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Pakistan–GCC Security Cooperation and Emerging Layered Minilateralism amid Regional Escalation

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Abstract
This paper looks at how the Pakistan-Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) security cooperation has evolved since the institutionalization of the Pakistan-GCC Strategic Dialogue in 2022 to the end of 2024 when the war in Gaza, Houthi attacks on Red Sea shipping, direct Iran-Israel exchanges and wider regional uncertainty intensified the Gulf security anxieties about being military ready, maritime security and strategic dependence. The study relates three tiers of interaction in security: the collective-defense institutions existing within the GCC; the formal dialogue of Pakistan with the GCC as an organization; and various levels of bilateral relationship between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates in the area of bilateral defense cooperation. It claims that the trend that can be seen by the close of 2024 can only be termed as developing layered Minilateralism as opposed to a new alliance. GCC institutions also wanted to be more integrated in their operations, even as its member states were diversifying their external relations without the security relations with the United States and Europe being discarded. The value of Pakistan was based on the military training, experience of counterterrorism, geographical features of the sea, military educational institutions, defence-industrial prospects and the political ability to preserve the relations with the Gulf monarchies and Iran at the same time. However, the same balancing role also brought about constraints, Pakistan was not in a position to assume Saudi preferences as equivalent to GCC position, join a sectarian security alliance, or provide open-ended military assurances. The article lists the maritime security, intelligence liaison, counterterrorism, cyber resilience, critical-infrastructure protection and modular training as the most viable areas to develop the institution. It concludes that the environment that existed in December 2024 offered chances of greater Pakistan-GCC security co-operation, but not a collective-defence architecture of Pakistan.

Keywords: *Pakistan, Gulf Cooperation Council, regional security, strategic dialogue, Red Sea, Saudi Arabia, minilateralism, defence cooperation, maritime security*

1. Introduction

By late 2024, the issue of Gulf security had once again turned into a question of military exposures at once and diplomatic insecurity. The conflict in Gaza had created a spillover in the region; the attacks by the Houthis had led to the disruption of the commercial shipping in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, Israel and Iran had passed a new line by direct exchange of fire and the danger of further escalation had touched energy facilities, maritime insurance, supply chains and political calculations of Gulf regimes. The GCC reacted by repeating the de-escalation with the further discussion of the military integration as well. In November 2024, the GCC organized the first meeting of its Armed Forces Security Working Group, and the twenty-first meeting of the Joint Defence Council, one week later in Doha. In December, the 45th GCC Supreme Council approved the recommendations of the Joint Defence Council and registered the achievements of operational integration of the armed forces of the member-states (GCC, 2024d, 2024e, 2024f).

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These changes were not taking place in a vacuum. Pakistan and the GCC had already signed a Joint Action Plan of Strategic Dialogue 20222026, which directly encompasses the security in the list of the areas of collaboration (MOFA Pakistan, 2022). In March 2023, a strategic dialogue between the leaders of the two countries discussed the political and regional security issues and mechanisms to strengthen the relationship (GCC, 2023a). In addition to the GCC-level relationships, Pakistan had had bilateral defence relationships with each of the Gulf monarchies. In June 2023, the continuing relationship between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia in military affairs, security and defence consultations with Oman, and training relationships with other member states was reflected in the Pakistan–Kuwait Defence Cooperation Agreement.

The main analysis issue is not then whether or not Pakistan is in security relationship with the gulf; it definitely is. How these relations can be integrated into a region where the GCC collective institutions, national defence policies, western security guarantees, new Asian alliances and issue-specific coalitions meet is a more challenging question. A bilateral relationship with the Saudi Arabia cannot be automatically termed as a Pakistan-GCC alliance. Similarly, there is no institutional coordination in GCC that would remove the sovereignty of its six members. The right unit of analysis should thus encompass a difference between organizational cooperation and bilateral partnerships as well as small group or issue-based arrangements.

The paper poses the question: How did the institutionalization of a Pakistan-GCC dialogue between 202224 interplay with regional security shocks in 2024, and what opportunities and constraints characterized new role of Pakistan in Gulf security in 2024? It puts forth three arguments. To start with, the escalation in 2024 was not the source of Pakistan-Gulf defense relations, but a speed-up of historical and institutional relations before the crisis. Second, the architecture that will be observable by the end of 2024 can be characterized as the development of layered Minilateralism: the GCC-wide security coordination was accompanied by the bilateral relationships of differentiation and issue-specific partnerships. Third, sustainable contribution of Pakistan was in terms of capacity building, interoperability, maritime security, counterterrorism, crisis communication and defense-industrial cooperation instead of an unspecified collective-defense guarantee.

2. Review of the literature and the analysis framework

2.1 Relations between Pakistan and GCC in the literature

The history of the relations between Pakistan and the Gulf monarchies has pointed out a long-lasting alliance of strategic location, religion, elite faith, labor migration, economic reliance and defense cooperation. Kamran (2012) focuses on the fact that Pakistan is at the gateway to the Arabian Sea, its military potential and the rich history of political and security relationships with the Gulf states. Citing the example of Saudi Arabia, Oman and Qatar, Nasim (2021) shows that the relationships were built unevenly, and addressed the unique needs of each of the monarchies. Similarly, Nasim, Shamim and Ali (2023) emphasize that mutual interests and institutional experience can be viewed as more relevant to explain the political and security cooperation than the religious affinity would be.

Relationships between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia take the centre-stage in this literature. Siddique (2019) explains a relationship which has grown on ideological unity to a more intricate strategic interdependence influenced by economical limitations of Pakistan, regional concerns of Riyadh, Pakistan-Iran connections, as well as the increasing connections of Saudi Arabia and India. The 2015 parliamentary ruling to stay out of the Saudi-led military

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action in Yemen continues to be an essential notice to the reality that proximity does not eliminate local, constitutional or geopolitical boundaries to Pakistani military undertakings.

Another warning in the literature is against considering the GCC as a unitary security actor. According to Kostiner (2010) there are persistent challenges in transforming the perceptions of common threats into complete defence. Deficits in command and control, joint planning, intelligence, logistics, sustainment and interoperability are pointed out by Cordesman (2014) even with very high defence spending. These arguments still hold validity since the GCC has on numerous occasions tried to enhance the Unified Military Command, frequent drills and collective security facilities as member states still maintain sovereign authority on the decision-making of the military.

Material aspect of this issue is significant. In 20192023, SIPRI rated Saudi Arabia as the second largest importer of major weapons in the world with a 8.4 per cent of the world imports and Qatar had 7.6 per cent. During the same time, the United States provided 75 per cent of the major-arms imports made by Saudi, and 45 per cent of Qatar (Wezeman et al., 2024). In 2023, SIPRI also approximated military spending by the Middle East to be about US200 billion, with Saudi Arabia being the highest spender of this region (SIPRI, 2024). These statistics reveal that it is not so much acquisition but institutional transformation of national capabilities into disseminated warning, planning, procedures and credible decision-making.

2.2 The complex of regional security, hedging and diversification

The Regional Security Complex Theory offers a good point of departure since both Pakistan and the Gulf are situated in the same security setting linked together by the Arabian Sea, the Gulf of Oman, Iran, Afghanistan, energy routes/transnational militant networks (Buzan and Waeber, 2003). Pakistan can be impacted by a crisis in the gulf, based on the price of energy, remittances, shipping and diaspora exposure; a crisis in the western neighborhood of Pakistan can have an impact on Gulf threat perceptions in terms of terrorism, flow of narcotics and insecurity on the sea. The two subregions are not the same due to their geographic proximity, but this brings about security interdependence recurrence.

The states of GCC have at the same time taken a policy of diversification or hedging. Their military ties with America are also structurally significant, particularly due to the presence of bases, hi-tech weaponry, chains of sustenance, intelligence and training. However, Gulf states have increased political, economic and security relations with China, Türkiye, India and Pakistan and so on. The statements by GCC Secretary General at the December 2024 Doha Forum clearly put the Gulf policy in the context of equal partnerships, multilateralism and dialogue with various great powers (GCC, 2024g). Diversification thus does not synonymous to strategic withdrawal of the West; but it is an effort to minimize the vulnerability and maximize the maneuvering space in a congested security environment.

2.3 Emerging layered Minilateralism

Minilateralism is a collaboration between few actors that is structured around a certain issue, ability or political goal. This type of arrangement may be quicker and more adaptable than big multilateral organizations, however, also may lead to duplication, exclusion, and ambiguity regarding hierarchy (Tow, 2019). The term should be cautiously used in the context of Pakistan and GCC. As of December 2024, no new Pakistan-inclusive GCC collective-defense treaty and no trilateral mutual-defense agreement (between Pakistan and a

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GCC member and another external power) existed. The fact is thus validating the narrower idea of emerging layered Minilateralism.

Four layers are contained in this framework. The former is the legal and military structure of the GCC such as Joint Defense Council, Unified Military Command and joint exercises. The second one is the Pakistan-GCC Strategic Dialogue and its Joint Action Plan of 2022-2026 which provides an organisational framework of security cooperation without entailing Pakistan to be a GCC member. The third one is bilateral defence ties of Pakistan with the individual member states. The fourth one is issue-focused alliances and groupings whereby Pakistan and the Gulf states can be involved individually or collectively especially in maritime security, counterterrorism, training and diplomacy. The conceptual worth in this is that it demonstrates how these layers could support each other without being made into an alliance.

2.3.1 Theoretical Framework

In this paper, the author integrates *Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT),* security hedging, and Minilateralism security cooperation to elaborate on the development of the Pakistan-GCC security relationships in 2022-2024. The theory of Regional Security Complex (Buzan and Waever, 2003) elaborates that geographical areas have interrelated security concerns. The states of the GCC and Pakistan are connected with the Arabian Sea, Gulf of Oman, energy corridors, migration and common interests in terrorism, maritime security and instability in the region.

Security hedging is also a part of the framework and that is why states have many partnerships so as to maintain strategic flexibility. The GCC states maintain their relations with the West in security issues; they also develop collaboration with other partners like Pakistan, China and Türkiye. In the same way, Pakistan balances its defence relations with Gulf states and still has the required relations with Iran.

Lastly, the research uses Minilateralism security cooperation to explain why the development of Pakistan-GCC cooperation has occurred via flexible and issue-based arrangements as opposed to a formal alliance. The relationship is composed of overlapping layers: GCC internal defence mechanisms, Pakistan-GCC strategic dialogue, bilateral defence ties, and problem-specific cooperation, in domains like maritime security, counterterrorism and training. This framework asserts that the Pakistan–GCC security cooperation is an emergent multi-layered security arrangement instead of a traditional collective-defence alliance. It describes the way states may enhance their cooperation without strict commitments, losing strategic autonomy.

2.4 Research gap

As of 2022, existing literature offers much historical nuance to the Pakistan-Gulf relationships, and a sophisticated analysis of GCC defense integration, but much of it is pre-2022. Meanwhile, policy commentary tends to leap too far in the direction of evidence of close bilateral relations to asserting an emerging alliance. An analysis that is oriented towards the process but does not lose the difference between GCC-wide institutions, bilateral relationships and issue specific cooperation and evaluates what the 2024 security environment actually altered by the end of the year is required.

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3. Methodology

The case-study design employed in the study is qualitative involving analysis of documents and tracing of the process. Process tracing is suitable since the task is to build up the history of how the institutional cooperation and regional shocks interacted with each other and not estimate a statistical relationship. The center of the analysis period starts as soon as the Pakistan-GCC Joint Action Plan of Strategic Dialogue is finalized in January 2022 and concludes on 31 December 2024. The historical foundations are set with the help of earlier scholarship; any developments that happened later are intentionally omitted.

The evidence is categorized into four. First, there are the official Pakistani sources of the statements by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the Joint Action Plan, the Pakistan Kuwait Defence Cooperation Agreement, the January 2024 Pakistan Kuwait crisis, the Pakistan Kuwait April 2024 and Pakistan Kuwait October-November 2024 visits and the Qatar visit and the December 2024 year-end diplomatic review. Second, the documents of GCC contain the June, September, October and December 2024 statements of the Ministerial and Supreme Council and the military meetings, which took place in November 2024. Third, the sources of international institutions such as SIPRI and the International Maritime Organization are also used to give evidence on military spending, reliance on arms and Red Sea attacks. Fourth, scholarly research has historical, bilateral and conceptual context.

Around six themes, which were perceived as a threat; institutional design; military integration; external partnerships; the bilateral contribution of Pakistan and constraints of implementation, the documents were coded. The statements regarding planned deployments of forces or covert obligations or nuclear guarantees were not to be considered unless they were backed by responsible public evidence by the time of 2024. This is especially significant since the relations between Pakistan and Gulf are often the subject of speculation that goes beyond the documentary account of these relations.

There are three limitations of the study. To begin with, bilateral military arrangements are not necessarily fully public and thus training, intelligence and contingency planning cannot be fully reconstituted. Second, the relations between Pakistan and GCC are not equal Saudi Arabian relations with Pakistan are far stronger than that of other GCC participants and publicity depends on the circumstances. Third, this year 2024 is a year of a crisis that is transforming at a fast rate. The article does not thus evaluate the trend of institutionalization as at the cut-off date, but a regional security architecture that has already been achieved.

4. Institutionalization and foundations before the 2024 Shock

4.1 Bilateral defense relationships over a long period of time

Pakistan has its military ties with the Gulf monarchies even before the formation of GCC in 1981. The Pakistani officers were used as advisors and trainers, Gulf officers were sent to the Pakistani military schools, and bilateral military cooperation involved the development of the air-force, exercises, and professional military education as well as security assistance (Kamran, 2012; Nasim, 2021). The most robust one was formed with Saudi Arabia, but Oman, the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain and Kuwait established their own channels which were conditioned by the specific geographical position and the security needs.

Such relationships can be termed as differentiated bilateralism. Saudi Arabia has long been appreciating the manpower and training facilities as well as political symbolism of Pakistan. The maritime and border-security cooperation is particularly relevant to Oman due to its geographical location on the Arabian Sea. Qatar is an amalgamation of defense

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relations, investment and a significant diplomatic mediation. The security system in Bahrain is firmly bound to Western military presence and the UAE has grown up to build up high advanced defense systems and external network which is highly diversified. In June 2023, Kuwait signed a Defence Cooperation Agreement with Pakistan, which was a recent formal bilateral institutionalisation (MOFA Pakistan, 2023). The fact that there is such variation implies that no one bilateral relationship can be used to deduce a single Pakistan-GCC defense policy.

4.2 Pakistan GCC Strategic Dialogue 2022-2026

Another significant institutional development was on 5 January 2022 when Pakistan and the GCC signed the Joint Action Plan of Strategic Dialogue of 20222026. Political and security cooperation, as well as trade, investment, energy, and food security, transport, environment, health, culture and education were explicitly discussed in the plan (MOFA Pakistan, 2022). This step was significant because it was not so much a treaty-like obligation as it provided a certain administrative regularity to the relationship: it provided the sectoral follow-up with an organizational structure.

In March 2023, the senior-officials strategic dialogue at the GCC Secretariat discussed the political and regional security issues and mechanisms to implement the memorandum of understanding and joint action plan (GCC, 2023a). This had formed an intermediate between mere bilateral relationships and official GCC membership, in analytical terms. It provided Pakistan with an avenue to talk security with the organization, whereas the GCC had the freedom to decide on the extent and speed of collaboration. The latter difference is the key to comprehending the place that is achieved by December 2024.

Table 1: *Evolution of Pakistan–GCC Security Cooperation (2022–2024)*



4.3 Interdependence in the economy and the society as an enabler of security

The strong economic and social networks consolidate security collaboration. GCC states are one of the biggest providers of employment and remittance, energy resources and financial aid to Pakistan, whereas Pakistan offers a considerable amount of expatriate labour force, a substantial market and military resources. Overall, in FY202324, Pakistan receives

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over US$30 billion in the workers remittances and Saudi Arabia and UAE are the two largest source countries (State Bank of Pakistan, 2024). This interdependence extends the definition of security to encompass the expatriate security, energy security, financial security and crisis evacuation in addition to the traditional understanding of defence.

The interdependence brings about asymmetry. The repeated balance-of-payments stresses experienced by Pakistan can prompt short-term economic diplomacy which is seen to be strategic dependence. An institutional reciprocity as opposed to episodic demands of financial aid is thus needed in a credible long-term security relationship. The professionalism of the military, geography and human capital are valuable assets of Pakistan, which need to be converted into specific programmes that will have mutual positive results and benefits.

5. Regional Build-up in 2024 and the GCC Security Redo

5.1 Gaza and the growth of the area risk

The Gaza war continued to be the political crisis of the day in the Arab and Islamic worlds in 2024. GCC ministerial declarations continually demanded ceasefire, securing of civilians and political process leading towards Palestinian statehood. The conflict was also associated with the instability in the region in general and the need to de-escalate the situation was also noted by the June 2024 Ministerial Council (GCC, 2024a). To the Gulf governments, Gaza was both a humanitarian and a diplomatic problem and a source of second-level security impacts via proxy warfare, marine assaults, a Lebanon-Israel spillover and an increase in Iran-Israel tensions.

Pakistan was very much in line with GCC on the Palestinian issue such as advocating an immediate ceasefire and Palestinian state. This political congruence provided diplomatic room of security consultation, but failed to bring forth a common military policy. The difference is significant: political solidarity across Palestine might be used to enable collaboration in responding to humanitarian aid, in maritime protection and in crisis diplomacy without suggesting that there should be a mutual commitment to war-fighting.

5.2 Red Sea and Gulf of Aden sea insecurity

One of the most plausible strategic repercussions of the crisis in the region turned out to be maritime insecurity. In May 2024, the International Maritime Organization denounced the Houthi attacks on the commercial ships at the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden and urged them to stop. As of 25 November 2024, there were 69 confirmed incidents reported by the IMO Secretariat since 19 November 2023 (IMO, 2024a, 2024b). The attacks had an impact on the freedom of navigation, insurance rates, rerouting choices and international supply chains making the Red Sea a direct economic-security issue both to the Gulf states and to Pakistan.

The June 2024 Ministerial Council of the GCC took a strong position on the situation in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden and stressed on the de-escalation, the rights to maritime navigation and the safety of commercial routes (GCC, 2024a). The December Supreme Council once again emphasized the significance of maritime security and addressing the practices, which pose a threat of commercial shipping, international trade, and oil facilities (GCC, 2024f). To Pakistan, whose ports and navy are on the approaches to the Arabian Sea, leading to the Gulf of Oman, these issues have offered an inherent area of collaboration, which is not as politically provocative as a land-force engagement.

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5.3 Iran–Israel escalation and vulnerability to missiles and drones

This situation became even worse with April 2024 strike on the diplomatic premises of Iran in Damascus and the following direct exchange between Iran and Israel. On 14 April, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs urged Pakistan to restrain and de-escalate and its statement warned about the repercussions of the collapse of the diplomacy (MOFA Pakistan, 2024c). The GCC was also highly critical of the targeting of diplomatic facilities and concerned about military escalation, and outlined ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, drones, international navigation and oil facilities as the priority issues related to regional security (GCC, 2024a).

In October 2024, GCC extraordinary ministerial meeting once again discussed the situation between Israel and Iran as well as the intensification in Gaza and Lebanon urging all sides to exercise restraint and avoid the growth of the conflict (GCC, 2024c). The importance to Gulf defence planning was evident: it was impossible to separate the missile and drone threats with the air defence, early warning, protection of critical-infrastructure and communication of crisis. These are the areas, in which interoperability and information-sharing is more important than mere ownership of expensive national systems.

5.4 internal defence integration of GCC by the end of 2024

The greatest institutional change that will be important to this article was during the last weeks of 2024. The GCC also held the inaugural workshop of its Armed Forces Security Working Group in Riyadh, 1920 November. Such mechanisms were termed as the contribution to the defence and security integration, the readiness and a mechanism of a unified action among the armed forces of the member states by the Secretary General (GCC, 2024d). In Doha, the Joint Defence Council convened on 26 November, and discussed the further evolution of joint military activities in the form of the Unified Military Command, joint exercises and coordination tools (GCC, 2024e).

On 1 December 2024, the 45th Supreme Council approved the recommendations of the Joint Defence Council, and said it was pleased with operational integration between the armed forces of the member states. It also supported the implementation of a commander of the Unified Military Command and supported security initiatives (GCC, 2024f). Such decisions do not show a well integrated Gulf alliance of the military. They do demonstrate, however, that the local crisis was coupled with a new institutional focus on the coordination and preparedness.

This is the reason why it has been changed to Doha in the new title of this article. November 2020 Joint Defence Council meeting offers a historically justifiable date of 2024 to study the correlation between the escalation of the situation in the region and the military institution-building of GCC countries. It takes a point of inflection, prior to any subsequent agreements that would lie beyond the temporal frame of the study.

6. The Security status of Pakistan in the Gulf, in 2024

6.1 Saudi Arabia: non-existent depth of strategy in the absence of new mutual-defence treaty

In 2024, Saudi Arabia continued to be the most significant gulf security relationship ever between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. On 7 April 2024, Prime Minister Muhammad Shehbaz Sharif received Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, in Al-Safa Palace, Makkah. It was a joint statement in which ties of friendship, economic assistance, investment and peace in the region, and dialogue between Pakistan and India was stressed (MOFA Pakistan,

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2024a). On 1516 April, a Saudi ministerial delegation, headed by Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan, visited Pakistan, to solidify the momentum of high-level politics (MOFA Pakistan, 2024b).

In order to do a December 2024 analysis, the most important aspect is what was not determined by the public record. In 2024, no new Pakistan-Saudi mutual-defence treaty was announced publicly and in the language of a formal collective-defence, a language which would emerge only later. The association was still deep-strategically and its defence content was based upon long-term bilateral mechanisms and training, consultation and long-term collaboration and not on a new proclaimed automatic guarantee. By keeping this distinction, it will be impossible to rewrite the 2024 record by hindsight.

6.2 Iran: crisis, retaliation and speedy diplomatic mending

The case of relationships between Pakistan and Iran is a clear example of limited nature of any security role of the Gulf. In January 2024, Iranian attacks within Pakistan were responded to by Islamabad with precision attacks against what it claimed were terrorist hideouts in Iran, Operation Marg Bar Sarmachar (MOFA Pakistan, 2024d). The episode brought about a small yet intense bilateral crisis on the western border of Pakistan. But the two states hastened to de-escalate and reinstatement of diplomatic communications.

This repair was institutionalised by the visit of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi to Pakistan 22-24 April 2024. The declaration of the common border as a border of peace and friendship and the frequent cooperation of political, military and security leaders in countering terrorism, drug trafficking, human trafficking, hostage-taking, money laundering and kidnapping (MOFA Pakistan, 2024e). This shift, at a very fast pace, between the military exchange between Pakistan and the Gulf states to the security dialogue shows why Pakistan can not afford to maintain its relations with the gulf countries as an anti-Iran alliance. Stability in the border with Iran is a direct national-security interest, rather than a fringy diplomatic preference.

6.3 Oman: a natural security and sea bridge

The stance of Oman is particularly crucial since the foreign policy of the country is based on the focus on mediation and due to the common maritime space with Pakistan in the Gulf of Oman. The eighth Pakistan-Oman Bilateral Political Consultations were held in Muscat on 27 August 2024 and discussed security and defence, as well as political and trade cooperation (investment), health, cultural and consular cooperation (MOFA Pakistan, 2024f). The scope of the agenda is typical of the Pakistani relations with the Gulf countries: it is not that defence is not a part of a broader strategic alliance but, on the contrary, it is not a standalone entity that does not rely on other relationships Pakistan has with the Gulf countries (economic and diplomatic).

Another model that can be used to cooperate in a non-escalatory way is Oman. The security can be enhanced through maritime-domain awareness, search and rescue, port security, anti-smuggling coordination and professional exchanges, without a common stance on Iran. This form of modular cooperation is a better fit with the layered approach as opposed to efforts to build a solid bloc.

6.4 Qatar: diplomacy of strategic partnership and mediation

The visit of Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif to Qatar in the end of October and the start of November 2024 was mainly aimed at the investment and trade and economic cooperation.

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The joint statement however outlined Pakistan to be a strategic partner in the region and it also captured the discussion of regional and global issues, including the mediation efforts of Qatar on Palestine (MOFA Pakistan, 2024g). This is indicative of yet another key aspect of Gulf security, which is that diplomatic mediation in itself is a strategic ability.

The participation of Qatar illustrates why security collaboration can not be diminished to the traditional military obligations. Dialogue support, hostage and ceasefire mediation, humanitarian access and crisis communication can have an influence on the dynamics on escalation. The fact that Pakistan can continue to have relations with Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkiye, China and the West would provide it with diplomatic utility, which would be undermined by a highly sectarian or adversary-specific stance.

6.5 Kuwait, Bahrain and the UAE: bilateral channels which are differentiated

The most recent formal bilateral defence tool that was not a part of the Saudi relationship and offered grounds to train and institutional contact was the 2023 Defence Cooperation Agreement between Kuwait and Pakistan (MOFA Pakistan, 2023). The strategic environment between Bahrain and the UAE is different as well as the two countries had established security relations with Pakistan. The defence position of Bahrain has a strong linkage with the military infrastructure of the West and the UAE has established a diversified network with the United States, Europe, India and other partners. What this policy on the part of Pakistan means is that it will have to provide modular collaboration that fits into the systems that are already in place in each state and not necessarily demand a homogenous GCC.

Table 2: *Comparison of Pakistan's GCC Security Relationships*

GCC State	Main Areas of Cooperation	Strategic Character
Saudi Arabia	Defence cooperation, training, political coordination	Deepest strategic relationship
Oman	Maritime security, political consultations, border cooperation	Non-escalatory security partnership
Qatar	Diplomacy, investment, strategic dialogue	Security linked with mediation role
Kuwait	Defence agreement, training cooperation	Formal bilateral institutionalisation
UAE	Defence links, economic and strategic cooperation	Diversified partnership
Bahrain	Security cooperation and military relations	Connected with Western security structures

7. What by December 2024 "Layered Minilateralism" Will have Entailed

The evidence to a layered architecture, but not a Pakistan-inclusive alliance, is supported by the end of 2024. The initial one was internal GCC defence integration. An organisational effort to enhance the coordination of operations was in the form of the Joint Defence Council, Unified Military Command, working groups and exercises. The second tier was the Pakistan-GCC Strategic Dialogue that institutionalised the security consultation without applying the GCC-collective-defence obligations to Pakistan. The third layer was the bilateral Pakistan-Gulf defence relationships, each of various levels, history and political boundaries. The fourth tier comprised of issue-based security cooperation in maritime security, counterterrorism, diplomacy and resilience.

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This arrangement should be referred to as minilateralism. The logic of small number is evident in bilateral and issue-oriented alliances, but the formal network was yet to be solidified into a new mutual-defence alliance. The term is thus used to refer to a new approach towards security governance as opposed to an existing alliance. Its strength is that it is flexible, states are able to collaborate on a capability and not to solve all regional disputes. Its drawback is fragmentation: duplicated exercises may be given by overlapping channels, and incompatible procedures and confusion of crisis roles.

The behaviour in itself of the GCC reinforces this interpretation. It enhanced internal military integration and at the same time, widened the strategic consultations with many foreign states and insured on equal partnerships and multilateralism (GCC, 2024f, 2024g). External diversification was complementary, rather than subtractive. Pakistan may turn out to be more helpful in that ecosystem, exactly when Gulf states, in order not to lose Western security relations, had to give up a part of their own.

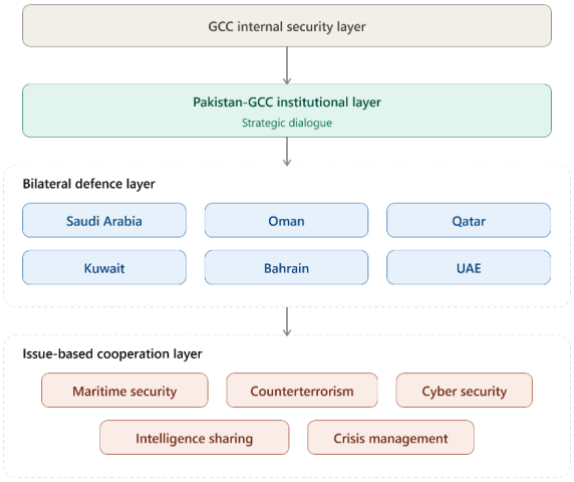


Figure 1: *Pakistan–GCC Layered Security Cooperation Framework*

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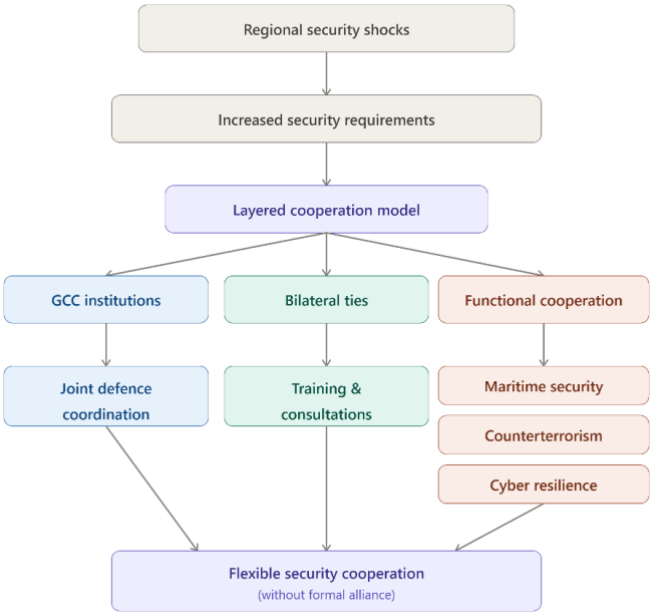


Figure 2: *Analytical Model of Emerging Layered Minilateralism*

8. December 2024 Areas of Strategic Opportunity

Table 3: *Security Drivers Behind Pakistan–GCC Cooperation in 2024*

Regional Challenge	Impact on GCC Security	Potential Pakistan Contribution
Gaza War	Increased regional uncertainty and escalation risks	Diplomatic coordination and crisis communication
Red Sea/Houthi attacks	Threatened maritime trade and energy routes	Maritime security cooperation
Iran–Israel escalation	Increased missile and drone concerns	Training, intelligence cooperation and resilience planning
Terrorism and transnational crime	Border and internal security concerns	Counterterrorism experience

8.1 Maritime security and protection of sea-lanes

Another case suggesting closer cooperation between Pakistan and the GCC was the most immediate case of maritime security. The Red Sea crisis showed that an assault of the freight routes, energy prices and business confidence can be influenced by the attacks that are located much far out of the territorial waters of Pakistani. The coastline of Pakistan, the experience of the country in the marine sphere, and the closeness to the Strait of Hormuz approaches contribute to the country being a suitable partner in the maritime-domain awareness, the anti-piracy, search and rescue, mine countermeasures, port protection and sea-line security. Cooperation may be viewed more as protection of the common good instead of being involved in a war against a designated enemy.

An effective tool would be a PakistanGCC Maritime Security Dialogue as a part of a 20222026 Joint Action Plan, which is connected to the negotiation of the naval staff and the presence of multinational maritime agreements. The standardisation of incident reporting,

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liaison officers, anti-smuggling information, rescue procedures, port-security drills and contingency planning to disruption of shipping should be considered as key priorities at the initial stages. This would be more of an addition to existing commands, and not a replacement.

8.2 Early warning, liaison with air defence and intelligence

The 2024 Iran-Israel tension solidified the apprehension of missiles, drones and critical infrastructure by the Gulf. Pakistan is unable to offer an integrated air-defence shield which can be instantly available but can be involved in training, doctrine, simulation, command-post exercises and intelligence liaison. It is necessary to start cooperation on the procedural level: similar terminology of threats, secure communication, reporting templates, tabletop activities and lessons-learned procedures. The steps are both technically and politically more easily implemented than trying to integrate highly sensitive national sensors immediately.

Reliability of GCC air forces on various Western systems also comes with restrictions in form of licensing and cybersecurity. Any technical integration that would be Pakistan-related would have to abide by the third-country policies and any existing alliance commitments. A single combined network is thus not as realistic as a modular approach which is based on procedures and training.

8.3 Cooperative efforts in counterterrorism and border-security

Counterterrorism is also one of the best comparative advantages that Pakistan has. Its military and law-enforcements are highly experienced in their operations against militant networks and Gulf states are in need of strong financial-intelligence, border-control and critical-infrastructure capabilities. The topics of urban counterterrorism, security of airports and energy infrastructure, counter-unmanned systems, crisis negotiation, terrorist-money laundering markers and civil-military coordination can be jointly taught.

The Pakistan-Iran April 2024 joint statement provides valuable lessons as it conceptualized security collaboration based on functional aspects, i.e., terrorism, smuggling, trafficking and abduction instead of ideology congruity. Pakistan-GCC cooperation can be directed by the same principle: threats should be defined based on the behaviour and capabilities rather than the sectarian identity.

8.4 Interoperability and professional training of the military

Low-cost, long-lasting mechanisms of influence are training and professional military education. Distributing GCC officers in Pakistani organizations, exchange of faculty, common staff coursework and scenario-driven planning has the potential to develop a common professional vocabulary. The impact is compounded: through training, officers have the ability to coordinate themselves during crisis situations despite their governments having different policies.

Exercises need to be beyond ceremonial involvement to appraised ability building. Measurable interoperability can be created without any permanently deployed politically sensitive deployments by multi-year goals, after-action planning and planning at the staff level. This is one of the areas that bilateral programmes can assist in GCC-wide standards in the future.

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8.5 Resilience of cyber defence, critical infrastructure and civil resilience

The 2024 security environment indicated that the strategic vulnerability encompasses cyber disruption, ports, financial networks, energy infrastructure and public communication. Cyber incident response, energy and transport system protection, continuity planning, emergency medicine and crisis communications can hence be added to the list of areas that Pakistan-GCC can collaborate. They are particularly appropriate areas where GCC-wide participation can be done since there is no need to have an agreement on a common enemy.

The high presence of expatriates in the Gulf by Pakistan further brings about a civil-protection aspect. Emergency preparedness (evacuation), consular, hospital overflow, and transport disruption contingency planning can make the diaspora management an element of resiliency collaboration. These kinds of measures enhance deterrence by lessening the disruptive impacts of assault or crisis in the region.

8.6 Co-operation in defence industry and maintenance

Pakistan is also able to provide some of the defence-industrial capabilities, such as training systems, maintenance, ammunition, naval support, small arms and some conventional platforms. But the most powerful is complementarity but not replacement of western suppliers. GCC forces have spent lots of money on American and European equipment; sustainment chains, intellectual-property regulations and export controls thus define what is realistic to be co-produced or sustaining.

Technical feasibility and the life-cycle cost should be used to pick the projects and not political symbolism. Other more realistic entry points may be offered by simulators, secure communications, counter-drone technologies, maintenance services and chosen maritime-surveillance systems than ambitious platform programmes which may demand limited third-country technology.

9. Security Risks and constraints

9.1 The GCC is not a unit actor

The first limitation is analytical and political: GCC is comprised of six independent states that have varying perceptions of threats, external relations and diplomatic cultures. The preferences of Saudi cannot be regarded as a GCC policy per se. Oman and Qatar will be more inclined to push back against an overtly anti-Iran model; the UAE is a combination of coercion and expansive external relationships and strong connections with India; Bahrain is strategically positioned and connected to the United States; and Kuwait has unique domestic and regional sensibilities. Any GCC–Pakistan initiative should thus be carried out via the GCC Secretariat in case it purports to have organisational scope and via bilateral avenues in cases that it is aimed at meeting national needs.

9.2 Pakistan’s Iran imperative

The crash of 2024 in Pakistan, and its quick reconciliation with Iran illustrate a severe structural constraint. The borders of Islamabad border Iran and there is cross-border militancy, smuggling and instability. It thus needs to engage in combining military and diplomatic efforts with Tehran despite strengthening alliances with the Gulf. An anti-Iranian security arrangement would destroy the cooperation of the borders, undermine the potential of Pakistan as a mediator and create a domestic sectarian threat.

The most plausible posture that Pakistan could have is the defensive one and the behavioural one; counter the violations of sovereignty, defend shipping and civilians, counter

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terrorism, and assist in de-escalation. This stand aligns with the repeated calls of the GCC on itself to restraint and diplomatically solve regional crises as early as 2024.

9.3 limits to Western dependence and interoperability

The second structural constraint is a technological constraint. In 20192023, Saudi Arabia and Qatar were the biggest arms importers in the world, with the United States continuing to be the leading supplier of weapons to both (Wezeman et al., 2024). The GCC military systems are thus integrated in the Western sustainment and training, software, licensing and intelligence associations. These structures can be replaced, but not easily, and capabilities can be added by Pakistan.

This renders interoperability a political, legal and technical issue as well. Secure gateways, common procedures, liaison officers and exercises are possible, complete integration of sensors, mission systems or classified networks can be limited. The starting point of policy should not be what can be transferred but based upon the notion that technology transfer is the automatic consequence of political benevolence.

9.4 Economics and domestic legitimacy of Pakistan

Pakistan is a state with a substantial military potential, yet with a chronic need to conduct counterterrorism operations domestically, an unstable western border setting, competitive strategic rivalry with India and financial limitations. It could not be regarded as a bottomless pool to use in case of Gulf contingencies. Open-ended deployments would put a strain on readiness, and raise political controversy back home.

The Yemen 2015 parliamentary debate is still up to date as it demonstrated that Gulf guarantees are open to internal legitimacy. The purpose, duration and cost of missions will be known, which will contribute to the future cooperation being more sustainable. Ambiguous combat obligations are more difficult to justify than training, exercises, intelligence liaison, and maritime cooperation and technical support.

9.5 India-GCC relations and competition in South Asia

The states of GCC have escalated their economic, technological and defence ties with India. Pakistan must not believe that increased Gulf relations mean the member states must lessen their interactions with New Delhi. Introducing South Asian competition into GCC institutions would render Pakistan a more challenging partner and would be against the Gulf inclination towards diversified relationships.

The competitive approach of Pakistan must rather be performance-based, which includes credible training, professional military schooling, maritime accessibility, handy defence items, diplomatic uniformity as well as quick crisis relief. A strategic relevance that is based on capability is more sustainable as compared to one based on exclusivity.

9.6 Nuclear guesswork and theological extrapolation

When it comes to Saudi-Pakistan relations, often, speculation arises in the discussions due to Pakistan being nuclear. However, the public record and information accessible as of 31 December 2024 did not form a Pakistani nuclear guarantee to either Saudi Arabia or the GCC. There is no analytical merit in viewing strategic ambiguity as a sign of prolonged nuclear deterrence and that it is destabilising. It is capable of creating proliferation issues and distractions to traditional areas where cooperation can be verified and effective.

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This policy analysis should be based on the conventional defence, non-proliferation, crisis communication and protection of territory and infrastructure in 2024. Credibility of deterrence in the Gulf is based at this moment on warning, resilience, air and missile defence, dispersal and decision-making and not on unsubstantiated assertions of nuclear umbrellas.

10. A Sustainable Pakistan -GCC Cooperation Policy Framework by December 2024

10.1 Start a security working track by the Joint Action Plan

The current institutional framework of security cooperation already has a basis of the 20222026 Joint Action Plan. That framework should be utilized by Pakistan and the GCC to set up a routine security working track between the GCC Secretariat, and the corresponding ministries and military representatives of Pakistan. It is important that the mechanism should coordinate and not replace bilateral defence committees. It would be there to find out which projects can really be improved by the participation of GCC at large.

10.2 Adopt modular cooperation

Modular roadmap would enable the member states to become part of programmes at the discretion of need and political comfort. These modules might comprise maritime-domain awareness, counterterrorism, professional military education, critical-infrastructure protection, cyber incident response, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and some choice early-warning exercises. The modules are supposed to be specific on lead institutions, participants, timelines and evaluation criteria.

10.3 Prioritise maritime security

The Red Sea crisis results in maritime cooperation being the most suitable one to initially institutionalise. A Pakistan-GCC maritime exercise could be used annually consisting of search and rescue, anti-smuggling, port protection, and mine awareness and emergency response to commercial-shipping accidents. Combat communication and compatible reporting procedures could be developed by naval staff conversations, without the need to establish a new combat command.

10.4 g.c.c. connect bilateral strengths to the GCC-wide standards

Pakistan must use its bilateral relations as labs to further collaboration. A training programme created and designed in one of the member states can create a curriculum that will be later accessed by other GCC partners. An experiment with Oman can enlighten a broader conversation by a maritime protocol. A quality and export-control standard could be created by a defence-maintenance project with one of the Gulf states. By doing so, bilateralism will be a stepping stone towards regional interoperability as opposed to GCC institutions being a rival.

10.5 Maintain diplomatic balance and defensiveness in framing

The new efforts must be designed to be grounded on territorial defence, legal passage, counterterrorism, civilian protection and resilience. Pakistan needs to maintain working relations with Iran, and not use sectarian language. On their part, GCC partners must not employ Pakistan in intra-GCC conflicts or as a tool of South Asian conflicts. It must aim at minimizing vulnerability, rather than building an ideological block.

10.6 Response to actions instead of statements

The security cooperation should be measured by the operational deliverables: the number of trained officers, exercises, liaison systems, maritime incidents, response time,

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cyber exercises, completed, and infrastructure-protection plans experimented with. PakistanGulf relations have long been typified by declaratory friendship, the policy challenge after 2024 is what to do with that political capital in a way that it can be converted into institutions that can be used in times of crisis.

11. Conclusion

The security structure that would be in place at the end of 2024 was more of a consequence than a regular bilateral diplomacy but it was not well integrated as a new alliance. Bilateral defence relations were still active and differentiated; the Pakistani and the GCC had created an organisational channel via the 20222026 Joint Action Plan; and the 2024 regional crisis created a concern about the maritime security, missiles, drones, critical infrastructure and escalation. Meanwhile, the GCC enhanced its internal military coordination by the working groups, the Joint Defence Council, the Unified Military Command and the decisions of the Supreme Council in December.

The trend can be termed as the developing minilateralism in layers. The main layer of collective was formed by GCC institutions; the outer organisational layer was established by Pakistan-GCC dialogue; the practical depth of bilateral Pakistan-Gulf ties; and the flexibility of the issue-based cooperation provided flexibility in the areas of maritime security, counterterrorism, training and resilience. These layers might develop into reinforcements to each other, however, it would only be possible when they have clear mandates, and when there is coordination to avoid duplication.

The strategic value of Pakistan is what it can reliably maintain; military education, counterterrorism experience, geographic control of the maritime domain, planning experience, selective support of the defence industry and diplomatic access to regional boundaries. Its weaknesses are as well significant. Pakistan should not be allowed to think that Saudi tastes are those of the GCC as a whole, the strategic need of a stable relationship with Iran, or the substitution of a Western military ecosystem, in which the Gulf forces still rely.

Institutional discipline is thus the lesson of policy that comes out decisively in a December 2024 view. Greater security co-operation can be achieved without building an automatic collective-defence insurance. An offensive, defensive, and legalized system has the potential to enhance the security of both the Gulf and Pakistani as well as maintain diplomatic flexibility. A significant milestone in consolidating the architecture was the Doha Joint Defence Council meeting and the December 2024 GCC summit, although the architecture was still in its nascent stage. Any evaluation which transfers subsequent agreements to the period they would have had in 2024 would exaggerate the extent of integration and the publicly-declared obligations then.

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