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SMDA; evolving relations with Iran; potential impacts of these developments on Pak's balancing efforts in ME

Answer

Introduction:

"Pakistan is walking a diplomatic tightrope as it seeks to deepen security ties with Saudi Arabia while avoiding confrontation with Iran."

(Al-Jazeera)

Pakistan's Middle East policy is undergoing a delicate but consequential recalibration. The signing of Strategic Mutual Defense

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Agreement (SMDA) with Saudi Arabia and simultaneous efforts to normalize and deepen pragmatic cooperation with Iran reflect Islamabad's attempt to navigate a region historically defined by rivalry, proxy conflicts, and shifting alliances. These developments must be understood not as isolated diplomatic moves, but as components of Pakistan's broader strategy to secure economic stability, regional security, and strategic autonomy amid declining global certainties. Pakistan's current approach resembles managed hedging, where shared cooperation with Saudi Arabia coexists with selective engagement with Iran. To deter the challenges of Proxy, Perception, Sanctions exposure, volatile situation on borders and domestic sectarian spill-over; Pakistan needs to balance its Foreign Policy with Delinking Saudi Security from Iran Containment, compartmentalisation between KSA and Iran, ^{and} using the Post 2023-KSA-Iran detente' as diplomatic cover.

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II. Reviewing Strategic Mutual Defense Agreement with KSA:

The SMDA formalizes a long-standing but previously implicit security partnership between Pakistan and KSA. The core provision—treating aggression against one as aggression against both—signals deterrence and mutual reassurance. Unlike earlier defense cooperation agreements (trainings, advisory roles, troop deployments), SMDA elevates the relationship to a strategic security pact.

III. Evolving Pakistan-Iran Alliance:

Pakistan-Iran relations have historically oscillated between cooperation and distrust. Recent developments—baster trade Agreement, Border Markets, Post Jan 2024 skirmishes diplomatic ties and an ambitious \$10 billion bilateral trade target—indicate a shift towards selective engagement driven

by geography and pragmatism
rather than alliance formation.

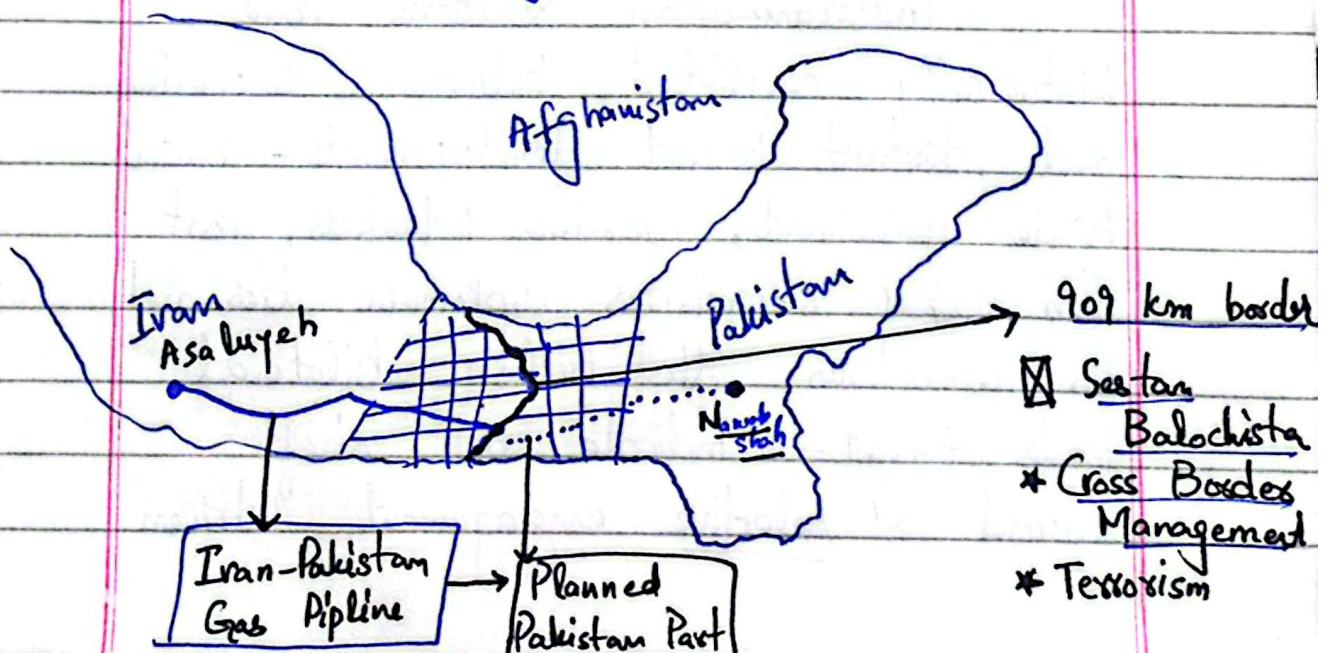
III. Importance of KSA and Iran for Pakistan:

KSA

- Economic importance: oil facilities, deposits, investments pledges, employment for 35 million Pakistanis, largest remittances
- Diplomatic clout
- Religious

IV. Importance of Iran:

- Long border 909 km
- immediate neighbours
- Cross border management
- Energy Sources



IV. Potential Impacts of these developments on balancing Pakistan's relation with both M.E Powers:

a) Shift from ideological Alignment to Interest-based Foreign Policy:

These developments signal a shift toward interest-driven realism, where:

- security cooperation with KSA is pursued for deterrence and economic confidence
- Engagement with Iran is pursued for border stability, energy security and trade.

b) Rebalancing Pakistan's Gulf-Centric Foreign Policy:

For decades, Pakistan's M.E focus was heavily Gulf-Centric. Engagement with Iran introduces geographical balance into foreign policy, by re-centering neighbourhood diplomacy and integrating border-security into regional strategy. Hence, Pakistan's foreign policy becomes less asymmetrical.

c) Compartmentalization Becomes a Diplomatic Necessity:

Pakistan is compelled to compartmentalize foreign relations. FP practice shifts from broad alliances to issue-specific partnerships, increasing flexibility but requiring administrative sophistication.

d) Constrained freedom in Multilateral Forums:

SMDA raises expectations of Pakistan's alignment in OIC positions, Gulf security narratives, and regional crises - Yemen, Red Sea, Israel-Palestine spillovers. Simultaneously, Iran engagement limits Pakistan's ability to endorse overtly anti-Iran positions. Hence, Pakistan's voting behaviour and diplomatic language in multiple forums becomes more cautious and neutral.

e) Reinforcement of "Bridge State" Identity:
If managed well, Pakistan

can present itself as a connector between Gulf and Iran; a diplomatic interlocutor rather than a proxy.

Conclusion:

Pakistan's engagement with both KSA and Iran signals a foreign policy shift from alliance dependency to strategic hedging; expanding diplomatic options while demanding unprecedented coherence and restraint. Pakistan's FP gradually transforms from identity-driven to institution-driven diplomacy.

Pakistan's evolving M.E posture demonstrates that in a polarized region, balance is not neutrality by default but an active, carefully managed strategy requiring constant diplomatic calibration.

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