

Role of Pakistan in the Islamic Military Coalition: Consequences and Significance

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Abstract

The Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC), announced in December 2015 by Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince and Defense Minister Muhammad bin Salman, represents an unprecedented collective security initiative involving 42 Muslim-majority states. Pakistan, as the only nuclear power within the alliance and with extensive experience in counter-terrorism, occupies a central role in shaping its trajectory. While the IMCTC aims to counter terrorism and violent extremism, its geopolitical implications—particularly in the context of Saudi–Iranian rivalry—raise challenges for Pakistan's strategic balancing. This paper examines the historical context of the coalition, Pakistan's role and motivations, and the implications for its foreign and security policy. It critically examines existing literature, identifies research gaps, and offers a forward-looking perspective on Pakistan's engagement in the IMCTC.

Keywords: Islamic Military Coalition, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Counter-Terrorism, Foreign Policy

Introduction

The Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC), often referred to as the “Muslim NATO,” was formally announced on December 15, 2015, by Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman. Headquartered in Riyadh, the alliance was initially composed of 34 member states, later expanding to 42, with the stated objective of countering terrorism across the Muslim world (DeYoung, 2015). The IMCTC encompasses diverse member states from the Middle East, Africa, and Asia, all sharing a Sunni-majority orientation, while notable Shia-majority countries such as Iran were excluded. This exclusion has generated both opportunities and risks for Pakistan, given its geostrategic location and its history of balancing relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran (Javaid & Mushtaq, 2020). Pakistan officially joined the IMCTC in January 2016. Its decision was reinforced by its extensive experience in counter-terrorism, particularly through military operations such as Zarb-e-Azb and Radd-ul-Fasaad, which significantly weakened militant networks within its borders (Fair, 2018; Yamin, 2019). Pakistan's military credibility was further elevated by the appointment of former Chief of Army Staff, General Raheel Sharif, as the first commander-in-chief of the coalition in 2017 (Khan, 2019). However, Pakistan's participation has sparked domestic debates regarding neutrality in Middle Eastern conflicts, particularly in the

Yemen war. Critics argue that Pakistan risks alienating Iran, a critical neighbor and long-standing partner in energy and security cooperation (Rizvi, 2020; Abbas, 2019). Globally, the IMCTC has been perceived as a Saudi-led initiative aimed at consolidating Sunni dominance in the Muslim world, drawing cautious support from the United States and other Western powers (Hokayem, 2017; Markey, 2019). For Pakistan, its membership in the coalition is both an opportunity to reaffirm its counter-terrorism credentials and a dilemma in balancing its relationships with Riyadh and Tehran (Hussain, 2021; Zafar, 2022). This paper investigates Pakistan's role in the IMCTC by exploring its historical context, scholarly debates, challenges, and prospects for maintaining regional equilibrium.

Historical Background

The Islamic Military Coalition was established against the backdrop of escalating terrorism in the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia. The rise of transnational jihadist groups such as Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) prompted regional powers to seek a coordinated response (Byman, 2019). Saudi Arabia, facing direct threats from extremist groups and sectarian instability in neighboring states, spearheaded the creation of the IMCTC. The coalition was envisioned not only as a counter-terrorism initiative but also as a mechanism to strengthen Riyadh's leadership in the Muslim world (Hokayem, 2017). Pakistan's entry into the IMCTC reflects both historical ties with Saudi Arabia and its broader security calculus. Since the 1960s, Pakistan has provided military training and advisory assistance to the Kingdom, while also benefiting from Saudi financial aid and investments (Riedel, 2018). The relationship deepened in the 1980s during the Soviet-Afghan War, when Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, with U.S. support, coordinated efforts against Soviet forces in Afghanistan (Usman, 2020). Pakistan's inclusion in the IMCTC thus builds upon this longstanding security partnership. However, the exclusion of Iran complicates Pakistan's position, as Islamabad has historically sought to balance its relations with both Riyadh and Tehran, especially in the context of the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline and border security cooperation (Javaid & Mushtaq, 2020; Siddiqui, 2022). This historical trajectory demonstrates that while Pakistan's participation strengthens its ties with Saudi Arabia, it also risks exacerbating regional sectarian divides (Shafiq, 2021).

Literature Review

Existing scholarship on the IMCTC and Pakistan's role highlights three broad dimensions. First, several studies explore the coalition's counter-terrorism objectives and its potential to institutionalize collective Muslim security. Sultan (2018) emphasizes that Pakistan's membership enhances its global credibility as a counter-terrorism actor, while Ahmad (2017) argues that the IMCTC represents an important step in consolidating regional military cooperation. Fair (2018) and Khan (2019) both stress Pakistan's counter-terrorism operations, such as Zarb-e-Azb, as a precedent for its inclusion. Similarly, Mahmood and Javaid (2021) point out that Pakistan's anti-terrorism experience makes it a natural fit for leading roles within the IMCTC. From a regional lens, Hokayem (2017) and Byman (2019) observe that the IMCTC was formed largely in response to ISIS and Al-Qaeda's regional threat, offering member states a platform to coordinate intelligence and resources. Second, a substantial body of work discusses the geopolitical dilemmas for Pakistan, particularly the Saudi-Iran rivalry. Ghulam Qumber, Ishaque, and Riaz (2017) stress that Pakistan must walk a tightrope to avoid alienating Iran while remaining aligned with Saudi Arabia. Rizvi (2020) highlights parliamentary debates where neutrality in the Yemen conflict was emphasized as a national consensus. Similarly, Riedel (2018) describes the Saudi-Pakistan partnership as historically deep but vulnerable to strains when Riyadh and Tehran clash. Scholars such as Javaid and Mushtaq (2020) and Siddiqui (2022) argue that Pakistan risks alienating Iran

economically, especially concerning the Iran–Pakistan gas pipeline. Moreover, Abbas (2019) notes that Iran has increasingly strengthened ties with India as a counterbalance, which complicates Pakistan’s foreign policy. Third, Western and global perspectives on the IMCTC are more skeptical. Hokayem (2017) describes the coalition as an attempt by Saudi Arabia to institutionalize Sunni dominance, while Shafiq (2021) contends that its exclusion of Shia-majority states undermines its legitimacy. Markey (2019) situates the IMCTC within broader U.S.–Saudi strategic cooperation, suggesting that it reinforces Washington’s counter-terrorism objectives while outsourcing costs to Muslim-majority states. Meanwhile, Moghul (2020) critiques the IMCTC as symbolic rather than operational, lacking a unified command structure. From a comparative angle, Kamal (2020) observes that unlike NATO, the IMCTC has no binding defense clause, making it more of a political gesture. Others, such as Ali (2018) and Hussain (2021), suggest that Pakistan could use its participation to mediate Saudi–Iran tensions, leveraging its credibility with both states. Overall, the literature identifies Pakistan’s centrality in the IMCTC but also underscores the precariousness of its role. While some scholars highlight the opportunities to project Pakistan as a leading Muslim power (Mahmood & Javaid, 2021; Khan, 2019; Ullah & Khan, 2021), others warn that the coalition risks deepening sectarian divides and complicating Pakistan’s domestic and regional security outlook (Rizvi, 2020; Abbas, 2019; Zafar, 2022).

Research Gap

While much of the literature focuses on Pakistan’s balancing act between Saudi Arabia and Iran, limited scholarly work critically examines the domestic implications of Pakistan’s IMCTC membership particularly the internal sectarian dynamics and parliamentary debates (Syed, 2022). Moreover, there is insufficient analysis of the coalition’s operational effectiveness and the long-term impact on Pakistan’s regional security strategy. This research addresses these gaps by assessing both external and internal dimensions of Pakistan’s role in the IMCTC.

Research Questions

1. What motivated Pakistan to join the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition?
2. How has Pakistan’s participation in the IMCTC influenced its relations with Saudi Arabia and Iran?
3. What are the strategic opportunities and challenges for Pakistan within the IMCTC framework?

Research Objectives

1. To analyze Pakistan’s motivations for joining the IMCTC.
2. To evaluate the consequences of Pakistan’s participation for its regional diplomacy.
3. To identify the challenges and prospects of Pakistan’s role in the coalition.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research methodology focused on the critical analysis of secondary sources to evaluate Pakistan’s role in the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC). The approach is exploratory in nature, relying on scholarly articles, policy papers, official statements, parliamentary debates, think-tank reports, and credible media coverage to gather insights into the political, strategic, and security dimensions of Pakistan’s participation. By applying thematic analysis, the research identifies patterns in existing literature and synthesizes diverse perspectives on Pakistan’s motivations, challenges, and prospects within the coalition. The methodology emphasizes contextual understanding rather than numerical measurement, allowing for a deeper exploration of the complexities surrounding Pakistan’s foreign policy choices. Through this approach, the study not only traces the historical and geopolitical context of Pakistan’s decision but also assesses its implications for domestic stability and regional diplomacy.

Findings

The findings suggest the following:

Pakistan's Strategic Motivations for Joining IMCTC

Pakistan's decision to join the IMCTC was primarily driven by strategic, political, and security considerations. As the only nuclear power in the Muslim world, Pakistan sought to strengthen its image as a leading Islamic state capable of addressing terrorism and violent extremism (Mahmood & Javaid, 2021). Participation also provided Pakistan with an opportunity to consolidate its longstanding defense and economic ties with Saudi Arabia, which has historically supported Pakistan financially and diplomatically (Riedel, 2018). By accepting the appointment of General Raheel Sharif as the first commander-in-chief of the IMCTC, Pakistan further reinforced its leadership credentials in counter-terrorism operations, particularly given its proven track record in successful military campaigns such as Operation Zarb-e-Azb and Radd-ul-Fasaad (Fair, 2018; Khan, 2019). This alignment allowed Pakistan to project itself internationally as a responsible stakeholder in global and regional security, while simultaneously gaining access to political and economic incentives from Riyadh.

Challenges of Balancing Relations with Iran

While joining the IMCTC bolstered Pakistan's ties with Saudi Arabia, it simultaneously created friction with Iran, which viewed the coalition as a Sunni-dominated, Saudi-led initiative designed to isolate Tehran (Shafiq, 2021). Pakistan's participation was perceived by Iran as a departure from its traditional policy of neutrality in Middle Eastern rivalries, especially during conflicts such as the war in Yemen (Rizvi, 2020). Domestically, this raised concerns among Pakistan's political elites and Shia community, who feared that aligning too closely with Riyadh could import sectarian tensions into Pakistan's internal politics (Abbas, 2019). Despite repeated assurances from Islamabad that the IMCTC was not directed against any state, including Iran, skepticism persisted both at home and abroad. Furthermore, the deepening ties between Iran, India, and Afghanistan have complicated Pakistan's ability to balance its relations in the region, with strategic projects such as the Iran–Pakistan gas pipeline becoming stalled (Javaid & Mushtaq, 2020). Thus, Pakistan's membership in the IMCTC has created a diplomatic dilemma, as it seeks to maintain economic and security cooperation with Saudi Arabia while avoiding alienation of its neighbor Iran.

Operational Limitations and Domestic Political Debates

Despite its symbolic importance, the IMCTC has faced significant operational limitations that affect Pakistan's role within it. Analysts argue that the coalition lacks a clear mandate, unified command structure, and agreed-upon mechanisms for intelligence-sharing or joint operations (Moghul, 2020; Kamal, 2020). This has led many to view the IMCTC as more of a political tool for Saudi Arabia than a functioning military alliance. Within Pakistan, debates in parliament and the media reflect deep divisions over the country's involvement. Some political leaders endorsed participation as a means to strengthen counter-terrorism cooperation and improve relations with Riyadh (Sanobar, 2018), while others warned that it risked dragging Pakistan into proxy wars in the Middle East (Syed, 2022). Public opinion has also been cautious, as Pakistanis remain wary of becoming embroiled in external conflicts while facing pressing internal security and economic challenges (Zafar, 2022). These debates underscore the tension between Pakistan's external commitments and domestic political realities, highlighting the complex trade-offs inherent in its decision to join the IMCTC.

Discussion and Analysis

Pakistan's Geostrategic Importance in IMCTC

Pakistan's participation in the IMCTC is deeply rooted in its geostrategic significance as a nuclear power and as a frontline state in the global war on terror. With decades of experience in counter-terrorism operations, Pakistan represents an indispensable member of the coalition (Fair, 2018). Its geographical location, bridging South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East, further enhances its relevance, making its role central to the coalition's credibility.

Saudi–Pakistan Security Partnership

The IMCTC strengthened the already robust Saudi–Pakistan security partnership. Saudi Arabia has historically relied on Pakistan for military training and advisory roles, and in turn, Pakistan has benefited from Riyadh's financial support (Riedel, 2018). The IMCTC thus became an extension of this bilateral relationship, allowing Saudi Arabia to utilize Pakistan's military expertise while giving Islamabad diplomatic and economic leverage.

Domestic Political Reactions

Despite the strategic benefits, Pakistan's involvement in the IMCTC has faced significant domestic resistance. Parliamentary debates revealed skepticism among political elites, with many fearing that participation would undermine Pakistan's neutrality in Middle Eastern rivalries (Syed, 2022). The Yemen conflict, in particular, triggered widespread criticism, as opposition parties demanded that Pakistan avoid entanglement in sectarian conflicts (Rizvi, 2020).

Iran's Perceptions and Diplomatic Strains

A central challenge for Pakistan has been Iran's perception of the IMCTC as a Saudi-led bloc designed to marginalize Tehran (Shafiq, 2021). Pakistan has repeatedly assured Iran that its role is limited to counter-terrorism and not directed against any state, yet mistrust persists. This perception has led to diplomatic strains, complicating cooperation on regional energy projects like the Iran–Pakistan pipeline (Javaid & Mushtaq, 2020).

Impact on Domestic Sectarian Dynamics

Pakistan's IMCTC membership has also raised concerns about internal sectarian harmony. As a country with a significant Shia population, alignment with a coalition perceived as Sunni-dominated risks aggravating sectarian divisions at home (Abbas, 2019). This internal dimension makes Pakistan's role even more delicate, as domestic instability could undermine the very counter-terrorism objectives the coalition seeks to achieve.

Operational Limitations of the IMCTC

Critics argue that the IMCTC suffers from structural weaknesses. The absence of a unified command system, clear rules of engagement, and inclusive membership—particularly the exclusion of Iran, Iraq, and Syria has limited its effectiveness (Moghul, 2020; Kamal, 2020). For Pakistan, this has meant participation in a coalition with limited operational capacity, reducing the tangible benefits of its involvement.

Symbolism versus Substance

Many scholars describe the IMCTC as more symbolic than functional. While it projects unity among Muslim-majority states, the lack of coordinated actions and military campaigns undermines its credibility (Markey, 2019). For Pakistan, this raises questions about whether the alliance is truly a platform for counter-terrorism or primarily a geopolitical tool for Saudi Arabia (Hokayem, 2017).

Balancing Relations Between Saudi Arabia and Iran

Pakistan's broader foreign policy dilemma is how to balance its deep ties with Saudi Arabia against its need for stable relations with Iran. While Riyadh provides economic aid and political backing, Tehran is an essential neighbor with shared borders and energy potential (Hussain, 2021). Pakistan's challenge has been to reassure both sides while avoiding being drawn into their rivalry (Zafar, 2022).

Pakistan's Role as a Mediator

Some analysts argue that Pakistan could use its position within the IMCTC to mediate between Saudi Arabia and Iran (Ali, 2018). By leveraging its credibility with both states, Pakistan might transform its participation from a liability into a diplomatic asset. However, this requires careful navigation, as overt mediation could also backfire if perceived as favoritism.

Economic and Strategic Incentives

Participation in the IMCTC also offers Pakistan economic and strategic benefits. Riyadh has extended financial aid packages to Islamabad, while Gulf states provide remittance inflows critical to Pakistan's economy (Mahmood & Javaid, 2021). Engagement in the coalition therefore has an economic dimension that cannot be separated from its security motivations.

Domestic Security and Counter-Terrorism Credibility

Through its membership, Pakistan reinforces its reputation as a state committed to fighting terrorism. Having borne immense human and financial costs in its own counter-terrorism campaigns, Pakistan's involvement in the IMCTC strengthens its international profile as a responsible security partner (Yamin, 2019). This helps counter external criticism that Pakistan has not done enough to combat extremism.

Future Prospects and Strategic Dilemmas

Looking ahead, Pakistan faces a strategic dilemma: continue strengthening ties with Saudi Arabia through the IMCTC or pursue a more neutral stance to avoid alienating Iran and destabilizing its domestic sectarian balance (Ullah & Khan, 2021). The future of Pakistan's role depends on whether the IMCTC evolves into a functional counter-terrorism alliance or remains largely symbolic. Either way, Islamabad must carefully manage its commitments to avoid long-term geopolitical entanglements.

Conclusion

Pakistan's participation in the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC) underscores the country's dual identity as both a frontline state in the global war on terror and a pivotal Muslim-majority power with regional responsibilities. By joining the coalition, Pakistan reaffirmed its commitment to collective counter-terrorism efforts while simultaneously reinforcing its longstanding security and economic ties with Saudi Arabia. The appointment of General Raheel Sharif as the first commander-in-chief of the coalition symbolized Pakistan's leadership role and its ability to contribute militarily and diplomatically to broader Islamic security structures. However, the decision also generated considerable challenges, both regionally and domestically. Pakistan has struggled to maintain a delicate balance between Saudi Arabia and Iran, as its participation was perceived by Tehran as a tilt toward Riyadh. This has complicated Pakistan's efforts to sustain cooperative relations with Iran in areas such as border security and energy projects. At home, political debates and sectarian sensitivities highlighted the risks of being drawn into Middle Eastern rivalries, with concerns that involvement could destabilize Pakistan's fragile

domestic harmony. These dilemmas reveal the high political cost of participating in alliances shaped by sectarian and geopolitical divisions. Looking ahead, Pakistan's role in the IMCTC will remain shaped by the coalition's evolving relevance and effectiveness. If the IMCTC matures into a genuine platform for counter-terrorism cooperation, Pakistan could leverage its participation to enhance its global standing and regional influence. If, however, it remains primarily a Saudi-led initiative with limited operational value, Pakistan must carefully reassess its commitments to avoid unnecessary entanglements. The future thus demands a cautious, balanced approach that prioritizes Pakistan's national interests, safeguards its domestic stability, and upholds its role as a responsible and independent actor in regional and global security.

Way Forward

Pakistan's future engagement with the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC) requires a carefully calibrated approach that balances international commitments with domestic stability. As a pivotal member of the coalition, Pakistan should advocate for a clearer operational framework that emphasizes intelligence-sharing, capacity-building, and counter-terrorism training rather than sectarian alignment. By ensuring that the coalition's activities remain explicitly directed against terrorism rather than any particular state, Pakistan can safeguard its neutrality while enhancing its credibility as a responsible Muslim power. Strengthening parliamentary oversight of Pakistan's commitments would also help maintain national consensus and prevent domestic divisions. At the regional level, Pakistan should leverage its membership to promote dialogue and confidence-building between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Its unique geopolitical position and historical relations with both states enable Islamabad to act as a mediator rather than a partisan player. By initiating backchannel diplomacy and supporting inclusive dialogue within the coalition framework, Pakistan could reduce tensions in the Muslim world while projecting itself as a constructive peace broker. This approach would not only help mitigate sectarian polarization but also enhance Pakistan's diplomatic standing in the wider Islamic community. Finally, Pakistan must ensure that its participation in the IMCTC is aligned with its long-term national interests. Economic cooperation, security partnerships, and regional diplomacy should all be prioritized in ways that complement Pakistan's internal stability and development agenda. Engagement in the coalition should serve as a platform for strengthening Pakistan's counter-terrorism capacity, securing international partnerships, and protecting its diaspora in Gulf countries. By maintaining a cautious, pragmatic, and forward-looking stance, Pakistan can transform its role in the IMCTC from a source of potential conflict into an opportunity for leadership, cooperation, and regional stability.

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