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INTRA-ALLIANCE POLITICS AND ALLIANCE SECURITY DILEMMA: MAKING SENSE OF SAUDI ARABIA'S ALLIANCE FORMATION WITH PAKISTAN

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the strategic rationale behind Saudi Arabia's decision to form a formal alliance with Pakistan in September 2025, despite its longstanding security alignment with the United States. The main argument is that the increasing intensity of the alliance security dilemma in Riyadh–Washington relations—manifested through fears of abandonment and entrapment—motivated Saudi Arabia to pursue additional alliances. Employing Snyder's alliance security dilemma approach, the study systematically investigates three independent variables: alliance commitment, alliance dependence, and alliance interest convergence, enabling a nuanced understanding of the kingdom's alliance calculus. The case study reveals that the informal nature of the U.S.–Saudi alliance, the structural asymmetry favoring U.S. security provision, and the post-2023 divergence in threat perceptions—particularly Israel's expansionist policies—heightened Saudi security anxieties, prompting alliance diversification through a formal, symmetric alliance with Pakistan, which mitigates uncertainty, preserves strategic autonomy, and reinforces regional deterrence capacity.

Keywords

Alliance Politics, Alliance Security Dilemma, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and the US.

Resumo

Este estudo tem como objetivo analisar a lógica estratégica subjacente à decisão da Arábia Saudita de formar uma aliança formal com o Paquistão em setembro de 2025, apesar do seu alinhamento de longa data em matéria de segurança com os Estados Unidos. O argumento principal é que a crescente intensidade do dilema de segurança da aliança nas relações entre Riade e Washington — que se manifesta através de receios de abandono e de ficar encurralado — motivou a Arábia Saudita a procurar alianças adicionais. Recorrendo à abordagem do dilema de segurança das alianças de Snyder, o estudo investiga sistematicamente três variáveis independentes: o compromisso com a aliança, a dependência da aliança e a convergência de interesses da aliança, permitindo uma compreensão matizada do cálculo de alianças do reino. O estudo de caso revela que a natureza informal da aliança EUA-Arábia Saudita, a assimetria estrutural a favor da garantia de segurança por parte dos EUA e a divergência pós-2023 nas

perceções de ameaça — em particular as políticas expansionistas de Israel — intensificaram as ansiedades de segurança sauditas, levando à diversificação das alianças através de uma aliança formal e simétrica com o Paquistão, que atenua a incerteza, preserva a autonomia estratégica e reforça a capacidade de dissuasão regional.

Palavras-chave

Política de alianças, Dilema de segurança das alianças, Arábia Saudita, Paquistão e EUA.

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Introduction

Since the end of World War II, Saudi Arabia and the United States have been allies. A strategic partnership has persisted between the two nations for decades. During the Cold War, Saudi Arabia sought strategic cooperation with the United States to ensure its security in the face of regional and global threats. In return, the United States prioritized the security of Saudi Arabia due to its vast energy resources and proximity to vital maritime chokepoints. Although there have been occasional intra-alliance disagreements, tensions, and disputes over the years, both parties have generally perceived the continuation of the alliance as serving their mutual interests. However, following the Hamas attack on September 7, 2023, Israel's expansionist foreign policy in the Middle East has called the long-standing alliance into question. Under the conditions of an increasingly uncertain security environment, Saudi Arabia's decision to establish a formal alliance with Pakistan in September 2025—includes mutual defense commitment—constitutes a notable development. This move is particularly puzzling when situated within the evolving strategic landscape of the Middle East, in which shifting threat perceptions, realignments among regional actors, and the recalibration of external security partnerships have altered traditional patterns of alliance formation.

The research seeks to explain the strategic rationale underlying Saudi Arabia's pursuit of an alliance with Pakistan, despite its longstanding security alignment with the United States. The main argument of the study is that the primary rationale behind Saudi Arabia's additional alliance-seeking tendency is the increasing intensity of the alliance security dilemma in Riyadh-Washington relations. Concerns over the potential ineffectiveness of security commitments of the US to provide the desired security support against increasing Israeli aggression have prompted the Kingdom to diversify its existing alliances. Following the Hamas attacks on October 7, 2023, Israel launched a series of ground and air strikes targeting several states around Saudi Arabia, including Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Yemen, Iran, and Qatar. The United States' explicit support for these aggressions severely undermined its reliability in the eyes of the Saudi leadership. Israel, adopting an increasingly expansionist regional policy, has come to be perceived by Saudi Arabia as an aggressive actor that poses a significant threat to regional security and stability. These developments have triggered a fundamental shift in Saudi Arabia's threat perceptions and alliance politics. Consequently, confronting with growing fears of both

abandonment and entrapment, Saudi Arabia moved to formalize an alliance with Pakistan to mitigate risks stemming from heightened anxiety, uncertainty, and perceived unreliability. The successive military attacks on Qatar by both Israel and Iran in 2025 led Saudi leadership to regard U.S. security commitments as increasingly ineffective amid a regional conflict environment dominated by Tel Aviv's agenda.

This study develops an intra-alliance dispute analysis model (Table I) based on Glenn H. Snyder's alliance security dilemma approach (1984; 1996) in order to provide a complementary theoretical perspective. The Intra-alliance dispute analysis model consists of three parameters—alliance commitment, alliance dependence, and interest convergence—and includes eight hypotheses developed in this study. The model is employed in a complementary manner to offer a more comprehensive and nuanced explanation of Saudi Arabia's recent alliance patterns. Snyder's alliance security dilemma approach offers valuable insights into the growing concerns and declining confidence within Saudi Arabia regarding its existing alliance with the United States. Taken together, this framework enables us to identify and analyze the key variables underlying the formation of the Saudi–Pakistan alliance, especially in the context of evolving regional threat perceptions and alliance (in)security dynamics.

The remainder of this study is organized into three main sections. The first section establishes the theoretical framework underpinning the case analysis, drawing primarily on Snyder's alliance theory to develop a cohesive analytical lens for understanding alliance formation and management. The second section applies this framework to a case study of Saudi Arabia's alliance-seeking behavior, aiming to elucidate the kingdom's recent strategic decisions and evolving alliance politics. Finally, the third section presents the study's conclusions, offering a general evaluation and discussion of the findings, reflecting on their broader implications.

Theoretical Framework: Alliance Security Dilemma

In an anarchic international system, there is no overarching authority capable of guaranteeing state sovereignty. For this reason, within the anarchic structure of the international system, states seeking to preserve their survival tend to adopt balancing strategies in response to emerging threats (Waltz, 1979, p. 119-128; Mearsheimer, 2001, p.30). Snyder (1997, p.52) underlined that alliance with other states may reduce the pervasive insecurity of anarchy. Alliances are among the foreign policy toolkit that states frequently employ in the international politics. Whether strong or weak, states rely on alliances to deter and defeat threats. Waltz (1979, p.126-127) argued that states achieve defensive and deterrent strength to dissuade adversaries from attacking by forming alliances. Therefore, alliances have two primary functions against adversaries: deterrence and defense (Snyder, 1961, p.9-40). When an alliance becomes incapable of performing one of the core functions—deterrence and defense—it gradually loses strategic coherence among allies and undermining its reliability and durability. Furthermore, once an alliance is formed, two important dynamics come into play: alliance management and alliance competition. On the one hand, states seek to strengthen the strategic cohesion of their own alliances (inter-alliance dispute); on the other, they seek

to undermine the strategic cohesion of rival or adversarial alliances (intra-alliance competition) (Izumikawa, 2020; Crawford, 2021; Akdogan, 2025; Akdogan, 2026).

Snyder (1984) accounts for the deterioration of strategic cohesion among allies by employing the alliance security dilemma approach. According to this approach, the establishment of alliances inherently generates an alliance security dilemma between allies. The main reason states find themselves under this dilemma is that they simultaneously experience fears of entrapment and abandonment (Snyder, 1997, p.187). The fear of abandonment stems from a state's concern that its ally may or may not fulfill its security commitments when needed, while the fear of entrapment drives from a state's concern that it may be drawn into a conflict/war due to its ally's strategic interests (Mandelbaum, 1988, p.101; Mandelbaum, 1981, p.52-55). Allied states, due to the security commitments they have previously made to each other, may be compelled to act in accordance with the strategic interests of their allies even when it is not in their own interests. The harsh stance or reckless behaviors of a state toward another may give rise to the risk of entrapping its ally (Snyder, 1997, p.181). Meanwhile, the severity of the alliance security dilemma is not constant but subject to change over time. According to Snyder (1997, p.186), three parameters are decisive in determining the fluctuations of the dilemma: alliance commitment, alliance dependence and alliance interest convergence.

The Degree of Alliance Commitment

Walt (1997, p. 157) emphasizes that the defining feature of any alliance is the commitment for mutual military assistant against an external threat in a certain circumstance. Alliances are founded upon some specific security commitments. In the absence of such a commitment, the formation of alliances would not be possible. The alliance commitment delineates the conditions under which allies assume responsibilities and obligations. Alliances, however, target potential or actual enemies and is based on solidarity, cooperation, and coordination among allies against security threats. Wolfers (1959, p.268). defines alliances as promises of mutual military assistance between sovereign states. According to Friedman (1970), alliances are the central feature international political arena. National security is the primary incentive for states to form alliances (Lalman & Newman, 1991, p.239). Liska (1962, p.3) underlines that "it is impossible to speak about international relations without referring to alliances." Alliances are one of the main means by which states seek cooperation with other states in order to increase their power to achieve their interests (Osgood, 1968, p.17). Similarly, Morgenthau (1959, p.185) considers alliances as a necessary element of balance of power politics. Alliances in international relations are generally seen as the product of mutual security interests between states that result in a formal agreement, either explicit or implicit, to collaborate on national security issues (Holsti, Hoppman & Sullivan, 1973, p. 4).

Alliance commitment constitutes a key variable in determining the intensity of the security dilemma among allies (Snyder, 1984, p. 473). Allies' fears of abandonment and entrapment are shaped by both the nature and the type of alliance commitments (Snyder, 1997, p. 181). More importantly, the defining criterion for assessing whether a

particular form of cooperation between two or more states qualifies as an alliance lies in the presence of an alliance commitment. Accordingly, an arrangement can be considered an alliance only insofar as it entails a certain level of security commitment between at least two states, even when such commitment is unilateral.

The impact of the security commitment parameter within an alliance on the alliance security dilemma can be assessed based on four core criteria. These are the mutuality, contractuality, certainty and reliability. Examining these factors allows for the identification of the degree of security commitment embedded in an alliance. Fundamentally, evaluating alliances through these criteria facilitates their classification and enhances our understanding of their qualitative characteristics.

First, alliances are commonly divided into two categories: formal and informal. Walt (1997, p. 157) argues that "an alliance is a formal or informal commitment for security cooperation between two or more states." The classification of an alliance as formal depends on the simultaneous fulfillment of three core criteria in security commitments: mutuality, contractuality, and certainty (Snyder, 1990, p. 105). Accordingly, a formal alliance refers to cooperative arrangements in which two or more states enter explicit and reciprocal security commitments through a written and legally binding treaty. The existence of a written contract and an explicit mutual security commitment among allies constitutes the principal defining elements of a formal alliance (Singer & Melvin, 1966, p. 2). When one or more of these constitutive elements is absent, the resulting arrangement is considered an informal alliance. The codification of security commitments in a written treaty endows alliances with formal binding force. Moreover, the certainty of security commitments clearly specifies the conditions under which allies are expected to fulfill particular obligations. When the conditions anticipated by a clear alliance agreement materialize (casus foederis), allies expect one another to honor their commitments (Snyder, 1997, p. 182). By contrast, in ambiguous alliances, allies' expectations remain uncertain due to the lack of clarity regarding who is obliged to act, under which conditions, and in what manner.

Secondly, the reliability criterion is used to evaluate alliance commitments, allowing an alliance to be classified as either reliable or unreliable. The formal codification of security commitments in a written treaty does not necessarily imply that allies will unequivocally fulfill these obligations. Allies' adherence to alliance commitments provides important information about both the reliability of the alliance and the credibility of its members. States tend to form and sustain alliances with partners perceived as reliable in honoring their security commitments (Crescenze et al., 2012, p. 260). By contrast, the presence of an unreliable ally may embolden an expansionist state that poses a security threat to adopt more aggressive behavior (Miller, 2003, p. 55). In such cases, the alliance fails to perform its primary function of deterrence. States' past attitudes and behaviors shape their reputation in the eyes of other states (Mercer, 1996, pp. 14–43). This reputation, formed through prior conduct, enables other states to anticipate their future actions (Crescenzi et al., 2012, p. 262; Miller, 2003, p. 54). Failure to fulfill alliance commitments when the casus foederis arises leads allies to devalue the alliance, even if it formally remains intact (Snyder, 1997, p. 182).

When an allied state fails to deter or defeat a security threat, its reputation among its allies is damaged, and its credibility regarding whether it will assume responsibility in the

face of future threats erodes (Schelling, 1966, pp. 35–91). Moreover, states make judgments about the reliability of their allies' security commitments by observing whether those allies honor alliance obligations in their relations with other partners. Consequently, states begin to question both the reliability and the competence of allies that violate alliance commitments or fail to adequately fulfill their responsibilities (Leeds, 2003, p. 805; Smith, 1998). States allied with partners whose credibility has gradually weakened tend to adopt additional security measures in response to emerging threats (Henry, 2020, p. 56). Furthermore, when alliance commitments are ambiguous, weaker states closely monitor whether their allies are reliable (Mattes, 2012, p. 684). Consequently, in order to systematically assess the dynamics of alliance commitments, I propose the following three hypotheses:

Hp.1: In formal alliances, states are expected to face low levels of concern about abandonment and high levels of fear about entrapment.

Hp.2: In informal alliances, states are expected to face high levels of fear about abandonment and low levels of fear about entrapment.

Hp.3: A decline in alliance credibility is expected to reinforce existing abandonment fear in both formal and informal alliances.

The Distribution of Alliance Dependence

Alliances inherently includes a relationship of dependence. When the variable of alliance dependence is considered, alliances can be divided into two categories: symmetric and asymmetric (Snyder, 1984, p. 473). Accordingly, the primary factor shaping whether an alliance assumes a symmetric or asymmetric structure is the level of dependence of the allies on the alliance. Each alliance provides allied parties with both benefits and costs (Walt, 1997, p. 158). The benefits are primarily measured in terms of enhanced security, whereas the costs are largely assessed in terms of conceded autonomy (Snyder, 1997, p. 43). In other words, states are required to bear certain costs in exchange for the benefits they obtain (Johnson, 2015, p. 666). Altfeld (1984, p. 528) argues that states confronting rising threats purchase security support from a great power at the expense of their own autonomy. Similarly, Morrow (1991, p. 905) emphasizes that weak states aligning with a great power tend to make concessions in return for security provision.

In an alliance, it is generally expected that the level of security provided to a partner corresponds to the amount of security received. However, this is not always the case. When a state is unable to supply its ally with a level of security equivalent to that which it derives from the alliance, it is compelled to concede a degree of its strategic autonomy in return. Strategic autonomy determines the scope of a state's room for maneuver in foreign policy. A loss of strategic autonomy implies that the ally with lower alliance dependence acquires influence over the foreign policy decisions of the state with higher alliance dependence (Schroeder, 1976, p. 197). In this way, the security–autonomy trade-off within alliances is shaped. Ultimately, every alliance is built upon a particular security–autonomy balance, and this balance may evolve over time (Morrow, 1991, p. 913).

The primary factor shaping states' alliance dependence is their individual security environment (Blankenship, 2023, p. 20; Snyder, 1997, p. 180). Each state possesses a distinct security environment at any given point in time. In addition, every alliance

relationship is established within a specific security context. Moreover, states' security environments evolve over time. Two principal factors determine a state's security environment: the distribution of power and the level of threat (Snyder, 1984, p. 472). With respect to the former, states' power capabilities define their international status. For states struggling for survival in an anarchic system, power constitutes the primary currency (Morgenthau, 1948; Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2001). The greater a state's share of the international distribution of power, the more favorable its security environment becomes. This is because states with higher power capabilities face a relatively lower probability of being subjected to the use of force by others. Consequently, within an alliance, a state possessing greater power capacity is expected to enjoy a stronger security environment.

However, the distribution of power, while necessary, is not sufficient for shaping a state's security environment. The other determining factor must also be incorporated into the analysis. Each ally faces a distinct level of threat, which, like power capabilities, may vary over time. The level of threat perceived by allies is influenced not only by their own power capabilities but also by the geographical proximity, offensive capabilities, and aggressive intentions of the threatening state (Walt, 1987, p. 23). Accordingly, these variables differentiate allies' threat levels and jointly shape their security environments. Even when states share a common threat perception, they may not experience the same degree of security threat from the adversary. This divergence plays a decisive role in shaping allies' degrees of alliance dependence (Blankenship, 2023, p. 20–21). Consequently, alliances can be classified as symmetric or asymmetric based on the security environments of the allies. In asymmetric alliances, the security–autonomy balance is weighted in favor of one side. In other words, asymmetric alliances emerge when a state with a weaker security environment aligns with a state enjoying a stronger security environment. In asymmetric alliances, the weaker ally gains more security at the cost of greater loss of autonomy (Morrow, 1991, p. 911), whereas the stronger ally gains autonomy by providing security (Rothstein, 1968, p. 118).

When a state's security environment improves, its dependence on the existing alliance decreases, prompting demands for greater autonomy; conversely, when its security environment deteriorates, it generates demands for additional security (Morrow, 1991, p. 917). If these demands are not met, there is a tendency toward weakened strategic alignment within the alliance and an intensification of the alliance security dilemma. This dynamic may lead the dissatisfied ally to pursue hedging alliance relationships. This is because an ally with a higher share of alliance dependence faces both a greater loss of strategic autonomy and an increased risk of strategic isolation. Consequently, holding other variables constant, I develop the following three hypotheses regarding the distribution of alliance dependence:

Hp.4: In symmetric alliances, both allies experience concerns about abandonment and entrapment at roughly equal levels.

Hp.5: In asymmetric alliances, the more dependent state is likely to face heightened concerns about both abandonment and entrapment.

Hp.6. In asymmetric alliances, the less dependent state is likely to face reduced concerns about both abandonment and entrapment.

The Level of Alliance Interest Convergence

Another variable influencing states' fear of abandonment and entrapment is the degree of overlap in allies' shared interests (Snyder, 1984, p. 474). States' primary common interest lies in deterring (deter) and, if necessary, defeating a state perceived as a common threat. Therefore, the principal incentive for states to form alliances is the presence of an external threat within an anarchic international system (Walt, 1989, p. 4; 1985, p. 4). Accordingly, alliances emerge as states pool their capabilities in response to shared threats. The presence of a common enemy or external threat is widely regarded as the single most important factor—the raison d'être—underpinning the formation and cohesion of alliances (Weitsman, 1997, p. 160). Moreover, interest alignment determines the level of strategic coordination among allies within an alliance. Thus, the greater the degree of interest alignment, the higher the level of intra-alliance cohesion. Strong alliance cohesion not only prolongs the lifespan of an alliance but also enhances its effectiveness in confronting threats.

The shared threat perception that exists at the state of alliance formation may change over time. Such change implies a divergence of interests and may place the continued existence of alliances at risk (Berkowitz, 1983). Three conditions can lead to shifts in threat perception. The first is change in power capabilities of states. An improvement in a state's power capacity may transform a previously shared threat into one that the state can manage independently. In this case, the state may no longer require its ally to the same extent for deterring and defeating the threat. The second condition is the weakening or disappearance of the common threat. A state previously identified as a source of threat may, for various reasons, cease to constitute a power center that endangers the security of others.

Third, a new threat may emerge that requires one ally's primary attention. A newly arising aggressive and expansionist state may not be perceived as a serious threat by all allies. When one ally prioritizes balancing this emerging aggressor, the alliance's strategic alignment centered on a shared threat may shift. Concerned that it may not receive support from its existing ally against the emerging threat, the state is likely to seek additional alliances to balance the threat (Castillo & Downes, 2020, p. 4–16). In doing so, the state whose threat perception has diverged may preserve its relationship with the existing alliance to minimize fears of abandonment, while simultaneously pursuing an alliance with another state that shares its perception of the new threat (Morrow, 1993, p. 213). About the alliance interest convergence, I advance the following two hypotheses. The two hypotheses (Hp.7 and Hp.8) were developed in the author's previous co-authored work on alliance politics (Akdogan and Küpeli, 2026). Accordingly, this study provides a further test of these hypotheses.

Hp.7: A decrease in shared threat perception is expected to heighten concerns about both abandonment and entrapment among the allies.

Hp.8: An increase in shared threat perception is expected to diminish concerns both abandonment and entrapment among the allies.

Table I. Intra-Alliance Dispute Analysis Model

Independent Variables	Dependent Variable: Severity of Alliance Security Dilemma	
	Sub-dynamics	Hypotheses
Alliance Commitment	1. Mutuality: Unilateral, Bilateral and Multilateral Alliances 2. Contractuality: Formal and Informal Alliances 3. Certainty: Certain and Uncertain Alliances 4. Credibility: Reliable and Unreliable Alliance	Hp.1: In formal alliances, states are expected to face low levels of concern about abandonment and high levels of fear about entrapment. Hp.2: In informal alliances, states are expected to face high levels of fear about abandonment and low levels of concern about entrapment. Hp.3: A decline in alliance credibility is expected to reinforce existing abandonment fear in both formal and informal alliances.
Alliance Dependence	1. The distribution of power 2. The level of threat perception	Hp.4: In symmetric alliances, both allies experience concerns about abandonment and entrapment at roughly equal levels. Hp.5: In asymmetric alliances, the more dependent state is likely to face heightened concerns about both abandonment and entrapment. Hp.6. In asymmetric alliances, the less dependent state is likely to face reduced concerns about both abandonment and entrapment.
Alliance Interest Convergence	1. Interest convergence 2. Interest divergence	Hp.7: A decrease in shared threat perception is expected to heighten concerns about both abandonment and entrapment among the allies. Hp.8: An increase in shared threat perception is expected to diminish concerns both abandonment and entrapment among the allies.

Source: The Table I was formed by the author based on Snyder and Morrow's studies.

Case Study: Saudi-the US Alliance Security Dilemma

This study seeks to explain why Saudi Arabia felt the need to form an alliance with Pakistan despite being allied with a superpower state, the United States. The analysis interprets Riyadh's inclination to establish an additional alliance and to pursue alliance diversification as an indication of a serious problem emerging within the Saudi–US alliance relationship. This assessment rests on the following core assumption: when one party of an existing alliance establishes an additional alliance with another state, this signals an intensification of the alliance security dilemma between the original allies. Accordingly, the central argument of the study is that the escalation of the alliance security dilemma in Saudi–Washington relations prompted the Saudi leadership to reassess its existing security policy and to pursue a hedging alliance relationship with an alternative power center. This orientation culminated in Saudi Arabia's signing of an alliance agreement with Pakistan in September 2025.

The intra-alliance dispute analysis model outlined above (Table I) can explains why Saudi Arabia is inclined toward alliance diversification. In line with this approach, the source of the observed increase in the intensity of the security dilemma within the Riyadh–Washington alliance can be identified by examining three parameters: the degree of alliance commitment, the distribution of alliance dependence, and the level of alliance interest alignment. The structure of these parameters is expected to lead to a variation in the severity of the security dilemma within the existing alliance patterns. An intensified alliance security dilemma, in turn, results in heightened fears of abandonment and entrapment among allies. Accordingly, the study defines the rising intensity of the alliance security dilemma in Saudi Arabia–U.S. relations as the dependent variable, with three parameters shaping its severity as the independent variables.

Saudi-American Alliance Security Commitment

The first variable that must be examined to understand the increase in the alliance security dilemma between Saudi Arabia and the United States is the level of alliance commitment. By assessing the degree of commitment, it is possible to identify the nature of the alliance relationship between the two countries. This, in turn, allows for an evaluation of whether the characteristics of the security commitment embedded in the existing alliance have contributed to the recent rise in Saudi Arabia's security concerns.

Saudi Arabia and the United States have maintained alliance ties since the early Cold War. The 1945 security cooperation agreement between King Abdulaziz bin Saud and President Roosevelt formally established their partnership (Memorandum of Conversation, 1945), laying the foundation for a lasting strategic relationship. In 1951, the Mutual Defense Assistance Agreement further strengthened ties, with the U.S. providing military training, arms, and establishing the Dhahran Base (Memorandum for Mutual Security, 1951). Subsequent agreements enabled Saudi Arabia to enhance its military capacity through U.S. equipment, ammunition, and heavy weapons (Sick, 2018). During the Gulf War (1990-1991), Saudi Arabia and the United States cooperated against Iraq, jointly conducting Operation Desert Shield and Operation Desert Storm. (Lippman, 2018, p. 297–298).

In the post–Cold War era, Saudi Arabia aligned with the U.S.'s Dual Containment policy toward Iran and Iraq (Gause III, 1994; Akdogan, 2020). Relations weakened after the September 11 attacks and the U.S. invasion of Iraq (Gause III, 2016) but regained momentum during Trump's first administration (2017–2021) (Al-Rasheed, 2017; Al-Rasheed, 2018). The 2017 Joint Statement outlined a new strategic partnership to ensure regional security and stability, primarily focused on countering Iran's expansionism (Joint Statement, 2017). As bilateral relations were making progress in such an atmosphere, the Khashoggi affair occurred and strained Washington–Riyadh relations. However, the Khashoggi affair, which occurred in October 2018, did not fundamentally undermine the existing security relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia. Although this diplomatic crisis, which unfolded during the first Trump administration, prompted members of the U.S. Congress to question the security and defense cooperation between Riyadh and Washington, President Trump viewed the crisis as an opportunity to extract new commercial and economic concessions from the Saudi leadership (Kragie, 2018).

Despite the U.S. Congress advocating the suspension of arms sales and military supplies to Saudi Arabia, the Trump administration refrained from taking concrete measures in this direction. At that time, the Trump administration, which was pursuing a policy of maximum pressure against Iran, regarded Saudi Arabia as a key regional ally (Trump, 2018). The Trump administration's reluctance to adopt measures specifically targeting Saudi Arabia in response to the Khashoggi murder prevented the crisis from causing significant damage to the alliance between Washington and Riyadh.

In the post-Arab Spring period, Iran's aggressive regional policy was viewed as a shared threat. In May 2025, a U.S.–Saudi defense cooperation agreement committed $142 billion in weapons, equipment, and ammunition (Al Jazeera, 2025). In November 2025, the Strategic Defense Cooperation Agreement reinforced U.S. support, including F-35 fighter jets and main battle tanks, strengthening Saudi Arabia's military capacity (The US-Saudi Strategic Defense Agreement, 2025). Nevertheless, a formal alliance with mutual, contractual, and certain security commitments remains absent. U.S. presidents, including Trump, have offered verbal assurances, designating Saudi Arabia a "major non-NATO ally" (TRT World, 2025). This absence of formal guarantees renders the alliance informal and sustains Saudi Arabia's fear of abandonment (Hp.2).

Another issue that must be assessed under the alliance commitment parameter concerns the reliability dimension of the Saudi–American alliance. As emphasized in the theoretical framework, the reliability of an alliance is determined by the extent to which allies consistently demonstrate commitment to their security obligations through their attitudes and behaviors. States assess their allies' degree of reliability not only by observing whether they fulfill security commitments owed to them, but also by closely monitoring whether those allies honor their security responsibilities toward third states. Perceptions of ally reliability may therefore change over time depending on observed conduct.

In the case of the Riyadh–Washington alliance, recent years have witnessed a marked erosion of alliance reliability (Al Lawati, 2025). Following the Hamas attack of 7 October 2023, Israel's increasingly aggressive and expansionist foreign policy in the Middle East functioned as a critical litmus test for alliance reliability within the Saudi–American alliance (Jeffrey & Dent, 2025). During this period, two major events significantly weakened Saudi confidence in the United States. First, Israel conducted an airstrike against Qatar in September 2025 (Al Jazeera, 9 September 2025), and second, Iran retaliated by striking a U.S. military base in Qatar in June 2025 following Israeli and U.S. attacks on Iran (Al Jazeera, 23 June 2025). Despite its alliance with Qatar, the United States did not take a clear deterrent or punitive action in response to either attack. These developments reinforced Saudi concerns that the U.S.–Saudi alliance might fail to deter or defeat threats arising from Israeli aggression (Gause III, 2026). As a result, Riyadh's trust in U.S. security commitments declined, further undermining the reliability of the alliance (Gordon and Karlin, 2026). Consequently, combined with the informal nature of the partnership (Hp.2), this erosion of confidence heightened Saudi Arabia's fear of abandonment to an advanced level (Hp.3).

Saudi-American-Alliance Dependence

The second variable determining the intensity of the alliance security dilemma in any security cooperation arrangement is the level of allies' dependence on the alliance. To understand why the alliance security dilemma has intensified in Saudi–American relations, it is necessary to identify the existing distribution of dependence within the alliance. To do so, one must first assess the allies' individual security environments. Two factors define an individual security environment: the distribution of power and the level of threat. By taking these two factors into account, it becomes possible to evaluate the individual security environments of Saudi Arabia and the United States and, in turn, to determine each side's degree of alliance dependence.

When assessed in terms of the distribution of power, the Saudi–American alliance appears as a bilateral alliance constructed between a superpower and a regional power (Ehteshami, 2014). Given the absence of any significant change in the parties' power status, it can be argued that the intra-alliance distribution of power has remained largely unchanged since the alliance's inception. Due to this disproportionate distribution of power, the alliance has retained its asymmetric character over time. From the perspective of threat levels, while the United States does not face an aggressive or expansionist state in its immediate abroad, Saudi Arabia has consistently been surrounded by regional powers pursuing expansionist policies. From past to present, the Saudi leadership has perceived regional states adopting expansionist strategies in the Middle East—such as Egypt, Iraq, Iran, and Israel—as proximate threats to its national security (Hinnebusch, 2002, p. 29–54). The primary driving force motivating Saudi Arabia to form an alliance with the United States has been the need to balance these expansionist states (Miller, 2017). In this sense, Saudi Arabia derives direct security benefits from its alliance with the United States.

The alliance serves a functional role for Saudi Arabia both by facilitating internal balancing aimed at enhancing national power capacity and by enabling external balancing to deter adversarial states. By contrast, the security benefits the United States derives from its alliance with Saudi Arabia are more indirect. For Washington, the core strategic concern in the Middle East lies in preventing the regional balance of power from shifting in favor of rival or hostile states and ensuring that energy resources and strategic maritime chokepoints do not fall under their control (Mearsheimer & Walt, 2016). In this respect, the alliance with Saudi Arabia carries strategic significance for the United States.

Saudi–American security cooperation constitutes an asymmetric rather than a symmetric alliance. Alliance dependence is structured against Saudi Arabia, as it cannot provide security contributions equivalent to the protection it receives. Consequently, Saudi Arabia bears the cost of security through reduced autonomy in foreign policy. This imbalance favors the United States and diminishes Saudi strategic autonomy while heightening fears of entrapment. The asymmetric nature of the alliance suggests that Riyadh experiences elevated risks of both abandonment and entrapment (Hp.5).

Following 7 October 2023, Israel's aggressive foreign policy shifted the regional balance of power (Fantappie & Nasr, 2023). With unwavering U.S. support, Israel violated the sovereignty of Iran, Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, and Qatar, directly threatening regional security (Dalay & Vakil, 2025). Viewed through the lens of alliance dependence, two

implications emerge for Saudi Arabia. First, U.S. involvement in Israel–Iran confrontations on Israel's side may draw Saudi Arabia into unwanted conflict. This risk stems from Riyadh's asymmetric dependence on the United States, limiting its ability to avoid entanglement. In a regional war scenario, Saudi Arabia would likely face U.S. demands for access to its bases and airspace, difficult to reject due to the kingdom's asymmetric dependence. This restricts strategic autonomy and exposes Saudi Arabia to potential Iranian retaliation. Iran's June 2025 attack on Qatar during the Twelve-Days War illustrates this vulnerability, and Saudi Arabia could face similar threats, given Tehran's repeated warnings to regional states in response to U.S. force. Indeed, in February 2026, Iran retaliated against the joint U.S.–Israeli military offensive against it by launching ballistic missiles and armed unmanned aerial vehicles against Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia. This incident was a striking contemporary example, for Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states, of falling into the trap resulting from an asymmetric alliance relationship with the United States. Therefore, this development provided evidence of the practical manifestation of the entrapment dimension of the hypothesis 5. Second, Saudi efforts to balance and restrain Israel's aggressive policies have largely failed to elicit meaningful action from Washington. As the more dependent ally, Saudi Arabia struggles to persuade the United States to prioritize balancing Israel. This, however, should be regarded as an evidence confirming the prediction of hypothesis 5 concerning the abandonment dimension. These dynamics collectively intensify both fears of abandonment and fears of entrapment for Saudi leadership, highlighting Riyadh's constrained position within the alliance (Hp.5).

Saudi-American Alliance Interest Convergence

The third variable driving the intensification of the alliance security dilemma in the Saudi–American alliance is the change in the level of alliance interest convergence. As outlined in the theoretical framework, alliances are built upon shared interests, the most important of which are common security threats. The degree of interest convergence determines the level of strategic cohesion within an alliance. State interests are not fixed; rather, they evolve over time. Accordingly, as interests change, the degree of strategic alignment between allies also shifts.

When examining the Saudi Arabia–United States alliance, the preservation of the regional balance of power in the Middle East during the Cold War constituted the main driving force that led the two countries toward security cooperation (Fürtig, 2007). The Soviet Union's efforts to establish political and military influence in the Middle East were perceived by both Riyadh and Washington as a security threat, necessitating coordinated action. This situation transformed the Middle East into a theater of global power competition between the United States and the USSR (Raberson, 2002, p. 55–70). At the same time, the region also contained regional powers pursuing aggressive and expansionist foreign policies, namely Nasserist Egypt (1952–1970), Ba'athist Iraq (1963–2003), and post–Islamic Revolution Iran (after 1979). The aggressive and expansionist foreign policy behaviors of these regional powers were regarded by Saudi Arabia and the United States as common security threats, and security cooperation was strengthened with the aim of deterring and defeating these threats (Gause III, 2002, p. 193–212).

In the post–Cold War period, the dissolution of the USSR in 1991 and the significant loss of Iraq's power capacity following the Gulf War removed these two actors from the category of imminent threats. However, Iran's regional expansionism, which began in 1979, continued into the post–Cold War era and sustained the shared threat perception between Riyadh and Washington. The outbreak of the Arab Spring in 2011 and the power vacuum created by the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq enabled Iran to pursue its aggressive and expansionist regional policy more effectively (Nasr, 2025b, p. 131). At the same time, Iran's substantial progress in nuclear technology and its ballistic missile program, which significantly enhanced its power capacity, posed a serious challenge to the regional balance of power (Barzegar, 2014).

When the alliance interest convergence variable is taken as the analytical baseline, 2023 emerged as a critical historical turning point that inaugurated a new phase in both the regional balance of power and Riyadh–Washington alliance relations (Kabalan, 2026). In that year, two major developments fundamentally reshaped Saudi Arabia's threat perception. The first was the historic agreement signed in Beijing in March 2023, under China's mediation, in which Saudi Arabia and Iran agreed to restore diplomatic relations and pursue security cooperation (Baghernia, 2024). For a full two decades—from the U.S. invasion of Iraq to the signing of the Riyadh–Tehran normalization agreement (2003–2023)—the Middle East had been the primary arena of an intense regional hegemony struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia (Hiro, 2020; Mabon, 2018). This agreement effectively brought to an end the increasingly confrontational regional rivalry and conflict environment that had intensified especially after 2010, while opening the door to cooperation aimed at ensuring regional security and stability (Divsallar, 2023). Indeed, relations strained by Iran's regional expansionism had previously led the Riyadh administration to completely sever political, commercial, and diplomatic ties in January 2016. The new agreement, however, signaled a critical decision by both parties to open a new chapter in bilateral relations that explicitly included security cooperation. Iran's provision of assurances to Saudi Arabia regarding the maintenance of regional security and stability, combined with the oversight of China as a rising great power, significantly reduced Riyadh's perceived threat level vis-à-vis Iran and altered its threat perception calculus (Nasr, 2025a). Consequently, the China-brokered normalization agreement served to decouple Saudi Arabia's perceived level of threat about Iran from that of the United States (Walt, 2023).

The second major development that reshaped Saudi Arabia's perception of security threats in 2023 was Hamas's launch of military attack against Israel. This attack generated two strategic implications that profoundly altered regional dynamics. First, it led to the collapse of Iran's 'resistance axis' constructed across the region during the 2003–2023 period (Maloney, 2025). Capitalizing on the Hamas attacks, Israel carried out devastating military campaigns against all Iranian-aligned proxy forces in the region, significantly weakening Hezbollah in Lebanon, Ansarullah in Yemen, Hamas in Palestine, and the Baath regime in Syria through extensive air and ground operations (Nasr, 2025b, p.135). Having achieved operational success across these theaters, Israel then shifted its focus directly toward Iran, initiating strikes aimed at degrading Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile capabilities. In June 2025, Israeli attacks on Iran triggered the outbreak of the Twelve-Day War, during which the United States joined the conflict on Israel's side, culminating in the Hammer Operation that inflicted damage on Iranian nuclear

facilities. As a result, Iran's military capabilities were substantially weakened and its regional influence markedly diminished (Tabaar, 2025). A second strategic implication of the 7 October attacks was Israel's adoption of an overtly expansionist and aggressive regional foreign policy, as Israeli authorities pursued territorial expansion and increasingly violated the sovereignty and territorial integrity of multiple regional states. Through ground operations in Gaza, southern Lebanon, and the Golan Heights in Syria, Israel engaged in territorial occupation, ultimately emerging as the primary actor undermining security and stability in the Middle East (Dalay & Vakil, 2025).

Taken together, these emerging regional dynamics indicate a shift in Saudi Arabia's strategic threat perceptions, with Iran perceived as a less significant threat and Israel emerging as the primary source of threat. For Riyadh, the primary source of security threat has thus shifted from Iran to Israel (Dalay & Vakil, 2025). However, my argument that Israel has emerged as the primary security threat in the strategic view of Saudi Arabia in the post-2023 period does not mean that Iran poses no threat any more. After October 7, 2023, it is possible to understand, by looking at the statements of Saudi political elites and the official statements of Saudi institutions, that Israel has become the regional country posing the main security threat due to its foreign policy attitudes and behavior (Jones, 2025). In order to assess the deteriorating regional security environment following October 7 and discuss the measures to be taken, an extraordinary Arab-Islamic Summit was held in Riyadh in November 2024 at the invitation of the Saudi King. The final communiqué issued at the end of the summit identifies Israel as the principal state undermining regional security and stability through its aggressive and expansionist behaviors. The communiqué also emphasizes that Israel is an aggressive state that threatens the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Iran (Minister of Foreign Affairs, 2024). Following Israel's military attack on Qatar in September 2025, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman stated that Israel is a country that threatens regional security and that Arab and Islamic countries need to take measures to prevent this (Arab News, 2025). On September 15, an extraordinary Gulf Cooperation Council summit was held with Israeli aggression agenda. At final statement of this summit, which Saudi Arabia also attended, it was decided to activate the mechanism containing the GCC's defense commitments in order to prevent Israeli aggression (Al Jazeera, 2025). The final communiqué issued at the extraordinary Arab-Islamic Summit held in Doha on September 15, 2025, attended by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, stressed the need to stand against Israel's aggressive policies in the region, warning that such efforts pose a direct threat to regional and international security (Anadolu Agency, 2025).

By contrast, the United States continues to regard Israel as a loyal and functional ally and to identify Iran as the principal security threat (Haass, 2024). This divergence signals a clear split in shared threat perceptions between Saudi Arabia and the United States. Such divergence in interests undermines strategic coordination in addressing security challenges within the Saudi–American alliance (Gordon & Karlin, 2026). In essence, while Saudi Arabia now views Israel as the main security threat and expects U.S. support to restrain it, the United States prioritizes Iran as the primary threat and seeks Saudi cooperation in containing it. This shift in perceptions regarding the common threat increases both partners' fears of abandonment and entrapment vis-à-vis one another (Hp.7).

Overall, when the three variables incorporated into the intra-alliance dispute analysis model are jointly assessed, a clear pattern emerges. The informal nature of security commitments in the alliance, the persistence of an asymmetrical distribution of alliance dependence to the detriment of Saudi Arabia, and the weakening level of alliance interest convergence have collectively intensified the Saudi leadership's fears of both abandonment and entrapment. Throughout this process, the erosion of U.S. allied reliability has further reinforced these two anxieties. Accordingly, the study reaches findings consistent with the expectations of hypotheses Hp.2, Hp.3, Hp.5, and Hp.7 developed within the theoretical framework. Therefore, from 2023 onward, the intensity of the alliance security dilemma in Saudi Arabia–United States relations has demonstrably increased.

This reality, in turn, pushed the Saudi leadership to pursue initiatives aimed at increasing its strategic autonomy vis-à-vis its ally and reducing the risk of strategic isolation in the face of adversary states. In an environment characterized by rising uncertainty and unreliability, Riyadh initially sought to elevate its informal alliance with its existing ally to a formal status by pursuing a binding defense cooperation agreement (Singh, 2024; Gause III, 2024). The failure to achieve a swift compromise in negotiations over a strengthened defense alliance, combined with the continued deterioration of the regional security environment, compelled the Saudi leadership to search for an acute and immediate remedy (Gordon & Karlin, 2026, p.152). To this end, Saudi Arabia opted to establish a hedging alliance without terminating its existing alliance with the United States. Accordingly, in September 2025, Saudi Arabia concluded a formal alliance with Pakistan, a nuclear-armed state, to balance Israel, another nuclear-capable actor. The Mutual Defense Cooperation Treaty signed between the two countries stipulates that the use of force against one party shall be considered as an attack against the other (Blank, 2025). The alliance with Pakistan is formal in terms of security commitment and symmetric in terms of alliance dependence.

Although it falls outside the main focus of this study, it is nevertheless worth briefly addressing the reasons underlying Pakistan's decision to form an alliance with Saudi Arabia. Pakistan's motivations for forming an alliance with Saudi Arabia can be grouped under two broad considerations. The first is the need to overcome its economic and financial constraints. Despite possessing nuclear capability and a powerful military, Pakistan remains heavily dependent on foreign investment and external financial assistance. In this context, capital from the Gulf, particularly from Saudi Arabia, can play an important role in maintaining economic stability (Nawaz, 2025). Saudi Arabia has provided economic and financial assistance to Pakistan since the early years following its independence (Ahmed and Faisal, 2014). Islamabad therefore has a strong interest in not only maintaining but also expanding Saudi investment and financial assistance to Pakistan. The alliance with Saudi Arabia can serve this purpose by reinforcing the economic ties between the two countries. Second, Pakistan's motivation stems from its desire to address its security needs. Pakistan regards neither Israel nor Iran, but rather its neighbor India, as its principal adversary. Since the two states gained independence from Britain in 1947, they have been engaged in a serious dispute over competing claims to the Kashmir region. Pakistan has pursued a balancing strategy towards India, whose military capabilities have expanded alongside its growing economic power. An alliance with Saudi Arabia can be expected to contribute to Pakistan's balancing strategy in two

important aspects. First, Pakistan may seek to constrain India's ability to expand its political and commercial relations with Saudi Arabia, thereby limiting India's diplomatic influence in the region. Second, by encouraging Saudi Arabia to provide substantial assistance and investment in Pakistan's defense industry, Pakistan may strengthen its military capabilities against India. Third, the strategic rapprochement between India and Israel in recent years has intensified Pakistan's security concerns. (Irrum, 2026)

Conclusion

This study focused on identifying the principal variables underlying Saudi Arabia's strategic decision to form an alliance with Pakistan. In this context, the core argument is that the intensity of the alliance security dilemma in Riyadh–Washington security relations has increased, and that this escalation has driven the Saudi leadership toward the establishment of a hedging alliance. Proceeding from this argument, the central analytical task of the study has been to explain why this dilemma has intensified, since understanding this dynamic also enables a clearer explanation of why Saudi Arabia attempted to ally with Pakistan. By adopting Snyder's alliance security dilemma approach, the study sought to account for the rise in the alliance security dilemma between two allies. Drawing on the alliance security dilemma literature, I developed a total of eight hypotheses, four of which were found to be empirically valid in the examined case. The study's main findings fall into three categories based on the independent variables.

The first group comprises findings related to the alliance commitment variable. Most notably, the study identifies the Saudi–U.S. alliance as characterized by a weak level of alliance commitment and confirms the expectations of Hp.2 and Hp.3. The informal nature of the alliance between Saudi Arabia and the United States generates a high level of abandonment fear on the part of Riyadh (Hp.2), primarily because no written, formal treaty containing explicit mutual security commitments has been concluded between the two states. The analysis demonstrates that the military and defense cooperation agreements signed by the parties aim at enhancing Saudi Arabia's defense capacity rather than establishing reciprocal security obligations, and that U.S. security assurances have largely remained verbal. Moreover, Washington's overt support for Israel's aggressive and expansionist foreign policy behavior after 2023 has significantly undermined alliance reliability from the Saudi perspective. In particular, the failure of U.S. security commitments to function effectively when Qatar was exposed to the use of force by both Israel and Iran dealt a severe blow to perceptions of alliance reliability. The erosion of alliance reliability, in turn, reinforced Riyadh's abandonment fears (Hp.3). When examined through the lens of the alliance security dilemma, the Washington–Riyadh alliance reveals a dual dynamic: Israel's attack on Qatar heightened Saudi Arabia's concerns about abandonment, whereas Iran's attack on Saudi Arabia intensified its concerns about entrapment.

The second group of findings concerns the alliance dependence distribution variable. The study finds that alliance dependence in Riyadh–Washington security cooperation is asymmetric and structurally disadvantageous for Saudi Arabia. The security–autonomy balance of the alliance operates in favor of the United States, compelling Saudi Arabia to

concede autonomy in exchange for security provision. This pattern constrains Riyadh's strategic autonomy in foreign policy and limits its capacity for independent decision-making, indicating a high level of entrapment fear (Hp.5), while simultaneously increasing the risk of strategic isolation. Following the 7 October 2023 attacks, the hardline posture adopted by the United States and Israel toward Iran, including the use of force, further intensified Saudi Arabia's entrapment concerns. At the same time, Washington's unwavering support for Israel's aggressive and expansionist conduct solidified Riyadh's abandonment fears.

The third group consists of findings related to the alliance interest convergence variable. The study observes a marked weakening of interest convergence in the Saudi–U.S. alliance in the post-2023 period. After the Arab Spring of 2011, Riyadh and Washington had largely converged in viewing Iran's increasingly aggressive and expansionist regional behavior as a shared threat and in adopting balancing security measures. However, 2023 constituted a critical turning point, as Saudi Arabia and Iran, under China's mediation, overcame their disputes and reemerged as two regional powers capable of cooperation. When this development is considered together with Israel's severe weakening of Iran's resistance axis after 7 October, Iran ceased to represent an immediate security threat for Saudi Arabia. By contrast, due to its increasingly aggressive behavior in the region, Israel emerged as the primary source of security threat requiring urgent countermeasures from Riyadh's perspective. In effect, Israel replaced Iran as Saudi Arabia's foremost security concern. Consequently, the United States' dual posture of backing Israel's aggressive conduct while prioritizing the use of force against Iran heightened Saudi Arabia's fears of both abandonment and entrapment (Hp.7).

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