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Media, State Narratives and Public Discourse in Pakistan: A Critical Analysis of Pakistan's Saudi Strategic Mutual Defense Agreement (SMDA)

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ABSTRACT

The Saudi Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement (SMDA), signed on 17 September 2025, marks a new epoch of bilateral and strategic partnership between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. Focusing on the high-impact influence of state communication, this research paper investigates the alignment, convergence and integration of state-mediated communication in mainstream English-language print media within the framework of Robert Entman's 1993 framing theory. The investigation is grounded in Entman's theory (1993), starting from narrative construction to its impact on the desired target audience. A qualitative content analysis of four mainstream English–language newspapers, i.e Daily Dawn, The News International, The Express Tribune and The Nation, is carried out. The study aimed to evaluate the quintessential elements of the framing model, i.e problem definition, causal attribution, moral evaluation, and policy recommendations, with a view to assessing observable patterns of narrative convergence in the historical milestone of the Saudi Strategic Mutual Defense Agreement (SMDA) 2025 that shaped new horizons in defense, diplomacy and bilateral engagements.

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Introduction

In historical context, media perception of political and security matters played a crucial role in shaping public opinion. During times of geopolitical turmoil and changing regional dynamics, the media becomes helpful in providing a theoretical lens to examine the presentation of significant events, i.e., the Pakistan-Saudi Arabia strategic partnership as one of the core events of substantial magnitude in the history of Pakistan. The study examines the news of Pakistan and Saudi Arabia's agreement in the context of its relevance to regional security issues, media

portrayal of the agreement, and its impact on bilateral and international relations. Makkah Joint Defense Agreement is yet another substantial case to look at how Pakistan and Saudi Arabia built and shaped narratives of strategic partnership, regional stability, Islamic unity, and collective security as an extension of the previous agreement. Pakistan presented the agreement as a defensive and cooperative effort for more robust deterrence and peace in the region, not as a means of confrontation. Both events are vital in the construction of strategic narratives, reinforced through official press releases and media representations. The pact was a historic bilateral deal, and it garnered enormous media attention. Appreciation and applause were urged in the official statements, and the media played a crucial role in representing, expanding, and reinterpreting these themes. Therefore, this study aims to examine the congruence or incongruence between the Pakistani newspaper and state-sponsored strategic communication on the coverage of the Pakistan-Saudi Strategic Mutual Defense Agreement (SMDA) 2025 in the four English-language Pakistani newspapers to assess the level of congruence or otherwise. The research takes the perspective of a single event and is not concerned with any surface detail, but rather with a more in-depth view of the whole process of framing. The overall message is that the media is conditionally convergent; that is, newspaper framing is closer to state framing at the core framing function level and has minor differences in tone and emphasis. These convergence results are not from direct state control, but from a combination of structural dependencies, professional norms, and what are often referred to as “national interest” discursive understandings. While conducting this study, state communication has been contextualised against the backdrop of cohesive frames and themes to create the perception of a particular national identity hence, the writings are characterized by recurrent themes and words, matched with an identifiable pattern. Thomas J. Cottle (2006) argues that narratives are symbolic transmitters used by states to construct meaning; Miskimmon et al. (2013) further endorse this view, arguing that states legitimize power through persistent narrative-building to support political aims. As Hallahan et al. (2007) put it, strategic communication is "the purposeful use of communication to accomplish its mission by an organization. The fundamental understanding of how the media construct perceptions of reality stems from Walter Lippmann's (1922) book Public Opinion, which explains how individuals perceive the world through mediated representations. The overall paradigm of the concept of framing has been explored in the classic work by Robert Entman, “Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm (1993).

According to Chomsky and Herman (1988), the state-media relationship is one of interdependence in democratic countries, with the media tending to support the interests of influential people in society, including the state. Official sources and political elites are also important sources for news organizations, often resulting in news that mirrors the limits of dominant political discourse (Bennett, 1990). Nonetheless, tensions exist in this relationship, as the media sometimes call into question government policies and actions. In a seminal work, Shoemaker and Reese (1996) argue that media content is deeply rooted in its sources. It is influenced by several factors, including journalists, media routines, organizational structure, external pressures, and ideology. They have documented shifts in how political and social issues are framed as a result of changes in political authority, public issues, and media properties. Since then, the method has been used in other settings worldwide, such as research on print journalism and strategic communication. In the second study (Gitlin, 1980), it dealt with the ways in which newspapers covered social movements and political activism, and how those ways evolved over the 1960s and 1970s. In the United States of America, Gitlin traced the transformation of the

media's coverage of early civil rights movements from mostly positive coverage to a more negative treatment as the protests radicalized.

Literature Review

Research shows that media framing, linguistic manipulation, and thematic prioritization shape state discourses and frame specific political and ideological beliefs (Salam-Salmaoui & Salam, 2023).

Building on this, the current study examines how English-language newspapers in Pakistan framed the contemporary issue of the Pakistan-Saudi Strategic Mutual Defense Agreement (SMDA) 2025. A substantial body of empirical research identifies conflicting patterns in the country’s political system, state objectives, and media freedom as major ingredients of the country’s communication environment, thereby warranting an intellectual inquiry to make sense of the phenomenon.

In Pakistani media, debates on internal security, geopolitics, and bilateral relations may feature state-focused narratives that obscure nonconforming viewpoints, including democratic accountability, socioeconomic growth, and human security. Research shows that media framing, linguistic manipulation, and thematic prioritization shape state discourses and promote specific political and ideological beliefs (Salam-Salmaoui & Salam, 2023). Therefore, studies of agenda-setting, framing, and strategic communication reveal the multifaceted relationship between media and political actors in Pakistan. Additionally, no major study has examined media coverage of the Pakistan-Saudi Strategic Mutual Defense Agreement (SMDA) 2025 in the context of state-driven strategic communication. The agreement marked a milestone in the country's recent security and geopolitical landscape and is crucial to understanding how state-driven communication operates and evolves in the media. Existing literature on Pakistani media representation of conflict and policy does not offer a mechanism to investigate how conflict and policy are constructed and how newspapers use framing tools. This study addresses these gaps by examining the Pakistan-Saudi Strategic Mutual Defense Agreement (SMDA) 2025 to see how four English-language dailies in Pakistan construct meaning to align with state-sponsored communication. Moreover, the study first addresses this gap by examining the communication process in which state narratives are used strategically to pursue national interests. Secondly, researchers continue to study particular political events (elections, terrorist attacks, military changes) rather than examining how framing evolves across newspapers. Thirdly, many researchers treat agenda-setting, framing, and strategic communication as three distinct fields of research. However, few studies have examined how these perspectives can be combined to account for the legitimization of state narratives in media discourse. In Pakistan's global context of immense political, security, and diplomatic challenges, strategic communication is an important pillar of governance. It helps the government shape public opinion, strengthen national cohesion, formulate crisis policies, and define global perspectives.

Theoretical Framework

The research builds - on Robert Entman's Framing theory (1993), which offers a holistic framework for analyzing how individuals "organize, select, and arrange information" to "make meaning" in media texts. It applies Entman's four-dimensional framework of framing in the

study: Problem Definition, Causal Interpretation, Moral Evaluation, and Treatment Recommendation.

Tankard (2001) suggested that news reporting frames reality strategically, emphasizing some aspects over others and thus affecting audience interpretation and understanding of a given public issue. Gamson and Modigliani (1989) state that media frames are "interpretive packages" that help to interpret public issues by giving coherent narratives from facts, and Pan and Kosicki (1993) argue that news framing is evident in the structural properties of the news text, such as syntax, theme, script, and rhetorical devices. Sometimes, this form of bias is not propaganda, but is conveyed through formal language and appeals to authority and subtle storytelling techniques. Strategic communication also involves developing and disseminating stories to influence people's thinking, explain policy choices, and communicate the state's message (Hallahan et al., 2007). As defined by Holtzhausen and Zerfass (2015), it is a purposeful, research-informed communicative action that is used to regulate relationships, influence perceptions, and further the organization's objectives. Now, strategic communication is a more complicated, continuous process than wartime propaganda. In both war and peace, strategic communication is a tool modern states use to solve problems related to reputation, legitimacy, and policy conflict. According to Argenti, Howell, and Beck (2005), strategic communication is the process of synchronizing messages across communication channels to create credibility, build trust with stakeholders, and assist the institution's mission. It also depends on a complex network, primarily the news media, opinion leaders, and think tanks. According to strategic communication proponent Paul (2011), strategic communication is a planned, coordinated, and conscious use of words, actions, and images intended to shape target groups in the service of policy and organizational objectives. Historically, strategic communication has been linked to wartime propaganda, but it is now an ongoing peacetime process in response to situations that affect a state's reputation or legitimacy (Nye, 2008; Zaharna, 2010). Cornish, Lindley-French, and Yorke (2011) state that strategic communication is a key aspect of modern governance, as it can communicate national interests, policy objectives, and security priorities to both domestic and international audiences. In the context of Pakistan, although few studies have examined the framing process in English-language newspaper narratives on major political and security events, a clear gap remains in understanding the relationship between the state and media framing.

Methodology

This study conducts a qualitative content analysis of how the Pakistan-Saudi Mutual Defense Agreement is framed in editorials and opinion pieces across four newspapers: Daily Dawn, The News International, The Express Tribune, and The Nation. These four newspapers were selected using purposive sampling, as they have editorial and opinion sections and carry significant editorial commentary on national security and foreign policy. The selection of these newspapers also provides a comparative analysis of how the same political development was reported by various newspaper platforms. The analysis is based on the period 16-21 September, 2025, which included the immediate days following the announcement/signing of the Pakistan-Saudi Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement (SMDA) and the following days when it was discussed in the newspapers regarding its implications.

Selection Criteria

The inclusion criteria encompass the following parameters: the article had to be an editorial or opinion piece with direct reference to the agreement in any aspect, like, political, diplomatic, military, strategic impacts; it had to be published in one of the four selected newspapers from 16–21 September 2025. This selection ensured that newspaper discourse was analyzed in an opinion-oriented way rather than in a general news reporting style.

Analytical Procedure

Entman's (1993) framing theory was used to analyze the selected editorials and opinion articles. The analysis was performed systematically as follows:

First, with regard to the inclusion criteria, the editorials and opinion articles were collected and read multiple times in order to establish how the agreement was covered. Second, relevant statements were located and coded. Third, the identified codes were classified under four frames: problem definition (issue), causal interpretation (cause), moral evaluation (judgement), and treatment recommendation (solution). Recurring themes were combined and contrasted in order to identify the pattern for interpretations.

Findings and interpretations

Table 1 Organizational Framework for Data Collection and Analysis – Daily Dawn (Strategic Defense Mutual Agreement)

Table 1 presents the framing analysis of Dawn's coverage of the Pakistan–Saudi Arabia Strategic Mutual Defense Agreement using Entman's (1993) framing model to examine how the agreement was framed and aligned with state narratives.

Table 1

S. NO	PUB DATE	TITLE	PROBLEM DEFINITION	CAUSE ATTRIBUTION	MORAL EVALUATION	DOMINANT FRAMEWORK	STATE ALIGNMENT
1.	17 Sep, 25	Pakistan and Saudi Arabia sign defense pact pledging joint response to aggression	Regional security threats; need for stronger bilateral defense cooperation	No explicit blame; focuses on external threats and regional instability	Positive / Diplomatic / Strategic	Security & Foreign Policy / Defense Cooperation	Pro-government / Pro-diplomatic
2.	18 Sep, 25	Guns and Money	Pakistan's economic weakness limits its ability to fully leverage military capabilities; potential reliance on Gulf wealth for security and economic needs	Deep economic dysfunction; historical legacy of relying on great powers for strategic support; Gulf states' need for credible protection	Mixed – pragmatic and analytical; highlights both opportunity and risk in Pakistan's strategic positioning	Geopolitical-Economic & Security Bargaining	Supports Pakistan leveraging military strength to gain economic resources; cautions about dependence and limited domestic reform
3.	19 Sep, 25	Saudi Defense Pact	Clarifying operational details and reliability of Pak-Saudi defense commitment; regional security uncertainties	Pakistan and Saudi Arabia must navigate questions of trust and commitment; India's potential threat	Analytical, strategic, slightly cautionary	Security-diplomacy, geopolitics, collective defense	Balanced / Pro-Pakistan

4.	20 Sep, 25	Pak-Saudi pact has massive potential	Regional security, need for practical Muslim-world cooperation	Lack of actionable follow-up, Pakistan's economic constraints	Positive, aspirational, constructive	Security-diplomacy, regional cooperation, economic-security nexus	Balanced / Pro-Pakistan
5.	20 Sep, 25	Regional Security	Regional geopolitical volatility; speculation over Pakistan's nuclear role; need for collective Muslim defense	Israeli attacks on Middle East states, Pakistan-India tensions, misinterpretation of nuclear capabilities	Cautionary / Analytical	Security / Nuclear deterrence	Positive toward Pakistan; emphasizes responsible military posture
6.	20 Sep, 25	Moment of Truth	Unchecked Israeli aggression in the Middle East; unreliability of US security guarantees; need for alternative defense mechanisms	Israeli attack on Qatar; US failure to restrain Israel; Gulf states' insecurity	Constructive / Good – highlights proactive defense and strategic planning	Security / Geopolitical realignment	Positive toward Pakistan-Saudi cooperation; cautious about US reliability
7.	21 Sep, 25	A Word in Ferment	Strategic uncertainty in the Middle East and Gulf; reliance on the US for security has proven unreliable; potential gaps in collective defense	Israel's unprovoked strike on Qatar; US unconditional support for Israel; Gulf states' dependence on a single security provider	Good – encourages self-reliance, proactive strategic planning, and regional security cooperation	Security / Geopolitical strategy	Positive toward Pakistan-Saudi partnership; cautious about US reliability; aware of regional economic and political interdependence
8.	21 Sep, 25	A reunion with limits	Need to restore Pak-Saudi strategic ties; past strains affected regional influence	Pakistan's temporary alignment with Iran-Turkiye-Malaysia bloc; leadership tensions; economic fragility	Analytical, cautious, strategic	Security-diplomacy, geopolitics, economic-security nexus	Balanc / Pro-Pakistan
9.	22 Sep, 25	Ties That Bind	Pakistan's need to strengthen strategic security amid regional uncertainty; drifting relations with Saudi Arabia	India (Modi) and Israel (Netanyahu) blamed indirectly for destabilizing the region	Analytical, cautionary, slightly critical of regional powers	Security & Foreign Policy / Bilateral & Regional Alliances	Pro-Pakistan / Strategic Hedging
10.	23 Sep, 25	Elite Pact	Uncertainty about operational details and economic implications of Pak-Saudi defense pact	Reliance on external funds by Pakistani elite; political will lacking for domestic reform; historical elite consensus	Analytical, cautionary, slightly critical	Security-diplomacy, economic dependency, elite politics	Balanced / Pro-Pakistan

Table 2 - Organizational Framework for Data Collection and Analysis – The News International (Strategic Defense Mutual Agreement)

Table 2 presents a framing analysis of The News International's coverage of the Pakistan–Saudi Arabia Strategic Mutual Defense Agreement (SMDA), examining how the agreement was

defined, interpreted, and evaluated across selected English-language newspapers using Entman's framing model.

Table 2

S. NO	PUB DATE	TITLE	PROBLEM DEFINITION	CAUSE ATTRIBUTION	MORAL EVALUATION	DOMINANT FRAMEWORK	STATE ALIGNMENT
1.	17 Sep, 25	Defense Pact	Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have signed a Strategic Mutual Defense Agreement (SMDA) that reshapes regional security dynamics and presents both opportunities and risks for Pakistan.	Saudi distrust of long-term US security commitments; Pakistan's demonstrated military capability (ECM, IADS) boosting its strategic value; Saudi desire to diversify defense partners; Pakistan's economic vulnerabilities	Analytical, strategic, pro-engagement; highlights both opportunity and caution.	Geopolitics, defense cooperation, military strategy, regional security, economic-military linkage.	Strongly pro-Pakistan; supportive of SMDA as a strategic win
2.	18 Sep, 25	'Aggression against either country to be considered aggression against both': Pakistani military might, Saudi financial heft to redraw Gulf security map	Pakistan and Saudi Arabia formalize a mutual defense pact, reflecting concerns over regional security instability. The agreement could reshape geopolitical dynamics, heighten military commitments, and tie Pakistan's foreign policy closely with Saudi strategic interests.	Regional security threats, geopolitical tensions in the Gulf and Middle East	Strong alliances are crucial for national security, but alignment should consider long-term diplomatic implications and sovereignty.	Geopolitical-security & Defense	Pro-Saudi / Strategic
3.	19 Sep, 25	Pak-Saudi ties to attain new heights	Pakistan seeks to strengthen bilateral relations with Saudi Arabia through strategic diplomacy, mutual defense agreements, and increased economic cooperation. This highlights the importance of regional	Geopolitical strategy and mutual regional interests	Diplomatic engagement and friendship between nations can enhance security, economic development, and regional stability.	Geopolitical-security & Diplomacy	Pro-Saudi / Strategic

			alliances for national security and economic growth.				
4.	19 Sep, 25	Shehbaz-Asim teamwork behind game-changing Pak-Saudi defense deal	The article highlights the role of seamless civil-military coordination between PM Shehbaz Sharif and COAS Asim Munir in achieving a historic defense and strategic cooperation agreement with Saudi Arabia, demonstrating the importance of unified national leadership in foreign policy and security initiatives.	Strategic diplomacy and civil-military coordination	Trust, harmony, and unity between political and military leadership enable the nation to achieve major foreign policy and defense milestones.	Civil-Military Relations & Geopolitical-Security	Pro-Saudi / Strategic
5.	20 Sep, 25	Saudi business delegation to visit Pakistan next month for investment, trade talks	The article highlights Pakistan's efforts to capitalize on its strategic defense agreement with Saudi Arabia by boosting bilateral trade and economic engagement through a high-level Saudi business delegation.	Strategic diplomacy and proactive economic engagement	Strengthening trade over aid, fostering people-to-people and business ties, and enhancing national economic self-reliance.	Economic Diplomacy / Strategic Partnerships	Pro-Saudi / Economic

Table 3 - Organizational Framework for Data Collection and Analysis – The Express Tribune (Strategic Defense Mutual Agreement)

Table 3 presents a framing analysis of The Express Tribune's coverage of the Pakistan–Saudi Strategic Mutual Defense Agreement (SMDA), illustrating how the event was framed through problem definition, cause attribution, moral evaluation, dominant framing, and alignment with state narratives, using Entman's (1993) framing model.

S. NO	PUB DATE	TITLE	PROBLEM DEFINITION	CAUSE ATTRIBUTION	MORAL EVALUATION	DOMINANT FRAMEWORK	STATE ALIGNMENT

1.	19 Sep, 25	Landmark Strategic Deal - Ed	Regional security threats; aggression in the Middle East	Regional aggression (Israel, expansionist policies of India and Israel)	Confident, assertive, pro-Pakistan	Strategic-military	Pakistan as responsible security provider
2.	20 Sep, 25	Karma and do-overs	Regional insecurity; rising threats to GCC countries	Israel and India's expansionist policies; miscalculations by Pakistan in past GCC conflicts	Cautionary, reflective, pragmatic	Strategic-political	Pakistan as a careful, learning actor
3.	21 Sep, 25	Pak-Saudi pact to reshape MENA security	Muslim world insecurity in the Middle East; need for new defense partners	Greater Israel aggression, US failure to guarantee regional security, regional power imbalances	Positive, celebratory of Pakistan's military prowess and strategic role	Geopolitical-Security Leadership	Strongly state-aligned, pro-Pakistan military; endorses Pakistan as a regional security provider
4.	21 Sep, 25	Pak-Saudi defense pact: an old brotherhood recast for a dangerous age	Middle East insecurity; Israel as a rising threat; Pakistan's strategic vulnerability without reliable allies	Aggressive Israeli policies, US unreliability, regional instability	Strongly positive toward Pakistan-Saudi cooperation; celebratory and nationalistic	Strategic-Military-Geopolitical	Pro-Pakistan military perspective; endorses Pakistan's nuclear and conventional strength
5.	21 Sep, 25	Pak-Saudi Defense Pact	Regional instability; shifting geopolitical dynamics; threats to Saudi sovereignty	US policies, Israeli aggression, regional power competition	Analytical, cautionary, pragmatic	Geopolitical-strategic	Pakistan as balancing force in new regional framework

Table 4 - Organizational Framework for Data Collection and Analysis – The Nation (Strategic Defense Mutual Agreement)

Table 4 presents a framing analysis of the Nation's coverage of the Pakistan–Saudi Arabia Strategic Mutual Defense Agreement, examining how the agreement was defined, interpreted, and evaluated through problem definition, cause attribution, moral evaluation, dominant framing, and alignment with state narratives, using Entman's (1993) framing model.

S. NO	PUB DATE	TITLE	PROBLEM DEFINITION	CAUSE ATTRIBUTION	MORAL EVALUATION	DOMINANT FRAMEWORK	STATE ALIGNMENT
1.	15 Sep, 25	Strength in Partnerships	Global uncertainty; need for stable economic & strategic partnerships	Mutual recognition of potential; global competitiveness; shifting alliances	Positive, optimistic, encouraging	Economic cooperation; regional stability; connectivity	Strong alignment with Pakistan's national interest in building external partnerships
2.	18 Sep, 25	Why the Pakistan–Saudi Defense Pact Matters?	Regional insecurity and unpredictability; need for reliable security partnerships	Uncertainty in US posture; regional instability; historical defense needs of Saudi Arabia	Positive, pragmatic, reassuring	Strategic-security, alliance-centered	Pakistan as reliable security partner

3.	18 Sep, 25	A New Alliance	Shifting regional geopolitics; heightened security tensions; uncertainty in Middle East and South Asia	Security threats from regional adversaries (India & Israel); unstable regional environment; gaps in existing defense arrangements	Positive–cautiously optimistic, highlighting achievement but warning of complexities	Geopolitical realism; collective defense; regional security recalibration	Strong alignment with Pakistan's state narrative praising the pact as a strategic success
4.	18 Sep, 25	Peace Through Deterrence	Erosion of state sovereignty due to cross-border strikes justified under "counterterrorism"; ineffectiveness of protests/communiqués	Blames Israel, India, and U.S. policies for normalizing cross-border attacks; blames weak Arab deterrence	Assertive, critical, pro-deterrence, warning and strategic	Realist security logic; deterrence theory; sovereignty protection	Strong alignment with Pakistan's narrative of deterrence as essential to security
5.	19 Sep, 25	Leveraging the Alliance	Need to strategically leverage the Pakistan–Saudi defense pact for defense diversification, diplomacy, and regional stability	Structural vulnerabilities in Pakistan's defense procurement; regional instability; lack of coordinated diplomacy	Positive, strategic, forward-leaning; emphasizes opportunity and responsibility	Realist–institutionalist hybrid: alliance building, deterrence, strategic cooperation	Strongly aligned with Pakistan's strategic narrative and its attempt to elevate role in Muslim world
6.	21 Sep, 25	Pakistan–Saudi Defense Pact: A New Chapter in Regional Politics	Regional instability; reliance on US security; ambiguity over Pakistan's role	Historical military cooperation; Israel-Qatar crisis; US security monopoly; multipolar power shifts	Analytical, cautious, forward-looking	Realism & collective security; multipolarity	Pakistan as Islamic security guarantor; Saudi diversification from US
7.	22 Sep, 25	Pak-Saudi defense pact, a huge achievement	Regional tensions; uncertainty in Gulf and South Asia; security concerns	Decades of friendship; historical military cooperation; Middle East turmoil; Pakistan-India	Positive, celebratory, confidence-inspiring	Collective defense; strategic partnership; regional stability	Pakistan and Saudi Arabia as mutual anchors of Muslim world security

Findings and interpretation - Summary

Out of four English - language dailies, Daily Dawn characterized the framing of the Pakistan-Saudi Arabia Strategic Mutual Defense Agreement (SMDA) as optimistic, with a caution against getting into the trap of overdependence in the long run. The daily highlighted that the cooperation between two allies may result in strategic gains, yet overdependence may limit Pakistan's individual autonomy and compromise its future security.

The News International's approach to analyzing the Pakistan-Saudi Strategic Mutual Defense Pact - 2025 was practical rather than emphasizing overwhelming patriotic rhetoric. It focused on

the functional modalities aimed at the execution phase, policy coordination, institutional collaboration, strategic partnerships, and logistics. Instead of dwelling upon the ideological facet of the pact, it highlighted a perspective on the practical aspects of long - term strategic partnership and cooperation with a sense of policy freedom. In its op-ed assessment, the daily covered the agreement in a controlled manner and avoided ideological or patriotic overtones. In contrast, its editorials emphasized the key aspects of successful cooperation to achieve mutual benefits and lasting peace. This reflects the newspaper's overall style: strategic engagement through state efficiency and institutional coordination, not democratic engagement.

The Express Tribune's state-supportive, strategically realist approach is evident in its coverage of the Pakistan–Saudi Strategic Mutual Defense Agreement (SMDA). It was among the most openly positive, portraying the agreement as a strategic achievement and an opportunity for Pakistan to boost its regional influence and strengthen the economy.

The Nation has been more religiously oriented about the accord, as both countries, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, are perceived as natural allies with religious and security interests. It is considered a symbol of Muslim unity and association which indicates the level of agreement among newspapers, particularly on national defense and foreign policy.

Analysis

The analysis provides insight into the interplay among the four newspapers and between the four framing elements: the problem they constructed, their explanations of the causes of the problem, their assessments of the pact, and their proposals for action. The analysis uncovered the larger trends in the newspaper discourse on the Pakistan- Saudi Mutual Defence Agreement after the initial interpretation. It was then contrasted with each other among the four newspapers to see how the Agreement was framed. Overall, this study shows the results in terms of negotiated autonomy, which is influenced by context and perceived national interest. Media outlets can still criticize without violating national sensitivities. This study defies the notion of a hierarchy of state-media relations and instead suggests a dynamic, negotiated, and context-bound relationship. Pakistani English-language print media not only has the capacity to critique but is also cautious in matters where national interests are thought to be at stake.

Table 1: Pakistan–Saudi Strategic Mutual Defense Agreement (SMDA) – Framing Components

	Daily Dawn	**The News International**	**The Express Tribune**	**The Nation**
Problem Definition	Regional insecurity and Gulf vulnerability.	Security and economic opportunity for Pakistan.	Security vacuum in the Gulf	Need for Muslim world collective defense.
Causal Interpretation	US withdrawal and regional instability create need for alternatives.	Saudi diversification and Pakistan's military credibility.	Regional instability and strategic shifts.	Regional threats and US unreliability.
Moral Evaluation	Balanced optimism with caution over dependence.	Supportive but managerial.	Pakistan framed as a reliable security provider.	Highly celebratory and nationalist.

Treatment Recommendation	Expand cooperation Avoid overreliance Maintain strategic clarity.	Implement cooperation pragmatically.	Leverage pact economically and strategically.	Expand deterrence and alliance structures.
Narrative Outcome	Supportive but analytical.	Strategic engagement framing	Strongly positive toward pact.	Pact presented as historic strategic achievement.

Table 2 highlights near-total alignment with the state strategic narrative

Table 2: Pakistan – Saudi Strategic Mutual Defense Agreement (SMDA) - Overall Pattern

Daily Dawn	The News International	The Express Tribune	The Nation
Supportive	Supportive	Supportive	Supportive

Table 3: Pakistan – Saudi Strategic Mutual Defense Agreement (SMDA)

Table 3 demonstrates supportive engagement

Strategic success	Economic opportunity
Economic opportunity	Defense diplomacy achievement
Defense diplomacy achievement	Regional security stabilizer
Regional security stabilizer	Strategic success

Discussion

Methodological Considerations

The analysis is limited to English-language newspapers, and the results may not be generalizable. The dynamics of the Urdu press and electronic media differ. In addition, framing analysis requires interpretive judgment, but systematic coding minimizes subjectivity.

Contribution to Theory

This study contributes to theories of media framing, strategic communication, and the relationship between states and media by showing how states use strategic communication to create media frames in English-language newspapers in Pakistan. Framing theory and strategic communication have been widely used in Western democracies and in the study of communication during conflict. However, a research gap is identified in the context of institutions struggling with professional and national security agendas.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The pattern of conditional convergence, highlighting integration with state communication and limited editorial variation, has been identified. A single event: Pakistan–Saudi Strategic Mutual Defense Agreement (SMDA) has been focused in order to learn an in-depth, systematic understanding of framing process in the Pakistani context. The conclusion of the study showcases that media autonomy does not exist explicitly rather compromised and complied with

discursive factors. Unconventionally, these factors co-inhibit to produce narratives of restraint and responsibility at the same time.

Policy Recommendations

- Sufficient legislation to protect and shield journalists from oppressive measures.
- Media Literacy Initiatives, including awareness of framing, should be introduced and integrated into university curricula and civil society.
- Strategic Communication should be transparent.
- A structured state-media dialogue is needed.
- Briefings and off-the-record sessions can enhance understanding without sacrificing autonomy.

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