



Social Sciences Spectrum

A Double-Blind, Peer-Reviewed, HEC recognized [Y-category](#) Research Journal

E-ISSN: [3006-0427](#) P-ISSN: [3006-0419](#)

Volume 05 Issue 04, 2026

Web link: <https://socialsciencesspectrum.com/index.php/sss>



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Maritime Strategic Depth and Regional Balance: Evaluating Pakistan–Saudi Naval Synergy in an Indo-Pak Conflict Scenario

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Article Information [YY-MM-DD]

Received	2026-08-08	Revised	2026-09-15	Accepted	2026-10-09
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Citation (APA):

Karim, M (2026). Maritime strategic depth and regional balance: Evaluating Pakistan–Saudi naval synergy in an Indo-Pak conflict scenario. *Social Sciences Spectrum*, 5(4), 232-244. <https://doi.org/10.71085/sss.05.04.617>

Abstract

In Pakistan's traditional security milieu, the term of strategic depth has been understood in land-centric concept. This paper makes an endeavor of translating this concept into the maritime domain using Pakistan's enhanced naval collaboration with Saudi Arabia. Keeping in view, growing naval capabilities of India and Pakistan's vulnerability owing to its concentrated and limited coastal infrastructure, the study evaluates prospects of the Saudi intelligence-sharing arrangements, basing facilities, logistical and maintenance support for Pakistan. The paper argues that maritime strategic depth could enhance dispersal of forces, operational endurance, and survivability of Pakistan Navy, in the Indo-Pak high-intensity conflict. While highlighting its likely impacts on the developing maritime balance of power, in the Northern Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf especially on the face of ongoing crisis, the paper further assesses regional consequences, legal limitations, and political sensitivities of such cooperation. Using qualitative analysis of openly available data on defense, historical precedents, policy documents, and alliance theories, the paper asserts that though conceptually, maritime strategic depth is conceivable, yet its practical application may be limited by Saudi's diplomatic calculus, Gulf neutrality rules, and political alliances.

Keywords: Maritime Strategic Depth, Royal Saudi Naval Forces (RSNF), Pakistan Navy (PN), Naval Basing, Sea Lanes of Communications (SLOCs), Indo-Pak Conflict, Alliance Theory, Offshore Balancing, Alliance of Common Interest.

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Introduction

Security doctrine of Pakistan has remained locked, since long, on its strategic depth. Primarily it is owing to Pakistan's historical rivalry with India and its general security environment. This concern has contributed in shaping Pakistan's regional outlook, particularly regarding stability in Afghanistan, which is considered precarious to avoid strategic encirclement and ensure a secure western flank. Consequently, strategic depth has been understood not merely in territorial terms but as the need for a friendly or neutral regional environment that can reduce external pressures and enhance Pakistan's overall security posture (Feroz H. Khan, 2003). While the continental mindset of the policy makers was focused on the land-based moves in the region, Pakistan's maritime vulnerabilities was exposed by India's fast naval growth and rising capacity to project power across the Arabian Sea (Military Balance 2024). There is therefore a need to re-asses strategic depth in naval context. Pakistan, with a coastline of just around 1,000 kilometers and key naval bases Karachi, Ormara, and Gwadar inside the range of Indian strike envelope, urgently needs to broaden its operational options (Geoffrey till, 2018).

This paper examines possibilities for Pakistan to gain a credible maritime strategic depth through greater naval cooperation with Saudi Arabia—a longtime defense ally with a geographically favorable location, straddling the Red Sea and Persian Gulf. Signing of the Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement (SMDA) in September 2025, has created new avenues for institutionalized military cooperation among the two allies. The research is thus guided by a query of how Pakistan's naval posture and maritime strategic depth may evolve following the defence pact with Saudi Arabia, with a specific focus on wartime contingencies against India. It also examines the benefits of maritime strategic depth for the Pakistan Navy, including dispersal of its assets, docking and repair facilities, logistical supply chains, and expanded surveillance capabilities and its geostrategic implications. Methodically, the article uses a qualitative, scenario-based analytical framework relying on open-source defense publications, policy reports, historical case studies, and theoretical literature on alliances and marine strategy.

Strategic Depth: Land to Sea

The concept of strategic depth was originated and developed in conventional military theory. It is normally referred to the use of territorial depth, in order to disperse, delay, destroy or damage/degrade an invading force (John J. Mearsheimer, 2001). In air strategy, the term is used for having enough air and territorial space to keep the air assets out of the enemy's attack range (Rasid Ahmad, 2012). Maritime strategic depth, however, is an underexplored concept. Scholars such as Geoffrey till and James Holmes (2017) have argued that naval forces inherently provide strategic depth by enabling power projection, sea control, and protection of Sea Lanes of Communications (SLOCs). In broad sense, it refers to the ability of a nation to project power, sustain naval operations, and support maritime forces beyond its immediate territorial waters. It includes access to foreign naval bases and support facilities, extended logistics networks, and collaborative surveillance capabilities. For naval forces, strategic depth reduces vulnerabilities by allowing forces to disperse, resupply, repair, and refit from multiple locations. Particularly such dispersed operational capability becomes critical, when facing an enemy with robust air and naval assets. Growing use of long range drones and missiles against ports and other maritime assets have further necessitated such arrangement on urgent basis.

For a state like Pakistan with small coastline, whose energy and trade lifelines transverses the Arabian Sea and shares sea borders with the rival India, the alliance's reliance can mitigate risks

associated with geographic isolation and structural disadvantages during conflict and enhances its ability to sustain long-duration operations. Maritime strategic depth hence entails: -

- a. Having additional staging points and supportive infrastructure outside its direct geographic constraints.
- b. Securing its SLOCs, and establishing alternate basing as fallback options for fleet operations during hostilities.

Alliance Theory and Concept of Strategic Depth

Theories of alliance formation suggest that in order to offset external threats and vulnerabilities, medium and small powers usually engage in defense treaties (Walt 1987; Schweller 1994 and Snyder 1997). The Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement between Saudi Arab and Pakistan is in line with the alliance theories where partners gain mutual benefit from such arrangements. Saudi Arabia gains strategic leverage against regional rivals and derives manpower and training support while Pakistan gains operational, logistic, diplomatic and economic support. In the maritime domain, Pak-Saudi relation also resonates “Offshore Balancing”, as Saudi support may provide implicitly or explicitly depth and logistics. Following theories offer conceptual explanation for Pak – Saudi maritime cooperation to mutually benefit and Pakistan’s urge for maritime strategic space: -

- a. **Balance of Threat:** Balance-of-threat model of Stephen Walt (1987) advocates that aligning of states is based on perceived threats rather than sheer power balances. Long-range naval strike capabilities and conventional naval forces superiority of India constitute vital threat for Pakistan, whereas Saudi Arabia wants an unswerving allies to boost its maritime defence posture amid regional turmoil. Therefore, Islamabad–Riyadh cooperation signifies a typical case of asymmetric alliance formation, where sustained collaboration has been underpin by mutual strategic utility, ideological affinities and shared threat perceptions.
- b. **Offshore Balancing and Strategic Depth:** Walt and Mearsheimer advocate the offshore balancing theory, where they argue that to keep equilibrium without direct confrontation, regional powers mostly depend on external allies. Pakistan’s engagement with Saudi Arabia demonstrates an adaptation of this approach in the maritime domain. By using Saudi airbases and ports for logistics, Pakistan effectually enhances its operational reach outside the strike envelope of India. This offshore posture offers both strategic and physical depth, augmenting deterrence and survivability.
- c. **Maritime Geopolitics and Energy Security:** Energy route security serves as one of the major motivators for Pakistan–Saudi alignment. Approximately 80 percent of global oil trade transits through the Arabian Sea and the Strait of Hormuz. Any disruption—whether from war, piracy, or blockade—would have global repercussions. Hence, maintaining maritime order in both peace and conflict becomes mutually beneficial. Pakistan’s naval presence complements Saudi Arabia’s interest in protecting its western seaboard and oil export routes (Arab News July 16, 2024).
- d. **Alliance of Common Interest Theory:** Alliance of common interest theory offers a foundational lens for analyzing Pakistan–Saudi military cooperation. Neoclassic realists Randall L. Schweller Balance of Interest model (1994) discusses that the main governing principles of the alliances and alignments is based on convergence of interests rather than power considerations alone. States with comparable interests are more likely to form an alliance (Schweller, pp 85-87). Firstly, foreign and security policy goals of a state could best be served

by allying with a state or alliance that at least would not work against its interests and, at best, would support in achieving objectives and aims based on similarity of interests. Secondly, in some cases a state can join an alliance to ensure additional security for countering a threat or to gain from the international setting. Thirdly, in situation where states do not operate in continually insecurity situations; usually they are free to pursue their interests without the fear of physically annihilation. Since, balancing is a costly affair therefore; most states may not like to opt for this option.

Pakistan–Saudi Defence Relations: An Historical Overview

Defence cooperation between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia was initiated in 1950s, under the Treaty of Friendship, over concerns about Egypt's war in Yemen, (Nasim Zehra, January 19, 2026). The treaty established a deep military alliance, with Pakistani troops deployed to train Saudi military personnel and secure the Kingdom, a partnership later solidified by agreements like the 1982 security pact (Zehra).

Pakistan Naval Academy (PNS Rahbar) and other training establishments have trained hundreds of Royal Saudi Arabian Naval officers. Regular summer sea training and ship-visits exchanges have embedded operational familiarity and professional ties between Royal Saudi Naval Forces (RSNF) and Pakistan Navy (PN) officers. Multiple open-source reports and press releases document Saudi cadets and officers undergoing sea training and commissioning parades at PN facilities, and participation of RSNF officers in PN courses. These training relationships create a network of personal rapport and professional interoperability, embed cultural and doctrinal compatibility, that can ease tactical and operational cooperation in crisis scenarios. Similarly, the Pak-Saudi bilateral naval exercise series Naseem al-Bahr, Shamsheer al Bahr series (conducted alternately in Pakistani and Saudi waters), and other combined activities have been recurring features of the relationship. Pak – Saudi Defence cooperation could be categorized in following phases: -

a. Early Foundations (1950s–1980s)

Pakistan remains a regional military training hub for Arabs, since 1950s. Riyadh started military modernization after the 1967 Arab-Israeli War & oil boom and investing heavily in military hardware acquisition and training, for which Pakistan provided training facilities, expertise and manpower. Saudi naval officers and men were trained under bilateral training programs managed by Pakistan Naval Academy (PNA) and other training institutions of the Pakistan Navy at Karachi. According to Abdulaziz Sager, (December 2025), in 1970s and 1980s, Pakistan deputed air defence personnel and military advisers to Saudi Arabia, during same time period, several “Joint Naval Initiatives” began to take shape. During the regional crisis mainly, Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988), mutual collaboration deepened and Pakistan assured Saudi Arabia of security assistance against spillover threats. Defence partnership categorized by strategic consultation and training was institutionalized. This was part of a wider and enduring defense cooperation structure between the two states, formalized through covenants like the “Joint Defense Protocol” of 1982.

b. Consolidation and Modernization (1990s–2010s)

Though, regional alliances were redefined at end of the Cold War, but the Pak–Saudi ties stayed resilient. Saudi Arabia mounting worries about revolutionary idealism, radicalism, terrorism, and “Arab Spring” like situation aligned with the Pakistan’s quest for economic and strategic support amid monetary pressures and sanctions. Naval collaboration, during this period of time enhanced through maritime activities including joint exercises. Most of the senior officers of Royal Saudi

Navy during this era were PNA qualified, showing enduring imprint of Pakistan Navy on the Saudi naval culture. In 2000s, the cooperation inched ahead towards defence-industrial collaboration and Islamabad's support for Riyadh naval modernization projects. Advanced training for the Saudi naval personnel in mine-countermeasure operations, logistics management, surface and sub-surface warfare were facilitated in Pakistan (Sager).

c. Strategic Expansion (2010s–Present)

Saudi Arabia defence diversification have accelerated, after the global shifts in last decade, especially “the US pivot to Asia” and regional tensions with Iran. Islamabad's offer of a joint defence cooperation framework, in 2018, bolstered by subsequent dialogues, created suitable conditions for integrated operational planning that resulted in establishing Pak – Saudi Supreme Military Committee. This was a more formalized mechanism for strategic synchronization. Naval collaboration at planning, execution and tactical level expanded through series of Shamsheer al-Bahr exercises, concentrating on anti-submarine warfare, maritime interdiction, communication interoperability, seamanship, and live weapons firing displays, building mutual operational familiarity, and combined logistics practice. These activities also represent the operational face of the cooperation. The existence of such institutionalized exercises demonstrates both parties' ability to plan and execute bilateral maritime operations — a prerequisite for wartime deployment cooperation. Pakistan's deployment of Long Range Maritime Patrol (LRMP) aircraft to Saudi bases for joint drills exhibited operational readiness for extended basing in wartime contingencies (Sager).

Pak – Saudi Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement (SMDA)

Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement (SMDA) was signed, in September 2025, by the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, Mohammed bin Salman and Prime Minister of Pakistan, Shehbaz Sharif, in Riyadh (Pakistan Ministry of Foreign Affairs Press release, September 17, 2025). Vital article of the joint statement overtly stated that the agreement “purposes to enhance defence collaboration between the two nations and strengthen mutual deterrence against any aggression,” further stating that “aggression against any of the country shall be considered an aggression against both. Publicly publicized provisions of the SMDA obligate both the countries to mutual defence in any incident of aggression (Suraj Yadav & Manish K. Yadav, November 10, 2025). Holistically, old ties have been codified under SMDA, into an official treaty, gesturing willingness of both the countries to expand mutual security guarantees transcending conventional partnerships. This agreement has to be understood in a framework of mutual strategic interests including economic interdependence, political solidarity, and security collaboration. This represents an opportunity for Islamabad to use allied territory/ bases and facilities in exigency operations

Though full text of the agreement has not been released, public statements show a broader opportunity of cooperation and security integration among militaries of the two countries. Wide ranging discussions on the subject suggest an increasing willingness of both the countries to conduct combined patrols in the Arabian Sea and adjacent waters, share training, and integrate military operations. Such cooperation under the SMDA, lays the groundwork and prepare a framework for more determined arrangements that will ultimately pave way for the maritime strategic depth for Pakistan Navy.

Pakistan assesses strategic environment in the region from the perspective of its conflict with India. The Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement was signed at a time while strategic partnerships of Saudi Arabia were evolving. On one hand, Saudi was maintaining deep economic ties with New

Delhi, which is one of its largest trading partners, on the other hand it has finalized the mutual defence pact with Pakistan. This reflects a carefully calibrated approach to security cooperation and geopolitical competition. Moreover, in recent years, strategic calculus of the Saudi Arabia has evolved. While customarily reliant on the security guarantees of the United States, Riyadh has shown a desire to diversify its defence partnerships. The Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement is part of this reorientation, carving space for Riyadh to reinforce its deterrent posture in an explosive and impulsive Middle East, chiefly after the resurrection of regional conflicts and fears of external threats.

The agreement bargains deep strategic and diplomatic value for Pakistan. Islamabad wanted to increase its global footprint, underpin deterrence against India, especially on the face of recurring tensions and fierce clashes along their shared borders. Also accrue religious cum politico economic pressure on Afghan Taliban to keep them away from supporting terrorism in Pakistan. Moreover, secure economic support from Saudi Arabia and balance compound relationships with Gulf States and China. Though the agreement has been framed as a bilateral security arrangement, its implications for the Pakistan's maritime strategy however, outpace symbolic alliance. The agreement widens an established military relationship and presents new scopes of maritime strategic depth for Pakistan. In a time when geopolitical tensions in both the Middle East and South Asia are rising, the SMDA provides an opportunity for Pakistan to strengthen deterrence against its rivals like India, boost naval cooperation, diversify logistics support and extend its operational reach.

In the ongoing Gulf crisis, Pakistan is playing a key role in pacifying the volatile situation and also actively supporting Saudi Arab. Under the formalized defense pact, Pakistan has deployed Air Assets including HQ-9 surface-to-air missile systems, Squadrons of JF-17 multirole fighter jets and 8,000 troops (Defense Security Asia, May 18, 2026).

After Houthi attacks on Saudi Arabia, Pakistan has reaffirmed its commitment of any attack on Saudi Arabia would be considered an attack on Pakistan itself (Arab News July 20, 2026). Concurrently, Kuwait, facing frequent Iranian attacks, is discussing a mutual military alliance agreement with Pakistan (Arab News).

Maritime Geography and Pakistan Maritime Strategic Depth on the Face of India's Naval Expansion

In the regional maritime milieu, northern rim of the Indian Ocean includes the Arabian Sea and the Persian Gulf. This region has become a theater of strategic contestation. Expansion of the Indian Navy and its increasing strategic partnerships with many countries, especially with France, United States, Israel and Russia have given it significant capabilities. Indian Navy has evolved from a coastal defense force, in the past two decades, to a blue-water navy, acquiring substantial power-projection abilities. As per the International Institute for Strategic Studies' 2025 report, Indian Navy operates a fleet of nuclear-powered submarines, advanced guided-missile destroyers and two aircraft carriers, supported by space-based surveillance and long-range maritime patrol aircraft. Its growing collaboration with the United States, Japan, and Australia under the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue enhances its maritime situational awareness, surveillance, targeting, interoperability capabilities and operational reach. These assets, combined with satellite-based reconnaissance, network-centric command systems, and precision-strike weapons like the BrahMos cruise missile, have substantially enhanced India's ability to conduct offensive operations deep into the Arabian Sea.

The Pakistan Navy combines three tightly linked wings — Surface Fleet, Submarine Force, and Naval Aviation (plus Marines) — to perform maritime deterrence, sea-denial, maritime security, and protection of national sea lines of communication. The PN's strengths rest on a modernizing submarine force (Agosta-90Bs, Hangor/Type-039A being inducted), a capable surface flotilla for coastal defence cum escort duties, and naval aviation (MPA and shipborne helicopters) that extend surveillance and Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW) reach (IISS 2024). Pakistan's integrated naval triad gives it credible sea-denial and coastal defence options and a survivable undersea deterrent. Focused modernization/ upgradation, partnerships with Chinese companies and Turkish subsystems have improved PN lethality and sustainment. But its major bases—Karachi and Ormara and supporting logistics nodes —are vulnerable to pre-emptive strikes because they are within 700 kilometers of Indian missile launch locations (NIMA warning, August 31, 2025).

Moreover, relative numerical inferiority, Indian Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) and carrier/precision-strike reach, dependence on a few hubs, and sustainment limits create real vulnerabilities in a high-intensity contest. Mitigation requires a focused mix of passive defence (dispersal/hardening), improved ISR/ASW integration, force multipliers and strategic partnerships to increase survivability to raise the cost of Indian coercion. According to IISS *Military Balance 2025*, India's naval tonnage exceeds Pakistan's by a factor of 6:1, highlighting Pakistan's need for asymmetric and allied strategies. The modernization of the Indian Navy represents a strategic transformation that directly impacts Pakistan's maritime security calculus.

India enjoys a long coastline of over 7,500 kilometers with large number of major commercial and naval ports such as Mumbai, Visakhapatnam, Kochi, Chennai and port Blair. Many of its ports are well beyond effective strike range of Pakistan. Conversely, Pakistan has a shorter coastline of around 1,000 kilometers and narrow maritime depth. Pakistan's main maritime installations, especially Karachi and Ormara ports, are greatly exposed to Indian long-range missile and air attacks. This geographic lopsidedness is a structural hindrance for Pakistan in any naval confrontation, as well spread and well protected ports not only provide operational flexibility but also a strategic depth to sustain protracted naval operations.

Recent conflicts, mainly the Russia–Ukraine war, have emphasized the susceptibility of naval assets stationed in ports and repair docks. Ukraine claim of sinking Russian warships, in Novorossiysk, proved that how precision guided missiles and low cost unmanned systems can cause disproportionate damage and destruction of superior naval forces. Maritime threat perceptions, in recent years, have been redefined by easy availability of advanced UAVs and stand-off weapons. Likewise, the Pakistan's Fattah and Indian BrahMos missile attacks on each other's infrastructure during the May 2025 confrontation have further highlight the risks faced by stationary or exposed naval platforms.

These developments demonstrate the need for Pakistan to look for inaccessible dispersal sites - outside Indian intermediate and short ranges missiles, enhance mobility and diversify its basing options. Pakistan, therefore, faces a strategic imperative to offset India's growing maritime advantage by adopting tactics like dispersing its naval assets, developing hardened infrastructure, and pursuing asymmetric responses such as long-range unmanned systems, mobile missile platforms and submarines.

Analyses from regional naval think tanks have repeatedly warned that preemptive strikes by India could focus on maritime hubs of Pakistan, to paralyze operational capabilities of Pakistan Navy, at onset of conflict. Particularly vulnerable targets would be logistic depots, ships/ submarines alongside for maintenance, and Aircraft on the ground. The 1971 war, in which Karachi was

repeatedly attacked by Indian missile boats, remains a potent historical reminder of this exposure (Khan). Recent developments and past experiences strengthen the need for mobility, dispersal, and external/ allied basing options. Academic studies on maritime security identify partnerships, presence, and access as key enablers of naval power (Till).

Saudi Arabia's Maritime Posture and Potential Role

Maritime strategy of Saudi Arabia is guided by its coastlines on the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea and its dependence on safe and smooth energy outflow through the two international oil trade routes. The Royal Saudi Navy maintains two fleets – Western Fleet and Eastern Fleet. The Western Fleet is headquartered at Jeddah and the Eastern Fleet based in Jubail. Continuing modernization, under Vision 2030, is aimed at transforming the country into a self-sufficient defense producer with enhanced maritime domain awareness (Saudi Ministry of Defense, Vision 2030). Though not a major Sea power, Saudi Arabia however, owns modern airfields, port infrastructure and repair facilities, that may, theoretically, support allied naval operations.

Defense diplomacy of Riyadh prefers coalition operations, as witnessed in its involvement in the US led Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) and Red Sea security initiatives, which focus on counter-piracy and maritime security across critical sea lanes. Pakistan has historically contributed to Pak-Saudi bilateral and many multinational maritime security including CMF. Participation and operation of both countries within similar frameworks, not only create institutional familiarity but ability to integrate with broader surveillance architectures. Moreover, Saudi naval personnel trained in Pakistani institutions, Pakistan naval official on deportation to Saudi navy, and regular conduct of bilateral exercises demonstrate RSNF-PN interoperability on sea training, which can reduce friction in combined ship operations. Strategically, their share interest in the protection of sea lanes, energy transit routes, and counter-terrorism at sea may provide further opportunities for cooperative patrols and intelligence sharing, which can further augment maritime domain awareness for both navies. Pakistan could potentially benefit from Saudi logistics and refueling facilities during extended deployments (Arab News, July 16, 2024) Yet, Saudi Arabia's balancing posture toward India and Pakistan complicates overt alignment. Riyadh values its growing trade and investment ties with India and may seek to avoid being drawn into South Asian conflicts (Yadav & Yadav).

Likely Extension of SMDA into Maritime Strategic Space

Under the SMDA framework, one might investigate several operational ideas. In case of the Indo-Pak open conflict in Indian Ocean, there are three possible scenarios:

- a. Neutral Saudi Arabia:** Saudi Arabia avoids direct involvement in the conflict but offers diplomatic mediation or humanitarian and limited logistic support. Operations of the Pakistan Navy, in such case, will remain limited to national waters, without achieving any meaningful strategic depth.
- b. Covert Saudi Support:** Riyadh allows discreet and modest use of facilities for non-combat repairs, intelligence, and/ or logistics. Pakistan enjoys limited operational flexibility.
- c. Formal Treaty:** An entirely enunciated naval alliance facilitates joint patrols, forward basing, joint operations, logistic support, shelters for air, surface and subsurface units and fully integrated SMDA. Such all level integrations would considerably enhance Pakistan's deterrence and provide desired maritime strategic depth to Pakistan.

Assuming the best possible scenario, where Pak – Saudi SMDA converges into full spectrum defence agreement and Saudi Arab provides comprehensive support for Pakistan's maritime

operations against India, in future war. Pakistan therefore needs to develop a dedicated maritime strategic depth doctrine emphasizing dispersal, alliance diversification, and asymmetric capabilities. Some of the advantages Pakistan may garner from such arrangements include: -

a. Forward Basing and Strategic Dispersal of Ships, Submarines and Aircraft:

Naval dispersal is a staple of maritime strategy for major powers. For example, during World War II, allied forces dispersed naval assets across multiple theaters to avoid losses from concentrated Axis attacks. In the case under review, Saudi western seaboard ports present potential staging sites. Access to secure RSNF piers, fueling points, and limited repair yards would enable PN ships to operate from Saudi territorial waters. Instead of keeping combatants concentrated in Pakistani ports vulnerable to strikes, the PN could plan to sortie principal surface/sub-surface units to Saudi ports or to pre-staged anchorage areas under RSNF protection. Similarly, Warships undergoing repair or maintenance in Pakistan could be relocated to Saudi ports. Shifting Submarines in refit/under maintenance to Saudi ports will reduce burden of anti-air / antimissile defence of Pakistan. Submarines on operational deployment cycle can embark its fuel, ration, ammunition and personnel from Saudi ports.

Long Range Maritime Patrol (LRMP) aircraft provide crucial maritime domain awareness, Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW), over-the-horizon targeting support, and Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) for fleet and coastal defence. Stationing LRMPs at Saudi airbases beyond Indian weapons' effective reach would preserve airborne ISR and extend Pakistan's maritime reconnaissance footprint in the Arabian Sea and approaches to the Gulf. Forward basing of LRMP aircraft, such as Pakistan's P-3C Orion or Sea Sultan, to Saudi bases, would improve surveillance range into the central Arabian Sea while keeping them outside Indian strike range. Dispersal helps mitigate this risk by:

- Reducing predictability and vulnerability to pre-emptive strikes.
- Allowing naval task groups to operate from geographically diversified positions.
- Increasing survivability of key capabilities such as, LRMPs, submarines, frigates, and missile boats.

b. Utilization of Merchant Ships for Passive Monitoring.

Commercial merchant vessels, bearing Saudi flags, can be fitted with relatively low-profile intelligence collection suites, communications relay nodes, or serve as passive maritime domain awareness platforms. These arrangements will supplement LRMPs and surface ISR. Apart from the physical infrastructure, naval warfare of the modern age increasingly depends on Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) — the capacity to search, monitor, correlate, interpret, and act on maritime movements across war zone. Greater Saudi – Pakistan collaboration and teamwork could facilitate:

- Data integration on movements of shipping and potential threats.
- Joint intelligence and reconnaissance missions by the alliance maritime patrol aircraft.
- Shared surveillance data from networks of the coastal radars.

c. Prepositioning of Supplies and Logistic Support.

Effectiveness of the maritime operations largely depend on robust system of logistics — technical spares, medical supplies, food, munitions, and fuel. Logistics of Pakistan Navy were historically confined to domestic supply chains. Possibilities for across the sea logistics cooperation have been

increased by the SMDA. During conflict, these arrangements, implicit or explicit and formal may lessen the stress on already constrained wartime logistics of Pakistan, and reduce its dependency on long supply lines to home ports. Furthermore, proximity of Saudi Arabia to refineries and vital oil shipping lanes carves opportunities for Pakistan to benefit from:

- Bulk fuel access at competitive rates during crises.
- Forward logistics hubs for replenishment.
- Shared stockpiles of essential naval inputs.

d. Sea-based Sustainment and Mobile Repair Options

Mobile forward repair facilities (auxiliary repair ships, tenders) and interchangeable logistics units can reduce the need to return damaged hulls to Pakistan for repair. Under the SMDA, access to Saudi logistic yards and the possibility of joint mobile repair detachments could be explored. Pre-positioning spare parts, technical teams, and modular repair kits in Saudi logistics hubs would shorten repair timelines for afloat units.

Gains for Pakistan

A primary strategic concern for Pakistan is deterring Indian naval aggression. The Indian Navy is larger and more capable in terms of ships, submarines, and air assets. India also enjoys a wider network of port access points —at its own western and eastern seaboard including Andaman and Nicobar Islands and strategic partnerships/ basing rights in Seychelles, Mauritius, Madagascar and other countries in Indian Ocean region. **By securing deeper cooperation with Saudi Arabia, Pakistan enhances its deterrence dynamics in several ways:**

- In a high-intensity conflict with India, one of the most tangible benefits of Saudi cooperation is the potential to disperse naval assets across multiple bases rather than concentrating them within Pakistan's primary ports of Karachi and Gwadar.
- If Pakistani units can operate from or rendezvous with Saudi facilities, Indian planners must account for dispersed deployments across the Arabian Sea and potentially into the Gulf that could complicate Indian naval planning.
- The explicit backing of Saudi Arabia raises the political cost for any adversary contemplating aggressive action. India — which maintains economic ties with Riyadh — may now factor potential Saudi involvement in any conflict calculus.

Limitations

a. Geopolitical and Strategic Implications

- i. A broader Pak–Saudi naval collaboration carries deeper geopolitical consequences. Explicit arrangements of basing facilities for Pak Navy in Saudi Arabia, may risk provoking diplomatic response from India and disturbing neutrality norms of the Gulf countries. Diplomatically, neutrality of the Gulf countries, in Pak-Indo conflicts, restricts Riyadh engagement. Saudi Arabia relations with the United States and its leading role in the Gulf Cooperation Council demand a thoughtful stance. Pak–Saudi alliance in maritime domain, would usher the beginning of a new sub-architecture in Arabian Sea security, theoretically supplementing presence of China in the Indian Ocean. Such alignment, for India, could be seen as an encirclement strategy, encouraging closer cooperation with Gulf partners like the UAE.

- ii. For Riyadh, partnership with Islamabad augments its defense diversification and hedges against over-reliance on Western security providers. On the other hand, Riyadh also requires preserving GCC consensus and balancing relations with India. For Islamabad, maritime collaboration with Riyadh could partly offset naval supremacy of India but its maritime strategy needs to be integrated within a wider strategy involving Turkey and China, as Pakistan largely depends on these countries for naval weapons and technology. Trilateral defense pact between Pakistan, Saudi Arab and Turkey is on the card that will further crystalize the environment in favor of Pakistan (The Express Tribune, July 20, 2026).
- iii. China is also operating a naval base in Djibouti, thus the likely trilateral synergy among China, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan —linking Djibouti, Jeddah, and Gwadar —may re-form security geometry of the western Indian Ocean region. Such an arrangement however, could face scrutiny from the regional actors and Washington wary of growing influence of China.

b. Regional Reactions

The adoption of the SMDA faced reactions from New Delhi. India expressed hopes that Saudi Arabia would take into account “sensitivities and mutual interests” in its strategic agreements, showing concerns regarding the implications of deepening Pak- Saudi Defence ties. Likewise, the geopolitical environments of the South Asia and Middle East are tented with contending interests ranging from Indo - Pak rivalry, Sino-India conflicting narratives, regional role of Iran to Defence & security assurances of the United States. Enhancing cooperation among Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, therefore need to be managed skillfully to evade escalation or unintentional entanglements.

c. Operational Limitations

Though the strategic narrative suggests likely access to support facilities and ports of the Saudi Arabia, practical and on ground implementation, however, faces political, diplomatic and logistical restraints. Primary text of the agreement emphasizes on “Collective Defence” rather than logistic arrangements or explicit basing, which means that much depends on developing military diplomacy. Establishing basing rights for Pakistan, in Saudi Arabia including rules of engagement, legal frameworks, and formal basing rights would therefore, involve extensive coordination and might provoke diplomatic backlash. Moreover, naval infrastructure of Saudi Arabia, although expanding, but still adapted to defensive missions within the Red Sea and Gulf instead of expeditionary support.

Recommendations

- a. The study suggests that Pakistan may develop a coherent “Maritime Strategic Depth” doctrine focusing on alliance diversification, forward logistics, and survivability. The Pakistan Navy should develop its capacity for sustained operations using joint maritime domain awareness platforms and logistics agreements.
- b. For the Gulf countries, formal maritime cooperation would contribute to joint security in the Arabian Sea that will promote SLOC protection, anti-piracy operations, and counter-terrorism. A multilateral maritime architecture including Gulf States, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan, could enhance economic resilience and regional stability.
- c. For Riyadh, broadening naval engagement with Islamabad offers intelligence, defense-industrial, and training benefits. Riyadh can use this cooperation in strengthen its Red Sea security architecture and building indigenous expertise. This arrangement also offers an opportunity for Saudi Arabia to diversify its defence sector and reduce dependence on the West.

- d. Encourage other Arabian Sea and Persian Gulf littoral states like Iran, Oman, Qatar and UAE to partake in multilateral naval security debates to nurture confidence and crisis-management systems.

Conclusion

The Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement among Saudi Arabia and Pakistan marks a significant development in defence cooperation between two like-minded nations. Though the SMDA is a broader collective security agreement, yet its potential to increase Pakistan's maritime strategic depth is factual, tangible and significant. In a future high-intensity conflict scenario, against India, the ability to access external docking and repair options, extend logistics networks, disperse assets, and integrate surveillance data provides Pakistan Navy with a level of operational flexibility. Strategic advantages of the agreement depend on how both nations synchronize economic and political interests, formalize naval support arrangements, and implement cooperation on the ground, within a complexed regional architecture. The accomplishment of this project will also rest on escalation dangers, legislative systems, and deliberate navigation of regional alliances. Lastly, Maritime Strategic Depth must be understood as a robust command system, technological adaptation/ transformation, and dynamic capacity created via partnerships, instead of a set geographical idea. Future studies may investigate how such collaboration could be incorporated into larger region wide multilateral security platform in the western Indian Ocean and Arabian Sea.

Conflict of Interest

The authors showed no conflict of interest.

Funding

The authors did not mention any funding for this research.

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