% of the Pakistani population) and deterioration in relations with neighboring Iran, which is supporting the Houthis in Yemen.14

The current policy shift comes as former Pakistan Army chief, General Raheel Sharif, is the current head of the so-called Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC), which is based in Riyadh. Sharif has already won Bin Salman’s trust and convinced Pakistani military officials to further expand military ties with Saudi Arabia.

The deployment of Pakistani troops would not be the first in relations between the two states. Pakistan has long been involved in protecting Saudi Arabia:

- Pakistan helped formation of the Royal Saudi Air Force (RSAF) in the 1960s and trained its first jet fighter pilots. Pakistani combat pilots also flew RSAF British Lightning fighter jets during the al-Wadiah conflict between Saudi Arabia and the People’s Republic of South Yemen in 1969.
- Pakistani combat troops assisted Saudi forces in suppressing the Grand Mosque seizure, which occurred between November and December 1979.
- Under a bilateral security cooperation agreement struck in 1982, Pakistan has accepted to help Saudi Arabia with military training, defense production and joint military exercises. Nearly 15,000 Pakistani troops were posted in Saudi Arabia throughout the 1980s.
- Forces from Pakistan were based in Saudi Arabia during the first Gulf War when the kingdom feared attack by Saddam Hussein. Up to 13,000 Pakistani troops and 6,000 advisors were posted in Saudi Arabia during the first Persian Gulf War in 1991. Most were recalled after the war ended in 1988 – but a smaller contingent stayed on.15
- Pakistani troops have frequently taken part in maneuvers inside Saudi Arabia alongside Saudi Armed Forces.

Pakistan and the war in Yemen

Riyadh has urged Pakistan to back its military campaign in Yemen with troops and equipment. Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen and increased tensions with Pakistan's neighbor Iran, has led many in Islamabad to urge caution in cultivating this relationship further.

Up to a quarter of Pakistanis are Shiite, and that proportion is reflected in the armed forces and Islamabad has been reluctant to concede to the Saudi demands fearing a political backlash at home.

In 2015, the Pakistani parliament voted to turn down a request by Saudi Arabia to join its coalition fighting the takeover of Yemen by the Houthis and their allies. Members of Pakistan's parliament opted instead for a neutral stance on the Yemen conflict, fearing it would jeopardize their efforts to balance relations with the kingdom and Iran.
At the time, the Pakistani military was also wary of any involvement in a foreign war because its forces were overstretched fighting Pakistani Taliban and other extremist groups in the north-western tribal areas and elsewhere within the country's borders.

In December 2017, Islamabad expressed grave concern over a ballistic missile attack against Saudi Arabia from Yemen. Pakistan’s Foreign Ministry said the government “strongly condemns the attack, and commends the timely action by Saudi forces to destroy the missile, preventing any loss of lives.” Pakistan demands that Yemeni rebels stop attacking the Kingdom, the ministry added.16

Under pressure from Riyadh, Pakistan will provide a separate force of some 5,000 men to Saudi Arabia to help guard its vulnerable south, close to the border with Yemen. The troops to be dispatched will be an operational deployment, aimed at protecting installations against terrorism and repelling any incursion into Saudi Arabia.17

If the latest deployment of Pakistani troops to Saudi Arabia goes ahead it would a sign of a marked improvement in ties between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia since the low point of 2015.

The Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism (IMAFT).

Pakistan is one of 41 members at the Saudi-led Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMAFT) which was launched by the Saudi Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman, in 2017.

Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman held a ministerial meeting of the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC). Pakistani Defense Minister Khurram Dastgir represented Pakistan at the first meeting of the IMCTC in Riyadh on November 26, 2017.

Former Pakistan army chief retired Gen Raheel Sharif, arrived to Saudi Arabia in April 2017, to assume the command of IMAFT.18 Gen Sharif was lauded at home for leading Operation Zarb-i-Azb that centered on North Waziristan, once considered the hotbed of terrorism, but his decision to serve the Saudi-led alliance has been severely criticized.

The coalition (IMAFT) was envisaged to serve as a platform for security cooperation, including provision of training, equipment and troops, and involvement of religious scholars for dealing with extremism.19

Saudi defense forces spokesman Gen Assiri said that the alliance wasn’t restricted to confronting terrorist organizations like the militant Islamic State group and Al Qaeda. He said the coalition could, at the request of a member, move against rebel groups and militias posing a threat to member countries such as Yemen’s Houthis, which are supported by Iran.20

The alliance is governed by a council of defense ministers of the member states. The Joint Command Centre would, be based in Riyadh.21

Pakistan Arm’s sales to Saudi Arabia

More than 20 major public and over 100 private sector firms are engaged in manufacturing defense-related products in Pakistan. While major defense products are manufactured by the armed forces-run Pakistan Ordinance Factories, Pakistan Aeronautical Complex, Heavy Industries Taxila, National Radio Telecommunication Corporation and Karachi Shipyard & Engineering Works, the private sector firms produce small supportive equipment only.22
Saudia Arabia is the largest importer of Pakistani arms, and has purchased small and medium conventional weaponry worth millions of USD. The National Assembly Defense Production Committee was briefed at Parliament House by Lt Gen Omar Mahmood Hayat, chairman Pakistan Ordinance Factories (POF). During the current fiscal year, POF has secured export order worth $81 million, and Saudi Arabia remains the biggest importer of arms and ammunition from Pakistan,” said Hayat.  

**Saudi "Vision 2030" and Pakistan**

Saudi Arabia and Pakistan work closely within the framework of “Saudi Vision 2030.” The two countries have unexploited proven mineral resources. Thus, investment in geophysics and other mining-related disciplines will pay huge dividends in the long run.

The Saudi interest in mining industry is there to stay and Pakistan has the human resource to provide for such a demand. The Vision 2030 offers Pakistan an opportunity to upscale its manpower export to more skilled and managerial levels, inevitably boosting its foreign remittances. The close ties between Riyadh and Islamabad will provide more opportunities for cooperation within the Vision 2030.

Vision 2030 has a mandate to forge closer partnerships with foreign countries. No doubt, Pakistan has enjoyed warm relations with Saudi Arabia since the birth of the country. The relations are rooted in the centuries-old religious, cultural and commercial links between the two peoples. Moreover, the relationship is also based on shared Islamic ideals.

**Military and security discussions**

Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman Bin Abdulaziz, who also acts as Defense Minister, received Chief of Staff of the Pakistani Army General Qamar Javed Bajwa on February 5, 2018, in Riyadh. Crown Prince Mohammad and General Bajwa discussed issues of mutual interests with particular focus on military relations and how to develop them. In this context, there is talk about the possibility of Pakistan sending military troops to the Kingdom.  

The meeting was attended notably by Saudi Assistant Defense Mohammad Al-Ayesh, Chief of Staff of the Saudi Armed Forces General Abdulrahman Bin Saleh Al-Bunyan, Commander of the Royal Saudi Land Forces (RSLF) Lt-General Prince Fahd Bin Turki Bin Abdulaziz and Military Adviser to Defense Minister Major-General Engineer Talal Al-Otaibi.

Saudi Deputy Defense Minister Mohammed bin Abdullah Al-Aysh on December 12, 2017, met with Pakistani Defense Minister Khurram Dastgir to discuss bilateral ties and defense cooperation. During the meeting in Islamabad, Dastgir reiterated Islamabad’s commitment to safeguarding Saudi territorial integrity and the Two Holy Mosques.

On October 16, 2017, Pakistan Army Chief Gen Qamar Javed Bajwa met with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, on the sidelines of an ‘anti-terror’ conference organized by the Saudi Defense Ministry in Riyadh. The meeting with Crown Prince Salman came a little over two months after General Bajwa hosted Saudi Deputy Defense Minister Mohammad Bin Abdullah Al-Aysh in Rawalpindi, where Saudi domestic security was discussed in detail.
Joint military exercises

The Joint Naval Exercise Naseem Al Bahar XI (February 2018)

The Joint Naval Exercise Naseem Al Bahar XI was conducted in Saudi Arabian Waters, between Pakistan Navy (PN) and Royal Saudi Naval Forces (RSNF). Current Exercise is 11th of Naseem Al Bahr Series. Since the inception of biennial exercise Naseem Al Bahr in 1993, it has matured as an advanced level maritime exercise involving almost all facets of naval forces. The level of participation from both sides signifies the trust and mutual confidence which prevails between the two brotherly countries.

The Joint PN – RSNF Naval Exercise Naseem Al Bahr is aimed on enhancing interoperability and sharpen the tactical proficiency in Counter Piracy, Anti Air & Surface Warfare and Mine Countermeasure Warfare. These exercises will help in developing synergy in operations against asymmetric, air, surface and mine threats. On completion of harbor phase, second phase of the Exercise included joint naval operations at sea. Concurrently, Pakistani and RSNF Marines were also engaged in Joint Marine Exercise Deraa Al Sahil.

The exercise comprised of a series of harbor activities to provide synergy in different domains of naval operations. It also afforded opportunity for both navies to conduct operational planning for the joint naval operations to be conducted in subsequent sea phase of the exercise. Mission Commander of Pakistan Navy and Exercise Director from RSNF closely monitored and supervised the training activities.

Conduct of Joint Maritime Exercise between Pakistan Navy and RSNF in present geo-political milieu assumes great significance and will go a long way in enhancing bilateral relations between the two countries.

Exercise Al-Saman 6

On October 26, 2017, the Pakistani Army concluded Al-Saman 6, a three-week military exercise with the Saudi Royal Land Forces. Drills included use of live ammunition, ambushing, combat patrolling and special training on how to deal with IEDs, under commanding officer Lieutenant General Akram Al Haq from the 30th Corps of the Pakistani Army. 27

Saudi Arabia and Pakistan’s land forces held joint-exercises


The joint operations aimed to exchange military and combat expertise and to develop units and increase their field readiness, director of operations of the northwestern region Brig. Gen. Yusuf Khairallah al-Shahrani said.

“The Islamic Republic of Pakistan and its army have a long history with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Saudi Royal Land Forces. We have a common history of brotherhood and mutual trust,” Brig. Gen. Mohammed Aref from the Pakistani army said at the ceremony.

Saudi Arabia and Pakistan’s land forces held joint-exercises

Saudi Arabia and Pakistan’s land forces held in October 2017, a joint-exercises in the northwestern region of the Kingdom. The Royal Saudi Land Forces and their Pakistani counterparts took part in the joint drills in the presence of the commander of the kingdom’s North-West Region, Maj. Gen. Dhafer bin Ali Al-Shehri. The joint operations aimed to exchange military and combat expertise and to develop units and increase their field readiness. 28
Pakistan – Saudi Arabia joint exercise "Aff’aa Al Sahil"

The joint special operation forces maritime exercise Aff’aa Al Sahil, was held in Karachi. The exercise, being held between Special Forces of Pakistan Navy and the Royal Saudi Naval Forces, included a series of land and harbor drills. Aff’aa Al Sahil is a bilateral exercise being conducted annually between the two sides since 2011.29

Exercise Aff’aa Al Sahil aimed at enhancing interoperability and sharpening the tactical proficiency in countering maritime human trafficking, piracy and terrorism. The exercise will help in developing synergy in operations against asymmetric and conventional threats.30

Pakistan – Saudi Arabia joint exercise "Dera Al Sahil"

Joint exercise Dera Al Sahil between Pakistan Marines and RSNF Marines was conducted in October 2017 in Saudi Arabia. The exercise is aimed at professional skills and practices, especially in the areas of coastal defense, military operations in urban terrain (MOUT), joint beach landings and sniper training.31

Multinational exercise in Saudi Arabia

In February 2016, armed forces from 20 countries, including Pakistan, began rehearsing maneuvers in northeastern Saudi Arabia that the Saudi Press Agency (SPA) described as one of the world’s biggest military exercises.

Troops from Malaysia, Turkey, Egypt, Morocco, Jordan and Sudan as well as Pakistan are among those participating in the ‘Thunder of the North’ exercise, which began on Saturday and involves ground, air and naval forces, SPA reported.

Summary

Saudi Arabia has becoming increasingly militarized under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, ramping up military spending, leading a military expedition in Yemen and increasing large-scale parades and training. Although Riyadh’s forces have some of the world’s most cutting-edge arms and technology it lacks military know-how and experience - something Pakistan has in abundance.32

Both Pakistan and Saudi Arabia share strong military ties. Pakistan is one of the 41 members of the Saudi-led Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC) that is being headed by Pakistan’s former army chief, the retired Gen Raheel Sharif.

Saudi Arabia had asked Pakistan for troops deployment. However, due to domestic pressure the Pakistani government did not then commit any troops for Yemen war. The Saudi request was then politely declined on the pretext of military’s extensive involvement in Operation Zarb-i-Azb against Islamic militants in Pakistan.33

Saudi military is well-equipped with advanced European and American arms, but the kingdom’s combat forces are not experienced and perform with limited success in the war against the Houthis in Yemen. Saudi Arabia hopes that the Pakistani Army would support to upgrade their ground forces operational capabilities.

Pakistan has declared its neutrality in the conflict between Riyadh and Tehran, but in reality Islamabad is picking the Saudi side in the conflict.

Thousands of Pakistani troops will be deployed in 2018 to Saudi Arabia to help train and advise the kingdom's military, but the decision has led to a backlash at home with many fearing "mission creep". Islamabad did not
clarify the number of troops who will be sent to Saudi Arabia but the "contingent" will join other Pakistani troops based in the kingdom.

Even if the Pakistani troops aren’t physically involved in an attack on Iran – or in Yemen, Qatar or Lebanon – the fact that Pakistan is bolstering Saudi defense domestically naturally makes Pakistan an integral part of their camp.

The two countries are progressing toward a comprehensive defense relationship and expanding cooperation in strategic planning. If the latest deployment of Pakistani troops to Saudi Arabia goes ahead, it will be a sign of improvement in ties between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia and other Arab Gulf states since the low point of 2015.

Notes

4 10,000 Saudi soldiers being trained in Pakistan, Middle East Monitor, February 19, 2018.
7 Pakistan army contingent to join training, advisory mission in Saudi Arabia, Al Arabiya, February 17, 2018.
8 Pakistan army contingent to be posted in Saudi Arabia on 'training and advisory mission', Dawn, February 15, 2018.
9 10,000 Saudi soldiers being trained in Pakistan, Middle East Monitor, February 19, 2018.
11 Does Pakistan have nuclear weapons ready to ship to Saudi Arabia? The Guardian, November 7, 2013.
15 Why Pakistan has troops in Saudi Arabia – and what it means for the Middle East, The conversation, March 6, 2018.
17 Baqir Sajjad, Raheel leaves for Riyadh to command military alliance, Dawn, April 22, 2017.
18 Baqir Sajjad, Raheel leaves for Riyadh to command military alliance, Dawn, April 22, 2017.
20 Baqir Sajjad, Raheel leaves for Riyadh to command military alliance, Dawn, April 22, 2017.
21 Naveed Siddiqui, Raheel Sharif’s appointment to Saudi-led military alliance a state decision, says DG ISPR, Dawn, April 05, 2017.
26 Saudi Arabia, Pakistan discusses defense cooperation, Arab News, December 12, 2017.
28 Saudi Arabia and Pakistan hold join-military exercises, Al Arabiya, October 2, 2017.
33 Baqir Sajjad, Raheel leaves for Riyadh to command military alliance, Dawn, April 22, 2017.
34 Saudi Arabia, Pakistan discusses defense cooperation, Arab News, December 12, 2017.