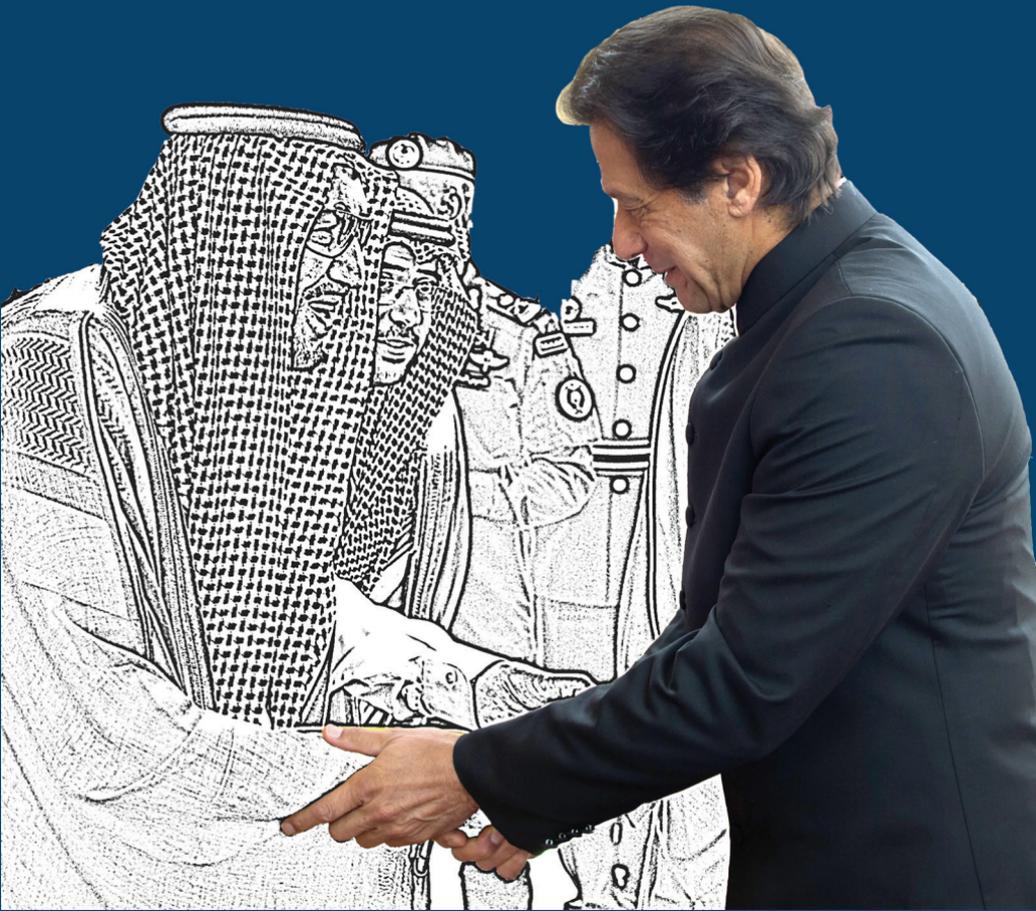


THE CONVERGENCE OF PAKISTAN AND GULF STRATEGIC INTERESTS: AN ASSESSMENT

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The Convergence of Pakistan and Gulf Strategic Interests: An Assessment

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CONTENTS

Introduction & Literature Review	5
Primer on Nature of Pakistan-GCC strategic relations.....	7
Gulf Military Doctrine.....	10
Pakistan's Military Doctrine	13
Pak-GCC: Strategic Convergence	15
Conclusion.....	18
End Notes.....	21
References.....	24

The Convergence of Pakistan and Gulf Strategic Interests: An Assessment

The Gulf region is one of the most security-sensitive regions with stakeholders beyond the region who are cooperating, competing, or complementing the ongoing security maneuverings. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is made up of six countries. These include Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman. The GCC region has become particularly important for Asian countries, given the increasing symbiotic connections between the two sides, particularly in the energy sector. The relationship between Pakistan and the GCC countries has been multidimensional; notable of course is the GCC support to the Pakistani economy and Pakistani help to the GCC countries in the military and security arenas. Moreover, Pakistan's strategic location and critical geographical placement, as well as the continuous efforts made by the Pakistani expatriate population to develop infrastructure and other institutions in the Gulf, have made it a natural ally of the GCC countries. However, in light of the present oil glut, Covid19 pandemic, and the resulting repatriation of Pakistani workers it is more important than ever to reassess Pakistan-GCC strategic interests. This article will showcase how the strategic outlooks of both sides converge and will also give recommendations on how the Pakistani-GCC strategic relationship can be further improved to build a more comprehensive and integrated future policy.

Introduction & Literature Review

The Gulf region is one of the most security-critical regions of the world, with stakeholders beyond the region itself who are either collaborating or competing within the regional security apparatus. The Gulf region comprises a grouping of six Middle Eastern countries namely Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman under the banner of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The GCC region has become especially significant for Asian states. Evidence of this can be seen in the increasing associations and alliances between countries of both regions.

Pakistan and the GCC have always had friendly relations, initially based on religion, but now also encompassing political, strategic, and economic ties as well. The importance Pakistan places on its relationship with the Middle Eastern countries can be seen in Prime Minister Imran Khan's victory speech in 2018, when he stated that his government would play the role of a healer in the Middle East.

Pakistan's policy towards the Gulf states mainly emanates from the large expat presence in the region. Growing ever more significant however is the fact that Pakistan relies heavily on the GCC in terms of energy. Likewise, Pakistan's strategic location, critical geographical placement in addition to the efforts made by the Pakistani emigrants in countless development projects in the Gulf have made it a natural affiliate of the Gulf countries. The Gulf countries will always rely on migrant labor, argues Ahsan Nisar in his article titled, "Why the Gulf will Always Need Migrants?" because many of these states have turned to invest in mega infrastructure projects as a bulwark against fluctuating oil prices. The Gulf States also hosts a large Pakistani labor

force - the second largest expatriate community after India encompassing professionals, businessmen, skilled and semi-skilled laborers. The worker migrants are based primarily in Saudi Arabia and UAE, while the others are spread in other places. Pakistan's remittances from the Gulf region amounted to \$11.74 billion in FY19 which is more than 50 percent of the total remittance inflows in the country during that period.

The relationship between Pakistan and the Arabian Gulf has been multidimensional. Notable of course is the Gulf support to the Pakistani economy and Pakistani help to the GCC countries in both the military and security arenas. However, even economic aspects of the relation have been lined with strategic interests. In the article, "Pakistan-Saudi Relations- An Assessment" Gawdat Bahgat states that since the 1960s aid from Saudi Arabia has served both economic development as well as strategic purposes.

Almost all of the military doctrines in the Gulf feature Pakistan's profile in military terms and nuclear capability, the latter of which is seen as a bulwark against any infringement from the East (for example from Iran) to the Gulf. In his article, "Pakistan's Interests in the Gulf," Sajjad Ashraf argues that Gulf countries need to be aware of the fact that any security architecture in the region cannot be established without excluding Pakistan.

Over the years, several economic and security interests have aligned to underscore the strategic importance of the relationship for both sides. These include energy security and counter-terrorism efforts. However, not to be forgotten is the present oil glut, the Covid19 pandemic, and the resulting repatriation of Pakistani workers. Given

this backdrop, it is more important than ever to reassess Pakistan-GCC strategic interests.

This article will give a brief overview of GCC and Pakistan's strategic interests. It will then go on to showcase how the strategic outlooks of both sides converge and will give recommendations on how the Pakistani-GCC strategic relationship can be further improved. The article will aim to address the following questions:

Question 1: How do Pakistan and GCC's strategic interests converge?

Question 2: What areas in the Pakistani-GCC strategic relationship need improvements?

Primer on Nature of Pakistan-GCC strategic relations

After independence in 1947, Pakistan has been part of the Western alliances such as SEATO and CENTO which made it favorable for the GCC in terms of provision of security and strategic affairs than any other country with open socialist inclinations such as Egypt, or a secular state like Turkey at that time. At that time the GCC featured nowhere and its initial security providers were the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK). The oil boom in the 1970s was the start of Pakistan's greater role in the Gulf region mainly because the now oil-rich GCC countries invested their new-found wealth in bolstering their security by investing in state-of-the-art weapons. However, the locals lacked the technical know-how of the equipment. In this regard, members of the Pakistan defense forces, including air and naval forces were deputed to the GCC countries to primarily train local security forces but also handle complex equipment such as radars. Pakistan also

helped create and train the Saudi navy force. In the 1960s Pakistani Air Force pilots helped the Saudi air force to repel South Yemeni invasion from the kingdom's southern border. Pakistani personnel has continuously worked with Saudi security forces in advisory and training roles. Much of the training is focused on enhancing the combat efficiency of troops against terrorist operations in low-intensity conflict circumstances.

Thus, in many ways and then Pakistani manpower came and helped in the development of these countries. The specifics of Pakistan-Saudi military cooperation are rarely made public but there is no denying Pakistani military troops present in Saudi Arabia. Military cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan has strong backing from Western Quarters. It should also be mentioned apart from practical purposes, the military connection that the two countries share also has a psychological element to it. For a friendless Pakistan during the Soviet invasion, the presence of the Saudi military relationship was a boost. Furthermore, for both Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, the close military relationships with the United States also contributes significantly to their respective strategic thinking.

The strong military presence of Pakistani troops has changed following the requirements and needs of the time. In 1979, Pakistan troops were stationed in Saudi Arabia amid rising Shia Sunni tensions and invasion of the Holy Mosque in Makkah. In 2018, the National Assembly of Pakistan was told that as many as 1671 Pakistani armed forces men have been stationed in Saudi Arabia, 629 in Qatar, and 66 in the UAE. In February 2018, a strong contingent of Pakistani troops was sent to Riyadh for training and advice under

the 1982 Protocol Agreement between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. There are already around 1,100 Pakistan troops present in the Kingdom. The former Saudi intelligence chief Prince Turki bin Faisal once said that the ties between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia were “probably one of the closest relationships in the world between any two countries without any official treaty.”

After the 1990-1991 Persian Gulf War, Pakistan’s security involvement in the Gulf increased. In 1990, Pakistan sent troops to Kuwait in response to the Iraqi invasion. Pakistani officers served in procedural and advisory roles in the Kuwaiti Army during the Gulf War. Moreover, during the same war, Pakistan responding to Saudi appeal, dispatched its soldiers to safeguard the Islamic holy sites in the Kingdom. In turn, the Kingdom assisted Pakistan, when the latter conducted nuclear tests in 1998 by the promising provision of 50,000 barrels per day of free oil to help Pakistan pull through the threat of forthcoming sanctions.

Fast-forwarding to the 21st century, Pakistan-GCC strategic relations encompass joint exercises, training, deployment, and sale of weapons. An example is the Joint Gulf Shield 1 drills in which a Pakistani flotilla participated along with troops from 24 other countries. These included Bahrain, the UAE, the US, Jordan, Kuwait, and Egypt. In 2011, Pakistan accepted Prince Bandar bin Sultan’s request to help suppress an anti-government popular uprising in Bahrain, a key ally of Saudi Arabia.

While the US to this day remains the main external security provider, Pakistan’s security provision to the Gulf

comes under the framework of security provided by the US and UK which involves troop deployment for military training, defense pacts, and joint military exercise. However, despite a history of close ties, challenges increased, mainly because of asymmetrical expectations on either side. For example, in 2015, relations faced a hindrance when Pakistan was unable to comply with a Saudi Arabian request to position troops for the Yemen war, due to limitations at home. Both Saudi Arabia and UAE gave critical responses to Pakistan's stance. However, in 2016, Pakistan's former Chief of Army Staff, General Raheel Sharif became the head of the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition's (IMCTC)-a move which was not only symbolic but also showcased how much Pakistan is valued in strategic terms.

Strategic relations between Pakistan and the Gulf States also lies in how Pakistan balances its relations between regional rivals the KSA and Iran. In 2019, both Saudi Arabia and the UAE have made investments culminating in almost \$30 billion in loans and investments in Pakistan. This includes setting up an oil refinery in Gwadar. This gives a substantial economic cover to the bilateral relations between Pakistan and the GCC. The Gulf states have also expressed interest in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).

Gulf Military Doctrine

In the last twenty-five years, the Gulf region has suffered three major wars: the Iran-Iraq war, (1980-1988); the Gulf war to overthrow Iraq to keep it from inhabiting Kuwait, (1990-1991); and the Iraq war (2003–2009). However, the ever-changing scenario in the Middle East is changing the regional balance of power which means that the Palestinian

issue has taken a back burner and the Saudi-Iranian rivalry has new dimensions to it. Although the Gulf War provided the impetus, the arms race in terms of weapon accumulation in the Middle East is increasing at an exponential rate. Syria and Yemen are two primary case studies in this regard. While the former is witnessing struggles between at least different countries namely the US, Russia, Iran, Israel, and Turkey as well as non-state actors, the latter is an example where third party (Houthi rebels) powerplay is being witnessed. Saudi Arabia has also been working on building a nuclear arsenal with US help. Not to forget that added US sanctions on Iran also purport the escalation of an arms race in the region.

According to SIPRI, strained relations between Iran, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE are major obstacles to the region's stability, security, and peace. These states rely on the stockpiling of weapons as an important means to achieve a dominion status in the region. Available data shows that the GCC states spent an estimate of \$95 to \$128 billion on their countries' armed forces in 2017. Cordesman (2017) estimated that total GCC military spending was around \$120 billion in 2016-17. That said, military spending information is rarely publicly released in some countries (UAE and Qatar). Places with available data, do not tally with actual expenditure on the military (Saudi Arabia).

In the year 2018, Saudi Arabia made wide-ranging security and defense reforms taking into account regional threats, rapid changes, and the role played by the Kingdom in both regional and international conflicts. Along similar lines is UAE's strategy which entails maintaining a

strong partnership with Saudi Arabia, fostering a stable relationship with the US, increasing participation in the global economy using financial resources, and building strong national security technology. Both countries particularly cybersecurity and intelligence, curbing violent extremist threats, encountering the so-called Iranian threat, and maintaining a strong relationship with the GCC countries.

The GCC was formed primarily as a counter apparatus against post-revolution Iran especially its alleged development of nuclear capability. This is not to discard the challenges present from groups such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS. However, the underlying factor has always been Iran—whether it be the war in Yemen where Saudi Arabia views the Houthi rebels as Iranian proxies or the Qatar-Gulf crisis where of the thirteen demands presented to Qatar were that it break ties with Iran. This trepidation has resulted in serious military cooperation, an example of which is the Saudi-Emirati alliance in Yemen.

As mentioned previously, during the uprisings in Saudi Arabia in 1979, Pakistan sent troops to maintain peace in the country. Though Pakistan has always maintained that it will not be part of third-party warfare, the presence of Pakistani military does give a psychological boost to the Saudis. Pakistan is already playing a helpful role in this regard through security provision for the regime, which although does not include third-party warfare does incorporate providing defense against any direct attack on Saudi soil for example.

The threat of Iran is also linked to the protection of GCC oil facilities. The Strait of Hormuz tensions and the recent

Aramco attacks have made it more pertinent that the GCC project its oil interests and assets. Hence, the two main considerations underlying the choice of military doctrine by the GCC states are the balance of forces and strategic depth. While other factors such as regime survival, oil fields, and supplies protection are also security concerns, the threat from Iran takes the center stage in the current time followed by any other concerns. In fact, at the end of the day, the GCC countries link every other concern such as regime survival with Iran, directly or indirectly.

Pakistan's Military Doctrine

Pakistan's strategic outlook focuses on countering both external and internal threats. Since 1947, Pakistan has faced both real and perceived threats to its existence originating from wars, rebellions, natural disasters, and fears of an economic breakdown in the first 25 years after independence. By going explicitly nuclear in 1998, Pakistan showcased its long-term rival India, that Delhi would not be able to attack Islamabad militarily. Pakistan's doctrine has evolved since 1998. Policymakers have become cognizant of the fact that resorting only to defense will ultimately result in defeat. Which is why there is now the concept of 'offensive defense' which means that concurrent to attacking there needs to be an element of defending at the same time, rather than trying to tire out the opponent through defense only. This was employed in the aftermath of the Pulwama attack in February 2019.

In terms of external threats for Pakistan, the threat from India as the forefront. Following that is the threat Pakistan faces from extremist elements within the country. Then, of course, is the instability in Afghanistan. If peace does not

come to Pakistan's western neighbor soon, there will be a spillover into Pakistan. Given Pakistan's already floundering economy with its energy shortfalls, this is something it cannot afford. While Pakistan has taken measures to curb the above threats- Operations Zarb-e-Azab and Rad-ul-Fasad being cases in points- a lot of arenas still need to be tackled. Given recent investments by the GCC states in Gwadar as well as the work on the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the threat of instability within Pakistan has increased substantially.

The Pakistani army forms a significant segment of Pakistan's armed forces and holds competence in both offense and defense. The Pakistan army's main battle tank (MBT), the al Khalid is a testament to Pakistani-China cooperation in the field of defense. In addition to its MBTs, the military can durable transporters for on-ground movements. The second vital part of the army comprises the Air force. As of 2010, the Pakistani air force owns a mix of French Mirages and Chinese-built fighters, including the JF-17, for which Pakistan is China's first major customer. The budget allotted to the Pakistani military increased by an alarming 73 percent from 2009 till 2018. In 2018 the military outlay was \$11.4 billion. According to the 2019-2020 budget the Pakistan Government was set to apportion Rs1.15 trillion for 'Defense Affairs and Services'. The official Pakistani narrative preserves that the country's nuclear capabilities are being undertaken to maintain the practicability of its long-standing nuclear doctrine of minimum credible deterrence. Data from SIPRI estimates that Pakistan maintains an estimated 100-120 nuclear weapons. The core objective of Pakistan's nuclear

weapons are to maintain deterrence in face of both Indian conventional and nuclear attack. In case of failure of deterrence, the second objective is to rebuff any attempt at an Indian victory in case war occurs.

Moreover, in light of India's illegal annexation of Jammu & Kashmir on 5 August 2019, there is a threat now that India in its second phase, may move towards the occupation of Azad Kashmir and Gilgit Baltistan as well as create instabilities in Balochistan province- the latter of which it has already been doing for years. In Kashmir, the GCC has not voiced concern as much as Pakistan expected them to do so primarily because they view India as a potential trading partner in the future when oil runs out. Post-August 05, and India's continuing Hindutva strategy against Muslims, Pakistani policy makers have all voiced that a robust strategy to counter India is needed more urgently than ever. With regards to the GCC however, Pakistan has failed to get the GCC on board in terms of all the threats mentioned above.

Pak-GCC: Strategic Convergence

Several economic and security interests have aligned to underscore the strategic importance of the relationship for both sides primarily in energy security and military to military relationship. The GCC is the world's largest importer of arms, but as budgets are set to remain tightened in an era of low oil prices, its members are also looking for cheaper alternatives. This imperative comes in parallel to a longer-term goal of diversifying strategic relationships away from a dependence on the United States.

The international energy market, especially oil trade is conditional to unswerving supply because any impasse

however temporary has an immediate effect on global energy prices. Oil tankers are always susceptible to attacks from pirates and even terrorists. Thus, the security of energy trade in both the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf is a fundamental interest for all regional as well as macro actors. The Strait of Hormuz is an important junction in the facilitation of the energy stream from the Persian Gulf since it connects with the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean via the Gulf of Oman. An estimated 90 percent of hydrocarbon exports of the Persian Gulf, over 40 percent of the global oil trade, and almost all of Qatar's liquefied natural gas are shipped through this point.

During the 2006 IISS Manama Gulf Dialogue in Bahrain, the Pakistan delegation was led by General Ehsan ul Haq, former Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee. During the presentation on "The Future of Gulf Security," it was suggested that the GCC should shape a collective security apparatus to counter both internal and external threats rather than importing any security cover from the west. A second proposal was that Pakistan can actively contribute to the development of the GCC's defense capabilities. This could be done through training programs in both Pakistan as well as the Gulf States. Pakistan already has defense cooperation agreements with all GCC states.

Thus, an area which is common is the military to military relationship, which encompasses training and intelligence sharing. It also includes the purchase of weapons. The GCC is the world's largest importer of arms, but as budgets are set to remain tightened in an era of low oil prices, its members are also looking for cheaper alternatives. Pakistan is a perfect fit for this. Already talks of joint production

and defense mechanisms are in place. Islamabad sees the GCC as a key market for this expansion. The Pakistan Ordnance Factory recently opened an office in Dubai, which covers the entire Middle East. Another area where the two doctrines meet in the IMCTC task force which a former Pakistani General heads. Its main objective is to protect Muslim countries from all terrorist groups and terrorist organizations irrespective of their sect and name.

Over the years, a major means of providing aid to Pakistan has been through deferred payments for oil. Pakistan is an energy deficit country and relies desperately on imports from the GCC's petroleum industry. This is a two-way street because Pakistan helps the GCC by contributing to their security, particularly the sea links and the energy supply lines. On several occasions, the Pakistan Navy has taken charge of the international piracy coalition, Combined Task Force (CTF)-151. The main objective of this force is to disrupt and eliminate the chain of piracy in the Arabian Sea, Gulf of Aden, Somali Basin, and Southern Red Sea

Conclusion

O The GCC states hold increasing significance for Asian states. This is primarily because Asian countries are undergoing a process of moving away from western reliance in terms of global trade and economy. Such predispositions can be seen in the increasing high-level bilateral exchanges between the two sides during the past decade. Increasing cooperation on counter-terrorism, defense, and security is also an indication of the new emerging associations. Moreover, a large number of Asian countries have collectively constituted the largest importer base of hydrocarbons from the GCC. Since this demand will continue to increase in the foreseeable future, the GCC role as an energy provider to the Asian region will progressively increase. Furthermore, economic ties between the GCC and Asian countries are rapidly growing. These ties cover both the vast number of Asian immigrants working in the GCC as well as the investments the GCC countries are making in Asian states. This makes maintaining the security and stability of both regions, mutually important for both sides.

All in all, while there have been differences in Pakistan and GCC, it cannot be denied that there are strategic convergence areas where Pakistan and the GCC can work upon. Even though differences in outlooks and recently a significant GCC tilt towards India may cause impediments in Pakistan relations with the GCC. However, Indian Government's increasing brutalities against Muslims in India, particularly in Indian-occupied Kashmir has led to raised eyebrows within the Gulf.

As outlined in the article, energy security is the main binding factor followed by counterterrorism efforts.

Pakistan's continuing role with the GCC states is contingent on how successfully it can be incorporated in the Gulf power equation. It must however be pointed out that geographical congruity with Iran and the fact that Pakistan has a significant Shia population means Pakistan will not be party to any project or action that allies it against its neighbor. Gulf countries need to accept this fact. Sideways, Pakistan must be cognizant of growing India Gulf ties and the edge India holds in terms of better skilled labor which has made it easier for them to integrate in the Gulf market. In light of this Pakistan needs to invest in their work force through various training programmes.

The Covid pandemic has resulted in an increase in unemployment in Pakistan. Before the pandemic, around 60,000 people were in the process of applying abroad for jobs- 20,000 of these people were in the process of entering Saudi Arabia. The International Monetary Fund has already estimated the unemployment rate projection for Pakistan to be 6.2% for 2020. The present oil glut and discontinuation of all tourist projects in the Gulf countries means a cessation of manpower export for now. This means that in light of the economic recession in wake of the Covid pandemic, the GCC countries will be looking for alternative means of revenue, especially to make up for the present downturn in oil prices. Pakistan provides a perfect opportunity in this regard. Unemployed labour can be absorbed in large scale construction work on within the Special Economic Zones (SEZs) of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor Project. Pakistan's relations with China are unique and the former can very well act as a conduit between China and the Gulf region. Hence, investment by GCC states in these projects

provides viable 'recession-buffer' opportunities for both Pakistan and the Gulf Countries.

It should also be noted that even though Covid-19, has halted major projects in the Gulf, once activities resume, there will be a demand for a labour force. Apart from focusing on making the labour force more competitive, the government should ensure a plan for mitigating the worst threats to migrant workers' rights and improving their status throughout the Gulf. This too would be in both sides' interest.

All in all, the GCC states need to aware that any new security architecture will be incomplete without Pakistan. Hence, it is imperative that both sides evaluate their strategic interests and build upon mutual grounds, so as to safeguard their economic futures by building a more comprehensive and integrated future policy.

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