

PAKISTAN-SAUDI ARABIA DEFENCE COOPERATION: ENHANCING RELATIONS FURTHER

By
Sarah Akram
Research Fellow

Centre for Afghanistan, Middle East & Africa (CAMEA), ISSI

Edited by
Amina Khan

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The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and Pakistan enjoy a robust and enduring strategic partnership. Alongside their multifaceted relationship, both nations prioritize their bilateral defence cooperation. To this end, Pakistan's armed forces provide comprehensive training and advisory support to their counterparts in KSA. Moreover, under various agreements, Pakistani military personnel have been stationed in Saudi Arabia to further strengthen the security of the country.¹ Furthermore, Saudi Arabia's military personnel, including recruits, officers, and engineering staff, receive education, training, and valuable experience in military academies, war colleges, and defence industries within Pakistan. The armed forces of both countries also regularly engage in noteworthy and beneficial joint exercises, both in Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. These exercises serve as platforms for the exchange of first-hand field experiences, enhancing combat efficiency, and strengthening real-time coordination between their respective forces. The relationship continues to flourish and has been described by the former Saudi

¹ Pakistan-Saudi Arabia joint counter-terrorism drill 'AL BATTAR-I' concludes in Cherat, September 4, 2023, Pakistan Observer, <https://pakobserver.net/pakistan-saudi-arabia-joint-counter-terrorism-drill-al-battar-i-concludes-in-cherat/>

intelligence chief, Prince Turki bin Faisal as “probably one of the closest relationships in the world between any two countries.”²

The partnership between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan traces its origins back to the 1960s. However, a significant defence agreement was inked in 1967, primarily focusing on the training of the Royal Armed Forces of KSA.³ This landmark agreement commenced an uninterrupted exchange of defence expertise, strategic planning, training, and equipment from Pakistan to KSA. In the 1960s, Pakistani pilots operated RSAF fighter jets during Saudi Arabia's conflict with Yemen, known as the Al-Wadiah conflict, as the PAF supported the RSAF (established in 1969). The Pakistan Army played a pivotal role in assisting Saudi authorities in resolving the 1979 Grand Mosque seizure. Saudi Arabia has traditionally considered Pakistan an ally, particularly in matters of security. In the 1980s, Saudi Arabia relied on Pakistan, deploying 15,000 soldiers for its defence. During the first Gulf War, 13,000 Pakistani military personnel actively participated. Earlier, Pakistani Army engineers had constructed fortifications along the Saudi-Yemen border. Currently, approximately 1,800 Pakistani officers and soldiers are serving in Saudi Arabia as part of a military training mission.⁴ Thousands of members of the Royal Saudi Armed Forces have also received training in Pakistan, and both countries frequently conduct joint military exercises. An exchange of high-level visits of military officials of both countries regularly takes place throughout the year.

Under the leadership of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, Saudi Arabia has witnessed a growing trend of military expansion, marked by an increase in military expenditures. A recent example of military-to-military cooperation between the two countries is the joint drill named AL BATTAR-I, involving the Special Forces. The primary objective of this exercise is to strengthen bilateral relations and facilitate the exchange of knowledge and experiences. The opening ceremony was attended by high-ranking officials from both Armed Forces and took place in the Nowshera district of north-western Pakistan. This two week training exercise aims to further bolster the historical military ties between the two nations. It will focus on developing joint operational concepts and identifying areas of mutual interest for future military cooperation. The ultimate goal is to leverage each other's expertise in counterterrorism efforts to maximize the benefits of this collaboration.⁵

² Sib Kaifee, Saudi-Pak Ties: “One of the closest relationships in the world”, June 13, 2020, Arab News, <https://www.arabnews.pk/node/1453546/pakistan>

³ Safdar Sial, Emerging Dynamics in Pakistan Saudi Relations, Norwegian Peacebuilding Centre, <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/195227/202d14d49238cab72b99e625383101d3.pdf>

⁴ Adeela Naureen, Waqar K Kauravi, The deep-rooted ties with Saudi Arabia, The Express Tribune, January 17, 2022, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2396198/the-deep-rooted-ties-with-saudi-arabia>

⁵ Pakistan, Saudi Arabia begin joint Special Forces drill, Middle East Monitor, August 23, 2023, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20230823-pakistan-saudi-arabia-begin-joint-special-forces-drill/>

Pakistan is among the 41 nations that form the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMACT), initiated by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in 2017. At the inaugural ministerial gathering of the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC), Pakistan was represented by its Defence Minister during the meeting held in Riyadh on November 26, 2017.

In Pakistan, several major publicly-owned and many privately-owned companies are involved in the production of defence-related goods. The primary defence products are usually manufactured by government-run entities such as Pakistan Ordnance Factories (POF), Pakistan Aeronautical Complex (PAC) at Kamra, Heavy Industries Taxila (HIT), National Radio Telecommunication Corporation (NRTC), and Karachi Shipyard and Engineering Works (KSEW). The private sector focuses on the production of smaller supporting equipment.

Saudi Arabia stands as the largest importer of Pakistani arms, with the latter having procured various small and medium conventional weaponry worth millions of US dollars.

Owing to the close bilateral relations, and specifically in the defence arena, the Turkish-Pakistani Tripartite Committee held its first meeting in Riyadh to discuss ways to enhance defence co-operation.⁶ Senior officials from all three countries attended the meeting; which included Talal Al Otaibi, the Assistant Minister of Defence from Saudi Arabia, Lt. Gen Muhammad Saeed, who serves as the Chief of General Staff in the Pakistani Army, and Celal Sami Tufekci, the Deputy Defence Minister of Turkiye. The focus of the discussions revolved around advancements in the defence sector, as well as subjects such as technology-sharing and adaptation, and scientific research.

In conclusion, the enduring strategic partnership between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan is a testament to the depth of their relationship, particularly in the realm of defence cooperation. Over the decades, both nations have prioritized this aspect of their collaboration, resulting in a multifaceted exchange of expertise, training, and equipment.

Pakistan's unwavering support to Saudi Arabia in the defence arena, from providing training and advisory support to deploying troops on Saudi soil, underscores the depth of their commitment to safeguarding mutual security interests. The extensive education and training opportunities afforded to Saudi military personnel in Pakistan have further strengthened their military capabilities. The history of joint military exercises, spanning from the 1960s to the present day, demonstrates the tangible benefits of this partnership. Moreover, the establishment of the IMCTC and the recent AL

⁶ Mariam Nihal, Saudi-Turkish-Pakistani Tripartite Committee discusses defence co-operation, August 24, 2023, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/gulf-news/2023/08/23/saudi-turkish-pakistani-tripartite-committee-discusses-defence-co-operation/>

BATTAR-I joint exercise serve as contemporary examples of their ongoing collaboration, which continues to evolve and expand. Similarly, the prospect of trilateral cooperation involving Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Turkiye, as demonstrated by the recent Turkish-Pakistani Tripartite Committee meeting in Riyadh, further highlights the potential for future synergies in the realm of defence and security. This enduring partnership between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan is not only a reflection of their shared interests but also a testament to their commitment to regional stability and security.