

Neutrality-cum-Balancing: Understanding Pakistan's Foreign and Diplomatic Policy in the MENA Region

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Abstract

The term 'neutrality' has dominated Pakistan's foreign policy discourse vis-à-vis the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The paper argues that Pakistan's foreign and diplomatic policy in the MENA region cannot be described as consistently neutral. Rather, various governments have adopted a great degree of strategic flexibility when responding to regional crises. Ultimately, there exists an oscillation and fusion between the policies of neutrality and balancing, as the country attempts to ensure that its bilateral ties with various allies are not affected. This paper terms this approach as 'Neutrality-cum-Balancing'. With reference to the Yemen war and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)-Qatar crisis, it highlights the accuracy and validity of the strategic flexibility of such an approach.

Keywords: Neutrality, Balancing, Middle East, Diplomacy, Foreign Policy.

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Introduction

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region¹ has provided Pakistan with both challenges and opportunities throughout its turbulent 73-year history. Ranging from strategic alliances, estrangement, institutional cooperation and ‘special relationship’ statuses, Pakistan’s relations with MENA states have formed a pivotal feature of foreign and diplomatic policy since 1947. Whilst the nature of the challenges and opportunities have diversified and transformed over the decades, recent geopolitical strife in the region, and the domestic conditions in Pakistan, have facilitated new predicaments in Pakistani strategic thought vis-à-vis the MENA. This paper seeks to analyse Pakistan’s approach to contemporary regional geopolitical crises, which include the on-going conflicts in Yemen and Syria, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)-Qatar dispute and broader regional antagonism such as Saudi-Iran tensions, which have ‘posed considerable challenges for Pakistan’s foreign policy.’² Whilst the MENA region is often dubbed as a source of stability for Pakistan, characterised by reliable strategic partnerships and entrenched economic and military cooperation with the Gulf and Arab states, recent crises have tested Pakistan’s ability to remain a trusted partner while remaining committed to its national interest. Considering these contemporary quandaries, the common narrative observed and espoused within Pakistani academia, political circles and media publications is the notion of ‘neutrality’ – whereby Pakistan’s approach to the region is said to be characterised by a non-interventionist stance towards its conflicts. This ‘neutral’ policy is the central theme of this paper, which interrogates the extent to which Pakistan’s approach can be described as ‘neutral.’

Neutrality, as a theoretical concept in International Relations discourse and in its most basic format, refers to a ‘condition through which a state declares non-involvement in a conflict or war and indicates its intention

¹ MENA countries consist of Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates and Yemen.

² Ankit Panda, *Pakistan’s Approach to Navigating the Saudi-Iranian Split*, report (Report number 439, Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, 2019), 1-24, https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2019-02/pakistans-approach-to-navigating_the-saudi-iranian-split.pdf.

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to refrain from supporting or aiding either side.³ Pakistan formally adopted a neutral position through a parliamentary statute at the start of the Yemen war in 2015,⁴ initiating a misled consensus that neutrality is Pakistan's broader regional doctrine. The overwhelming emphasis on neutrality within Pakistani discourse may be misinformed, as Pakistan has conducted a great deal of normative and strategic engagement with MENA actors and their respective conflicts. This engagement has tested the limits of neutrality, as political and strategic influences have produced a vast array of policy responses ranging from neutrality, balancing and diplomatic initiatives. It is, therefore, surprising that limited attention has been attributed to dissecting what the term 'neutrality' implies, as well as its practical conduct in the midst of a complex regional order. As such, this academic enquiry seeks to occupy an intellectual void within Pakistani foreign policy analysis vis-à-vis the MENA region.

Neutrality-cum-Balancing: Argument and Structure

This paper argues that Pakistan has adopted a degree of strategic flexibility when dealing with MENA crises, resulting in the exercise of two major policy options: neutrality and balancing. Pakistan's policy cannot be described as consistently 'neutral'⁵, as external and internal political influences have shaped Pakistan's response in various contexts. As such, aside from implementing an observable policy of neutrality in some cases (such as the GCC-Qatar crisis), a policy of balancing can also be observed in other cases (such as the Yemen conflict) – whereby Pakistan has attempted to appease regional actors with whom it shares cordial relations with, whilst ensuring that bilateral relations with opposing actors are not affected in an attempt to navigate the complex regional balance of power. Hence, this paper has coined the term 'neutrality-cum-balancing' to best portray Pakistan's practical conduct in various crises. Neutrality-cum-balancing provides a fresh

³ Andrew Heywood, *Key Concepts in Politics and International Relations*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

⁴ *The National Assembly of Pakistan Gazette*, May 2015, http://www.na.gov.pk/uploads/documents/1431958789_151.pdf.

⁵ Zubeida Mustafa claims that Pakistan has succeeded in adopting a non-partisan profile. Zubeida Mustafa, "Recent Trends in Pakistan's Policy towards the Middle East," *Pakistan Horizon* 28, no. 4 (1975): 1-17.

perspective on Pakistan's MENA policy, ultimately demonstrating that there exists an oscillation and occasional fusion between conducting a balancing act and pursuing a neutral approach to crises.

It is paramount to explain which factors result in the practice of neutrality-cum-balancing. This paper argues that national interests are paramount in the decision to pursue balancing, neutrality or both, as the consequences of either policy has different and extensive implications for Pakistan. A comprehensive strategic calculus is, therefore, required as the policies have differing outcomes for bilateral ties, in turn greatly affecting Pakistan's domestic economy as well as other aspects of society. Therefore, the strategic flexibility of 'neutrality-cum-balancing' is an extension of realist self-interests, as Pakistan cautiously opts for neutrality and/or balancing based on the political context of the crisis and its wide-ranging foreign and domestic interests. As the MENA region is a vital source of economic security through trade, diaspora remittances and energy resources, as well as a catalyst for sectarian tensions within Pakistan, policy responses to regional tensions are 'determined by its own political, economic and strategic interest.'⁶ This interest includes appeasing regional actors to maximise gains and maintain a trustful partnership, as well as exercising restraint and non-interventionism to uphold ties with conflicting states. Hence, geostrategic realities, such as the regional balance of power and the nature of bilateral relations, and national interest overshadowed Pakistan's April 2015 National Assembly resolution, which committed the nation to pursuing neutrality in the Yemen conflict and subsequent regional tensions.⁷

Secondly, this paper proposes that the concept of parity (or difference) also provides a key indicator of Pakistan's approach to MENA conflicts. Where bilateral relations between Pakistan and the two conflicting actors are similar (limited parity), a policy of neutrality is more likely to be preferred in order to maintain the level of bilateralism between Pakistan and each respective actor. Therefore, Pakistan would exercise restraint from becoming involved or choosing sides in that conflict. For example, if a crisis is initiated between Actor A and Actor B, and both Actors A and B have cordial and entrenched bilateral ties with Pakistan and,

⁶ Mustafa, "Recent Trends in Pakistan's Policy towards the Middle East," 5.

⁷ *The National Assembly of Pakistan Gazette*, May 2015, http://www.na.gov.pk/uploads/documents/1431958789_151.pdf.

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therefore, reduced parity between them, the government will likely pursue a policy of neutrality to sustain ties with both Actor A and Actor B. Here, bilateralism is prioritised in order to achieve national interests as damaging bilateral ties with actors that drive Pakistan's political-economy is not desirable – even if the actors are involved in a 'moral wrong.' Historic examples include India's Cold War non-alignment, where non-intervention in Soviet Union-United States (US) conflicts was observed to maintain cordial relations with both blocs to for the sake of national interest. This paper uses the example of Pakistan's conduct towards the GCC-Qatar crisis since 2017 to validate this argument. Pakistan's swing towards neutrality is highly observable in this case due to the limited parity between Pakistan-Qatar relations and Pakistan-Saudi (and co) relations, and country's interests in maintaining close relations with both blocs for wide-ranging political, economic and military motivations. On the contrary, where a greater degree of parity is evident i.e. the relationship between Actor A and Pakistan is perceived as being greater in value and importance than the relationship between Actor B and Pakistan, a policy of balancing is likely to be preferable. This is because the influence, demands and expectations of Actor A require a response or involvement from Pakistan, whilst it also remains in the national interest to maintain ties with Actor B, despite being of lesser value. Therefore, all efforts are made to appease Actor A whilst reassuring Actor B, resulting in a strategic balancing act. This is especially desirable when the (lesser) relationship between Actor B and Pakistan holds enormous strategic value, such as territorial borders, shared security threats or opportunities for growth in bilateral issues.

This paper examines Pakistan's conduct towards the Yemen conflict to highlight this delicate balancing act between Pakistan and the two conflicting actors – Iran and Saudi Arabia. Thus, bilateralism is the core tenet of both policy options as the purpose is to preserve, maintain and potentially enhance ties between Pakistan and the conflicting states as a product of rational self-interests. In order to preserve these bilateral ties, a consistent regional doctrine of neutrality cannot be adhered to. Rather, strategic flexibility is required and indeed observed. National interest, informed by parity in relations, determines policy-making. Therefore, the concept of 'neutrality-cum-balancing' holds validity, as no uniformed regional doctrine

is observed – discrediting claims that Pakistan maintains consistent neutrality, or a perpetual balancing policy vis-à-vis the MENA region.⁸

To demonstrate these arguments, this paper first explores the concepts of neutrality and balancing in International Relations from a theoretical perspective, providing a framework to analyse the case studies. It, then, provides a comprehensive overview of Pakistan’s regional approach from a historical perspective – from independence, through the Cold War, post-Cold War and contemporary issues. To validate the theory of ‘neutrality-cum-balancing’, the case studies of the Yemen conflict and the GCC-Qatar dispute are analysed. Also, by examining Pakistan’s diplomatic initiatives during these crises, this paper also highlights the fusion between neutrality and balancing. This paper culminates with a series of recommendations to ensure Pakistan retains its strategic flexibility to remain committed to its national interest.

Definitions and Theory

Neutrality

Neutrality, as a concept within International Relations discourse, refers to a ‘condition through which a state declares non-involvement in a conflict or war and indicates its intention to refrain from supporting or aiding either side.’⁹ Therefore, in tautological terms, neutrality implies that a state should abstain from being involved in a conflict both directly and indirectly. It is the latter (indirect) involvement which contests Pakistan’s neutrality claim, as Pakistan’s indirect engagement with conflicting actors and their crises is extensive and observable in specific conflicts. However, to limit neutrality to a concept of general non-intervention would be deficient, as neutrality takes on numerous facets and varieties. Permanent or enduring neutrality such as ‘*de jure* neutrality’ cannot be applied to Pakistan due to its existential risk of war with India and hostile relations with Afghanistan. *De jure* neutral states, such as Switzerland, are bounded to neutrality by agreeing to international

⁸ For arguments analysing Pakistan’s balancing act, see, Omer Aslan, “Pakistan: Balancing between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The Shah, Ayatollahs and Kings” (paper, Al Sharq Forum, Istanbul, 2019), 1-67, <https://research.sharqforum.org/2019/09/25/pakistan-balancing-between-iran-and-saudi-arabia-the-shah-ayatollahs-and-kings-2/>.

⁹ Heywood, *Key Concepts in Politics and International Relations*, 144.

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agreements, and therefore adherents to international neutrality legislation in war and peacetime.¹⁰ Therefore, Pakistan's adherence to neutrality via international law is not possible. Other forms of neutrality include 'de facto' neutrality, where a state's neutral status is not determined by any legal status. Rather, neutrality is adopted 'without recourse to international law.'¹¹ States, such as Ireland and Sweden, follow the principles of neutrality without formally signing international treaties – yet their neutrality is recognised by the international community. Again, Pakistan's readiness for war and lack of adherence and advocacy for neutral principles in a broader sense deny it a position of *de facto* neutrality. Therefore, Pakistan's neutrality can only be applied to a narrow and specified context, advocating neutrality on a temporary basis. This form of neutrality is classified as 'ad hoc' neutrality. Here, neutrality is adopted as a choice to avoid participation in a specific conflict. Examples of this are numerous, including Iran's neutrality in the first Gulf War; Spanish, Portuguese and Afghan neutrality in World War II and numerous other states in respective conflicts. States that exercise *ad hoc* neutrality are not bound to remain neutral in other contexts, attributing a temporal and geographical aspect to this form of neutrality. It is this *ad hoc* neutrality that best describes Pakistan's approach to some contemporary disputes, as only in specific contexts has the country adopted a neutral stance. Simultaneously, even *ad hoc* neutrality cannot be observed in other areas, such as within South Asia, where Pakistan conducts its realist interests characterised by the security dilemma. Pakistani discourse has failed to comprehensively dissect neutrality, opting to utilise the term in a loose and broad manner with no academic value. This paper has aimed to rectify these shortcomings.

Realism, Neutrality and the Balance of Power

This section aims to place the concept of neutrality into the broader framework of Realist Theory in order to comprehensively grasp why states pursue neutrality, and how the concept of neutrality-cum-balancing is a

¹⁰ Efraim Karsh, *Neutrality and Small States* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998).

¹¹ Archie W. Simpson, "Realism, Small States and Neutrality," *E-International Relations*, February 5, 2018, <https://www.e-ir.info/2018/02/05/realism-small-states-and-neutrality/>.

product of realist self-interests and the balance of power. Within Realist Theory, permanent neutrality is often viewed as a betrayal of the *raison d'être* of a state – that is to pursue its self-interests to survive in an antagonistic Hobbesian international system.¹² Therefore, emphasis is placed on balancing and bandwagoning during wartime.¹³ However, neutrality can be viewed as an extension of realist self-interests. *Ad hoc* neutrality provides small and weaker states with a third option – to remain neutral in a conflict to survive. Thus, Ryszard Czarny contends that neutrality fulfils those ‘realistic functions.’¹⁴ In the Pakistani case vis-à-vis MENA crises, these realist self-interests are wide-ranging including economic security through sustained oil and gas imports from the Gulf; Gulf states’ investments in Pakistani infrastructure and aid programmes; maintaining the income generated by diaspora remittances; military co-operation; and maintaining domestic sectarian peace. Therefore, *ad hoc* neutrality provides Pakistan with a third option beyond traditional bandwagoning or balancing, contributing to the conduct of ‘neutrality-cum-balancing’ as the chosen doctrine vis-à-vis MENA. Whilst it remains beyond the scope of this paper to explore all tools of foreign policy, it interrogates neutrality and balancing as the two policy options of most significance.¹⁵

The relationship between the balance of power and the policies of neutrality and balancing are key to understanding the intellectual framework of ‘neutrality-cum-balancing.’ Balance of Power theories, originating in realist thought, claim that states, motivated by their primary desire of survival and security, pursue hard power mechanisms and external alliances to prevent other states from infringing upon their interests.¹⁶ According to prominent

¹² Hans J. Morgenthau, “The Resurrection of Neutrality in Europe,” *American Political Science Review* 33, no. 3 (1939): 473–86, doi:10.2307/1948801.

¹³ Daniel A. Austin, “Realism, Institutions, and Neutrality: Constraining Conflict through the Force of Norms,” *Commonwealth: A Journal of Political Science* 9 (1998): 37–56, <https://sites.temple.edu/commonwealth/files/2013/11/1997-1998-v9.pdf>.

¹⁴ Ryszard M. Czarny, “Neutrality in the Theory of International Relations,” in *Sweden: From Neutrality to International Solidarity* (Trnva: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 13-17.

¹⁵ Other policy options not analysed in this paper include hedging and bandwagoning.

¹⁶ Jack S. Levy, “What Do Great Powers Balance against and When,” in *Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the 21st Century*, eds. T. V. Paul, James J. Wirtz, and Michel Fortmann (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004).

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realist thinkers such as Hans Morgenthau and Morton Kaplan, neutrality and the balance of power are inherently linked, as neutrality is 'essentially a function of the balance of power.'¹⁷ The theory of neutrality and Balance of Power states that under the conditions of multipolarity, where powerful states have 'relatively equal strength'¹⁸ and capabilities are distributed in rough parity, neutrality can thrive as a tool used by smaller states. Under the conditions of unipolarity and bipolarity, neutrality is rarely a viable option as states balance against the single hegemon or bandwagon under superpower umbrellas. Hence, neutrality is 'both embedded in and conditioned by the balance of power'¹⁹ subject to and bounded by specific power configurations. Balancing between conflicting states in a multipolar order is a policy option which provides an avenue to maintain positive bilateral ties with different poles. Consequently, the concepts of neutrality and balancing must be viewed in tandem, as they are both facets of the broader balance of power.

The contemporary balance of power in the MENA is characterised by this multipolar explanation, as various states including Saudi-Arabia, Iran, Turkey, the UAE, Qatar and Israel²⁰ exist in approximate parity whilst vying for regional leadership. Because neutrality and balancing are both products of a multipolar balance of power, 'neutrality-cum-balance' becomes inherent in Pakistani foreign policy due to the country's desire to sustain cordial relations with all these states bar Israel. Pakistan attempts to navigate its way through the complex balance of power in MENA is firmly to attain its realist national interests. The current balance of power of multipolarity allows Pakistan to oscillate and fuse the policies of neutrality and balancing, as it remains a valuable ally and source of diplomatic support for the various MENA powers, just as these powers provide the former with irreplaceable economic and military partnership. Therefore, the multipolar balance of power provides

¹⁷ Morgenthau, "The Resurrection of Neutrality in Europe," 482.

¹⁸ Morton A. Kaplan and Nicholas deB. Katzenbach, *The Political Foundations of International Law* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1961).

¹⁹ Raimo Vayrynen, "Commentary," in *Between the Blocs: Problems and Prospects for Europe's Neutral and Nonaligned States*, Woodrow Wilson Center Series, eds. Joseph Kruzel and Michael H. Haltzel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 1989), 122-9.

²⁰ Ross Harrison, *Shifts in the Middle East Balance of Power: An Historical Perspective*, report (Doha: Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, 2018), <http://studies.aljazeera.net/en/reports/2018/09/shifts-middle-east-balance-power-historical-perspective-180902084750811.html>.

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Pakistan with the strategic flexibility of neutrality-cum-balancing. As a result, ‘neutrality-cum-balancing’ to preserve and sustain Pakistan’s ties to the region is logical, and observable as a tool of foreign policy.

A Historical Overview of Pakistan-MENA Relations

Independence and the Formative Years

The special relationship between Pakistan and the Arab world precedes independence. The predominantly Muslim region and the sizable Muslim population of the Indian subcontinent have shared sentimental and empathetic relations for centuries due to their common religion. Historic events such as the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and rise of the *Caliphate* movement aided Islamic-oriented politics across the Muslim world, strengthening ties between the people of the two regions. As ‘political Islam’ gathered support in the inter-war years, there was widespread support from within the MENA region for the All Pakistan Muslim League (APML) cause, especially from Turkey and Saudi Arabia. The Muslims of the subcontinent also expressed moral support for MENA causes of de-colonisation and aggression against Muslims, including Russian attacks on Iran in 1905; Western aggression towards Turkey; the Palestine conflict; British control over Egypt; and French colonial atrocities in northern Africa.²¹

Pakistan rose to prominence within the Muslim world following independence through its public diplomacy advocating religious political causes. Most significantly, Pakistan’s stance on the Palestine conflict, led passionately by Sir Muhammad Zafrullah Khan (who was elected chairman of Palestine sub-committee II),²² further heightened its reputation as a champion of Muslim struggles. Public diplomacy initiatives as well as material and political support to the independence movements of Libya, Eritrea, Somaliland, Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria also formed a major part of Pakistan’s foreign policy in the formative years. The combination of the politically unifying force of Islam, shared anti-colonial struggles and a

²¹ Khalida Qureshi, “Pakistan and the Middle East,” *Pakistan Horizon* 19, no. 2 (1966): 156-166.

²² *Ibid.*

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common ethnic, cultural and historical heritage²³ consolidated inter-societal solidarity and political relations between Pakistani and Muslim states following independence.

Cold War Balancing and Bandwagoning

The heat of the Cold War impacted the MENA, as it divided the states into two conflicting camps - those under the US bandwagon such as the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) states, also known as the Baghdad Pact, and the Arab nationalist states which naturally oriented towards closer relations with the Soviet Union due to their anti-western/colonial socialist tendencies. The Arab nationalist camp was spearheaded by the charismatic Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser, and supported by other Arab republics such as Syria and North Yemen.

Pakistan's Cold War policy was conducted as a response to its own security predicaments. To increase its military capacity vis-à-vis India and prevent any future Soviet incursion into South Asia, it allied with the US. The Mutual Defence Assistance Agreement of 1954 cemented close defence ties with the US, followed by Pakistan joining CENTO alongside Turkey, Iran and Iraq. Hence, the divided Middle East during the Cold War can be classified into two geographical tiers: the non-Arab northern tier states which formed CENTO and the Southern tier Arab states.²⁴ Pakistan enjoyed very cordial relations with the northern tier states, characterised by close economic relations and a formal military alliance. Economic relations became formalised after the inception of the Regional Cooperation for Development (RCD) in 1964, which aimed to drive socioeconomic development in Iran, Pakistan and Turkey, though without much success. A product of these formalised treaties with Iran and Turkey allowed Pakistan to foster support for its Kashmir cause. During the 1965 and 1971 wars, both Iran and Turkey provided Pakistan with 'material and logistic support',²⁵ whilst Pakistan extended moral and diplomatic support to Turkey on the Cyprus issue.

²³ Bruno De Cordier, "The Interaction between Pakistan and the Countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council: 'Sub-Imperialism by Complementarity'?" *Journal of Conflict Transformation & Security* 5, no. 1 (April 2016): 7-30, <http://cesran.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/JCTS-8-A-1.pdf>.

²⁴ Mustafa, "Recent Trends in Pakistan's Policy towards the Middle East," 2.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

Although Pakistan enjoyed close relations with its CENTO partners, it alienated the Arab republics. Most notably, the Pakistan-Egypt relations ‘bordered almost on the hostile’²⁶ until Nasser’s death, as Nasser espoused a ‘no pacts’ policy in the region. As a result, Nasser waged a ruthless diplomatic war against CENTO, specifically branding the US-Pakistan alliance as a ‘manoeuvre to split up Arab nations.’²⁷ From the Egyptian perspective, Pakistan was a backwards state, as it sided with the ‘reactionary... monarchies, non-Arabs and the pro-western groups.’²⁸ Egyptian-Pakistan hostility was also a product of a greater political rivalry – the bid to become the leader of the Muslim world. As Pakistan ‘gained prestige in the Arab world’²⁹, Egyptians believed that Islamabad aimed to challenge its influence and leadership amongst the Muslims – though in reality this holds limited validity. Overall, relations continued to crumble between Pakistan and the Egyptians over the Suez crisis, Egyptian support for India over Kashmir and Pakistan’s involvement in the North Yemeni civil war until 1970. It was not until Pakistan’s estrangement with the US after the 1965 Indo-Pak war; breakup of the United Arab Republic; death of Nasser; and reignited Arab unity and Muslim solidarity following the 1967 Arab-Israeli war when the Pakistan-Egyptian rapprochement began. Most importantly, the rapprochement between the divided Arab states following the end of the 1967 and Yemen wars allowed Pakistan to pursue a more independent foreign policy in the region, not based on the Cold War or nationalist-monarchy divide. This contributed towards greater inter-Islamic unity, such as the inauguration of the Organisation of Islamic countries (OIC) in 1969. The closer relationship between MENA states and Pakistan was evident following the secession of Bangladesh in 1971, as various states including Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey and the UAE did not recognise Bangladesh until Pakistan formally did, while a delegation of Muslim states ranging from Morocco to Malaysia aided a ‘smooth recognition’³⁰ of Bangladesh by Pakistan before the 1974 OIC Summit in Lahore. Overall, Pakistan’s MENA foreign policy during the early and mid-Cold War years was to bandwagon under the US to enhance its security; frame formal alliances with likeminded states such as Iran and Turkey; and maintain its

²⁶ Qureshi, “Pakistan and the Middle East,” 164.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 161.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 162.

³⁰ Mustafa, “Recent Trends in Pakistan’s Policy towards the Middle East,” 7.

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close links with the conservative monarchies, especially Saudi Arabia. The mid- and late Cold War saw drastic change in political landscapes, contributing towards positive shifts in Pakistan's relations with all MENA states.

Pakistan, Iranian Revolution and Afghan War – Start of the Pakistan-Iran-Saudi Nexus

1979 would be a vital turning point in the balance of power of the Middle East and South Asia, as new geopolitical rivalries emerged in both regions. Both the Iranian Revolution and the Afghan-Soviet war would have lasting implications on Pakistan's relationship with Iran and Saudi Arabia – initiating the discourse on Pakistan's policy today. The Iranian Revolution instigated sectarian strife between the two states and the region more broadly, as the Shia revolution was then used as a tool of foreign policy by Iran in the following decades. Iran has long dominated Pakistani political thought due to its shared borders and historically warm relations with the Shah during the Cold War. Iran even viewed Pakistani security as an extension of its own, as its internal Pakhtun and Balochi problems directly affected Iran's security.³¹

At the same time, Pakistan's relations with Saudi Arabia continued to grow exponentially, with enhanced military and economic cooperation. The Afghan war nurtured the alliance further, resulting in a mass flow of money, arms and trade between Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the US. Although the Iranian revolution altered the balance between Iran and Saudi Arabia, Pakistan's policy vis-à-vis the two rivals during the late Cold War remained one of balancing – as it 'took Saudi money to bankroll the Afghan *Jihad*'³² whilst also paying lip service to the new revolutionary regime in Iran. The legacy of the Afghan War and Iranian Revolution hold great significance today, as Pakistan still aims to navigate the split between its 'special ally' Saudi Arabia and neighbouring Iran.

³¹ Mustafa, "Recent Trends in Pakistan's Policy towards the Middle East," 9.

³² Aslan, "Pakistan: Balancing between Iran and Saudi Arabia," 4.

Contemporary Conflicts

The post-Cold War era echoed and exacerbated the regional geopolitical rivalries that preceded it. As tensions with Iran worsened due to supporting rivalling factions in the Afghan Civil Wars, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia continued their cooperation on Afghan affairs and broader economic and military matters. This cooperation reached new heights when Pakistan conducted its nuclear tests in 1998, cementing the ‘special relationship’ even further. The US era of unipolarity following the Cold War and 9/11 radically transformed regional politics through military interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria and contemporary antagonism with Iran.

However, the era of US hegemony has been deteriorating, as multiple actors both regionally and internationally are conducting unilateral foreign policies suited to their interests. The multifaceted wars in Syria and Yemen evidently prove this, as various actors are involved for a plethora of interests. Most prominently, the Iran-Saudi rivalry has reached new heights within contemporary disputes with both states vying for regional leadership and influence – especially in the Syrian and Yemen proxy theatres. Apart from the Saudi-Iranian split, other regional tensions have produced foreign policy quandaries for Pakistan such as the recent Qatari blockade; widespread sectarian conflicts; and political crises stretching from the Maghreb to Arabia since the Arab Spring.

Lessons from History

Pakistan’s relations with the MENA countries have been predominantly positive since independence, despite sporadic hostility. However, foreign policy analysis into these historical relations demonstrates some fundamental points.

First, it would be misnomer to ascribe the term ‘non-partisan’³³, or that that ‘Pakistan has always followed a policy of neutrality *vis-à-vis* conflicts between Muslim states’³⁴ as scholars have done so. Historical enquiry proves that Pakistan pursued a policy of bandwagoning and

³³ Mustafa, “Recent Trends in Pakistan’s Policy towards the Middle East,” 4.

³⁴ Kashif Mumtaz, “The Middle East in Flux: How Should Pakistan Respond?” *Strategic Studies* 35, no. 2 (2015): 136-156, <http://issi.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Kashif-35-No.2.pdf>.

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balancing throughout its history towards MENA states and conflicts – as shown by its conduct in the Cold War pacts and the early Iranian-Saudi splits. It would also be misnomer to state that Pakistan has always balanced its interests and relations in the region. Whilst intensive historical enquiry is beyond the scope of this paper, it provides valuable insight into where the concepts of Pakistan's neutrality and balancing have emerged from. In the era of regional, and increasingly global multipolarity, neutrality has become a new policy option for Pakistan to respond to contemporary crises. The changes in the balance of power have constructed a complex strategic environment where Pakistan must manoeuvre responsibly to ensure it remains committed to its national interest, rather than adopting a uniformed regional doctrine of neutrality, balancing or bandwagoning.

Case Study 1: Saudi-Iranian Split and the Yemen War 2015 - Present

When the Yemen civil war erupted in 2015, various regional actors entered the military conflict. Most prominently, the Saudi-led coalition comprising of nine states initiated a series of air strikes in order to restore the former Yemeni government led by Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi. The Yemen conflict is largely viewed as an extension to the Saudi-Iranian proxy war, as both powers support opposing factions. To further enhance the coalition's efforts, Saudi officials requested Pakistan's support to contribute towards to coalition through fighter jets, naval forces and ground troops³⁵, initiating a large-scale national debate within the country.

The Pak-Saudi Melian Dialogue: Attempted Neutrality

There exists a plethora of historical precedent to suggest that Pakistan would aid Saudi Arabia's military effort. Even within the Yemeni theatre, Pakistan Air Force pilots flew Royal Saudi Air Force planes to repel South Yemeni attacks on Saudi territory in the 1969 Yemen wars.³⁶ Beyond Yemen, Pakistani troops were stationed in Saudi Arabia during the first Iraq war and it has remained a matter of normality for Pakistani troops to be stationed

³⁵ Mumtaz, "The Middle East in Flux," 140.

³⁶ Panda, *Pakistan's Approach to Navigating the Saudi-Iranian Split*, 4.

there for training purposes and to defend Saudi territorial integrity since the establishment of defence ties between the two nations. Therefore, according to Saudi strategic thought, Pakistani support was almost guaranteed – especially as Saudi finances have bankrolled the Pakistani economy through bailouts and continued investments.

In response to the Saudi request, Pakistan conducted a special joint session of Parliament which unanimously adopted the resolution that the country should not join the Yemen war, as ‘Pakistan should maintain neutrality in the Yemen conflict’³⁷ to play a constructive role in regional peace. The overwhelming support for the resolution was adhered to, and no Pakistani troops or equipment were sent for combat in Yemen. The motives for the parliamentary consensus were two-fold. First, it was not within the national interest to commit troops to Yemen, as this would have overbearing costs on the economy and military supplies needed for domestic security. Secondly, the effects on Pakistan-Iran relations would be unknown or likely to be damaging – with possible exacerbation of domestic sectarian tensions. However, despite the legislative adoption of a ‘neutral’ position, Pakistan’s conduct towards this MENA crisis is more complex. The neutral position has prevented any military involvement in the Yemen war, but this has not prevented any indirect involvement in Yemen through aiding Saudi security and paying diplomatic lip service to both Saudi Arabia and Iran – effectively following the ‘neutrality-cum-balancing’ approach.

Ancient Greek philosopher Thucydides articulated an immensely influential extract in his seminal accounts of the ‘History of the Peloponnesian War’ titled the ‘Melian Dialogue’. Here, the small, autonomous island of Melos opted to remain neutral in the war between Athens and Sparta. However, due to the assumptions of realist political thought, Athens rejected the Melian plea to remain neutral and invaded the island. Whilst the outcome of the Melian dialogue cannot be attributed to the Pak-Saudi dialogue, the Pakistani attempt to remain neutral was thwarted by the Saudi expectations and influence over Pakistan. The outcome in the Pak-Saudi dialogue is a clandestine shift away from the neutral position the National Assembly adopted to a position of appeasing Saudi demands and balancing bilateral ties with both Saudi Arabia and Iran.

³⁷ *The National Assembly of Pakistan Gazette*, May 2015,
http://www.na.gov.pk/uploads/documents/1431958789_151.pdf.

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Appeasing Saudi Demands

As neutrality implies the absence of one state aiding another, this cannot be observed in Pakistan's 'neutral' approach to the Yemen war. Rather, to preserve Pak-Saudi relations, a series of assurances and commitments have been agreed indirectly aiding Riyadh in Yemen. First, Pakistan agreed to send more troops to be stationed in Saudi Arabia for 'border security' measures,³⁸ insisting that these troops would aid already stationed troops to defend holy sites and conduct military training and exercise as normal – contrary to speculation that these troops would aid the Yemeni war. Second, the Pakistani leadership has remained committed to providing diplomatic and moral support to the Saudi cause. Most notably, former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif stated 'Pakistan does not abandon friends and strategic partners'³⁹ and that 'any threat to Saudi Arabia will evoke strong reaction from Pakistan.'⁴⁰ Pakistan has expressed its utmost concerns for Saudi territorial integrity, which indirectly has placed them firmly amongst those who defend Saudi sovereignty. To express this further, former Defence Minister Khawaja Asif also supported Saudi interpretation of the ground realities in Yemen, branding the Hadi government as 'legitimate' and the Houthis as 'non-state actors.'⁴¹ From an ideological perspective it, therefore, seems as though the Pakistan's leadership has supported and advocated the Saudi cause in order to appease their valuable partners. Third, Pakistan's decision to join the 'Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC)', a Saudi-led coalition, sparked further controversy. The Coalition has been branded as a Sunni military alliance, as it excludes Iran and Iraq,⁴² despite being mandated to consolidate Muslim cooperation on counterterrorism. To further undermine Pakistan's neutral position, former Pakistani Chief of Army Staff (COAS) General Raheel Sharif was appointed to lead the IMCTC. The covert support for Saudi territorial integrity and diplomatic support for the Saudi aims in Yemen, as well as joining the IMCTC, have

³⁸ Panda, *Pakistan's Approach to Navigating the Saudi-Iranian Split*, 14.

³⁹ Mateen Haider, "Pakistan Does Not Abandon Friends and Strategic Partners: PM Nawaz," *Dawn*, April 13, 2015, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1175691>.

⁴⁰ Irfan Haider, "Threat to S Arabia Will Evoke Strong Reaction from Pakistan: Nawaz," *Dawn*, March 27, 2015, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1172016>.

⁴¹ Asad Hashim, "Pakistan Debates Military Involvement in Yemen," *Al Jazeera*, April 6, 2015, www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/04/pakistan-debates-military-involvement-yemen-150406163128463.html.

⁴² Panda, *Pakistan's Approach to Navigating the Saudi-Iranian Split*, 14.

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undermined the parliamentary resolution prescribing complete neutrality. Pakistan should therefore be labelled a 'non-belligerent' rather than 'neutral' in the Yemen conflict, as even *ad hoc* neutrality has not been adhered to. Non-belligerent actors may support a faction in a conflict, but do not take part directly through military means. Similarly, Pakistan has supported notions of Syrian sovereignty, but remained a non-belligerent in the Syrian war. Overall, Pakistan's attitude to towards the Yemen conflict cannot be termed as neutral. Rather, Pakistan has aimed to balance its relations with the Saudis and its progressing relations with Iran by fusing notions of neutrality and balancing.

Balancing Iran and Saudi Arabia

Pakistan's balancing act between Iran and Saudi Arabia has long existed following the Iranian Revolution. Since then, the Iranians and their Saudi counterparts have indulged in proxy conflicts in various theatres to enhance their influence in the region. To understand why Pakistan has pursued this balancing act into the contemporary Yemen war, comprehension of the historic relations Pakistan has with these two countries, is paramount.

Historically, Pakistan has entrenched cooperation with Saudi Arabia in matters of defence, economics and societal relations. Military ties were initiated by 1967, where Pakistani military advisors aided Saudi military expansion and modernisation. It was not until the early 70s when Pakistan conducted large-scale training of Saudi troops, alongside other states. Within this decade, about 24 per cent of Saudi aid budget was allocated to Pakistan for industrial infrastructure development.⁴³The Afghan war entrenched the alliance even further, as both shared the same political vision for the Afghan-Soviet war at the behest of the US. The post-Cold War era ushered a new age of Pak-Saudi relations, where economic and military cooperation reached new heights. Pakistan has aided Saudi security during the Iraq war, while Saudi Arabia has continued to fund developmental programmes in Pakistan and provide bailout packages in times of economic hardship.

Pakistan's relations with Iran have remained far more complex, with periods of concentrated cooperation followed by periods of disengagement. The two states have conducted bilateral relations as a matter of force due to their shared border, which can be categorised into two distinct stages: the 1947-

⁴³ Aslan, "Pakistan: Balancing between Iran and Saudi Arabia," 17.

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79 and the post revolution 1979-present phase. Pakistan's Cold War relations with Iran remained cordial through formalised military and economic alliances, as well as the Shah's interest in ensuring Pakistan's security as an extension of Iran's. Despite the reoccurring Baloch issue, Pakistan and Iran maintained robust ties throughout the Shah's rule. The Revolution altered the dynamic between Pakistan and Iran, where the former now saw Iran as a potential threat to its own sectarian peace – especially as Ayatollah Khomeini utilised the Shia card to export his ideals abroad. This era saw the downfall of the American-backed northern tier alliance that dominated Cold War alliance structures in the MENA. Therefore, Pakistan became weary of Iran and did not seek further hostility. For example, during the hostage crisis of 1979-81, Pakistan did not leverage Iran as per American requests to prevent Pakistani-Iranian resentment. During the Iran-Iraq war, President Zia even showed signs of tilting towards Iran to keep it as a friendly neighbour, but not enough to antagonise Saudi Arabia.

However, it is the post- Cold War era which saw the worsening of Iran-Pakistan relations, as both states supported opposing factions of the Afghan war, as well as Pakistan siding with the US on the Global War on Terror despite never formally supporting the US declaration of the 'Axis of Evil'.

A continuous thorn in Pak-Iran relations remains the Balochistan problem. Iran has remained dissatisfied with Pakistan's attempts to rid Balochistan of terror outfits that pose a threat to Tehran, such as *Jundallah*, which has resulted in border hostilities between both armed forces. However, recent years have seen a progression of Pak-Iran ties due to the finalisation of the Iranian nuclear deal, with trade statistics showing increasing bilateral exchange.⁴⁴ Overall, Pakistan has long been concerned about its relationship with Iran and has remained committed to ensuring that umbrage should remain minimal. Hostility with Iran at this crucial juncture in Pakistani politics and security would be vastly damaging for economic growth. As such, Pakistan must balance the Saudi-Iranian split carefully.

As Pakistan committed itself to indirectly aiding the Saudi cause in the Yemen war ideologically and materially, the Iranian leadership expressed major concern towards this development. In April 2015, Iranian Foreign

⁴⁴ Islamic Republic News Agency, "49% Rise in Iran-Pakistan Trade in Past Nine Months," *Iran Daily*, January 26, 2018, <http://www.irandailyonline.ir/News/208799.html>.

Minister Jawad Zarif insisted Pakistan reject any Saudi appeals to join the coalition in Yemen, as this would exacerbate the Iranian belief that the ‘Sunni states’ are conspiring to isolate Shia Iran.⁴⁵ As a result, Pakistan initiated a delicate balancing act to appease both states. Vis-à-vis Iran, Pakistan ‘neutralised to appease’ – ensuring that the proclaimed policy of neutrality would be enough to appease and satisfy the Iranians. After all, Pakistan did not join the Saudi coalition to fight in Yemen and has done everything in its diplomatic power to ensure that joining the Islamic military coalition was not to target Iran.⁴⁶ Through diplomatic initiatives, Pakistan has been able to renew trust with the Iranians. For example, during its inaugural summit, Raheel Sharif insisted that the IMCTC is ‘not against any country or any sect.’⁴⁷ Within Pakistan, many public diplomatic measures were taken to convey Pakistan’s approach towards the IMCTC – emphasising that the organisation is a coalition of willing rather than a formal alliance. To Iranian relief, Saudi Arabia was unable to influence Pakistan’s decision to withdraw its ambassador to Syria as a protest against the Iranian-backed Assad government – rejecting the claim of Saudi suzerainty over Pakistan.

More tactfully, Pakistan’s continued use of empathetic diplomacy⁴⁸ and solidarity with both Saudi Arabia and Iran has had profound effects on how both these countries perceive Islamabad. The unwavering diplomatic support Pakistan has given Saudi Arabia is also accompanied by empathetic responses to misfortunes in Iran – such as terror attacks, humanitarian problems and respect for sovereignty. As a result, Pakistan is not viewed as an uncooperative or unsympathetic nation, contributing greatly to the sustained bilateral ties. Additionally, Pakistan’s unified civil and military attempts at shuttle diplomacy following the Nimr Al-Nimr crisis provided clear evidence that it favours diplomatic channels of communicating its desire for a Saudi-Iranian rapprochement and thaw in tensions. Therefore, Islamabad has conducted wide-ranging diplomatic initiatives, both publicly and privately, to manage the perceptions of Saudi Arabia and Iran, preventing alienation of any side. The continued increase in trade between Iran and Pakistan also aids the balancing act, as the bilateral relations between Pakistan and Iran and Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have been preserved in their parity vis-à-vis each other. The Pak-Saudi relationship remains strong and

⁴⁵ Aslan, “Pakistan: Balancing between Iran and Saudi Arabia,” 39.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 5

⁴⁷ Panda, *Pakistan’s Approach to Navigating the Saudi-Iranian Split*, 15.

⁴⁸ Todd H. Hall, *Emotional Diplomacy: Official Emotion on the International Stage* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2015).

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investment into Pakistan has continued.⁴⁹ Ultimately, Pakistan's attempts to use its neutral official policy and diplomatic channels to balance Saudi-Iran tensions prove the oscillation and fusion of neutrality and balancing.

Case Study 2: The Qatar Blockade

Pakistan's response to the Qatar blockade provides a different outlook towards crisis compared to the Yemen war.⁵⁰ Although Prime Ministers Nawaz Sharif and Imran Khan espoused the common narrative of remaining neutral in the public sphere,⁵¹ analysis into the (lack of) direct and indirect involvement in the dispute shows more consistency with the concept of *ad hoc* neutrality. Hence, this crisis has seen Pakistan revert to a neutral stance after the Yemen balancing act, as it has no interest in leveraging Qatar into any preferred policy option.⁵² The GCC states accused Qatar of sponsoring terror outfits such as the Muslim Brotherhood and contributing to regional instability, citing Qatari-Iran relations as a special cause of concern. The Anti-Terror Quartet (ATQ) states which comprises of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Bahrain and UAE organised anti-Qatar protests on the international stage. This dispute provided Pakistan with another arena to showcase its support for its Gulf partners, especially after the disappointment of rejecting the Saudi invitation to join the Yemen coalition. However, there is an observable emphasis on remaining neutral to ensure the Pakistan-Qatar ties remain strong – a product of national interest. Pakistan's ability to revert to neutrality whilst balancing in the Yemen arena highlights the strategic flexibility the country has adopted.

⁴⁹ "Saudi Arabia Signs \$20bn in Deals with Pakistan," *BBC News*, February 18, 2019, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-47274672>.

⁵⁰ In May 2017, an air, land and sea blockade was imposed on Qatar by Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain and Egypt, claiming it supported 'terrorism' and was too close to Iran.

⁵¹ Kamal Alam, "Have Imran Khan and the Army Fixed Pakistan's Lopsided Middle East Policy?" *TRT World*, February 1, 2019, <https://www.trtworld.com/opinion/have-imran-khan-and-the-army-fixed-pakistan-s-lopsided-middle-east-policy-23796>.

⁵² Sulaiman Wasty, *Pakistan And Qatar: Constraints and Dilemmas* (New York, NY: IndraStra Global, 2017), <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-53896-5>.

Pakistan-Qatar Ties

Pakistan's ties to Qatar resemble those of other MENA states – with a sizable Pakistani workforce providing remittances, security cooperation and vast economic relations ranging from goods to gas. The focal point of the ties is centred around the import of Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG), of which Qatar is the world's largest producer and exporter. In 2015, the two states finalised a long-awaited USD 16 billion LNG deal.⁵³ Apart from oil and gas, the visit to Qatar by Prime Minister Imran Khan saw the completion of a USD 3 billion package through direct investments and injections into Pakistan's economy, resembling the deal Pakistan agreed with Saudi Arabia and the UAE in the same year.⁵⁴ While the four Arab states cut all trade and diplomatic ties, Pakistan's trade with Qatar has grown over 230 per cent since the blockade⁵⁵ – creating new opportunities to enhance economic relations only possible if the former continues its policy of neutrality in this dispute.

Neutral Steps Taken

Pakistan, like various other Saudi allies within the Muslim world, adopted an independent and neutral stance on the Qatar blockade. Instead of balancing or bandwagoning under the Saudi influence, states such as Pakistan, Turkey, Oman, Malaysia have emphasised the maintenance of strong bilateral ties with both Saudi Arabia and Qatar. The GCC-Qatar crisis emerged at a vital time in Pakistan's political and military transition as the military leadership changed hands from Raheel Sharif to General Qamar Bajwa, and the 2018 General Election saw Imran Khan become the Prime Minister. Both COAS and the new Prime Minister have shown a

⁵³ Aamir Ilyas Rana, "Pakistan, Qatar Sign \$16 Billion LNG Deal," *Express Tribune*, February 10, 2016, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1044645/game-changer-pakistan-qatar-sign-16-billion-lng-deal/>.

⁵⁴ "Qatar Will Invest \$3 Billion in Pakistan, State News Agency Says," *Reuters*, June 24, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-qatar-pakistan/qatar-will-invest-3-billion-in-pakistan-state-news-agency-says-idUSKCN1TP0T1>.

⁵⁵ Natasha Turak, "Qatar Trade Surplus Hit \$52 Billion Last Year, Minister Says," *CNBC*, March 10, 2019, <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/03/10/qatars-trade-surplus-hit-52-billion-last-year-minister-says.html>.

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commitment to establishing and maintaining entrenched strategic ties to the Gulf based on Pakistan's national interests in an increasingly multipolar region. At the zenith of the Gulf crisis, COAS Bajwa 'assured Qatar that Pakistan would stand with all the Gulf countries without taking sides'⁵⁶ during a tour of Qatar, Egypt and Jordan. He also became the first COAS to visit Iran in three decades. Imran Khan took similar steps, whilst sustaining the narrative of neutrality.

Another means to test Pakistan's neutral stance within the GCC-Qatar dispute is its diplomatic initiatives. The Yemen war saw the appeasement of Saudi and Iranian interests, forming a balancing act rather than a policy of *ad hoc* neutrality. The Qatar blockade, however, has seen Pakistan's attempts at shuttle diplomacy – albeit with limited success. Public statements by former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif focussed on diplomatic mediation as a preference.⁵⁷ The National Assembly of Pakistan adopted a neutral stance, stating that the House prefers mediation through dialogue⁵⁸ to thaw GCC tensions with Qatar. As Pakistan remains a crucial component of the Saudi military strategy, Pakistan is in a position to influence Saudi policy on Qatar or attempt to mediate. It remains within Pakistan's interest to seek an end to the GCC-Qatar crisis, as both Saudi Arabia and Qatar have shared interests in the sustainable development of Pakistan. 'Neutrality-cum-balancing' provides Pakistan with the license to pursue neutrality in this specific crisis. Whilst the crisis is on-going, there remains little evidence to suggest that Pakistan would change its course of action – especially as domestic security improves, and the domestic economy continues to struggle.

⁵⁶ Alam, "Have Imran Khan and the Army Fixed Pakistan's Lopsided Middle East Policy?"

⁵⁷ Shamil Shams, "Pakistan Faces a Diplomatic Conundrum over the Gulf Crisis," *Deutsche Welle*, June 12, 2017, <https://www.dw.com/en/pakistan-faces-a-diplomatic-conundrum-over-the-gulf-crisis/a-39209645>.

⁵⁸ Asad Hashim, "On Qatar, Pakistan Walks a Diplomatic Tightrope," *Al Jazeera*, June 9, 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/06/qatar-pakistan-walks-diplomatic-tightrope-170609071856229.html>.

Prospects, Emerging Threats and Recommendations

In order to remain committed to its national interest, Pakistan must continue to steer its MENA policy to ensure bilateral relations are sustained and enhanced. Neutrality-cum-balancing must remain the preferred option as only a flexible strategy can ensure maximum gains for Pakistan. This paper recommends the following policy options going forward:

The Yemen War and broader Saudi-Iranian Conflict

Pakistan must continue its delicate balancing act through appeasing Saudi demands and sustaining ties with Iran. Most importantly, the Yemen war has intensified and is threatening to spill over into Saudi territory. Recently, Houthi drone attacks (allegedly at the behest of Iran) have targeted Saudi airports and oil fields, threatening to strike the very core of Saudi Arabia. It is in this emerging context that Pakistan must remain committed to the parliamentary resolution it adopted in 2015 and reject any call for Pakistani troops to be utilised in Yemen. At the same time, Pakistan cannot ignore the Iranian demands for closer economic cooperation in the realms of border security and economic cooperation on natural resources and transport links. Indeed, these projects would aid Pakistan's bleak economic condition. More broadly, Pakistan must also continue to ensure its diplomatic mission in Tehran reassures Iranians that Islamabad's conduct in the region does not seek to damage ties with Iran. Thus, every request by Iran or Saudi Arabia must be assessed independently to ensure bilateral ties remain intact and actions contribute to Pakistan's national interest.

The Qatar Crisis

As the Qatar crisis continues into its third year, Pakistan should continue its consistent policy of non-intervention and neutrality. The crisis has remained stagnant, and Pakistan's conduct over the last two years has not antagonised nor damaged its relations with Saudi Arabia and other GCC states. Strategically, the blockade has provided an opportunity for Pakistan to increase its exports to Qatar, and more emphasis must be placed on expanding these economic ties. Every possible attempt at mediating through

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diplomacy should be adopted by Pakistan's government, as peace in the Gulf positively affects its economic security.

Broader Middle East

Pakistan must attempt to diversify its partners in the region beyond its traditional allies. Economic agreements with emerging economies such as Turkey should be a priority to tackle economic woes and expanding trade and cultural relations with other Arab and North African states. To ensure these relations can be established and enhanced, Pakistan should utilise its soft power as a major Muslim country with extensive Islamic traditions in arts, tourism and culture, to play a constructive role in peaceful political transitions and encourage inter-state peace.

Nuclear Dimension

The breakdown of the Iranian nuclear deal poses the biggest threat to the regional balance of power. As the US has withdrawn from the nuclear deal, Iran's commitment to sustaining its enrichment programme will no doubt reignite the threat of an arms race between Iran and Saudi Arabia. If Iran succeeds in developing nuclear weapons, there is a high probability that Saudi Arabia will seek to develop its own. Due to the extensive history of nuclear cooperation between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, Pakistan may be expected to provide its nuclear know-how and transfer technology to Riyadh. This may have detrimental repercussions on Pakistan's ability to remain neutral. In this regard, Pakistan's global image will be negatively affected as it may be branded as a 'rogue nuclear state' engaging in the proliferation of nuclear weapons, cementing its position as a nuclear outcast and blocking any potential future concessions given by the global nuclear community. Furthermore, the collapse of the nuclear deal will also adversely affect the economic potential between Pakistan and Iran, due to international sanctions on the Iranian regime. A nuclear arms race will, no doubt, drastically affect the Pakistan-Iran-Saudi balance. Therefore, Pakistan must work towards establishing a nuclear free zone in the region and use diplomatic channels to encourage international support for the existing Iranian nuclear deal. If it is unable to do so, Pakistan will have to

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establish civil-military consensus to refrain from cooperating in the production of a potential Saudi bomb.

Conclusion

According to James Dorsey, ‘of all Muslim nations, Pakistan is probably in the most difficult position’⁵⁹ regarding contemporary conflicts in the Muslim world. Pakistan’s relations, with Saudi Arabia, Iran and Qatar, place it in an uncomfortable position of being questioned as to whose side it is on. Whilst diplomatically, Pakistan ensures all its partners hear what they want to hear, the public narrative is one of being neutral. This disparity between the public and private highlights the most fundamental argument of this paper – no uniform nor consistent regional doctrine has been adopted by Pakistan. Rather than pursuing a consistent policy of neutrality or balancing, as many academics and policy-makers believe, Pakistan has insisted on flexing various tools of statecraft depending on the crisis at hand. This has resulted in Pakistan conducting a balancing act in the Yemen war and broader Saudi-Iranian dispute, and a policy of neutrality in the GCC-Qatar crisis since 2017. Policy options are determined by the parity in bilateral ties between Pakistan and the respective actors - in turn promoting national self-interest - an approach of ‘neutrality-cum-balancing.’ ■

⁵⁹ Hashim, “On Qatar, Pakistan Walks a Diplomatic Tightrope.”