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Gulf States' Soft-Power Diplomacy in South Asia
Portfolio Power, Strategic Competition, and Implications for Pakistan

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Abstract
This paper discusses the influence of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar in South Asia using portfolios comprising of religious legitimacy, humanitarian action, sovereign investment, access to labor market, cultural and sports branding, media, mediation and security assurance. It posits that the traditional language of soft power is still needed but it is not enough: attraction tends to be more and more incorporated into material access and long-lasting institutional relations. India has transformed demographic size, trade framework, talented manpower, technology, and perpetuated leadership diplomacy to comparatively thick Gulf associations. Pakistan has had outstanding religious, societal, humanitarian, and defense networks, yet has tended to deploy them on an episodic basis and via the elite, as opposed to institutionalizing them into an institutional capability. This contrast is enhanced by the Saudi Pakistan Strategic Mutual Défense Agreement that was signed on 17 September 2025. It elevates the status of Pakistan as a contributor to security and can build confidence, but defense promises are not soft power and cannot replace competitiveness, labor protection, sharing of knowledge and deliver credible projects. Conceptualizing the notion of portfolio power which is based on asymmetric interdependence, the article suggests a Pakistani approach that revolves around co-production: mutually recognized skills, projects that are investable, diaspora institutions, cultural and academic networks, humanitarian preparedness and governance of security discipline. The main argument is that inherited affinity can be useful only in the case when it is transformed into mutual value in the society.

Keywords: *Gulf states; soft power; portfolio power; Pakistan; India; South Asia; migration diplomacy; security reassurance*

CENTRAL ARGUMENT Gulf *influence works through interlocking portfolios rather than attraction alone. Pakistan's comparative advantage lies in affective and security trust; its principal weakness is the limited institutional conversion of those assets.*

1. Introduction

Gulf-South Asia relationship is no longer suitable to be defined as an exchange of oil, labor and remittances. Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar are becoming more and more a place to invest, mediate, be humanitarian, cultural hosts, adopters of technology and the source of regional comfort. Their airlines, sovereign wealth funds, media outlets, religious organizations, sports events, museums, universities, aid organizations and labor regimes communicate to South Asian audiences, via various channels, but rarely do these channels work independently. Access to jobs can enhance familiarity; development finance can also enhance elite confidence; cultural branding can ensure commercial partnership becomes more appealing; and security cooperation can assure investors and political leaders. The sum total effect is more decisive than any particular instrument.

Pakistan is in an abnormally high concentration in this field. The attachment to Makkah and Madinah based on religious affiliations, a history of military alliance, high levels of expatriate numbers, reliance on remittance, and recurring Gulf bailouts result in both the intimate and asymmetric form of relationships. As Ahmed and Karim (2024) demonstrate, this Saudi control over the holy places of Islam gives a unique source of cultural power in Pakistan. Affinity, however, does not necessarily bring about bargaining power. Popular warmth may go hand in hand with institutional fragility when the activation of engagement depends, first of all, on emergency financing, or visits by senior level officials, or the demands of security.

The invaluable comparative context is provided by India. Its Gulf policy has evolved beyond energy and expatriate well-being, to encompass overall trade agreements, digital transfer, technology, food security, logistics, military engagements and routine political discussions. The bilateral trade between India and GCC was about US$178 billion in financial year 202425 in the India-GCC Political Dialogue in Riyadh in September 2025 (Ministry of External Affairs, India, 2025c). The breadth of this cannot be attributed to the economic size of India alone. The political attention can survive beyond the individual visits due to sectoral committees, business networks, preparation of regulations, and repetitive bureaucratic engagement.

This analogy cannot be brought down to a situation of a zero-sum game. Gulf governments seek to have strategic independence through diversifying partners and isolating issues. India can be a key business and technological ally and Pakistan is still a defense, Islamic politics, labor, humanitarian response and regional diplomacy ally. The more practical question is then how local states transform their resources to a lasting impact. The questions put in this article are: how do the dominant Gulf powers build their influence portfolios in South Asia; why has India institutionalized its benefits better than Pakistan; and what the new Saudi-Pakistan defense commitment transforms- and does not transform- the Gulf position of Pakistan?

2. Literature Review and Research gap

The soft power that is not due to attraction.

The concept of soft power that was developed by Nye defines the capability to achieve the desired results without using force and/or bribes. Subsequent research has perfected the definition by separating resources and processes by which people are influenced to feel a sense of legitimacy and change behavior (Gallarate, 2011; Rothman, 2011; Nye, 2021). This is a key difference in the Gulf. Money can fund the conspicuous works, however; it is not visible that will draw people; status can generate power, yet such power is perceived differently in the constituencies at home and in the elites abroad; and a foreign policy agenda can even earn respect among elites and raise eyebrows among laborers or activists.

The assumption according to which liberal great powers are the main players of soft power is challenged in recent work as well. Monier (2024) describes the way in which the Gulf monarchies utilize the strategies of tolerance and coexistence to create the appeal to the outside world, and replicate the political legitimacy on the inside. Salman and Burton (2025) differentiate between positive and negative public diplomacy, the former which benefits the country by presenting the national story in an appealing way and the latter, which disputes the opponents and undermines alternative interpretations. These practices demonstrate an authoritarian middle-power diplomacy where national branding, sectoral competence, regime performance and foreign-policy autonomy mutually reinforce each other without falling into a unifying ideological model.

2.2 Autonomy, support sport and mediation

The Gulf autonomy literature sheds light on how both Pakistan and India can be made significant without being considered to be exclusive alignments. Shahbaz and Hassanin (2024) explain why there is a growing space of independent GCC foreign policies due to the shift of power in the region as well as globally. Bakir and Al-Shamari (2025) demonstrate the Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE as between the United States and China and Szalai (2025) places smaller Gulf states in conflicting Indo-Pacific scripts. Hedging is not vacillation, but a plan of multiplying choices, not being overdependent and deriving value in fields.

A second body of scholarship has been produced by foreign aid, humanitarian diplomacy, sport and the media. Pericolic (2025) views Gulf aid as a sphere of the domestic politics, security priorities, elite networks, ideology and the conditions of the recipients instead of charity. Barakat (2024) demonstrates that Qatar is using the humanitarian access and mediation together to gain a unique niche. The similar application of the reach and vulnerability of reputation is also evident in work on the 2022 FIFA world cup. Qatar gained the unprecedented publicity, and the story of modernity and openness was complicated by labor criticism (Brannagan and Giulianotti, 2015; Al-Thani, 2022; Al-Kubaisi, 2023). Both of these implications are analytical and normative: the same instrument can appeal, console, estrange, and reveal, and they need to be studied in audiences.

2.3 Migration, diaspora institution and agency of South Asians

Migration scholarship rectifies the propensity to depict the South Asian states and communities as inactive consumers. Burmeister-Rudolph (2024) demonstrates the role of the civil-society organizations that are run by migrants in mediating between the low-paid Indian workers and the state institutions in countries of the GCC. The creation of the reputation of a host country as well as the leverage of a sending state is involved in recruitment agencies, the employer, consulates, professional associations, family, and digital communities. The quality of certification, access to the consul and legal support and diaspora organization is thus as important as the number of workers in foreign countries.

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The high concentration of workers in low-paying industries, fragmented recruitment and a lack of professional networks to diplomacy limit the potential of the giant Gulf workforce in Pakistan to effect economic resilience and deep social familiarity, which can generate economic value. The experience of India demonstrates the way business councils, competent communities, and migrant organizations can be institutionalized into the interlocutors. The two countries do not get rid of labor vulnerability; the relative aspect is that the scale of the diaspora is only politicized by organizing, credibility and representation processes.

2.4 The research gap

Current literature offers compelling explanations on the Saudi religious power in Pakistan, Qatari mediation and sport, Gulf assistance, government of migration, and hedging. They rarely put these channels into a paradigm that can be used to compare the affective and security benefits of Pakistan and the economic and institutional advantages of India. Another way in which they are in danger is they will have conceptual slippage when they take defense ties, investments, and soft power as similar concepts. Both gaps have been filled in this article as the Gulf influence is now a portfolio although there is a very clear distinction between attraction, material inducement, institutional access, and coercive capability.

3 Theoretical frameworks: Portfolio Power under Asymmetric Interdependence

Soft power will always be the point of departure since the perceived legitimacy and appeal influence the reception of external initiatives as welcomed, opposed or re-packaged. It is not, but that which is the end. The audiences in South Asia familiarize themselves with the Gulf states via visa regimes, pilgrimage, employment agreements, development finance, energy provision, cultural output, assistance, mediation, and defense cooperation. These tools are of various types of power yet interact. The establishment of a reliable security relationship can open the door to political access to investors; an exploitative labor regime can undermine the appeal generated by an international sporting event; consistent provision of disaster relief can enhance the goodwill of society which can be tapped into later to facilitate diplomatic collaboration.

PORTFOLIO POWER The ability to package attraction, access, reward, institutional connection, and reassurance in such a way that one can have separate instruments to strengthen a relationship yet not necessarily through direct coercion.

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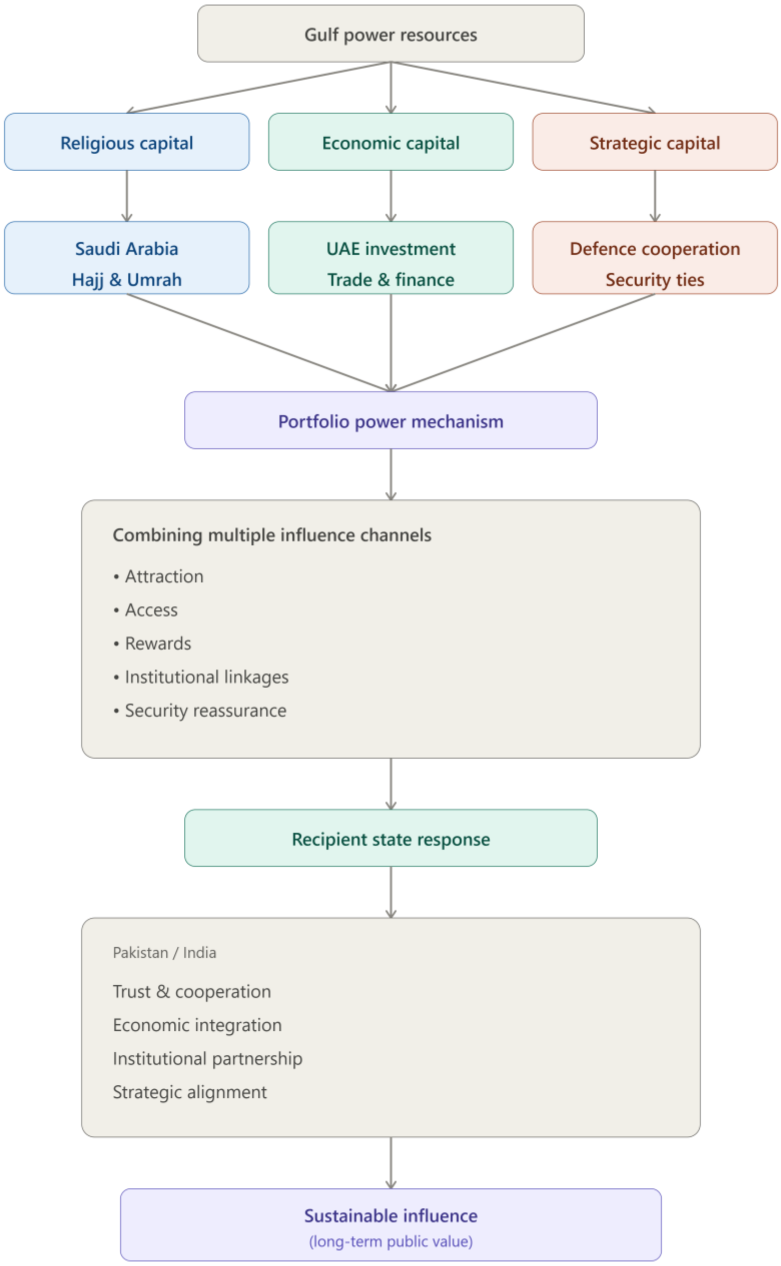

Table 1. Operational Dimensions of Portfolio Power

Portfolio Dimension	Main Instruments	Gulf Examples	Expected Influence Outcome
Religious legitimacy	Pilgrimage, religious institutions, cultural identity	Saudi Arabia–Pakistan relations	Social trust and symbolic influence

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Economic statecraft	Investment, finance, trade, aid	UAE and Saudi financial engagement	Economic dependence and partnership
Mobility diplomacy	Labour access, migration governance	GCC labour markets	Diaspora-based influence
Cultural branding	Sport, tourism, media, events	Qatar World Cup, UAE branding	International attractiveness
Mediation and humanitarian diplomacy	Aid, conflict mediation, relief	Qatar humanitarian diplomacy	Diplomatic relevance
Security reassurance	Defence cooperation, strategic partnerships	Saudi–Pakistan defence relations	Elite trust and strategic confidence

There are four attributes of portfolio power. To start with, it is cumulative: a scholarship programme, a labor agreement, an investment platform and a cultural initiative can be more successful combined than individual. Second, it is distinguished: there is no Saudi religious and security capital, Emirati commercial connectivity, and Qatari mediation and media. Third, it is co-produced: ministries, firms, universities, migrants, religious communities, and publics in recipient states make sense of and put Gulf initiatives into practice. Fourthly, it is reversible. The announcements of the investments that were not fulfilled, the abuse of labor, selective humanitarianism or the overreach of the strategy can transform the familiarity into distrust and the visibility into reputational risk.

The close proximity and vulnerability of Pakistan can be attributed to asymmetric interdependence. The advantages that gulf partners enjoy are the military professionalism, labor force, geography, market, and the political assistance of Pakistan. Pakistan on the other hand, will incur greater expenses when there is a break down in access to Gulf jobs, remittances, oil plants, deposits or emergency funds. This gives structural leverage to the Gulf capitals in the areas where they have issue-specific counter-leverage in defense and religious politics (Pakistan). It is not an unrealistic policy goal to escape interdependence by reducing asymmetry by exporting, developing skills, increasing institutional reliability, and co-producing the benefits of public goods.

4. Methodology

The research is based on the qualitative comparative analysis and organized review of the documents. Its academic foundation is peer-reviewed literature on soft power, public and niche diplomacy, aid, sport, migration, Gulf autonomy, the relationships between India and the Gulf and Saudi influence in Pakistan. Policy developments are measured through official joint statements, monetary and migration statistics and news reporting through carefully attributed news. The references to scholarly materials were verified with their publisher or DOI lists; the assertions, based on subsequent publications or the ones that could not be verified, were not included.

The UAE, Saudi Arabia and Qatar are juxtaposed in seven channels, such as, religious legitimacy, cultural and national branding, humanitarian and mediation diplomacy, economic state craft, labour and diaspora governance, media and sport and security reassurance. The main case is Pakistan where India is utilized as an organized comparator. It is not aimed at estimating a specific numeric measure of impact. It is to follow the construction of instruments, the establishment of dependence, the permanence of some and the impermanence of others of the affinities.

5. Gulf Influence South Asian Portfolios

5.1 Saudi Arabia: sacred geography, well-being, investment and assurance.

The Saudi domination in Pakistan starts with having a resource that no one can compete with, the custodianship of Makkah and Madinah. Hajj and Umrah, religious education, charitable associations, elite and personal connections and common Islamic discourse generate a social power that can endure temporary conflicts. However, Ahmed and Karim (2024) reveal that this power is both not automatic and homogenous. Religious influence is received through the Pakistani sectarian diversity, internal political rivalry and evolving policies by Saudi. Sustainable attraction is thus based on the value of the people such as open pilgrimage services, learning opportunity, respectable work and the observable developmental products as opposed to just symbolism.

The potential contents of the relationship have been increased by Saudi economic transformation. Industrial localization, renewable energy, infrastructure, tourism, entertainment, sport, mining, digital services, and industries offer opportunities to South Asian firms and professionals. Pakistan holds strengths on security trust, affinity in the society, flexible labor, agriculture, information technology, and geographical location. Nevertheless these resources are at odds with the market size, capital, technological companies and certified professional foundation of India. Political warmness could put Pakistan on an agenda; it is only preparations of regulations and project delivery which could keep it on the agenda.

Fiscal aid is still a significant element of Saudi economic statism. A US$1.2 billion deferred-payment facility of Saudi oil imports between Saudi Fund for Development and Pakistan was signed in February 2025, alleviating the pressure on external financing (Reuters, 2025a). This kind of support helps to stabilize the relationship during the vulnerable times and in many cases, it results in elite gratitude. Its strategic constraint is that liquidity relief is not a sole factor to change the productive structure of Pakistan. When the emergency support is not coupled to the export capacity, skills updating, or even investable ventures, it is reproduced instead of being transformed to partnership.

5.2 The UAE: interconnectedness, business, tolerance and technological innovation

The UAE is an image of a globally integrated, commercially efficient, technologically ambitious and open cultural hub. Aviation, ports, finance, logistics, tourism, museums, renewable energy, interfaith initiatives, high profile international events make a consistent story of competence. As Monier (2024) demonstrates, tolerance has turned into a tool of external positioning along with a source of domestic legitimacy. To the South Asian governments and businesses, this story is appealing as it will enable them to access the capital and global networks without necessarily having to agree to any ideological stance.

India has integrated itself in this pattern with India-UAE Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement, extensive commercial networks, the cooperation in food security, connection of digital payments, and high-populous skilled diaspora. The UAE relationship between Pakistan and UAE is still consequential based on labor, remittances, aviation, property, trade and investment promises. In January 2025, the UAE rolled over two US billion deposits at the State Bank of Pakistan, another showcasing the financial aspect of the relationship (Reuters, 2025b). However, an architecture that is dominated by deposits and announcements is not as enduring compared to one that is supported by facilitating trade, resolving disputes, adherence to standards, and cooperating partnerships in the industry.

The moral of the story is not to copy India and do all that in a mechanical way or have a trade pact in place first before you are ready. The country needs modernization of its customs, internationally recognized testing and certification, commercial adjudication that can be trusted and bankable pipeline of projects, which Pakistan needs. In Emirati portfolio reputation is attached to performance. A Pakistani attempt at making broad memoranda that he reiterates without closing deals is a strategy which is likely to undermine, instead of enhancing credibility.

5.3 Qatar: sport, humanitarian action, mediation and media

Qatar exemplifies the use of small states to gain disproportionate diplomatic access by means of select niches. Al Jazeera expands the power of communication; mediation makes access to actors that bigger states might not get to; humanitarian activities build relationships in crisis settings; aviation establishes market relations; and sport makes the world visible. Barakat (2024) believes that the good relations and readiness to communicate with various sides contribute to the enhancement of humanitarian diplomacy in Qatar. Al-Kubaisi (2023) contextualizes the World Cup, media and mediation in a broader repositioning of foreign-policy.

The boundaries to this strategy are also educative. The 2022 World Cup increased the visibility of Qatar and turned migrant labor and practices of migrant rights into a prominent aspect of its image on the world stage (Al-Thani, 2022). Soft disempowerment is when a

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project aimed at creating an attraction opens up new channels of criticism (Brannagan and Giulianotti, 2015). The labor-sending states of South Asia thus have influence on the reputation of Qatar in terms of recruitment, the effectiveness of the consular, media discourse, and the experience that the workers undergo.

To Pakistan, Qatar is not just a LNG provider, labor market or even a one-off donor. The collaboration might go as far as training of medics, humanitarian logistics, aviation, education, sports management and research on Afghanistan. The institutional scope of the actions to be measured against the Pakistani activity is illustrated by the India Qatar Strategic Partnership Agreement of February 2025 and the goal of doubling bilateral trade by 2030 and Qatari commitment of $10 billion in investments (Ministry of External Affairs, India, 2025a; 2025b). The comparative advantage of Pakistan in the region is the knowledge and access to politics but this needs permanent programmes and not the coordination of crisis.

Table 1. Gulf influence portfolios and Pakistan's conversion challenge

Actor	Dominant portfolio	Pakistan's comparative asset	Principal conversion challenge
Saudi Arabia	Religious legitimacy; finance; labor; investment; defense reassurance	Deep public affinity and long-standing security cooperation	Translate symbolic and security trust into skills, industry, education, and accountable delivery
UAE	Trade; logistics; finance; technology; tolerance branding; culture	Large diaspora, proximity, services, agriculture, and connectivity	Develop standards-compliant exports, bankable projects, skilled talent, and reliable commercial governance
Qatar	Media; mediation; humanitarian action; sport; LNG; education	Afghanistan expertise, humanitarian experience, labor, and aviation links	Build sustained institutional programmes beyond energy transactions and emergency assistance
GCC institutions	Political dialogue; mobility; energy; investment; coordination	A major Muslim state with defense capacity and a large market	Complement privileged bilateral ties with systematic GCC-wide economic and social diplomacy

6. Mobility Diplomacy, Labor, Diaspora

Labor mobility is a life-sustaining economic phenomenon, a governance arena, and a life-blood of day-to-day diplomacy. Record workers remittances of US38.3 billion reached a high in financial year 202425 in Pakistan, with Saudi Arabia and the UAE being the highest source countries of workers remittances (State Bank of Pakistan, 2025). These flows assist in the household consumption, education, housing and foreign-exchange stability. Their political connotation, however, is based on the location of the workers in the Gulf labor markets, and the ability of Pakistani institutions to secure and advance them.

The experience of recruitment agents, immigration systems, employers, police, health services and consulates by a worker is played out through a lived experience of the evaluation of the host and sending states. Familiarity and long-term affinity can be established through positive experience; the reputational benefits of large-scale public-diplomacy efforts can be negated by wage theft, unsafe working conditions, imprisonment or unavailable court reparations. The description of the migrant-led mediation provided by Burmeister-Rudolph (2024) can also come in particularly handy: the civil-society organizations and professional associations can channel complaints, translate the administrative system, and establish representation in the event that formal diplomacy is too remote.

The problem of Pakistan is thus a qualitative one. It has to shift towards providing laborers to regulating movement. The qualifications that are mutually recognized, the transparent cost of recruitment, the verified contracts, portable records, legal-aid panels, gender-sensitive protection, and professional alumni networks would uplift wages and the bargaining capacity. Gulf diversification would also be supported by the same architecture that would provide certified talent to work in the healthcare, hospitality, logistics, renewable energy, construction management, artificial intelligence, cybersecurity and technical trades. Mobility diplomacy turns into soft power when both parties consider it as competent, just and beneficial to both.

7. India-Gulf Institutionalization and the Relative position of Pakistan

The increase of the role of India in the Gulf calculations does not mean that Pakistan is going to be pushed out of the scene in all sectors. It brings out a discriminated valuation of partners. The country of India is the center of trade, technology, energy-demand, food-security, investment and diaspora networks. Pakistan is still relevant in military, Islamic politics, labor, geographical topography and regional specific issues. The autonomy in foreign policy outlined by Bakir and Al-Shamari (2025), Shahbaz and Hassaniyan (2024), and Szalai (2025) can enable the Gulf states to further develop both of their relationships without resorting to the exclusive geopolitical scripts.

The only difference between India and other countries is the level of institutionalization. Repeated political and bureaucratic contact was established with the February 2025 strategic partnership with Qatar, the April 2025 expansion of the India Saudi Strategic Partnership Council and the India GCC Political Dialogue in Riyadh in September (Ministry of External Affairs, India, 2025a; 2025c; 2025d). Sectoral committees, business councils and mechanisms of implementation, ensure the strength of agreements in comparison to diplomatic spectacle. They also enable leaders and companies to tell the barriers they might face during a leadership visit and not to arrive at the conclusion later.

There are two mistakes that Pakistan should avoid. The complacency presupposes that there are religious fraternity and defense relations, and this ensures that one receives special economic treatment. Alarmism views every India-Gulf move as a pro-anti-Pakistan move. The two dodge the main point: Gulf partners are rewarding of deliverable value. Pakistan ought to respond by providing differentiated capabilities, security and humanitarian competence at the areas where it has excelled and credible economic, educational and technological institutions where it needs to improve its performance as opposed to insisting on exclusiveness which the Gulf states are not eager to give.

Table 2. India–Pakistan Gulf Partnership Comparison

Dimension	India	Pakistan
Economic engagement	Large trade volume, CEPA, investment networks	Strong relations but limited diversification
Institutional mechanisms	Strategic councils, sector committees, business platforms	More leadership-driven engagement
Diaspora role	Skilled professionals and business networks	Large workforce but concentrated in lower-skilled sectors
Technology cooperation	Digital systems, technology firms	Emerging potential
Security relations	Growing defense engagement	Historically stronger defense trust
Main challenge	Managing strategic competition	Converting affinity into institutions

8. Security Reassurance and Saudi-Pakistan Strategic mutual defense agreement

On 17 September 2025, Saudi Crown Prince and Prime Minister Mohammed bin Salman and Pakistani Prime Minister Muhammad Shehbaz Sharif have signed a Strategic Mutual Defense Agreement in Riyadh. The joint statement outlines the agreement as an endeavor to establish defense cooperation and enhance joint deterrence; it also mentions that aggression against either of the countries will be viewed as aggression against the other (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Pakistan, 2025). The language institutionalizes a security relationship of profound historical origins and provides Pakistan with more presence as a provider of Saudi security as opposed to just a recipient of financial aid.

It is necessary to have conceptual accuracy. A defense commitment is a hard power tool and deterrent and not soft power. It can however have soft-power implications. The reassurance will enhance the level of confidence of the elite, strengthen narratives of comradeship and will foster the perception that economic and social relationships are safeguarded by politics.

On the other hand, an unclear or farfetched commitment may produce fear, internal rivalry and a loss of reputation. The connection between hard and soft power is thus interactive as opposed to being substitutive.

The text published justifies a few conservative conclusions. It institutionalizes collective deterrence between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia; it does not create a GCC wide alliance, a transnational command and control system and a nuclear assurance. Neither does it erode the economic relations Saudi Arabia has with India or the necessity of Pakistan to have a balance in relations with Iran, China, Türkiye, United States, and other allies. Arguments outside the textual meaning need to be supported by evidence and not innuendos.

To Pakistan the agreement provides an opportunity and a binding. It can be supported by security credibility to cooperate in critical-infrastructure protection, maritime-domain awareness, cyber defense, and counterterrorism training, emergency medicine, and disaster response. However, there is no automatic route that can be taken between defense trust, investment, exports, and skills. The results of those need individual institutions, monetary models, and regulatory efforts. The deal will only reinforce the wider scope of influence of Pakistan, as long as security assurance safeguards--and does not suffocate--the economic and social underpinnings of the relationship.

9. Implications to Pakistan

9.1 Definite recipient to co production

The best strategic move that Pakistan can make is to reform its Gulf relations based on co-production. The word does not mean the collective statements. That is, institutions in both Pakistan and the gulf design, finance, implement and evaluate programmes which add value to both societies. These can be the accredited technical qualifications, university research centers, food and health-security projects, digital public infrastructure, disaster-response projects, and Arabic, Urdu, and English cultural production. Co-production brings down the hierarchy that exist between donor and recipient relationships and in addition, influences are reciprocal.

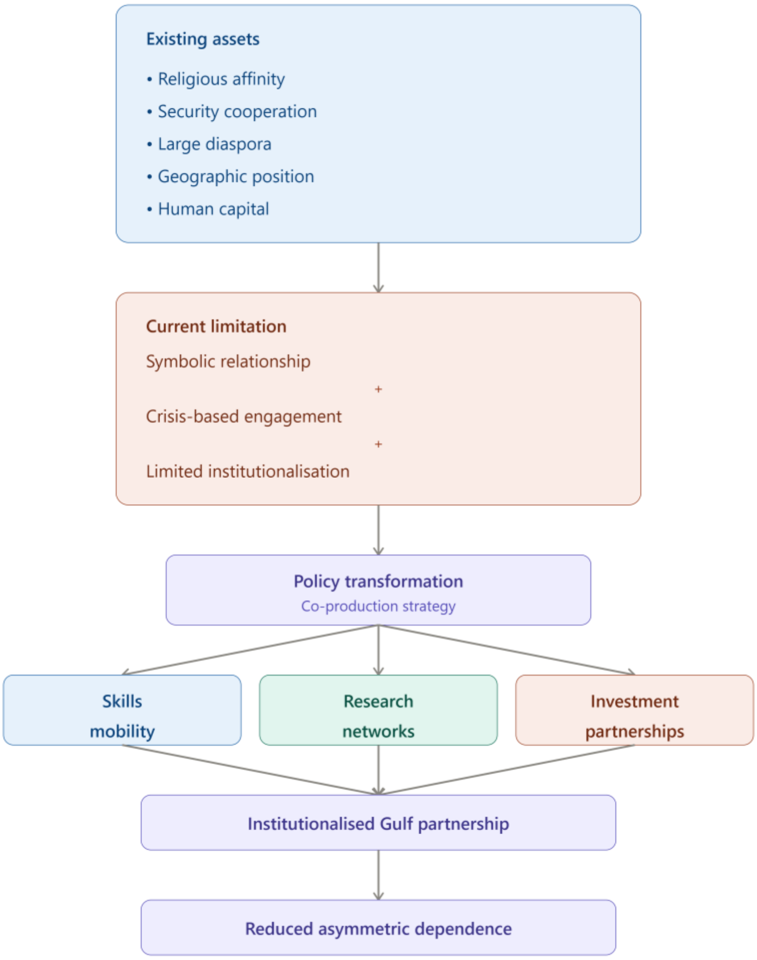

Figure 2. **Pakistan's Gulf Relationship Conversion Model**

9.2 Protecting against securitization and entrapment

The greater the defense position, the higher the political position of Pakistan but on the other hand it may lead to the filtering of all the Gulf issues based on security. Pakistan is interested in the stability of the Gulf, freedom of navigation, and the safety of civilians and infrastructure; and its diplomatic leeway in connection with Iran, Yemen, Afghanistan, and the Indian Ocean in general. The miscalculation can be mitigated through consultation processes, effective civilian command, parliamentary checks and balances and a disciplined channel of communication to the people without revealing the operational method. Strategic ambiguity can discourage but unmanaged ambiguity can lead to polarization within a nation and external over- expectation.

Raise awareness of lived experience: this is the objective of the report's recommendation that the public diplomacy is equated with lived experience. Credibility is based on the correspondence between the story and the action. Pakistan undermines its own powers when it selectively invokes the concept of solidarity, fails to protect the migrants, or presents

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projects which the institutions are not in a position to implement. The Gulf states also have the parallel threat of the challenge of the tolerance, humanitarian leadership or sustainability claims, which are incompatible with labor or military actions. Positive public diplomacy is best sustainable when it is based on the visible public value, as opposed to competitive messaging (Salman and Burton, 2025). Migrants, students, pilgrims, patients, entrepreneurs, communities impacted by disasters should then be considered as main audiences, rather than the marginal beneficiaries.

9.4 Reforming asymmetry by means of domestic strength

Economic asymmetry is impossible to eliminate because of defence relevance. Saudi and Emirati funding could give Pakistan much-needed breathing space but the country will be structurally weak as exports are limited, productivity is low, regulation is not predictable and skills are not suitable in the Gulf market. The ultimate success is strategic dignity which is a domestic success. Constant regulations, effective provincial authorities, reputable judicial and arbitration, quality laboratories, dependable energy and professional project management are foreign policy tools, as they make the difference between an external interest being converted into a consummated investment.

10. Policy Action Matrix

Priority	Policy action	Lead mechanism	Measurable indicator
Integrated strategy	Adopt a Pakistan–Gulf portfolio-diplomacy strategy covering culture, mobility, knowledge, investment, humanitarian cooperation, and security.	Prime Minister's Office, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, provinces, private sector	Country plans, named owners, quarterly implementation reporting
Skilled mobility	Negotiate mutually recognized certification in healthcare, hospitality, renewables, logistics, artificial intelligence, and technical trades.	Overseas Pakistanis Ministry, NAVTTC, provincial TEVTAs, Gulf labor authorities	Higher share of certified mid- and high-skill placements; lower recruitment complaints
Diaspora institutions	Create one-stop digital consular support, legal-aid panels, ethical-recruitment enforcement, and professional networks.	Embassies, BE&OE, licensed recruiters, diaspora associations	Response-time standards, resolved cases, verified-employer register, active professional chapters

Priority	Policy action	Lead mechanism	Measurable indicator
Economic conversion	Prepare standards-compliant export and investment pipelines before seeking preferential access or large announcements.	Commerce Ministry, Board of Investment, SIFC, chambers	Bankable projects, transaction closure rate, non-energy exports, published milestones
Knowledge diplomacy	Fund joint university chairs, research consortia, Arabic–Urdu–English media, and student and faculty mobility.	HEC, universities, cultural institutions, media partners	Co-funded chairs, accredited programmes, exchanges, joint publications
Humanitarian niche	Establish a Pakistan–Gulf platform for disaster response, climate health, and humanitarian logistics.	NDMA, health agencies, armed forces, Gulf aid institutions	Annual exercise, pre-positioned supplies, shared protocols, deployment-time benchmark
Security governance	Translate defense trust into defensive cooperation while defining consultation, civilian authority, and accountability.	National Security Committee, Parliament, relevant ministries	Consultation protocol, resilience projects, civilian briefings, evaluated exercises
Non-zero-sum diplomacy	Pursue functional projects with Gulf states and additional partners where Pakistani interests converge.	Ministry of Foreign Affairs and sectoral ministries	Operational projects in food, health, climate, logistics, or technology

11. Conclusion

The Gulf politics in South Asia has developed to become a portfolio power. The investment, labor governance, technology, and security reassurance are becoming more and more mixed with Saudi religious legitimacy, Emirati commercial connectivity, and Qatari media and mediation, sport, and humanitarian niches. This diversification enhances Gulf independence and allows it to be at the same time close to Pakistan and India. It renders inherited fraternity an inadequate policy ground, as well.

Pakistan has some impressive resources: popular goodwill, military credibility, strategic location, a huge manpower, humanitarian know-how and political saliency throughout the

Muslim world. The conversion of these assets into institutions is its weakness. India has been more effective in connecting the market scale, technology, trade diplomacy as well as the diaspora networks to the permanent mechanism. The correct Pakistani reaction is not refutation and anti-India rhetoric, but the attentive building of potentials that can be utilized by the Gulf partners and Pakistani citizens.

The Saudi–Pakistan deal elevates Pakistan to the position of a contributor to security, and might boost confidence, but it should not be understated or overestimated. The populist text establishes a two-way commitment of deterrence, rather than a GCC alliance or alternative to economic and social collaboration. The transformation of strategic confidence to co-produced institutions is still the sustainable path of Pakistan.

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