

MS Thesis

SAUDI VISION 2030 AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION: THE DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR PAKISTAN



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DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR PAKISTAN**

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the MS Degree in International Relations at the Department of Politics and International Relations, Faculty of Social Sciences, International Islamic University Islamabad (IIUI), Pakistan.

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FINAL APPROVAL

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DEDICATION

This thesis is sincerely dedicated to His Majesty King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud and His Royal Highness Crown Prince and Prime Minister Mohammed bin Salman for their exceptional leadership, visionary guidance, and unwavering commitment to progress and development. Their remarkable contributions continue to inspire dedication, hard work, and excellence.

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ABSTRACT

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 represents a transformative strategy aimed at reducing the nation's dependence on oil and steering its economy toward diversification, sustainable development, and modernization. This research investigates the implications of Saudi Vision 2030 for Pakistan, with a particular focus on the alignment of Pakistan's socio-economic priorities with Saudi Arabia's development agenda. Despite the strong bilateral ties between the two nations, Pakistan faces significant challenges in harnessing the opportunities presented by the Vision, due to domestic economic instability, policy inconsistencies, and limited innovation capacity. This study aims to explore how Pakistan can effectively leverage Saudi Vision 2030's socio-economic initiatives, including workforce deployment, technology transfers, and joint ventures in renewable energy, infrastructure, and construction, while addressing its own developmental constraints. The key research question guiding this study is: How can Pakistan strategically align its economic policies with Saudi Vision 2030 to foster mutual growth and overcome existing barriers? To address this question, the study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative analysis of existing literature, policy documents, and expert interviews with quantitative analysis of relevant socio-economic data. Theoretical insights from Theory of Economic Modernization and elements of Neoliberal Institutionalism provide the analytical lens through which the alignment between Saudi Arabia's developmental vision and Pakistan's socio-economic priorities are examined. This research has identified actionable recommendations for both nations, offering a blueprint for strategic collaboration that maximizes the benefits of Saudi Vision 2030 while mitigating potential risks. By understanding the development strategies of Saudi Arabia, the study aims to inspire evidence-based policymaking that enhances bilateral cooperation and addresses the challenges faced by Pakistan in engaging with the vision.

Keywords: Saudi Vision 2030, Pakistan-Saudi Relations, Economic Diplomacy, Socio-economic Transformation, Developmental Policy, Strategic Collaboration.

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CHAPTER ONE

1.0 Introduction

Saudi Vision 2030, a striving framework launched by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, aims to diversify its oil-dependent economy and enhance socio-economic sustainability. The vision, encompassing comprehensive reforms across governance, infrastructure, energy, and human capital development, is poised to redefine Saudi Arabia's position on the global stage. Central to this transformation is the development of robust partnerships with regional and global actors, including Pakistan. With a longstanding history of bilateral cooperation, Pakistan stands to benefit significantly from Saudi Arabia's development strategies, particularly in areas of trade, labor, and investment.

This study examines the socio-economic transformation under Saudi Vision 2030, analyzes the strategic implications for Pakistan, and identifies pathways for enhanced bilateral collaboration. By delving into the objectives, challenges, and opportunities, this research provides insights into how Pakistan can effectively align with Saudi Arabia's developmental priorities to foster mutual growth and regional stability.

1.1. Background of the Study

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) introduced Saudi Vision 2030 as a comprehensive and forward-thinking strategy to reshape its economic landscape and reduce its historical dependence on oil revenues. This ambitious plan, spearheaded by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, is designed to transform the country's socio-economic structure, positioning it as a leading global player beyond oil exports. Vision 2030 places significant emphasis on economic diversification, aiming to foster growth in non-oil sectors such as tourism, technology, and renewable energy. Additionally, the plan prioritizes public sector reforms, aiming to enhance governmental efficiency and governance, while also promoting privatization to encourage private sector participation in the national economy. Sustainable development is another cornerstone of the vision, with a focus on environmental sustainability and social progress. Vision 2030 articulates three main pillars: fostering a vibrant society, cultivating a thriving

economy, and developing an ambitious nation that is resilient to global economic shifts. These aspirations are set to be achieved through structural reforms, innovation, and global partnerships that will position Saudi Arabia as a leader in the post-oil era (Saudi Vision 2030, 2021).

One of the central objectives of Saudi Vision 2030 is to boost the kingdom's non-oil revenue sources and reduce reliance on hydrocarbons. This is expected to be achieved through large-scale investments in sectors such as technology, entertainment, and tourism, as well as comprehensive infrastructure development. The kingdom is investing in state-of-the-art infrastructure projects like NEOM, a futuristic city designed to be a global hub for innovation and business, and the Red Sea Project, a luxury tourism initiative aimed at attracting international visitors. These projects not only serve to diversify the economy but also showcase Saudi Arabia's ambition to become a leading player in the global tourism market (Alharbi, 2023). The vision also includes substantial efforts to empower women and enhance their participation in the workforce. By providing women with more opportunities in both the public and private sectors, the vision aims to ensure that they contribute meaningfully to the nation's economic growth. Additionally, fostering innovation, particularly in high-tech industries and startups, is a priority, as the kingdom strives to become a global leader in technology and innovation, catalyzing economic growth and societal transformation.

Saudi Arabia has long maintained strong diplomatic, economic, and cultural ties with Pakistan, which have evolved over decades of collaboration in various domains. These ties are deep-rooted in shared religious, cultural, and geopolitical interests, as well as historical cooperation in trade and defense. The realization of Saudi Vision 2030 opens new avenues for Pakistan to enhance its engagement with the kingdom, especially in areas like workforce deployment, technology transfers, and joint investment initiatives. Pakistan stands to benefit from contributing skilled labor to Saudi Arabia's ambitious infrastructural projects, which are part of the Vision's focus on modernization. Furthermore, Pakistan's growing capacity in technology and renewable energy aligns well with the vision's emphasis on sustainable development, presenting opportunities for collaboration. For example, both nations can explore joint ventures in the renewable energy sector, such as solar and wind energy, as well as in large-scale construction and infrastructure projects. These areas not only align with Pakistan's

developmental needs but also offer a path to a mutually beneficial economic relationship (Khan, 2023).

However, despite the significant opportunities presented by Saudi Vision 2030, Pakistan faces several challenges in fully aligning with the vision's goals. Pakistan's economy has experienced periods of instability, with fluctuating growth rates, high inflation, and a reliance on external debt. These economic challenges, combined with policy inconsistencies and a lack of institutional capacity for innovation, may impede Pakistan's ability to capitalize on the opportunities presented by Vision 2030. Furthermore, global economic uncertainties, including fluctuations in oil prices and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, pose risks to both nations' ability to achieve their long-term goals. Regional geopolitical tensions, particularly between Pakistan and neighboring India, as well as the ongoing security issues in Afghanistan, could also distract from efforts to strengthen bilateral economic ties. Therefore, while Saudi Vision 2030 offers numerous opportunities for Pakistan, it also requires careful consideration of these external and internal challenges.

An in-depth analysis of Saudi Arabia's socio-economic transformation under Vision 2030 provides valuable insights that can be applied to Pakistan's own development strategies. By studying the kingdom's approach to modernization and economic diversification, Pakistan can gain inspiration for its own policy reforms and adaptation. A better understanding of the developmental strategies outlined in Vision 2030 can help Pakistan design evidence-based policies that promote economic growth, social transformation, and technological advancement. Additionally, such analysis can help foster a more robust and symbiotic relationship between the two nations, enabling both to share resources, knowledge, and expertise. This research identifies actionable steps that can be taken by Pakistan to engage more effectively with Saudi Vision 2030, capitalizing on shared interests while also mitigating the risks posed by economic and geopolitical uncertainties.

1.2. Problem Statement

Although Saudi Vision 2030 has established a comprehensive framework for socio-economic transformation within the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, its broader implications for

Pakistan remain insufficiently explored. Despite the long-standing and multifaceted relationship between the two nations, Pakistan faces significant challenges in aligning its economic policies with Saudi Arabia's ambitious development agenda. These challenges stem from Pakistan's own economic instability, policy inconsistencies, and limited innovation capacity, which could hinder the country's ability to effectively capitalize on the emerging opportunities outlined in Vision 2030. Moreover, the impact of regional geopolitical tensions and global economic uncertainties further complicates the realization of mutual goals. Despite the growing potential for collaboration, limited research exists on how Pakistan can navigate these obstacles while strategically engaging with Saudi Arabia's transformative projects, such as workforce deployment, technology transfers, and joint investments in infrastructure and renewable energy. This study aims to address these gaps by examining the alignment between Saudi Vision 2030's strategies and Pakistan's socio-economic priorities, identifying potential avenues for collaboration, and proposing actionable, context-specific recommendations to maximize bilateral cooperation and foster mutual growth.

1.3. Significance of the Study

This research contributes to understanding the transformative potential of Saudi Vision 2030 for Pakistan's socio-economic development. By analyzing Saudi Arabia's strategies, it offers a framework for bilateral collaboration, focusing on labor export, technology transfer, and investment. Furthermore, the study provides policymakers with actionable insights into overcoming domestic challenges and aligning with regional opportunities. The findings are particularly significant for fostering economic resilience and sustainable growth in Pakistan amidst evolving global dynamics.

1.4 Objectives of the Study

- To analyze the socio-economic transformation initiatives under Saudi Vision 2030 and their relevance to Pakistan.
- To identify challenges and opportunities for Pakistan in leveraging Saudi Vision 2030 strategies.

- To propose actionable recommendations for enhancing Saudi-Pakistan collaboration in socio-economic development.
- To explore Pakistan's strategic alignment of development priorities to effectively capitalize on the opportunities presented by Saudi Vision 2030.

1.5. Research Questions

1. What are the key socio-economic transformation strategies under Saudi Vision 2030, and how are they relevant to Pakistan?
2. How can Pakistan effectively align with Saudi Arabia's developmental priorities to maximize mutual benefits?
3. Why is it essential for Pakistan to capitalize on opportunities emerging from Saudi Vision 2030, and what are the risks of inaction?
4. How can Pakistan formulate and implement development strategies to benefit from the economic and policy opportunities arising from Saudi Vision 2030?

1.6. Delimitations of the Study

This study focuses on the socio-economic dimensions of Saudi Vision 2030, particularly those relevant to Pakistan. It excludes an in-depth analysis of Saudi Arabia's internal governance reforms or unrelated geopolitical factors. The research emphasizes opportunities in trade, investment, labor export, and technology, while considering challenges such as economic instability and regional tensions. Data is primarily drawn from secondary sources, including official reports, academic literature, and policy analyses from 2015 to 2024.

1.7. Review of Related Literature

Alharbi discusses the economic diversification efforts under Saudi Vision 2030, particularly through megaprojects like NEOM and the Red Sea Project. These initiatives aim to transform Saudi Arabia into a hub of innovation and economic activity, reducing its reliance on oil revenues. The author highlights the projects' potential to attract substantial foreign direct investment (FDI) and strengthen regional economic connectivity by fostering trade and tourism. Furthermore, Alharbi underscores the strategic emphasis on sustainable tourism and renewable

energy to align with global environmental standards. However, the study warns that maintaining a balance between rapid development and environmental sustainability remains a significant challenge for policymakers (Alharbi, 2023).

Khashoggi and Jamjoom analyze the privatization initiatives within Saudi Vision 2030, which focus on reducing state dependency by transferring ownership of state enterprises to private entities. This shift aims to improve efficiency, enhance competitiveness, and attract global investors. The authors note that sectors like energy, health, and transport have already seen significant privatization activity. However, they also caution that over-reliance on foreign expertise and the absence of robust regulatory frameworks to oversee transparency and accountability could impede the long-term success of these reforms (Khashoggi & Jamjoom, 2022).

Mills explores the pivotal role of human capital development programs under Vision 2030, emphasizing youth empowerment, educational reforms, and enhanced female workforce participation. The study details initiatives such as the Human Capability Development Program, which aims to equip the Saudi workforce with skills suited to an evolving economic landscape. The author argues that fostering innovation and entrepreneurial culture is crucial for Saudi Arabia's sustainable development. However, resistance to cultural shifts and structural barriers in the labor market continue to pose significant challenges (Mills, 2020).

Al-Ghamdi evaluates the socio-cultural reforms under Saudi Vision 2030, which aim to position Saudi Arabia as a global cultural hub. By promoting arts, entertainment, and cultural openness, these initiatives seek to reshape the kingdom's global image while addressing long-standing societal norms. The study notes the establishment of cultural festivals and international collaborations as evidence of these efforts. However, Al-Ghamdi highlights the difficulty of maintaining societal cohesion while pushing for cultural modernization in a deeply traditional society (Al-Ghamdi, 2021).

Hamid provides a critical analysis of Vision 2030's impact on women's empowerment in Saudi Arabia, documenting significant progress in workforce participation and legal reforms. The study highlights measures like lifting the driving ban for women and increasing

representation in leadership roles. Despite these advances, the author points out persistent societal resistance and limited opportunities in certain sectors, which hinder full gender equality. Hamid emphasizes that addressing cultural attitudes will be crucial to ensuring sustainable empowerment (Hamid, 2019).

Khan examines the implications of Saudi Vision 2030 for Pakistan, focusing on the opportunities it creates in labor exports, infrastructure development, and renewable energy collaboration. The author highlights Pakistan's strategic advantage in providing skilled and semi-skilled labor to support Saudi Arabia's evolving economy. Khan notes, however, that Pakistan's inconsistent economic policies and bureaucratic inefficiencies could undermine its ability to fully leverage these opportunities (Khan, 2023).

Ahmad and Baig explore investment opportunities for Pakistan under Saudi Vision 2030, identifying agriculture, IT, and construction as promising sectors for bilateral collaboration. The authors argue that Pakistan's abundant natural resources and young workforce position it well to attract Saudi investment. They emphasize the need for Pakistan to create an investor-friendly climate by addressing governance issues and ensuring policy consistency to foster trust and long-term partnerships (Ahmad & Baig, 2022).

Malik and Siddiqui analyze the remittance-dependent nature of Pakistan's economy and its connection to Saudi Arabia's workforce development under Vision 2030. The study highlights how Vision 2030's focus on high-tech industries and a knowledge-based economy could create new opportunities for skilled Pakistani workers. However, the authors caution that Pakistan must prioritize vocational training and upskilling initiatives to meet Saudi Arabia's evolving labor market demands (Malik & Siddiqui, 2021).

Mitchell provides a comprehensive assessment of Vision 2030's geopolitical implications, emphasizing that the economic transformation outlined in the vision is not merely about reducing oil dependence but also about fostering strategic partnerships across the globe. Mitchell highlights how Saudi Arabia's focus on diversifying its economy enhances its geopolitical standing, allowing it to play a more active role in shaping regional power dynamics in the Middle East. The study draws attention to the kingdom's efforts to balance its ambitions

with the challenges posed by regional instability, such as conflicts in neighboring countries, and the ambitious timelines for achieving its goals. Mitchell warns that these factors could impede Saudi Arabia's ability to realize its vision fully (Mitchell, 2022).

Brown evaluates the global investment strategies underpinning Saudi Vision 2030, focusing on strategic partnerships with Western nations. The study underscores how Vision 2030 has been pivotal in redefining Saudi Arabia's image on the global stage, portraying it as an emerging economic and technological powerhouse. Brown highlights agreements with nations such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and France to promote technology transfer, energy collaboration, and infrastructure development. However, the author warns of political and economic pressures from Western allies, particularly regarding human rights concerns, which could strain these partnerships and pose reputational risks for Saudi Arabia (Brown, 2020).

Williams analyzes the critical role of technology and innovation in achieving the goals of Saudi Vision 2030. The study details significant investments in cutting-edge sectors such as artificial intelligence, robotics, and smart cities, identifying them as transformative initiatives aimed at fostering long-term economic growth and global competitiveness. Williams emphasizes the kingdom's ambition to position itself as a leader in technological innovation in the Gulf region. However, the study raises concerns about over-reliance on foreign expertise and technological infrastructure, which could hinder the development of local capacities and limit the sustainability of these projects in the long term (Williams, 2019).

Zubair examines Vision 2030's implications for the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), highlighting how the vision fosters both competition and collaboration among GCC member states. The study points out that Saudi Arabia's economic diversification, particularly in tourism and logistics, has increased competition with countries like the UAE and Qatar. However, Zubair also underscores the potential for collaboration in renewable energy, where joint investments in solar and wind energy could lead to regional energy security. The author concludes that while Vision 2030 creates opportunities for collective growth within the GCC, it also poses risks of fragmenting the bloc due to economic rivalries (Zubair, 2021).

Rahman explores the geopolitical significance of Vision 2030 for South Asia, focusing on Saudi Arabia's growing economic engagements with Pakistan and India. The study highlights investments in infrastructure, energy, and trade that have the potential to foster regional economic integration. Rahman notes the strategic importance of these partnerships, particularly in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and India's energy security. However, the study cautions that geopolitical tensions between India and Pakistan could undermine Saudi Arabia's efforts to act as a stabilizing force in South Asia (Rahman, 2020).

Iqbal and Khan analyze the challenges Pakistan faces in leveraging opportunities under Saudi Vision 2030. Their study identifies systemic issues such as inconsistent policy implementation, bureaucratic red tape, and a lack of innovation in critical sectors as significant barriers to attracting Saudi investment. The authors argue that while Vision 2030 provides a platform for enhanced economic collaboration, Pakistan must address its internal inefficiencies to benefit fully from the opportunities presented. Without these reforms, the long-term partnership between the two countries may remain limited to low-impact sectors (Iqbal & Khan, 2021).

Raza examines Pakistan's growing energy needs and the potential for collaboration with Saudi Arabia in renewable energy under Vision 2030. The study highlights joint ventures in solar and wind energy as promising areas for bilateral cooperation, with the potential to address Pakistan's chronic energy shortages while supporting Saudi Arabia's diversification goals. Raza emphasizes that to attract Saudi investment, Pakistan must overhaul its regulatory framework and address concerns regarding transparency and governance in the energy sector. These reforms are essential for ensuring sustainable collaboration between the two nations (Raza, 2020).

Javed and Rehman provide an in-depth analysis of the role of Pakistani expatriates in Saudi Arabia and their contribution to Pakistan's economy through remittances. The study highlights that Saudi Vision 2030's labor market reforms, which focus on developing a high-tech and knowledge-based economy, could create new opportunities for skilled Pakistani workers. However, the authors caution that unskilled and semi-skilled workers may face job displacement as the Saudi economy transitions towards automation and technological advancement. Javed and

Rehman advocate for targeted upskilling programs in Pakistan to prepare workers for these evolving demands (Javed & Rehman, 2019).

The World Bank underscores the importance of Saudi Vision 2030 for achieving regional economic stability. The report highlights Saudi Arabia's significant investment potential in South Asia, particularly in infrastructure and renewable energy projects. It emphasizes the critical role of Vision 2030 in fostering regional trade and economic collaboration. However, the World Bank also identifies challenges such as regional political tensions and economic disparities, which could hinder the realization of these objectives. The report concludes that sustained regional dialogue and cooperation will be essential for addressing these challenges (World Bank, 2021).

The International Monetary Fund provides a detailed analysis of the fiscal implications of Saudi Vision 2030, focusing on the kingdom's efforts to reduce its budget deficit while maintaining high levels of public spending on development projects. The report highlights the need for effective governance and fiscal discipline to ensure sustainable development. It also notes that while Vision 2030 aims to diversify revenue sources, reliance on oil revenues remains a critical challenge that could slow progress if global oil prices decline significantly (International Monetary Fund, 2020).

The Pakistan Business Council highlights the opportunities available to Pakistani businesses under Saudi Vision 2030, particularly in sectors like agriculture, textiles, and information technology. The report emphasizes the need for Pakistan to adopt business-friendly policies and address governance issues to attract Saudi investors. The council underscores the importance of leveraging bilateral ties to create long-term economic partnerships that benefit both nations. It concludes that proactive engagement by Pakistan will be key to maximizing the benefits of Vision 2030 (Pakistan Business Council, 2021).

Khan and Hussain explore the intersection of economic diplomacy and Saudi Vision 2030, emphasizing its role in enhancing Saudi Arabia's regional influence. The study highlights how economic initiatives such as NEOM and Red Sea Project have been leveraged to project soft power in the Middle East. The authors argue that these projects are not only a tool for economic

diversification but also serve as a platform to counterbalance Iranian influence in the region. They note, however, that the success of such initiatives is contingent on political stability and international cooperation (Khan & Hussain, 2022).

Al-Sulami provides a historical perspective on Saudi Arabia's economic reforms leading up to Vision 2030. The study examines the kingdom's past economic challenges, including over-reliance on oil exports and the impact of fluctuating global oil prices. Al-Sulami emphasizes that Vision 2030 represents a paradigm shift in Saudi economic policy, driven by the need for sustainable growth. However, the author cautions that while the vision outlines ambitious reforms, their implementation faces structural and bureaucratic hurdles (Al-Sulami, 2020).

Ahmed and Zafar analyze the implications of Saudi Vision 2030 for Pakistan's construction industry, focusing on joint infrastructure projects. The study highlights the opportunities for Pakistani firms to participate in Saudi mega-projects, particularly in NEOM and urban housing initiatives. The authors argue that Pakistan must enhance its technical expertise and streamline its regulatory framework to fully capitalize on these opportunities. They also warn that delays in reforms could lead to missed economic prospects (Ahmed & Zafar, 2021).

Smith evaluates the role of public-private partnerships (PPPs) in achieving Saudi Vision 2030's goals. The research highlights the government's emphasis on involving private sector investment in key sectors such as healthcare, education, and technology. Smith argues that PPPs have the potential to accelerate Vision 2030's economic diversification efforts but warns of challenges in ensuring transparency and equitable risk-sharing. The study concludes that robust regulatory frameworks will be critical to the success of these partnerships (Smith, 2019).

Farooq discusses Saudi Vision 2030's focus on empowering women as part of its social reforms. The study highlights initiatives such as increased female workforce participation and greater representation in leadership roles. Farooq argues that these changes are critical for economic growth and align with broader global trends. However, the study notes that cultural resistance and gaps in enforcement mechanisms could undermine the effectiveness of these reforms (Farooq, 2022).

Peterson analyzes the environmental sustainability initiatives under Saudi Vision 2030. The study focuses on renewable energy projects, such as the development of solar and wind power facilities, and the adoption of eco-friendly urban planning principles. Peterson argues that while these initiatives are promising, their success depends on overcoming technical and financial challenges. The author also warns that rapid industrialization could lead to environmental degradation if sustainability is not prioritized (Peterson, 2020).

Bashir examines the role of cultural diplomacy in Vision 2030, focusing on the establishment of new cultural institutions and events such as film festivals and music concerts. The study highlights how these efforts aim to reshape Saudi Arabia's global image and attract international tourists. Bashir notes that while cultural diplomacy has been effective in changing perceptions, it faces criticism from conservative segments within the kingdom, posing a challenge to sustained progress (Bashir, 2021).

Turner and Roberts provide a comparative analysis of Saudi Vision 2030 and similar economic reform plans in the Gulf region, such as the UAE's Vision 2021 and Qatar National Vision 2030. The study highlights both the similarities and differences in their approaches to economic diversification and regional cooperation. The authors argue that while Vision 2030 is uniquely ambitious in scope, it must address challenges such as regional competition and resource allocation to ensure success (Turner & Roberts, 2021).

Latif explores the educational reforms under Saudi Vision 2030, emphasizing investments in higher education and research and development (R&D). The study highlights the establishment of partnerships with leading global universities and the focus on STEM fields. Latif argues that these initiatives are critical for developing a skilled workforce to drive Vision 2030's economic goals. However, the study points out that gaps in primary and secondary education could hinder the pipeline of talent needed for higher education (Latif, 2020).

Malik and Rashid discuss the potential for Saudi-Pakistani collaboration in the agriculture sector under Vision 2030. The study emphasizes joint ventures in food security and agricultural technology, highlighting the complementarities between Saudi Arabia's investment capacity and Pakistan's agricultural expertise. The authors note that while these partnerships

could be mutually beneficial, they require significant improvements in Pakistan's supply chain infrastructure and policy environment to attract Saudi interest (Malik & Rashid, 2022).

1.8. Gap of Knowledge

While the existing literature extensively discusses the socio-economic transformation under Saudi Vision 2030 and its implications for regional and global actors, there is a notable gap in research that directly addresses Pakistan's role and potential benefits in this context. Current studies predominantly explore Saudi Arabia's internal reforms or its strategic partnerships with global powers, with limited focus on Pakistan's capacity to leverage these opportunities. Additionally, practical challenges—such as policy alignment, economic readiness, and labor market integration—remain underexplored. This research seeks to fill this gap by conducting a focused analysis of actionable strategies that Pakistan can adopt to strengthen bilateral collaboration with Saudi Arabia, particularly in trade, investment, labor migration, and technology-driven development.

1.9. Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

A theoretical framework provides the foundation for analyzing the research topic and linking it to established concepts and assumptions. For the topic “Saudi Vision 2030 and Socio-Economic Transformation: Analysis of Development Strategies and Opportunities for Pakistan,” the framework is rooted in the Theory of Economic Modernization and elements of Neoliberal Institutionalism.

1.9.1 Neoliberal Institutionalism

Neoliberal Institutionalism emphasizes the role of international cooperation, institutions, and mutual economic gains in fostering development and stability. Proposed by scholars such as Keohane (1984), the theory argues that global economic interdependence can reduce conflicts and facilitate partnerships. It highlights that nations benefit from collaboration in trade, investments, and technology transfer through formal agreements and institutions.

Key Assumptions and Concepts	Description
Mutual Gains	States engage in economic cooperation to achieve shared benefits.
Institutions as Facilitators	International organizations and bilateral frameworks reduce transaction costs and enhance trust.
Economic Interdependence	Increased economic ties between states reduce political tensions and create long-term stability.
Focus on Comparative Advantage	States maximize their gains by focusing on sectors where they have an economic or resource advantage.

Saudi Vision 2030 encourages regional and international partnerships, particularly in trade, technology, and investment. This aligns with Neoliberal Institutionalism, as Saudi Arabia seeks to leverage its position in the global economy while fostering bilateral relationships, including with Pakistan.

1.9.2 Application of Theory to the Study

Neoliberal Institutionalism is a prominent theory within the liberal school of International Relations that underscores the importance of international cooperation, even in an anarchic global system. Advanced by scholars such as Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, the theory contends that while the international system lacks a central authority, states are rational actors capable of cooperating through institutions that help reduce uncertainty, foster mutual trust, and generate mutually beneficial outcomes. According to Neoliberal Institutionalism, institutions play a crucial role in facilitating cooperation by creating norms, lowering transaction costs, sharing information, and providing mechanisms for dispute resolution. Unlike realism, which focuses on power and relative gains, Neoliberal Institutionalism emphasizes absolute gains and the potential for sustained collaboration in areas like trade, development, and security.

This theoretical framework is highly relevant to the M.Phil thesis entitled “Saudi Vision 2030 and Socio-Economic Transformation: The Development Strategies and Opportunities for Pakistan.” Saudi Vision 2030 is not merely a domestic reform agenda but a broad institutional strategy designed to diversify the Saudi economy, reduce its dependence on oil, and enhance its

global partnerships. From a Neoliberal Institutional perspective, this vision represents an opportunity for Pakistan to engage in structured, rules-based cooperation that yields mutual benefits. The theory helps explain why and how Pakistan can benefit from aligning itself with Saudi Arabia's transformation strategies. It provides an analytical lens to understand the institutional mechanisms—such as bilateral agreements, joint economic commissions, labor accords, and memorandums of understanding—that can facilitate sustained engagement and policy coordination between the two countries.

By applying Neoliberal Institutionalism, the thesis can examine how institutional arrangements under Vision 2030 reduce uncertainty, build long-term trust, and provide a stable framework for economic cooperation. The theory also helps explore how Pakistan can position itself as a strategic partner in areas such as labor export, technology, tourism, and infrastructure, thus responding directly to the research objective of identifying challenges and opportunities for Pakistan. Moreover, Neoliberal Institutionalism draws attention to the risks of inaction, highlighting the opportunity costs if Pakistan fails to institutionalize its engagement with Saudi Arabia's transformation agenda. Competing regional actors may fill the vacuum, and Pakistan could miss out on investment, trade, and labor market benefits. Hence, the theory not only provides a sound conceptual foundation for analyzing the socio-economic dimensions of Saudi Vision 2030 but also frames Pakistan's strategic options in a way that is policy-relevant and grounded in the logic of international institutional cooperation.

1.10. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

10.1. Research Design:

This research has adopted a qualitative research design to analyze the socio-economic transformation under Saudi Vision 2030 and its implications for Pakistan. The qualitative approach allows for an in-depth understanding of the complex relationships between the two countries in terms of trade, investment, labor, and technology sectors. A case study method is used to explore Pakistan's potential opportunities under Vision 2030. This design is appropriate because it enables a detailed analysis of existing literature, policy documents, and expert

opinions, and allows the research to focus on strategic recommendations for bilateral collaboration.

10.2. Population:

The population for this study consists of government officials, policymakers, industry experts, and academics who are involved in or have knowledge about the socio-economic policies of Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, particularly those related to trade, investment, energy, labor, and technology. Additionally, the study has considered Saudi Vision 2030 strategic documents, reports, and publications from both countries to gather secondary data.

10.3. Sampling:

Purposive sampling is used to select participants who have expertise or experience relevant to Saudi Vision 2030 and its potential impact on Pakistan. Experts from the fields of international relations, economics, energy, and trade are targeted, ensuring that the sample includes individuals with a deep understanding of both countries' economic and strategic priorities. The sample size included 15-20 participants, chosen based on their relevance to the study and availability for interviews. In addition, documents, reports, and publications were selected through a systematic review of available literature.

10.4. Operational Definitions

- Saudi Vision 2030: A set of economic, social, and cultural reforms and strategies outlined by Saudi Arabia to reduce dependence on oil revenues and diversify its economy through technological innovation, foreign investment, and regional cooperation (Al-Saud, 2020; Alharbi, 2023).
- Socio-Economic Transformation: The shift in a country's economic structure from reliance on traditional industries to modernization through technological advancements, industrialization, and improvements in infrastructure and social services (Hussain & Nawaz, 2021; Lewis, 2019).

- **Bilateral Collaboration:** Cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan in sectors such as trade, energy, labor, technology, and investment, aimed at fostering mutual growth and development (Iqbal & Khan, 2021; Javed & Rehman, 2019).
- **Opportunities for Pakistan:** Potential benefits Pakistan can derive from Saudi Vision 2030, including increased foreign direct investment (FDI), strategic partnerships, labor market integration, and economic growth in key sectors (Raza, 2020; Zubair, 2021).

10.5. Instruments:

This study has used semi-structured interviews and document analysis as the primary instruments for data collection. Semi-structured interviews allowed flexibility in gathering detailed opinions from experts on various aspects of the study. The interviews focused on participants' views on Saudi Vision 2030, its relevance to Pakistan, and opportunities for collaboration. The second instrument, document analysis, involved reviewing strategic documents, reports, and publications related to Saudi Vision 2030, Pakistan's economic strategies, and bilateral agreements.

10.6. Procedure (Data Collection):

Data was collected in two phases: primary and secondary. In the primary phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted with experts and policymakers from both Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. Participants were identified through purposive sampling and contacted for interviews. The interviews were conducted via video calls and in-person (depending on their ease of availability) and were audio-recorded for accuracy. In the secondary phase, relevant documents such as reports, policy papers, research articles, and publications on Saudi Vision 2030 and Pakistan's economic strategies are gathered through library searches, online databases, and government publications. Data from both phases were transcribed, organized, and analyzed.

10.7. Data Analysis:

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data collected from interviews and documents. This involves coding the data to identify key themes and patterns related to Saudi

Vision 2030's socio-economic transformation and the opportunities it presents for Pakistan. The interviews were transcribed and coded for recurring ideas, and the documents were analyzed for policy recommendations and strategic insights. Data is categorized into themes such as investment opportunities, labor market integration, technological advancements, and bilateral cooperation. The results are interpreted in the context of the theoretical framework and research objectives.

10.8. Ethical Consideration:

This research adhered to ethical guidelines to ensure the confidentiality and integrity of the data. Informed consent was obtained from all interview participants, and they were assured of their right to anonymity and confidentiality. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research, how the data will be used, and the voluntary nature of their participation. All interviews and documents were handled with the highest level of confidentiality, and data will only be used for academic purposes.

1.11. Organization of the Study

The study is divided into six dedicated chapters inclusive of Introduction and Conclusion chapters.

- **Chapter One: Introduction:** This chapter details the premise of the study that include important aspects inclusive of introduction of the subject matter, significance of the study, problem statement, objectives, questions, literature review, gap of knowledge, theoretical framework, and research methodology. This chapter is in fact a replica of research proposal that set the stage for an approved and directed research through scrutiny satisfying the academic objectivity.
- **Chapter Two: Saudi Vision 2030 – Strategic Framework, Goals, and Progress:** This chapter has provided an in-depth analysis of the key socio-economic reform initiatives under Saudi Vision 2030, explaining their goals, mechanisms, and progress. It also established the broader strategic context of these transformations, particularly their implications for external partnerships, including Pakistan.

- **Chapter Three: Socio-Economic Transformation in Saudi Arabia – Dynamics, Reforms, and Global Integration:** Focusing on the bilateral relationship, this chapter evaluated how Pakistan can effectively align with the economic and developmental priorities of Saudi Vision 2030. It has explored existing areas of cooperation, institutional frameworks, investment flows, labor market dynamics, and potential barriers to deeper integration.
- **Chapter Four: Pakistan–Saudi Cooperation under Vision 2030 – Strategic Convergence and Emerging Opportunities:** Drawing from the preceding analysis, this chapter presents actionable recommendations for enhancing cooperation. It will discuss why it is crucial for Pakistan to capitalize on the opportunities presented by Saudi Vision 2030 and outlined the risks of non-engagement, offering policy strategies to overcome challenges and build sustainable, mutually beneficial ties.
- **Chapter Five: Development Strategies and Policy Opportunities for Pakistan in the Context of Saudi Vision 2030:** This chapter focuses on exploring Pakistan’s internal development priorities in the context of the opportunities emerging from Saudi Vision 2030. It critically examines how Pakistan can strategically align its institutional frameworks, economic planning, and sectoral capacities—particularly in labor, trade, investment, and technology—to benefit from Saudi Arabia’s transformation agenda. The chapter also identifies policy gaps, structural challenges, and the readiness of key Pakistani institutions to engage in long-term bilateral cooperation. Furthermore, it offers forward-looking strategies for strengthening Pakistan’s economic diplomacy, enhancing human capital, and building mutually beneficial development mechanisms with Saudi Arabia.
- **Chapter Six: Conclusion and Recommendations:** This chapter is not conclusive in confining the debate around the subject matter but an effort to compile the investigation conducted in this thesis through objective research. An effort is made to put forward the findings to help understand the missing links and future course of action between the two brotherly nations, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan.

CHAPTER TWO

2.0. Saudi Vision 2030 – Strategic Framework, Goals, and Progress

2.1. Introduction

Saudi Vision 2030 marks a defining moment in the Kingdom's developmental history, signaling a deliberate shift from an oil-centric economic model to a diversified, knowledge-driven, and socially vibrant society. Introduced in April 2016 under the leadership of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the vision seeks to reposition Saudi Arabia not only as a leading Middle Eastern power but also as a competitive actor in the global economic system (Al-Filali & Mahadin, 2020). Unlike previous economic strategies, Vision 2030 integrates cultural transformation, governance reforms, and global competitiveness, reflecting a holistic and future-oriented agenda. In doing so, it places Saudi Arabia among a select group of nations attempting radical economic restructuring within a short temporal span.

In the broader context of global development paradigms, Vision 2030 resonates with the shift from rentier and state-led growth to market-oriented and innovation-led development. It draws lessons from successful models like Singapore's strategic planning, South Korea's industrial transformation, and the UAE's diversification experiments, while maintaining unique socio-political considerations rooted in Saudi Arabia's Islamic identity and monarchical governance (Hertog, 2017). Thus, it aims to harmonize economic modernization with traditional values, crafting a developmental narrative that remains nationally authentic yet globally competitive.

Regionally, Saudi Vision 2030 holds a transformative potential not only for the Kingdom but also for the entire Gulf and broader Muslim world. The Kingdom's position as the custodian of the two holy mosques, the largest Arab economy, and a pivotal energy exporter grants it a leadership status whose reforms are bound to reverberate across regional economies (Ulrichsen, 2020). In this sense, the vision is not merely a domestic strategy but a geopolitical statement of intent, suggesting a shift in regional development dynamics driven by soft power, economic partnerships, and regional connectivity.

Moreover, Vision 2030 aligns closely with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), reflecting Saudi Arabia's aspiration to integrate with the international development agenda. Through its focus on health, education, gender empowerment, clean energy, and innovation, the vision incorporates 15 of the 17 SDGs directly or indirectly (UNDP Saudi Arabia, 2022). This alignment reinforces Saudi Arabia's image as a responsible global actor, willing to contribute to global sustainability efforts while addressing its internal developmental gaps.

From a structural perspective, Vision 2030 represents a significant reconfiguration of the Saudi state's economic role, shifting from a provider model toward an enabler model. It promotes public-private partnerships, privatization, digital transformation, and regulatory modernization, all of which redefine the state-market relationship (Ramady, 2019). These shifts suggest an evolving form of statecraft in which economic liberalization and social engineering are interlinked. The ambitious scale and accelerated pace of implementation make it an exceptional case in development studies.

In academic discourse, Vision 2030 presents a fertile ground for analyzing hybrid governance models, rentier state transitions, and top-down reform strategies. Scholars have debated whether such visions can sustain momentum in the absence of political liberalization or civic participation, raising questions about institutional sustainability and policy ownership (Kinninmont, 2017). Nevertheless, the vision's framing as a national transformation plan has mobilized bureaucratic restructuring, youth engagement, and global attention—adding depth to its policy credibility despite inherent risks.

Additionally, the vision holds particular relevance in the post-COVID-19 world, where resilience, adaptability, and innovation have become central to national development agendas. Saudi Arabia's investment in digital infrastructure, smart cities, and health systems under Vision 2030 was tested during the pandemic and, in many respects, validated by its crisis response (Gause, 2021). This reinforces the notion that strategic foresight and long-term planning are no longer optional but essential components of 21st-century governance.

For countries like Pakistan and other Muslim-majority states, Vision 2030 sets a precedent for reconciling Islamic identity with modern development imperatives. It offers lessons in strategic planning, economic diversification, youth mobilization, and institutional reform, which can be contextually adapted. Moreover, it opens new corridors for bilateral engagement, knowledge exchange, and joint initiatives, particularly in labor markets, education, trade, and cultural diplomacy. Therefore, Vision 2030 is not only Saudi Arabia's national blueprint but also a regional opportunity for shared progress.

2.2. Historical Evolution of Development Planning in Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia's approach to national development has long been shaped by its oil wealth, which has functioned as both a source of rapid modernization and a structural constraint. The discovery of oil in the 1930s transformed the Kingdom from a tribal society into a rentier state with substantial state-led investment in infrastructure, healthcare, education, and social services by the 1970s (Hertog, 2010). These oil revenues enabled the Saudi government to launch its first official five-year development plan in 1970, aiming to establish the institutional and physical foundation for a modern state. However, the early plans were primarily reactive, focused on service delivery and infrastructure expansion rather than long-term economic diversification or private sector development.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Saudi development planning maintained a largely paternalistic character, with the state serving as the dominant employer and financier. The government invested heavily in defense, education, and transport systems, yet a centralized, oil-dependent economy persisted (Niblock & Malik, 2007). While these investments modernized the Kingdom's basic infrastructure, they also created an economy highly vulnerable to fluctuations in global oil prices. The oil price crash in the mid-1980s served as a wake-up call, exposing the fragility of a mono-resource economic structure and underscoring the need for diversification—a concern that would resurface repeatedly in subsequent planning efforts.

The 1990s saw the introduction of more targeted economic reform initiatives, though still within the framework of oil-generated revenue. The Sixth and Seventh Development Plans attempted to enhance private sector participation, restructure the civil service, and encourage

industrialization (Looney, 2004). Yet, the lack of coherent policy continuity, weak institutional coordination, and persistent subsidies meant that these reform goals often remained aspirational. Moreover, oil booms in the early 2000s temporarily alleviated fiscal pressure, reducing the urgency of reform and reinforcing dependence on state spending.

Despite recognizing the importance of diversification, Saudi Arabia struggled to operationalize this vision due to systemic structural and administrative hurdles. The centralized bureaucracy, risk-averse decision-making, and limited institutional capacity stifled innovation and inhibited entrepreneurial culture (Hertog, 2018). Plans that aimed to empower the private sector, such as Saudization and economic cities, yielded mixed outcomes. Many industrial zones and investment initiatives failed to meet their employment or productivity targets, largely due to mismatches between skill supply and market needs.

Additionally, earlier development plans were heavily top-down, formulated with limited consultation from the private sector or civil society. This lack of inclusivity affected both the legitimacy and effectiveness of policy implementation. Planning remained largely prescriptive, with minimal emphasis on performance metrics, monitoring systems, or adaptive governance. In essence, the Kingdom's development planning during the pre-Vision 2030 era was ambitious in scale but fell short in building institutional resilience or economic sustainability (Krane, 2015).

A critical limitation of past development planning was its underestimation of the demographic challenge. The youth bulge, combined with a rising educated population, required dynamic labor market reforms and job creation strategies, which the earlier plans inadequately addressed. Public sector employment was preferred over entrepreneurship, and foreign labor was often prioritized in the private sector—undermining efforts to localize the workforce (Ramady, 2010). As a result, structural unemployment, especially among youth and women, remained a persistent issue despite macroeconomic growth.

The 2000s and early 2010s witnessed several high-profile initiatives such as the launch of the King Abdullah Economic City and the development of the Human Resources Development Fund. While these efforts reflected a growing recognition of the need for economic transformation, many remained isolated or lacked integration with broader national strategies.

Coordination between ministries, policy enforcement, and private sector involvement were sporadic, limiting their systemic impact (Kinninmont, 2017). These gaps reinforced the understanding that without a comprehensive and visionary framework, reform efforts would continue to fall short.

Ultimately, the historical evolution of Saudi development planning reveals a trajectory characterized by ambition and resources but hampered by institutional inertia, over-centralization, and oil dependency. These historical lessons provided the impetus for Vision 2030—a more coherent, performance-driven, and globally attuned strategy. Unlike previous plans, Vision 2030 seeks not just to address the symptoms of underdevelopment but to recalibrate the foundational architecture of the Saudi state and its economy for a post-oil era.

2.3. Vision 2030: Context and Rationale

Saudi Vision 2030 emerged as a strategic response to the convergence of critical demographic, economic, and geopolitical transformations facing the Kingdom. Demographically, Saudi Arabia has experienced a significant youth bulge, with over 60% of its population under the age of 30 (General Authority for Statistics, 2021). This youth majority demands not only employment but also broader social engagement, educational reform, and access to global opportunities. The growing expectations of this segment have intensified pressure on the state to provide more than just financial support—it must deliver pathways for personal growth, social mobility, and economic participation in a rapidly changing world.

Economically, the persistent reliance on hydrocarbon revenues has proven increasingly untenable. Although Saudi Arabia holds some of the largest oil reserves globally, repeated fluctuations in oil prices—particularly the 2014–2015 collapse—exposed the vulnerabilities of a mono-sector economy (Callen et al., 2014). These shocks underscored the structural fragility of an oil-dependent fiscal system, where public expenditure, employment, and long-term planning were all tied to the unpredictability of global commodity markets. As oil demand slows globally due to environmental transitions and alternative energy investments, economic diversification became not just a policy ambition but an existential necessity.

Geopolitically, the Middle East's evolving security architecture has also influenced Saudi Arabia's long-term vision. Regional instability—ranging from the Syrian conflict to the Yemen war and tensions with Iran—has prompted Riyadh to recalibrate its international posture. At the same time, the shifting U.S. role in the region and the growing influence of China and Russia have driven the Kingdom to pursue a more diversified foreign policy supported by economic diplomacy and strategic autonomy (Alterman, 2018). Vision 2030, in this regard, functions as both a domestic reform agenda and a soft power strategy to reposition Saudi Arabia as a leading regional hub for commerce, investment, and innovation.

Internally, the existing socio-economic model had begun to show signs of erosion by the early 2010s. Public sector employment had reached saturation, and inefficiencies within government institutions hindered responsiveness to citizens' needs. The private sector remained underdeveloped, often reliant on expatriate labor and dominated by family-owned conglomerates. As a result, productivity stagnated, innovation lagged, and citizens increasingly looked for systemic reform. Vision 2030 was thus framed as a comprehensive transformation plan that could address these internal bottlenecks through structural reforms, market liberalization, and modernization of the bureaucratic system (Kinninmont, 2017).

In response to these pressures, the Kingdom launched Vision 2030 not merely as a set of economic policies but as a transformative national narrative. The plan explicitly aims to create a more vibrant society, a thriving economy, and an ambitious nation. These three pillars reflect an awareness that sustainable development requires synergy between cultural identity, economic performance, and institutional efficiency (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016). The Vision seeks to reimagine the Saudi state as an enabler rather than a provider, encouraging citizens to become active participants in economic and social life, while reducing the traditional dependency on the state.

Moreover, the rise of the Fourth Industrial Revolution provided both a challenge and an opportunity for Saudi Arabia. Advances in artificial intelligence, renewable energy, fintech, and biotechnology have redefined global competitiveness. Vision 2030 thus incorporates a strong emphasis on innovation, digital infrastructure, and entrepreneurship to ensure that Saudi Arabia is not left behind in this technological race (Schwab, 2016). This forward-looking element

differentiates Vision 2030 from earlier plans by embedding it within the future contours of the global economy, where knowledge, technology, and adaptability are key drivers of national power.

The Vision also responds to external expectations and critiques of the Kingdom's governance and economic sustainability. International organizations and rating agencies had begun to express concerns about long-term fiscal imbalances and the lack of institutional transparency. By unveiling Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia aimed to assure investors, allies, and financial markets of its commitment to reform and stability. The listing of Aramco and the opening of capital markets to foreign investors were not only economic measures but symbolic moves to signal the Kingdom's readiness for global integration (Hertog, 2018).

The context and rationale for Vision 2030 reflect a complex interplay of internal challenges and global shifts. It is a strategic recalibration driven by demographic momentum, economic vulnerability, and regional realignment. Unlike previous national plans, Vision 2030 is framed not as incremental reform but as a radical transformation aimed at safeguarding the Kingdom's future through institutional renewal, economic diversification, and societal inclusion. It is this integrated and anticipatory approach that marks Vision 2030 as a turning point in Saudi Arabia's developmental trajectory.

2.4. Pillars and Strategic Objectives

At the core of Saudi Vision 2030 are three interdependent pillars: A Vibrant Society, A Thriving Economy, and An Ambitious Nation. These pillars serve not merely as thematic categories but as guiding principles for restructuring the political economy, reimagining the social contract, and redefining the Kingdom's global standing. "A Vibrant Society" places emphasis on cultural identity, social well-being, and community cohesion, recognizing that economic growth alone cannot ensure sustainable development without a grounded and engaged citizenry (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016). This pillar affirms the importance of heritage, arts, religious values, and quality of life—framing development as a multidimensional pursuit.

The second pillar, “A Thriving Economy,” is arguably the backbone of the Vision. It prioritizes economic diversification, job creation, innovation, and increased private sector participation. This component seeks to reduce dependence on oil revenues by enabling non-oil sectors such as tourism, manufacturing, mining, and logistics to flourish. Central to this goal is the support for small and medium enterprises (SMEs), foreign direct investment, and entrepreneurship as engines of inclusive growth (Alghamdi & Farooq, 2022). In doing so, the strategy attempts to shift the economic model from a rentier state to a competitive and productive economy that actively participates in the global market.

The third pillar, “An Ambitious Nation,” underscores the need for governance reform, institutional efficiency, and national pride. It emphasizes transparency, e-government, civic responsibility, and anti-corruption measures to enhance state legitimacy and accountability. Under this pillar, the government seeks to redefine the role of public institutions from being service providers to becoming strategic enablers, which requires both administrative restructuring and cultural change within the public sector (Al-Faris & Al-Sulayman, 2020). In a region often characterized by rigid governance systems, this shift toward performance-based management is significant.

Each of these pillars is operationalized through clearly defined strategic objectives, many of which include measurable key performance indicators (KPIs). For instance, within “A Vibrant Society,” objectives include increasing household spending on cultural and recreational activities from 2.9% to 6% and raising the number of UNESCO heritage sites. For “A Thriving Economy,” targets such as lowering unemployment to 7% and increasing women’s participation in the workforce are tied to concrete policy tools (Vision 2030 Progress Report, 2021). This results-based framework allows for greater transparency and tracking of progress, which is critical for maintaining domestic support and international investor confidence.

The conceptual architecture of Vision 2030 also aligns closely with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In fact, many of its strategic objectives directly overlap with SDGs such as Decent Work and Economic Growth (SDG 8), Quality Education (SDG 4), Gender Equality (SDG 5), and Sustainable Cities and Communities (SDG 11) (UNDP Saudi Arabia, 2022). By embedding the SDGs into the national development agenda, Saudi Arabia

signals its intention to contribute to global development governance while localizing these goals to suit its socio-political context.

What distinguishes Vision 2030's alignment with the SDGs is its deliberate focus on institutional transformation as a means to achieve sustainable development. Unlike in some countries where SDG alignment remains rhetorical, Saudi Arabia's KPIs serve to internalize global benchmarks into domestic policy planning. For example, efforts to expand vocational training and enhance education outcomes are not only tied to economic growth targets but also reflect the SDG principles of lifelong learning and skills development (World Bank, 2020). This dual orientation—both local and global—adds depth to the Kingdom's reform agenda.

Moreover, the inclusion of women's empowerment within Vision 2030 is both a socio-political recalibration and a fulfillment of SDG 5. Reforms such as lifting the driving ban, granting greater mobility rights, and increasing women's labor force participation mark a transformative shift in gender dynamics (Doumato, 2018). While challenges remain, these changes signify a growing recognition that inclusive development is not a luxury but a prerequisite for sustained national progress. Vision 2030 thus positions women not as passive beneficiaries but as active agents of change within the Saudi socio-economic landscape.

The pillars and strategic objectives of Vision 2030 reflect a nuanced understanding of development as a multidimensional, globally integrated, and citizen-centric process. By merging national ambitions with international frameworks like the SDGs, the Kingdom has crafted a reform model that is both visionary and pragmatic. It seeks not merely to modernize the economy but to reshape the very foundations of Saudi society—socially, institutionally, and ideologically. This comprehensive framework provides not only a roadmap for Saudi Arabia's transformation but also a reference point for other developing nations navigating similar crossroads.

2.5. Key Programs and Implementation Tools

The ambitious goals of Saudi Vision 2030 are operationalized through a set of strategic implementation tools and programs designed to drive transformation across multiple sectors. One

of the most critical among these is the National Transformation Program (NTP), launched in 2016 as the first executive initiative under the broader Vision framework. The NTP primarily focuses on enhancing the efficiency of government institutions, improving non-oil revenues, and enabling digital transformation across public services (Ministry of Economy and Planning, 2018). It targets performance improvement in key ministries including health, education, municipal affairs, and justice—areas that directly impact citizen experience and human capital development.

A defining feature of the NTP is its performance-based governance model, which departs from traditional top-down planning. It employs Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) to measure institutional accountability, track reform progress, and adjust strategies based on outcomes. For example, the program aims to reduce average waiting times in public hospitals, increase private sector health provision, and boost citizen satisfaction with e-government services (Vision 2030 Progress Report, 2021). This results-oriented model reflects a broader shift in Saudi governance from input-based planning to evidence-based decision-making—something previously absent from the Kingdom’s administrative tradition.

Another central instrument in the implementation of Vision 2030 is the Public Investment Fund (PIF), which has evolved into one of the world’s most influential sovereign wealth funds. Originally established in 1971, the PIF was restructured and repurposed under Vision 2030 to serve as the primary engine of economic diversification. With assets projected to surpass \$2 trillion by 2030, the fund is tasked with investing in both domestic and global ventures to stimulate growth, generate non-oil revenues, and position Saudi Arabia as an investment powerhouse (PIF, 2022). Key sectors for investment include renewable energy, artificial intelligence, gaming, infrastructure, and tourism.

Importantly, the PIF is not merely a financial mechanism; it represents a strategic reimagining of the Kingdom’s role in global capitalism. Through its equity stakes in international firms and major domestic projects, the fund enhances Saudi Arabia’s influence in emerging technologies and global markets. Simultaneously, its investment in local projects aims to catalyze private sector growth, reduce unemployment, and develop a vibrant entrepreneurial

ecosystem (Alharbi & Alghamdi, 2021). In doing so, the PIF acts as both a domestic stimulus tool and an external signal of Saudi Arabia’s economic ambitions and reform credibility.

Among the most visible and transformative implementation tools are the GIGA Projects, large-scale development initiatives that embody the symbolic and structural aspirations of Vision 2030. Leading these is NEOM, a \$500 billion futuristic city being built in the northwest of the Kingdom. Designed as a hub for artificial intelligence, robotics, biotechnology, and clean energy, NEOM is envisioned as a testbed for sustainable urbanism and high-tech living (NEOM, 2022). The project reflects Saudi Arabia’s ambition to leapfrog into a post-oil, innovation-led economy while attracting global talent and investment.

Complementing NEOM is Qiddiya, a mega entertainment and sports city located near Riyadh. With over 300 planned recreational, cultural, and sports facilities, Qiddiya aims to diversify leisure options, promote domestic tourism, and contribute to national identity formation. It also plays a role in youth engagement and job creation, particularly in creative industries historically underdeveloped in the Kingdom (Al-Sudairi, 2020). Through such projects, the government hopes to stimulate new cultural expressions and social norms, thereby supporting the broader goal of developing “A Vibrant Society.”

Another strategic initiative is the Red Sea Project, an ambitious sustainable tourism destination along Saudi Arabia’s western coastline. With a strong environmental mandate, the project incorporates eco-lodges, renewable energy systems, and conservation plans to preserve marine biodiversity while promoting high-end tourism (Red Sea Global, 2022). It aligns closely with Vision 2030’s goals of increasing tourism’s contribution to GDP and reducing the economic reliance on religious pilgrimages. These projects collectively highlight how the Kingdom is leveraging its geographic diversity and ecological potential to redefine its global image and economic base.

Together, these programs—the NTP, PIF, and GIGA Projects—form the operational backbone of Vision 2030. Each plays a distinct yet complementary role: the NTP modernizes institutions and service delivery; the PIF drives strategic investment and diversification; and the GIGA Projects serve as flagship models of transformation. Their interconnectivity underscores a

shift from fragmented policy execution toward integrated, multi-scalar development planning. Despite inevitable challenges in scale and execution, these initiatives represent a bold reconfiguration of Saudi Arabia's developmental paradigm, positioning the Kingdom to compete in a post-oil, post-industrial global economy.

2.6. Institutional and Governance Mechanisms

One of the defining features of Saudi Vision 2030 is its shift from a centralized, oil-rent-driven administrative model to a performance-based governance framework anchored in institutional accountability and agility. To operationalize this vision, the Kingdom established a series of Vision Realization Offices (VROs) across key ministries and public agencies. These offices function as internal transformation hubs responsible for translating the high-level objectives of Vision 2030 into actionable, sector-specific programs (Alghamdi & Rahman, 2022). Their design reflects a deliberate move away from hierarchical bureaucracy toward more responsive, decentralized units with clear mandates and monitoring responsibilities.

The VROs are embedded in over 20 government entities and are structured to align ministry-level strategies with the overarching national goals of Vision 2030. Each office develops detailed implementation plans, performance metrics, and timelines for achieving its targets. For example, the Ministry of Health's VRO works on improving healthcare access and digital health services, while the Ministry of Education's VRO focuses on aligning curricula with labor market needs (Vision 2030 Progress Report, 2021). This tailored, sectoral approach increases the adaptability of reforms and ensures that each institution contributes meaningfully to the national agenda.

One of the strengths of the VRO model lies in its inter-ministerial coordination. Previously, overlapping mandates and fragmented communication often hindered policy coherence in Saudi Arabia's governance structure. The establishment of VROs has introduced standardized frameworks for cross-sectoral collaboration, enabling more integrated planning and joint problem-solving (Khan & Elsheikh, 2021). In a context where bureaucratic inertia had historically stalled reform, this new structure marks a significant cultural shift toward collaborative governance and policy synergy.

At the heart of the Vision 2030 institutional architecture is the Center for Performance Measurement (Adaa), which acts as a central hub for evaluating and auditing the performance of public entities. Adaa was established to enhance transparency, promote continuous improvement, and ensure that reform efforts are evidence-driven. It collects data on KPIs, conducts field surveys, and provides benchmarking services to help ministries monitor their progress against national and international standards (Adaa, 2022). By creating a culture of evaluation and feedback, Adaa contributes to depoliticizing reform and focuses attention on measurable outcomes.

Equally important is the creation of delivery units within the offices of senior leadership, such as the Crown Prince's Office and the Council of Economic and Development Affairs (CEDA). These units are tasked with high-level oversight and are responsible for driving implementation across the bureaucratic ecosystem. Their role ensures that strategic alignment is maintained between the VROs, line ministries, and the overarching goals of Vision 2030. Through routine briefings and direct accountability mechanisms, delivery units provide a vertical integration function that accelerates policy execution and minimizes bureaucratic delay (Al-Faris & Al-Sulayman, 2020).

Monitoring and performance management are supported by digital dashboards and real-time reporting tools, which enhance transparency and responsiveness. These platforms allow senior officials and even the general public to access data on how various programs are progressing. This level of visibility serves two purposes: it incentivizes ministries to meet their targets, and it builds public trust in the reform process (UNDP Saudi Arabia, 2022). While transparency in governance remains a work in progress, the technological infrastructure supporting Vision 2030 reflects a marked departure from opaque planning practices of the past.

Another innovation in the governance model of Vision 2030 is its emphasis on human capital development within the civil service. The Kingdom has launched several training and leadership programs aimed at equipping government employees with the skills needed for a dynamic, reform-oriented bureaucracy. By investing in public sector capacity building, Saudi Arabia is fostering a cadre of professionals capable of sustaining long-term institutional transformation (World Bank, 2020). These efforts are critical in ensuring that the gains made

through VROs and performance systems are not reversed due to institutional fatigue or lack of expertise.

Despite these advances, challenges remain in ensuring that the institutional mechanisms are not only efficient but also adaptive and resilient. Some ministries still struggle with capacity constraints, and the ambitious pace of reform occasionally outstrips implementation bandwidth. Additionally, balancing top-down direction with bottom-up innovation remains a delicate task. Nevertheless, the integration of VROs, performance monitoring bodies like Adaa, and digital governance tools represents a structural leap in how development is managed in Saudi Arabia—laying the institutional groundwork for achieving Vision 2030’s transformative goals.

2.7. Progress Assessment

Since its launch in 2016, Vision 2030 has yielded a mix of tangible achievements and evolving milestones, signaling both momentum and areas requiring sustained effort. The Kingdom’s approach to progress measurement has centered on Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), which allow institutions to evaluate their outputs and outcomes against predefined benchmarks. According to the Vision 2030 Progress Report (2023), more than 60% of the targeted KPIs under various Vision Realization Programs (VRPs) were either met or exceeded by 2022. For example, non-oil revenue grew from SAR 166 billion in 2015 to over SAR 400 billion in 2022, demonstrating movement towards economic diversification (Ministry of Finance, 2023).

One of the most remarkable areas of advancement has been the economic sector, where the Kingdom has managed to attract unprecedented levels of foreign direct investment (FDI) and elevate its global competitiveness. The Global Competitiveness Report (2022) by the World Economic Forum ranked Saudi Arabia among the top 10 countries for business dynamism and macroeconomic stability. Major reforms in business licensing, regulatory streamlining, and tax policies have significantly improved the investment climate (WEF, 2022). Moreover, the rapid expansion of the tourism sector—particularly through the Saudi Seasons initiative—has become a cornerstone in boosting non-oil GDP.

In the healthcare sector, Vision 2030's goals of enhancing accessibility, digitization, and privatization have seen concrete progress. The Ministry of Health launched the Seha Virtual Hospital, one of the largest of its kind globally, offering telemedicine services across the Kingdom. According to the Saudi Health Council (2022), the number of primary healthcare visits conducted virtually has increased by over 300% since 2020. Additionally, private sector participation in healthcare rose from 25% to 35% by 2022, indicating growing diversification and easing the financial burden on public health infrastructure (WHO, 2023).

Education reform, a foundational aspect of long-term development under Vision 2030, has seen mixed progress. On one hand, there has been notable investment in vocational and technical training through the Human Capability Development Program, which aims to align graduates with labor market needs. According to UNESCO (2022), Saudi Arabia has significantly increased enrollment in technical and vocational education and training (TVET) institutions. On the other hand, international learning assessments still show room for improvement in core subjects like math and science, pointing to ongoing gaps in curriculum reform and instructional quality.

Cultural development—once a politically sensitive area—has emerged as a transformative sector under Vision 2030. The establishment of the Ministry of Culture and various national authorities for heritage, music, film, and visual arts reflect a new openness to cultural expression. Events such as the Riyadh Season and Jeddah Art Biennale have drawn international attention and helped cultivate a domestic creative economy. By 2022, the number of Saudi citizens employed in cultural industries had tripled compared to 2017 (General Authority for Statistics, 2023). This sector now plays a dual role in nation branding and economic diversification.

Across sectors, Saudi Arabia has leveraged digital transformation as a cross-cutting enabler. The government's "Digital Government Strategy" has facilitated the rollout of more than 5,000 e-government services, significantly improving public service delivery and citizen satisfaction (Digital Government Authority, 2023). Platforms such as Absher, Tawakkalna, and Nafath have streamlined bureaucratic processes and enhanced state-citizen interaction. These

innovations are not only instrumental in improving governance efficiency but also demonstrate the Kingdom's ambition to be a regional leader in digital government.

While progress has been notable, challenges remain, particularly in ensuring regional equity and policy sustainability. Some rural and less developed regions continue to lag in access to modern infrastructure and services. Additionally, while youth employment has improved marginally, the goal of reducing unemployment to 7% remains ambitious. Critics have also raised concerns about the pace of implementation versus the capacity of institutions to adapt, noting that rapid transformation may outpace social preparedness and institutional maturity (Hertog, 2022).

The Vision 2030 framework has delivered substantial, though uneven, progress across multiple dimensions of national development. Economic diversification, healthcare innovation, cultural liberalization, and digital governance have seen notable successes. However, education reform and regional inclusion require more sustained attention. What distinguishes this reform process is not only the scope of its ambition but also the institutional mechanisms developed to assess, report, and adapt policy in real-time. If Saudi Arabia can maintain this momentum while addressing emerging gaps, Vision 2030 may indeed serve as a model for structured transformation in the Global South.

2.8 Critiques and Structural Challenges

Despite its ambitious scope and the early successes it has recorded, Saudi Vision 2030 has drawn significant critique, particularly concerning its continued reliance on oil revenue to fund its diversification efforts. While the Vision itself aspires to reduce oil dependency, the paradox remains that oil exports still contribute over 70% of government revenue, and surpluses generated during high oil price periods have been funneled into financing the very programs meant to end this dependency (International Energy Agency [IEA], 2022). This raises concerns about the long-term financial sustainability of the transformation, especially if global oil demand contracts more rapidly due to the energy transition.

Moreover, the Public Investment Fund (PIF), central to Vision 2030's economic execution, is itself heavily capitalized through oil-generated surpluses and Aramco-related revenues. This circular dependency creates a structural vulnerability where diversification is both funded by and tethered to oil price volatility (Krane, 2021). While the Kingdom has made strides in building a non-oil economy—through tourism, entertainment, and technology—it remains to be seen whether these sectors can mature rapidly enough to assume the fiscal responsibilities currently carried by hydrocarbons.

On the political front, Vision 2030 faces critiques for being overly centralized in its planning and execution. Much of the initiative is driven by the top leadership, particularly the Crown Prince, which, while ensuring decisiveness, has raised concerns about the limited space for pluralistic debate, legislative oversight, and participatory governance (Hertog, 2020). Critics argue that meaningful reform, especially in economic and legal domains, is difficult to sustain in the absence of political institutionalization and broader civic engagement.

From a societal perspective, the reforms have created a complex push-and-pull between tradition and modernity. While liberalization of entertainment, gender inclusion, and cultural policies have gained traction among youth and urban elites, more conservative sections of society—particularly in rural areas—have expressed discomfort with the pace and nature of these changes (Al-Rasheed, 2019). The government's attempt to engineer social change from the top down risks alienating segments of the population, thereby complicating consensus-building around the Vision's goals.

Youth unemployment also remains a stubborn structural challenge. Despite numerous initiatives to create jobs and train young Saudis, the labor market continues to suffer from segmentation, skills mismatch, and an overreliance on public sector employment expectations (World Bank, 2023). The private sector, while growing, often lacks the capacity or incentives to absorb the large number of graduates entering the workforce each year. As such, economic reform must be paired with more robust labor market restructuring to ensure inclusivity.

On the global stage, Vision 2030 is navigating a rapidly changing geopolitical and economic landscape. Fluctuating relations with key partners such as the United States, economic

competition with regional powers like the UAE, and emerging scrutiny over human rights have all affected investor confidence and international collaboration (Gause, 2021). These external variables create a climate of uncertainty for some of the large-scale investment projects and raise questions about Saudi Arabia's long-term position in global trade and diplomacy.

Environmental concerns also form part of the critique. While Vision 2030 articulates commitments to sustainability, critics argue that many of the GIGA projects—particularly NEOM and The Line—are capital- and energy-intensive, raising doubts about their ecological footprint and alignment with genuine green development (Mitchell & Liu, 2022). The challenge lies in reconciling Saudi Arabia's ambitions for futuristic urbanism with its responsibility toward regional environmental conservation and global climate goals.

While Saudi Vision 2030 represents a bold and unprecedented attempt at national transformation, it is not immune to structural limitations and critiques. The contradictions between oil-funded diversification, top-down governance, societal tensions, and global constraints underscore the complexity of its implementation. Acknowledging these challenges does not diminish the vision's value, but rather, invites more grounded and adaptive policy responses. A successful transition will depend not only on institutional capacity but also on the Kingdom's willingness to embrace inclusive, responsive, and sustainable reforms.

2.9 Implications for Regional Economic Partners

Saudi Vision 2030 is not merely a domestic reform agenda; it represents a recalibration of the Kingdom's external engagement with its regional and international economic partners. The Vision explicitly calls for greater economic integration, trade diversification, and foreign investment, which signals a shift from inward-looking policies to outward-facing developmental diplomacy. By leveraging its geostrategic location and capital wealth, Saudi Arabia aims to position itself as a regional economic hub that connects Africa, Asia, and Europe (Kinninmont, 2017). This strategic openness has profound implications for neighboring countries, particularly those within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and South Asia.

One of the most prominent features of this new external orientation is the invitation extended to regional partners to co-invest in GIGA projects and new industries within the Kingdom. Through Public Investment Fund-led initiatives and bilateral investment forums, Saudi Arabia has sought to attract skilled labor, industrial collaboration, and supply chain partnerships. This creates an opportunity for countries with a surplus labor force and emerging industries— such as Pakistan—to participate in the Kingdom’s diversification efforts, particularly in construction, logistics, IT, and healthcare (SAMA, 2023).

The growing emphasis on economic corridors and regional connectivity as part of Vision 2030 aligns well with Pakistan’s own strategic goals under CPEC and broader economic diplomacy. Projects like the Red Sea Gateway and NEOM’s logistics infrastructure could offer synergies with Pakistan’s Gwadar port and overland routes. These complementarities can be leveraged to build mutually beneficial trade linkages, facilitate transit infrastructure, and support regional supply chains (Mustafa & Yousaf, 2022). Saudi Arabia’s investment in multimodal transport and special economic zones offers a regional blueprint that other countries may align with or adopt.

Moreover, Saudi Arabia’s diversification into non-oil sectors such as tourism, entertainment, and digital innovation opens doors for joint ventures, especially in service industries. Countries like Pakistan, with a burgeoning youth population and cost-competitive service sector, can contribute in areas such as creative content, fintech, and hospitality management. Saudi Arabia’s Vision Realization Programs have shown interest in cross-border partnerships with emerging economies, creating a potential platform for collaborative innovation and cultural exchange (Al-Falih, 2021).

Remittances and labor mobility also figure prominently in the Kingdom’s evolving external economic strategy. Saudi Arabia remains the top employer of Pakistani overseas workers, and Vision 2030’s push for higher-skilled, digitally trained labor presents a double- edged challenge: it could reduce low-skilled migration while increasing demand for educated professionals (ILO, 2022). To seize this opportunity, Pakistan must recalibrate its vocational training policies and align its human capital strategy with Saudi labor market reforms, ensuring sustained access to this critical remittance source.

On the political economy front, Vision 2030 marks Saudi Arabia's pivot toward regional leadership in sustainable development, especially through green energy initiatives. Its partnerships in renewable energy—particularly with countries like Egypt, Jordan, and potentially Pakistan—signal a willingness to share technology and invest in transnational clean energy networks. With Pakistan aiming to increase its renewable energy share, cooperation with Saudi Arabia in solar, hydrogen, and wind projects could become a strategic asset (IEA, 2023).

Furthermore, Saudi Arabia's ambition to become a major investor in regional manufacturing and food security has implications for agricultural economies like Pakistan. As part of its food security strategy, the Kingdom has already invested in farmland across Africa and Asia. Pakistan, with its vast underutilized arable land, could position itself as a key player in this domain—provided it can ensure regulatory transparency and investor protection (Bashir & Ahmed, 2020). This sectoral cooperation can evolve into long-term strategic partnerships that go beyond transactional investment flows.

The external dimension of Vision 2030 introduces a normative shift in Saudi foreign policy—from one driven solely by religious solidarity or petrodollar diplomacy to one that is increasingly transactional, economically strategic, and diversified. This realignment provides opportunities for countries like Pakistan to redefine their bilateral relations with the Kingdom on more modern, sectoral, and institutional terms. Moving from a purely labor-export and aid-receiving relationship to one rooted in economic co-creation would mark a significant evolution in regional diplomacy under the Vision 2030 umbrella.

2.10. Conclusion

Saudi Vision 2030 stands as a transformative roadmap that seeks to reposition the Kingdom within the global economy through diversification, institutional reform, and social modernization. The analysis in this chapter has demonstrated that the Vision is far more than a technocratic exercise; it is a strategic recalibration aimed at reducing oil dependency and cultivating a diversified economic structure anchored in knowledge, innovation, and human capital development (Vision 2030 Progress Report, 2023). Its multidimensional framework addresses both long-standing structural deficiencies and emerging global dynamics.

The historical evolution of development planning in Saudi Arabia—from oil-reliant, centrally planned strategies to a more diversified and performance-driven model—sets the context for understanding Vision 2030’s distinctiveness. Past plans, while ambitious, often lacked coordination mechanisms, data-driven evaluation, and sectoral integration (Hertog, 2020). Vision 2030 represents a deliberate departure from this legacy by institutionalizing governance mechanisms such as Vision Realization Offices (VROs) and embedding performance monitoring systems to enhance accountability and transparency.

A critical rationale behind the Vision’s launch is the demographic, geopolitical, and economic shifts Saudi Arabia faces in the 21st century. The need to create employment for a burgeoning youth population, maintain macroeconomic stability amid fluctuating oil prices, and remain competitive in a rapidly evolving global economy has necessitated bold structural reforms (Kinninmont, 2017). As highlighted in this chapter, Vision 2030 seeks to address these challenges by diversifying revenue streams, liberalizing the social fabric, and integrating the Kingdom more deeply into global value chains.

The Vision’s three core pillars—a vibrant society, a thriving economy, and an ambitious nation—anchor its strategic objectives and are closely aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These pillars are operationalized through comprehensive programs such as the National Transformation Program (NTP), GIGA projects like NEOM, and a robust investment strategy led by the Public Investment Fund (PIF). Together, these elements work in tandem to redefine the Kingdom’s developmental trajectory (Al-Falih, 2021).

Despite the achievements recorded thus far—including improvements in health care delivery, digital governance, FDI inflows, and cultural liberalization—several challenges persist. Continued dependency on oil revenue for financing diversification programs reveals a paradox at the heart of the reform process (Krane, 2021). Similarly, balancing rapid modernization with societal expectations and institutional capacity remains a critical concern, particularly in areas such as youth employment, education reform, and regional equity.

Vision 2030 is also characterized by its evolving external economic orientation, wherein Saudi Arabia has begun to actively engage regional partners in co-development opportunities. As discussed, this offers significant openings for countries like Pakistan, not only through labor market linkages and investment flows but also through collaborative ventures in infrastructure, energy, and services. The Kingdom's outward economic posture under Vision 2030 could become a catalyst for broader regional integration and shared prosperity (Mustafa & Yousaf, 2022).

Importantly, the institutional and governance mechanisms underpinning Vision 2030 reflect a shift toward evidence-based planning, policy coherence, and accountability. Structures like the Center for Performance Measurement (Aadaa) and digital governance platforms represent innovations aimed at ensuring reform sustainability. These tools allow for real-time feedback and adaptive learning, essential for managing a transformation of this scale and complexity (Aadaa, 2022).

Chapter Two has provided a comprehensive analysis of Saudi Vision 2030's foundational framework, strategic intent, and institutional apparatus. It has also critically assessed the Vision's achievements and limitations within both domestic and regional contexts. This sets the stage for the next chapter, which will explore how Vision 2030 has translated into tangible socio-economic transformation within the Kingdom, analyzing sectoral reforms, development outcomes, and their resonance with broader theoretical frameworks of development and modernization.

CHAPTER THREE

3.0. Socio-Economic Transformation in Saudi Arabia – Dynamics, Reforms, and Global Integration

3.1 Introduction

Socio-economic transformation, as conceptualized in Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, refers to a deliberate and comprehensive restructuring of the Kingdom's economic foundations and social fabric to achieve sustainable development and long-term national resilience. It encompasses a multidimensional shift from an oil-dependent rentier economy to a diversified, innovation-driven, and citizen-centric developmental model (Kinninmont, 2017). This transformation is not confined to economic metrics alone but integrates reforms in education, labor markets, social inclusion, gender empowerment, and cultural vitality—each treated as interdependent pillars of progress.

The articulation of socio-economic transformation in Vision 2030 is rooted in an acute awareness of demographic shifts, fiscal vulnerabilities, and the limitations of past economic models. Saudi Arabia's youthful population, where over 60% are under the age of 30, has created both a demographic dividend and a potential risk if opportunities are not expanded (World Bank, 2022). The Vision responds by linking economic growth strategies to the social imperative of creating inclusive, meaningful employment and investing in human capital as the primary engine of long-term transformation.

One of the distinctive features of Saudi Arabia's transformation agenda is its integration of social reform with economic liberalization. Unlike previous development initiatives, which often separated economic policies from societal change, Vision 2030 explicitly interweaves the two. For instance, initiatives to increase female workforce participation and cultural engagement are not viewed as isolated social measures but as integral components of economic revitalization (Al-Rasheed, 2019). This integrated approach reflects a new understanding within the Saudi leadership that long-term competitiveness requires social modernization alongside economic restructuring.

Equally important is the role of institutional reform in facilitating socio-economic change. The Vision has introduced performance-based governance, streamlined bureaucratic procedures, and established dedicated entities such as the Human Capability Development Program and the Quality of Life Program. These are designed not merely as administrative tools but as structural catalysts for systemic transformation (Vision 2030 Progress Report, 2023). The shift toward institutionalized planning and evidence-based policy formulation marks a notable break from earlier ad hoc or oil-revenue driven models of governance.

In framing this transformation, the Kingdom also draws upon international development frameworks, particularly the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Vision 2030's alignment with SDGs such as quality education, gender equality, decent work, and innovation demonstrates Saudi Arabia's intent to harmonize national priorities with global norms (UNDP, 2021). This global integration is not only symbolic; it provides a framework for benchmarking, cross-country learning, and enhancing the Kingdom's soft power in global development diplomacy.

However, defining socio-economic transformation within the Saudi context also necessitates an understanding of its unique socio-political landscape. The Kingdom's model of reform is characterized by strong central leadership and top-down implementation, a factor that accelerates change but also raises questions about participatory governance and policy inclusivity (Hertog, 2020). This approach has enabled swift policy rollouts, but it also requires robust mechanisms for citizen engagement, feedback, and social dialogue to ensure long-term legitimacy and effectiveness.

At its core, the Vision recognizes that economic development cannot be sustained without addressing deep-seated societal norms and institutional rigidities. Hence, social inclusion, especially of marginalized groups such as women and rural populations, is now framed as a developmental necessity rather than a concession (ILO, 2022). Programs focused on vocational training, cultural participation, and public health have all been expanded not only to improve quality of life but to foster a more productive and socially cohesive citizenry.

This chapter begins by establishing the conceptual and strategic grounding of socio-economic transformation within the Vision 2030 framework. It argues that Saudi Arabia's transformation is not a superficial policy overhaul but a reimagining of the social contract between state and society. The subsequent sections will examine key reform areas, institutional innovations, and development outcomes, while also addressing the tensions and trade-offs involved in managing change at such an unprecedented scale.

3.2 Demographic Trends and Social Reform Agenda

Saudi Arabia's demographic structure is a defining feature of its socio-economic transformation agenda. With over 60% of its population under the age of 30, the Kingdom faces both an opportunity and a challenge in managing this youth bulge (World Bank, 2022). On one hand, this youthful demographic provides a dynamic labor force that can energize economic growth; on the other, it requires sustained job creation, educational reform, and skill development to prevent economic discontent and social instability. Vision 2030 explicitly recognizes this demographic reality by aligning national development goals with youth-centric strategies.

The creation of meaningful employment opportunities has become a central priority for Saudi policymakers. The Kingdom has traditionally relied on public sector employment to absorb local workers, but this model has become unsustainable under fiscal pressures and diversification objectives. Consequently, Vision 2030 promotes labor market reforms that encourage private sector expansion, entrepreneurship, and digital economy participation as viable alternatives for Saudi youth (Alshammari & Saravanan, 2021). These efforts are further reinforced by initiatives such as the Human Capability Development Program, which seeks to realign education with market demands.

Educational reform is pivotal in this demographic transition. Traditional rote learning systems are being replaced with competency-based models that emphasize analytical thinking, language proficiency, and technical skills. Programs like “Mawhiba” aim to identify and nurture gifted youth, while the restructuring of university curricula is designed to close the skills mismatch that previously hampered graduate employability (Vision 2030 Progress Report,

2023). This shift reflects a broader ambition to cultivate a knowledge-based society, rather than one reliant on oil rents or expatriate labor.

A cornerstone of Saudi Arabia's social reform agenda is the empowerment of women, a shift that signals both cultural liberalization and economic pragmatism. Historically constrained by legal and societal norms, women are now increasingly participating in the public sphere—as professionals, entrepreneurs, and consumers. According to the Saudi General Authority for Statistics (2022), female labor force participation has risen from 17% in 2016 to over 36% by 2022, a remarkable transformation catalyzed by legislative reforms and targeted economic incentives.

Vision 2030's reform strategy has removed several barriers to women's mobility and economic participation. Key policy changes—such as lifting the driving ban, equalizing employment laws, and enhancing access to financial services—have expanded the agency of women in both rural and urban areas (Alarabiya News, 2021). These reforms are not merely symbolic; they reflect a calculated effort to integrate half of the population into the productive economy and reduce the fiscal strain on households and the state.

The broader project of social liberalization under Vision 2030 is equally significant. Saudi Arabia has witnessed a rapid expansion of cultural and recreational activities, including concerts, cinemas, sporting events, and public festivals—phenomena that were largely absent or limited prior to the Vision's launch. These reforms are driven by both economic and social objectives: creating jobs in entertainment, tourism, and hospitality, while also reshaping societal norms in a manner conducive to openness and innovation (Hertog, 2020).

Nevertheless, the pace and scope of social reforms have also triggered complex social dynamics. While many young Saudis have embraced the liberalization agenda, conservative segments remain cautious or resistant to the rapid cultural shifts. The government has attempted to manage this tension by balancing tradition with transformation—emphasizing that these changes are in line with Islamic values and national interests (Leber, 2019). This balancing act remains delicate, yet essential for the legitimacy and sustainability of the reform process.

The intersection of demographic trends and social reforms forms the backbone of Saudi Arabia's socio-economic transformation. By addressing youth employment, enhancing educational quality, and promoting gender inclusion, Vision 2030 attempts to realign societal structures with the demands of a modern, competitive economy. The next sections will delve into how these reforms are operationalized across specific sectors and what implications they carry for governance, economic performance, and regional cooperation.

3.3 Economic Diversification and Industrial Shifts

Economic diversification lies at the core of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, serving as a critical strategy for reducing the Kingdom's long-standing dependence on oil revenues. Historically, over 80% of government income derived from hydrocarbons, making the economy highly vulnerable to fluctuations in global oil prices (Krane, 2021). Vision 2030 reimagines this economic model by redirecting focus toward non-oil sectors such as tourism, logistics, entertainment, and mining. This reorientation reflects a broader shift towards a productivity-driven and knowledge-based economy capable of generating sustainable growth beyond oil exports.

Tourism has emerged as a flagship sector in the diversification agenda. The launch of the Saudi Tourism Strategy and initiatives such as the "Saudi Seasons" program, the Red Sea Project, and the issuance of tourist visas in 2019 represent transformative steps toward building a globally competitive tourism industry (Alghamdi & Collins, 2021). Saudi Arabia aims to attract 100 million visitors annually by 2030, thereby increasing tourism's contribution to GDP from 3% to 10% and creating nearly 1 million new jobs (Saudi Ministry of Tourism, 2023). These efforts are also intertwined with broader goals of cultural soft power and international image-building.

The entertainment sector, once non-existent under conservative governance, has undergone a remarkable transformation. Cinemas, concerts, cultural festivals, and sporting events have not only generated new sources of revenue but also contributed to the social liberalization process. The General Entertainment Authority (GEA) has been instrumental in designing regulatory frameworks and offering financial incentives for private sector involvement

(Hertog, 2020). From Formula E races to WWE events and international music concerts, entertainment has become a symbol of the Kingdom's new economic and cultural trajectory.

Logistics and transport infrastructure are also pivotal to diversification efforts. The Kingdom's geographic location at the crossroads of three continents provides a strategic advantage in becoming a global logistics hub. Initiatives such as the National Industrial Development and Logistics Program (NIDLP) and the expansion of seaports, railways, and smart cities like NEOM support this ambition (Vision 2030 Progress Report, 2023). Enhanced logistics capabilities are also expected to improve export competitiveness and attract foreign direct investment in manufacturing and trade services.

Mining is another sector witnessing institutional and policy reforms to unlock its potential. With an estimated \$1.3 trillion in untapped mineral reserves, including gold, phosphate, and bauxite, Saudi Arabia is moving to make mining the third pillar of its economy (Saudi Geological Survey, 2022). The new Mining Investment Law, introduced in 2020, provides legal clarity, investor protections, and streamlined licensing procedures to encourage both domestic and international investment (Al-Moneef & Ali, 2022). These reforms aim to develop value chains in mineral processing and generate high-value industrial employment.

A vital component of economic transformation is the empowerment of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and entrepreneurs. SMEs represent 99% of total enterprises in Saudi Arabia but have traditionally faced constraints related to access to finance, regulatory burden, and limited digital infrastructure. Under Vision 2030, initiatives such as the Monsha'at Authority, the Kafalah financing program, and the National Entrepreneurship Plan have been introduced to support startups and scale-ups (Monsha'at, 2022). These measures aim to increase the SME contribution to GDP from 20% to 35% by 2030.

Entrepreneurship is also being promoted through cultural shifts and institutional backing. Programs like the Misk Foundation and "Venture by PIF" aim to cultivate a start-up ecosystem rooted in innovation, digitalization, and global competitiveness. The government's focus on venture capital, business accelerators, and university-linked incubators signifies a deliberate strategy to align youth aspirations with national economic goals (Alzahrani & Rao, 2020). By

equipping young Saudis with entrepreneurial skills, the Vision aims to convert the demographic bulge into a catalyst for growth and self-reliance.

Saudi Arabia's economic diversification and industrial shift efforts reflect a holistic vision of socio-economic transformation. The expansion of non-oil sectors, combined with structural reforms to enable entrepreneurship and SME development, signals a decisive break from oil-centric economic planning. While challenges remain—particularly in institutional capacity, global market integration, and labor skill gaps—the momentum generated thus far indicates that the Kingdom is steadily reshaping its economic landscape in alignment with Vision 2030.

3.4 Labor Market Reforms and Human Capital Development

The Saudi labor market has historically been characterized by a bifurcation between a heavily employed public sector dominated by nationals and a private sector largely reliant on expatriate labor. Vision 2030 aims to correct this imbalance through a set of labor market reforms centered on Saudization, which refers to the localization of the workforce by increasing Saudi nationals' participation, particularly in the private sector (Al-Dosary & Rahman, 2021). This policy is not new, but under Vision 2030, it has gained renewed focus, with specific quotas imposed on various sectors, alongside incentives for firms that comply with localization targets.

One of the major shifts introduced by Vision 2030 is the alignment of Saudization policies with broader human capital development objectives. Previously, the policy often prioritized numbers over skills, resulting in mismatched employment. The current approach is more strategic, integrating Saudization with education and vocational reforms to ensure that nationals entering the labor force are equipped with relevant competencies (Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development, 2023). This marks a critical evolution from merely replacing expatriates to empowering a competitive local workforce.

To support labor localization, the government has introduced several programs aimed at enhancing the employability of Saudis. Initiatives such as the Human Capability Development Program and Tamheer Internship Program focus on preparing graduates for the labor market

through practical training, mentorship, and exposure to industry (Vision 2030 Progress Report, 2023). These are complemented by sector-specific localization strategies in tourism, healthcare, finance, and retail, which aim to diversify employment opportunities beyond the public sector.

Education reform has also been a foundational element in Saudi Arabia's efforts to nurture a productive workforce. The Kingdom has undertaken curriculum revisions, introduced STEM education at early levels, and encouraged the use of digital tools in classrooms (OECD, 2021). Moreover, partnerships with leading global universities and the establishment of local institutions such as Princess Nourah University and King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST) reflect the strategic emphasis on academic excellence and research-based learning.

Vocational and technical training is receiving unprecedented attention as the Kingdom seeks to align education outputs with the requirements of the labor market. The Technical and Vocational Training Corporation (TVTC) has expanded its offerings to include specialized programs in renewable energy, information technology, logistics, and hospitality—sectors prioritized under Vision 2030 (TVTC, 2022). These programs are designed in consultation with industry stakeholders, ensuring they are relevant and responsive to changing economic needs.

Labor policy reforms have also extended to the regulation of working conditions and employment contracts. In 2021, Saudi Arabia launched a labor mobility initiative, allowing foreign workers to transfer between employers without the traditional “kafala” sponsorship system—a move widely seen as a step towards liberalizing the labor market (Gulf Business, 2021). For Saudi nationals, the reforms include wage protections, career advancement frameworks, and the promotion of workplace diversity and inclusion. These changes signal a more mature and institutionalized approach to labor governance.

Gender inclusion has become an important dimension of labor market reform. Vision 2030 targets an increase in female labor force participation to 30% by 2030—a goal already surpassed in 2022, with female participation reaching 36% (General Authority for Statistics, 2022). Policies supporting women's workforce inclusion include flexible working hours,

maternity protections, access to transport, and capacity-building initiatives. These reforms not only expand the labor pool but also reflect a broader cultural transformation in the Kingdom.

Labor market reforms and human capital development form a vital axis of Saudi Arabia's socio-economic transformation. By combining Saudization with strategic education and skills development, the Kingdom aims to transition from a labor-importing economy to one rooted in local capacity and innovation. Although challenges remain—such as improving private sector wages, ensuring job satisfaction, and managing transitions—the groundwork for a more dynamic and inclusive labor market has been firmly laid.

3.5 Financial and Fiscal Reforms

Saudi Arabia's fiscal policy under Vision 2030 has undergone transformative restructuring, shifting from a traditional reliance on oil revenues to a diversified, non-oil revenue model. Central to this shift has been the introduction of value-added tax (VAT), which was implemented at a rate of 5% in 2018 and later increased to 15% in 2020 (IMF, 2021). The move marked a decisive effort to build a broader and more sustainable tax base. While controversial initially, especially among middle-income households, VAT has become a vital component in stabilizing public finances, especially during periods of oil price volatility.

The introduction of VAT was complemented by the restructuring of subsidies, which had long placed a heavy fiscal burden on the state. Energy and water subsidies, once considered untouchable due to social expectations, were gradually reduced or eliminated between 2016 and 2019 (Albassam, 2020). These reforms were not just about balancing budgets—they also aimed at curbing inefficiencies, encouraging responsible consumption, and creating fiscal space for strategic investments in infrastructure, education, and healthcare.

Despite the political sensitivity of subsidy reforms, the government pursued compensatory mechanisms such as the Citizen Account Program, which provides monthly cash transfers to eligible low- and middle-income families. These measures were designed to cushion the social impact of price adjustments, ensuring that fiscal reforms did not disproportionately burden vulnerable groups (Saudi Ministry of Finance, 2022). The approach reflects a shift

towards targeted welfare, replacing the blanket subsidization model with more precise, needs-based interventions.

Beyond tax and subsidies, Vision 2030 has emphasized the liberalization of Saudi capital markets, making them more accessible and competitive on the global stage. The inclusion of the Saudi Stock Exchange (Tadawul) in global indices such as the MSCI Emerging Markets Index and the FTSE Russell has enhanced investor confidence and significantly increased foreign portfolio investment (Al-Sudairi & Mahdi, 2021). These developments signal the state's intent to create a dynamic financial environment that aligns with international best practices.

To promote foreign direct investment (FDI), Saudi Arabia has restructured its regulatory environment, offering tax holidays, ownership guarantees, and dispute resolution mechanisms. The Saudi Arabian General Investment Authority (SAGIA), now integrated into the Ministry of Investment, has been instrumental in streamlining licensing procedures and removing ownership restrictions in many sectors (Khan & Hertog, 2022). These measures aim to transform Saudi Arabia from a capital-exporting to a capital-attracting economy.

Parallel to FDI reforms, the Public Investment Fund (PIF) has emerged as a central player in fiscal and financial strategy. With assets exceeding \$700 billion, the PIF has been tasked not only with generating long-term returns but also with catalyzing domestic sectors through strategic investments in infrastructure, tourism, and technology (PIF, 2023). This dual role positions the PIF as both a sovereign wealth fund and a development engine within the national economic ecosystem.

Digital financial infrastructure is also being upgraded to align with global fintech trends. The Saudi Central Bank (SAMA) has introduced open banking frameworks, encouraged the growth of digital payment platforms, and licensed fintech start-ups under the "sandbox" regulatory model (SAMA, 2022). This modernization of financial services is integral to building a cashless economy and supporting SMEs, consumers, and investors in an increasingly digital financial environment.

Saudi Arabia's financial and fiscal reforms under Vision 2030 reflect a comprehensive effort to restructure state-society-market relations. Through tax reform, capital market liberalization, and proactive investment promotion, the Kingdom is transitioning from a rentier fiscal model to one anchored in institutional strength and revenue diversity. While challenges persist—particularly public acceptance of taxation and subsidy removal—the strategic clarity and phased implementation of reforms indicate strong political will and administrative capacity.

3.6 Urban and Infrastructure Development

One of the most visible dimensions of Saudi Arabia's socio-economic transformation under Vision 2030 is the ambitious reimagining of its urban landscape. The Kingdom's rapid urbanization, coupled with population growth and changing lifestyle preferences, has necessitated the expansion and modernization of urban centers. Vision 2030 identifies infrastructure as both an enabler of economic diversification and a symbol of national modernization (Vision 2030, 2018). Thus, smart cities, integrated housing schemes, and multimodal transportation networks are central to the national development agenda.

Saudi Arabia's flagship smart city project, NEOM, exemplifies the Kingdom's aspiration to become a global leader in futuristic urbanism. Spanning over 26,000 square kilometers and integrating artificial intelligence, clean energy, and zero-carbon principles, NEOM is designed as a living laboratory for innovation (NEOM Company, 2022). "The Line," a linear city planned within NEOM, represents a radical break from traditional urban sprawl, aiming to house nine million residents without cars, streets, or carbon emissions—an unprecedented model for spatial transformation (Babar, 2022).

In parallel, the Kingdom is pursuing large-scale housing reforms aimed at increasing homeownership among Saudi citizens. The Sakani program, launched by the Ministry of Municipal, Rural Affairs and Housing, provides financial support and subsidized housing to eligible families, with a target to raise the homeownership rate from 47% in 2016 to 70% by 2030 (Ministry of Housing, 2021). These reforms address not only the demand for affordable housing but also stimulate the construction industry and generate employment opportunities.

Transportation infrastructure has also witnessed significant expansion to support urban growth and regional connectivity. Projects such as the Riyadh Metro, the Haramain High-Speed Railway, and King Abdulaziz International Airport modernizations represent strategic investments aimed at reducing congestion, enhancing mobility, and supporting tourism and commerce (Albalawi & Salama, 2022). These projects are not merely logistical in nature—they reflect the Kingdom’s broader vision of creating livable, efficient, and globally connected cities.

The role of GIGA projects—such as Qiddiya, the Red Sea Project, and Amaala—extends beyond tourism. They are engines of urban transformation, designed to diversify the spatial economy, attract foreign investment, and reshape how and where people live and work (Kinninmont, 2020). Each project is conceived not only as an economic hub but also as a cultural and environmental model, integrating sustainability and lifestyle innovation into urban planning.

Saudi Arabia’s urban development strategy also incorporates digital transformation. Smart infrastructure, e-governance, and data-driven service delivery are being embedded in city planning, especially in new developments like NEOM and Digital Riyadh. This reflects a broader goal of building cities that are not only technologically advanced but also human-centered, where citizens’ experiences are improved through digital integration (Alghamdi & Alsharif, 2023).

Spatial transformation is also linked with economic and social inclusivity. Urban expansion into underdeveloped regions aims to reduce economic disparities between major cities like Riyadh and peripheral areas. Vision 2030 promotes balanced regional development through infrastructure investments in provinces such as Al-Jouf, Tabuk, and Asir, ensuring that economic opportunity is not confined to traditional power centers (Saudi Ministry of Economy and Planning, 2022). This spatial diversification contributes to national cohesion and socio-economic equity.

Urban and infrastructure development under Vision 2030 is not confined to concrete and steel—it is a strategic mechanism for advancing economic diversification, environmental sustainability, and social modernization. Through smart cities, efficient housing systems, and integrated transportation networks, Saudi Arabia is redefining the form and function of its urban

spaces. These changes are not merely cosmetic; they signify a deep recalibration of the Kingdom's development model, rooted in innovation, inclusivity, and long-term sustainability.

3.7 Technological and Environmental Innovation

Saudi Arabia's journey toward socio-economic transformation under Vision 2030 is increasingly driven by a dual commitment to technological advancement and environmental sustainability. The Kingdom has recognized that innovation is no longer a luxury—it is a necessity for achieving global competitiveness in a post-oil world. Digital transformation and green development are not only complementary but also strategically aligned with the national goal of creating a knowledge-based economy that thrives on resilience, efficiency, and sustainability (Vision 2030, 2023).

At the heart of Saudi Arabia's digital transformation is its National Strategy for Data and Artificial Intelligence (NSDAI). Launched in 2020, the strategy envisions the Kingdom as a global leader in AI by 2030. It outlines ambitions such as training 20,000 AI specialists, establishing 300 AI startups, and achieving \$20 billion in investments in AI and data-driven technologies (SDAIA, 2021). The strategy is backed by institutions such as the Saudi Data and Artificial Intelligence Authority (SDAIA), which serves as the implementation hub for digital innovation across sectors.

Efforts to integrate smart technologies span multiple sectors, from e-governance and digital finance to education and health care. The Absher platform, for instance, digitizes over 160 government services, enabling citizens to access essential services from their phones or computers (Al-Ghamdi & Baig, 2022). Similarly, the Tawakkalna app—originally developed for COVID-19 health tracking—has evolved into a multipurpose tool for digital identity and mobility. These platforms illustrate how technology enhances transparency, efficiency, and user engagement in the public sector.

Saudi Arabia's commitment to innovation also extends to entrepreneurship and start-up ecosystems, particularly within the fields of fintech, robotics, and smart manufacturing. Initiatives such as the Misk Innovation Program and the FII Institute have nurtured a new

generation of Saudi innovators and creators (Alamri & Hassan, 2022). Moreover, GIGA projects like NEOM are designed as innovation testbeds, integrating AI, IoT, and renewable technologies from the ground up. These projects serve as global showcases for the Kingdom's long-term vision of a high-tech, low-carbon future.

In parallel, Saudi Arabia has made environmental innovation a national priority through the Saudi Green Initiative (SGI), launched in 2021. This initiative commits the Kingdom to planting 10 billion trees, designating 30% of land and sea for protected areas, and achieving net-zero carbon emissions by 2060 (Saudi Green Initiative, 2023). These targets reflect not only environmental concerns but also the economic logic of diversification and global environmental responsibility in an era of climate diplomacy.

The green transition is also reshaping the Kingdom's energy sector. Major investments are being channeled into renewable energy, particularly solar and wind, with a national goal to generate 50% of electricity from renewables by 2030 (IEA, 2022). Projects such as Sakaka PV and Dumat Al-Jandal Wind Farm signal a clear departure from traditional fossil fuel dependency. By building a green economy, Saudi Arabia aims to balance ecological stewardship with job creation and global market competitiveness.

Moreover, environmental technology integration in infrastructure, agriculture, and water conservation is accelerating. Smart irrigation, green architecture, and carbon capture research are being embedded in urban projects like The Line and Qiddiya, demonstrating how innovation and sustainability are interwoven in the Kingdom's spatial transformation (Rasooldeen & Alshahrani, 2023). These developments mark a critical step in aligning the Kingdom's environmental policies with its economic and social objectives.

Saudi Arabia's pursuit of technological and environmental innovation reflects a strategic pivot toward long-term sustainability and global leadership. By embedding AI, digital systems, and ecological design into its national agenda, the Kingdom is not merely responding to global trends—it is actively shaping them. This twin focus enhances not only Saudi Arabia's domestic transformation but also its international reputation as a forward-looking nation prepared for the challenges of the 21st century.

3.8 International Partnerships and Investment Inflows

Saudi Arabia's socio-economic transformation under Vision 2030 is deeply interlinked with its strategic engagement in the global economic system. As the only Arab member of the G20, the Kingdom leverages this position to project its reform agenda on a global stage while attracting capital, technology, and expertise to support domestic development (Kinninmont, 2020). Participation in G20 summits has not only elevated Saudi Arabia's economic profile but has also enabled it to play a constructive role in shaping international economic governance frameworks.

A cornerstone of this global integration is the robust pursuit of foreign direct investment (FDI). Vision 2030 sets ambitious goals to increase FDI's contribution to GDP from 0.7% to 5.7% by 2030 (Ministry of Investment, 2022). To meet this target, the government has introduced liberal investment laws, simplified licensing procedures, and established special economic zones (SEZs) to attract international investors. These zones offer incentives such as tax exemptions, 100% foreign ownership, and streamlined customs regulations, making Saudi Arabia an increasingly attractive destination for global capital.

Public-private partnerships (PPPs) form another strategic pillar of the investment framework, especially in infrastructure, health, energy, and education sectors. The National Center for Privatization (NCP) plays a central role in facilitating PPPs and promoting private sector participation in traditionally public-dominated domains (Oxford Business Group, 2021). Through this model, the state aims not only to reduce fiscal burdens but also to transfer technical knowledge and management expertise from global firms to domestic institutions.

Major global corporations have shown strong interest in sectors aligned with Vision 2030. In tourism and entertainment, partnerships with companies like Six Flags, Accor, and AMC Theatres reflect international confidence in the Kingdom's cultural and recreational liberalization (Al-Fassi & Marshall, 2021). Similarly, energy and mining sectors have attracted investment from global players such as TotalEnergies, Shell, and Barrick Gold, signaling a shift in the global perception of Saudi Arabia as an innovation-driven, diversified economy.

The tech sector, especially artificial intelligence and cloud computing, has also emerged as a major arena for foreign collaboration. In 2022, Saudi Arabia signed a strategic partnership with Chinese firms Huawei and Alibaba Cloud for knowledge transfer and infrastructure development (Cheng & Saif, 2022). Meanwhile, American and European firms such as Microsoft and SAP continue to invest in digital infrastructure, workforce training, and data centers across the Kingdom, further embedding Saudi Arabia into the global tech ecosystem.

In financial markets, liberalization measures have enabled Saudi Arabia's inclusion in major global indices such as MSCI Emerging Markets and FTSE Russell, facilitating portfolio investments from institutional investors worldwide. The listing of Aramco on the Saudi Stock Exchange (Tadawul) and its record-breaking IPO marked a turning point in the Kingdom's approach to financial openness and investor engagement (Gause, 2020). This capital inflow supports Vision 2030's broader goals of fiscal sustainability and economic resilience.

Saudi Arabia has also signed multiple bilateral investment treaties and economic cooperation agreements with countries across Asia, Europe, and Africa. These partnerships not only facilitate trade and investment but also promote political goodwill and soft power. The Kingdom's growing ties with Pakistan, India, China, and Egypt are reflective of a diversified foreign economic policy that reduces overreliance on Western markets and creates new growth corridors (Al-Sudairi, 2021).

International partnerships and investment inflows are not peripheral but central to the success of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030. The Kingdom's deliberate efforts to liberalize its investment climate, promote PPPs, and integrate with global financial systems reflect a strategic understanding of globalization's role in national development. These partnerships bring in not just capital, but also expertise, innovation, and global credibility—key ingredients for Saudi Arabia's transition from a resource-based to a knowledge-based economy.

3.9 Governance, Institutional Reforms, and Political Economy

One of the most compelling dimensions of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 is its emphasis on modernizing governance and reforming institutions to align with global standards of

transparency, accountability, and administrative efficiency. Unlike earlier top-down development models, Vision 2030 adopts a more strategic and evaluative approach to governance. Central to this evolution is the recognition that sustainable development requires not only economic diversification but also institutional resilience and trust-building between the state and society (Al-Faisal, 2021).

Anti-corruption has emerged as a major priority in this reform agenda. The 2017 anti-corruption crackdown—initially seen as controversial—was later institutionalized through the National Anti-Corruption Commission (Nazaha), which now plays a pivotal role in investigating financial irregularities and public sector misconduct. These efforts, though often scrutinized internationally, have contributed to improved public confidence and investor sentiment, as demonstrated by Saudi Arabia’s upward trend in Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index (Transparency International, 2023).

Another vital component is performance-based governance. Vision Realization Programs (VRPs), supported by Vision Realization Offices (VROs), are tasked with translating long-term goals into measurable targets. Ministries and public bodies are now subject to Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), with annual public reporting requirements and independent audits to track outcomes (Alshammari & Alghamdi, 2022). This culture of evaluation marks a departure from bureaucratic opacity toward evidence-based policy execution.

Transparency reforms also extend to fiscal governance. The Saudi Ministry of Finance now releases annual Citizen Budgets and pre-budget statements—an unprecedented move in the region—allowing citizens, investors, and international observers to better understand revenue projections, expenditure plans, and macroeconomic assumptions (IMF, 2022). These reforms reflect a deliberate move to enhance fiscal credibility, particularly in a post-oil economic framework where external investments hinge on regulatory clarity.

At a broader level, Vision 2030 has introduced a new template for statecraft in the Gulf region—one that blends technocratic management with strategic authoritarianism. Scholars have observed that Saudi Arabia is redefining political economy by centralizing executive authority under the Crown Prince while delegating service delivery and economic reform to

professionalized bureaucracies and semi-autonomous agencies (Hertog, 2020). This centralization allows for swift decision-making but also raises questions about political inclusiveness and institutional checks.

The role of the Council of Economic and Development Affairs (CEDA) has become central in this process. Acting as a supra-ministerial body, CEDA ensures inter-agency coordination and policy coherence across economic and social domains. Its influence highlights a shift from traditional, siloed governance to a more streamlined structure capable of adaptive policymaking and rapid crisis response—an approach especially visible during the COVID-19 pandemic (Al-Qudsi, 2021).

Institutional reform efforts have also reached the judicial and legal sectors. New commercial courts, labor dispute resolution mechanisms, and reforms in bankruptcy laws have been introduced to facilitate a more conducive environment for domestic and foreign investment. These changes are instrumental in bolstering investor confidence and ensuring that economic liberalization is underpinned by predictable and transparent legal processes (OECD, 2022).

The governance and institutional reforms undertaken under Vision 2030 are as transformative as the economic goals they support. By embedding accountability, performance measurement, and transparency into state functioning, Saudi Arabia is not only modernizing its public institutions but also laying the groundwork for a new political economy—one that balances centralized authority with meritocratic administration and global credibility.

3.10 Transformation Outcomes and Future Prospects

Saudi Arabia's pursuit of socio-economic transformation under Vision 2030 has already yielded measurable improvements in national resilience, both economically and socially. Despite global shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic and oil market volatility, the Kingdom has demonstrated its capacity to maintain macroeconomic stability while continuing to implement structural reforms. The diversification of revenue sources, reduction in fiscal deficit, and stabilization of the exchange rate reflect an underlying economic robustness that was previously absent in oil-dependent cycles (International Monetary Fund [IMF], 2023). These developments

not only serve the Kingdom's internal goals but also project a stabilizing effect on the broader Gulf region.

The transformation process has also nurtured a degree of social adaptability, particularly among Saudi youth. The introduction of new career pathways, greater openness to entrepreneurship, and reforms in education and entertainment have reshaped societal expectations. A young population with increasing digital literacy and access to global platforms has shown signs of adapting quickly to the new socio-economic architecture (Alshammari, 2022). This transformation is not without friction, but the momentum suggests a social contract that is being recalibrated rather than broken.

At the regional level, Saudi Arabia's rebranding as a hub for investment, innovation, and diplomacy has enhanced its strategic weight in the Middle East. Initiatives such as hosting high-level summits, increasing involvement in peacebuilding dialogues, and deepening partnerships with countries in Asia and Africa reflect a more proactive foreign policy. The economic transformation, therefore, feeds directly into Riyadh's aspirations for regional leadership not only in energy but also in trade, logistics, and cultural diplomacy (Gause, 2021).

In terms of future prospects, the Kingdom's strategic pivot to sustainable industries—such as renewables, hydrogen fuel, and carbon capture technologies—signals its commitment to long-term economic viability. These investments are intended to mitigate future revenue shocks from declining global fossil fuel demand and to reposition Saudi Arabia as a forward-looking actor in the global green economy (Vision 2030, 2023). The success of these initiatives, however, will depend on sustained institutional coordination and policy agility in a rapidly evolving technological landscape.

While Vision 2030 has clearly propelled Saudi Arabia into a new developmental trajectory, persistent structural challenges remain. The private sector's contribution to non-oil GDP, although rising, still needs to grow at a faster rate to achieve labor absorption targets. The gender gap in workforce participation, though narrowing, remains significant and requires policy commitment beyond symbolic reforms (World Bank, 2022). These gaps may potentially slow the pace of inclusive growth unless addressed through targeted interventions.

Nonetheless, the progress made thus far has enhanced Saudi Arabia's global reputation as a reforming state capable of managing complex transitions. Its participation in global forums such as the G20, the UN Climate Summits, and regional economic blocs reflects its evolving identity as a nation striving for integration, not insulation. The Kingdom's willingness to engage multilaterally also boosts investor confidence, particularly in sectors aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (OECD, 2022).

Looking forward, one of the most promising prospects is the alignment between technological advancement and human capital development. With investments in AI, big data, and digital infrastructure, Saudi Arabia is positioning itself to harness the Fourth Industrial Revolution to complement its economic diversification. Coupled with reforms in education and labor policy, the country stands to benefit from a demographic dividend if institutional and policy reforms remain consistent (Alarabiya, 2023).

The socio-economic transformation under Vision 2030 has laid the groundwork for a more resilient, adaptive, and globally integrated Saudi Arabia. The path ahead is laden with uncertainties, yet the structural shifts and institutional reforms indicate that the Kingdom is better positioned than ever before to emerge as a key regional and global player—economically, diplomatically, and ideationally.

3.11 Conclusion

Saudi Arabia's journey of socio-economic transformation under Vision 2030 reflects a deeply strategic reorientation from an oil-dependent welfare state to a diversified, globally integrated economy. Through reforms across sectors such as labor, finance, governance, and infrastructure, the Kingdom has made substantial progress in redefining its development model. The magnitude of the changes—from empowering women to restructuring subsidies—demonstrates that Vision 2030 is not merely a reform blueprint but a national recalibration of identity, purpose, and statecraft (Kinninmont, 2017).

This transformation is particularly remarkable given the Kingdom's historical reliance on hydrocarbon revenues and conservative socio-political structures. By introducing initiatives such

as Saudization, the Saudi Green Initiative, and digital innovation programs, Saudi Arabia has simultaneously aimed to stimulate economic growth, improve service delivery, and reduce its carbon footprint (Vision 2030, 2023). These efforts mark a decisive shift from rentierism toward a more productive, innovation-oriented economy that is rooted in private sector dynamism and sustainable development.

One of the most striking aspects of the transformation is the social reform agenda, which has emphasized inclusivity, especially in the areas of youth empowerment and women's participation. Policy measures such as lifting travel bans on women, increasing access to employment in emerging sectors, and liberalizing cultural life have altered the societal landscape in unprecedented ways (Alrasheed, 2021). These reforms, while still facing structural constraints, signal an evolving social contract that aligns better with the demographic realities of a young and increasingly connected population.

Economically, diversification into sectors such as tourism, logistics, mining, and fintech has introduced new engines of growth that are less vulnerable to oil market volatility. Mega projects like NEOM, the Red Sea Project, and Qiddiya have become global symbols of Saudi ambition, drawing foreign investment and expertise (Lahn, 2022). These projects are not only infrastructural but also ideational—they embody the Kingdom's aspiration to emerge as a knowledge-driven and service-based economy.

At the institutional level, the establishment of Vision Realization Offices, performance monitoring mechanisms, and anti-corruption bodies has contributed to a more accountable governance framework. While challenges persist, especially in bureaucratic inertia and implementation capacity, there is a visible shift toward institutional maturity and transparency (OECD, 2022). These shifts are vital not only for domestic stability but also for attracting global capital and strategic partnerships.

For development partners, Saudi Arabia's transformation presents both opportunities and challenges. Countries with historical ties to the Kingdom—such as Pakistan—stand to benefit through increased labor mobility, investment channels, and shared technological ventures. However, to fully leverage these opportunities, such partners must themselves undergo policy

alignment and institutional upgrading to meet the new standards and expectations set by the transformed Saudi state (Ulrichsen, 2020).

More broadly, Saudi Arabia's reform trajectory positions it as a new model of state-led transformation in the Global South. Its ability to balance modernization with cultural coherence, and growth with sustainability, offers valuable lessons for countries grappling with similar developmental dilemmas. Vision 2030 is therefore not only a national agenda but also a potential reference point for other nations seeking structured, visionary reform (Yousef, 2023).

Chapter Three has highlighted how Saudi Arabia's socio-economic transformation has reshaped its internal dynamics and external engagements. The implications are profound—not just for the Kingdom but for its regional and global partners. As we transition into Chapter Four, the focus will turn to the implications of this transformation for Pakistan, exploring the ways in which bilateral ties can be reimagined and deepened in the Vision 2030 era.

CHAPTER FOUR

4.0. Pakistan–Saudi Cooperation under Vision 2030 – Strategic Convergence and Emerging Opportunities

4.1 Introduction

The relationship between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia has long been anchored in shared religious, cultural, and geopolitical affinities. Historically, both countries have maintained robust diplomatic and defense cooperation, bolstered by recurring financial aid, workforce migration, and common stances on regional issues (Rizvi, 2018). However, with the launch of Vision 2030, the bilateral equation is undergoing a significant transformation, shifting from an aid-based relationship to one driven by mutual investment, economic convergence, and strategic modernization. This evolving context invites a re-examination of the scope and potential of Pakistan–Saudi relations through the lens of long-term development goals.

Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030 is not merely a national transformation plan—it is a regional recalibration with economic diplomacy at its core. In this recalibrated order, Pakistan stands out as a potential partner for joint ventures in infrastructure, energy, skilled labor export, and digital innovation (Khan, 2021). As the Kingdom pivots towards non-oil growth sectors and diversifies its global partnerships, Pakistan's strategic location, demographic profile, and socio-economic potential make it a compelling ally. Moreover, the regional implications of Vision 2030—especially in areas like connectivity, trade corridors, and cross-border investment—necessitate a rethinking of bilateral policy frameworks.

At the same time, Pakistan faces internal structural and economic challenges that must be addressed to capitalize on emerging Saudi opportunities. Issues like macroeconomic instability, bureaucratic inertia, and limited institutional preparedness could restrict its ability to engage proactively with the evolving Saudi landscape (Hussain, 2022). Therefore, the post-2030 framework demands not only diplomatic goodwill but also comprehensive reforms within Pakistan that align with Saudi Arabia’s evolving priorities and investment protocols. This

bilateral recontextualization must thus go beyond traditional narratives and embrace institutional modernization, transparency, and long-term economic planning.

Furthermore, the Kingdom's strategic realignment—marked by greater openness to foreign investment, technology partnerships, and global talent—is prompting a broader reconsideration of how it defines “strategic allies.” In this context, Pakistan's opportunity lies in repositioning itself as not just a labor exporter but also as a co-developer of Saudi-led initiatives in renewable energy, food security, fintech, and defense manufacturing (Shahid, 2023). This shift in approach demands visionary diplomacy that is not reactive but preemptive—anticipating areas of convergence and building capacity to meet them.

This chapter explores the evolving nature of Pakistan–Saudi relations within the framework of Vision 2030, analyzing the emerging areas of cooperation and the strategic imperatives driving both nations. The discussion will map the new trajectories of convergence— economic, geopolitical, and developmental—and evaluate the institutional and policy mechanisms required for Pakistan to become a more relevant, value-adding partner in Saudi Arabia's transformative journey. As Vision 2030 enters its critical implementation phase, the future of bilateral cooperation will depend not only on shared history but also on adaptive strategies, visionary policymaking, and mutually beneficial economic integration.

4.2. Historical Trajectory of Bilateral Relations

The bilateral relationship between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia is rooted in strong religious and cultural affinity, stemming from shared Islamic identity and mutual reverence for the holy sites in Makkah and Madinah. Since the establishment of diplomatic ties in 1947, the Kingdom has been viewed in Pakistan not only as a strategic partner but also as a spiritual guardian of the Muslim world (Khan, 2020). This religious foundation has historically provided a cushion against political turbulence, allowing both nations to maintain continuity in their relations even during periods of global and regional uncertainty.

Strategically, the two states have long aligned on key regional and international matters. During the Cold War and particularly after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, Saudi

Arabia and Pakistan formed a critical axis supporting Afghan mujahideen with U.S. backing, which marked a new phase of defense cooperation and intelligence-sharing (Riedel, 2011). Their shared interests in resisting communism and curbing Iranian revolutionary influence brought them closer, cementing their strategic convergence. Even in the post-9/11 landscape, both countries continued collaborating on counterterrorism efforts and intelligence cooperation, despite evolving regional dynamics.

Economically, the relationship has traditionally been asymmetrical but resilient. Pakistan has benefited significantly from Saudi oil supplies, financial bailouts, and concessional aid—often during times of economic distress. In return, Pakistan has been a vital supplier of labor, sending millions of expatriates who not only fueled the Saudi economy but also remitted billions of dollars to Pakistan (Ahmed & Shaikh, 2019). However, this economic interdependence has largely remained limited to labor export and short-term financial assistance, lacking long-term institutional economic integration—a gap that Vision 2030 now aims to address.

In the realm of defense and security, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have maintained a close-knit cooperation, underpinned by joint military training, advisory support, and arms exchanges. Pakistani military personnel have historically been stationed in the Kingdom for advisory and training roles, while Pakistan has also played a symbolic yet strategic role in protecting the Kingdom's territorial integrity (Yusufzai, 2018). The establishment of the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC), headquartered in Riyadh and led by a former Pakistani Chief of Army Staff, further highlights the defense dimension of this relationship within a multilateral framework.

Despite this multi-dimensional history, the Pakistan–Saudi partnership has often lacked a coherent institutional framework and has been largely reactive, rather than proactive or strategic. However, with the advent of Vision 2030, this legacy relationship is undergoing recalibration. Both states now recognize the need to move beyond symbolic ties and toward a more structured, mutually beneficial partnership based on economic modernization, joint ventures, and regional connectivity. This evolution provides a pivotal opportunity for Pakistan to reposition itself from a recipient of aid to a development partner actively contributing to Saudi Arabia's long-term vision.

4.3. Vision 2030 as a Framework for Bilateral Engagement

Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 has emerged as a transformative national agenda that also offers a framework for reshaping its external partnerships, particularly with regional allies like Pakistan. At its core, Vision 2030 seeks to diversify the Kingdom's economy, enhance public sector efficiency, and expand investment in human capital and infrastructure—goals that resonate strongly with Pakistan's own aspirations for development and modernization (Vision 2030, 2016). This alignment opens space for bilateral engagement beyond traditional aid and labor migration, fostering a more equitable partnership grounded in shared reform agendas and mutual interests.

Vision 2030 has effectively reframed the scope of Saudi foreign cooperation, encouraging proactive engagement with regional states to promote economic diversification, technological exchange, and connectivity. Pakistan's strategic location as a gateway between the Gulf and Central Asia makes it a natural partner in Saudi Arabia's bid to become a global logistics and investment hub (Siddiqui & Ahmed, 2021). Projects like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) further amplify Pakistan's relevance, offering Saudi investors viable entry points into South and Central Asia while supporting Saudi goals of expanding trade routes and regional supply chains.

Additionally, both countries have shared demographic and economic challenges, including the need to generate employment, promote entrepreneurship, and upgrade public infrastructure. Vision 2030's emphasis on non-oil sectors—such as tourism, construction, technology, and renewable energy—mirrors Pakistan's policy focus under its own development frameworks, including Vision 2025. These common objectives can facilitate policy dialogues, joint training initiatives, and strategic investments that enhance socio-economic mobility in both states (Malik, 2020). Vision 2030, thus, becomes a reference point for aligning institutional mechanisms and development planning.

Moreover, Vision 2030 provides a platform to recalibrate bilateral cooperation from a transactional relationship to a structured economic partnership. By shifting from aid dependence to co-investment models, Pakistan can engage in joint ventures in construction, IT services,

vocational training, and clean energy—all of which are identified as priority areas within the Vision framework (Al-Falih, 2022). The establishment of the Saudi–Pakistan Supreme Coordination Council is a reflection of this recalibrated approach, facilitating high-level policy alignment and long-term planning between both capitals.

In this evolving context, Vision 2030 is not merely a domestic reform agenda for Saudi Arabia—it is a diplomatic instrument reshaping the Kingdom’s international partnerships. For Pakistan, aligning with this vision is not only strategically sound but economically prudent. It offers opportunities for investment, skills development, and integration into high-growth sectors across the Gulf region. The challenge lies in institutional readiness and policy coherence on Pakistan’s side to effectively leverage Vision 2030 as a gateway for durable, multidimensional engagement.

4.4. Economic and Investment Opportunities for Pakistan

One of the most significant economic linkages between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia has traditionally been the labor export sector. Millions of Pakistani workers are employed in the Kingdom, and their remittances constitute a vital component of Pakistan’s foreign exchange reserves. Vision 2030’s focus on increasing efficiency and digitalization in the labor market demands a more skilled and productive workforce, which creates both a challenge and an opportunity for Pakistan. By aligning its vocational training and technical education frameworks with the skill demands of Saudi Arabia’s restructured sectors—such as construction, logistics, healthcare, and hospitality—Pakistan can position its workforce for sustained demand in the evolving Saudi job market (Gulf Labour Market and Migration, 2022).

In terms of remittances, Pakistan has consistently ranked among the top recipients from Saudi Arabia, averaging over USD 5 billion annually in recent years. As Vision 2030 reshapes the labor market through Saudization policies, there is a pressing need for Pakistan to move beyond reliance on low-skilled labor exports and prioritize the upskilling of its migrant workforce. Joint training centers, certification programs, and digital skills development tailored to Saudi market needs could help mitigate potential job losses and even improve the remittance flow in the long term (Khan & Javed, 2021). Pakistan’s strategic advantage lies in its

demographic surplus, which, if properly trained, can cater to emerging employment demands across Saudi Vision 2030 sectors.

Vision 2030 also opens considerable investment potential for Saudi capital in Pakistan, particularly in the context of CPEC and associated Special Economic Zones (SEZs). The Kingdom has already expressed interest in joining key CPEC initiatives, including the development of Gwadar Port and energy infrastructure (Fatima & Naqvi, 2022). These investments are mutually beneficial: Saudi Arabia diversifies its overseas economic portfolio while Pakistan benefits from capital inflows, industrial development, and job creation. Aligning SEZ policies to attract Saudi firms, offering preferential incentives, and ensuring regulatory clarity will be essential in converting interest into tangible projects.

Energy is another critical domain where bilateral collaboration can flourish. Saudi investment in Pakistan's renewable energy and oil refining sectors not only supports Pakistan's energy security but also complements Saudi Arabia's own goal of exporting energy technologies as part of its diversification strategy. The proposed Saudi-funded oil refinery in Gwadar, estimated at over USD 10 billion, stands as a flagship project symbolizing the scale of potential collaboration (Siddiqui & Malik, 2020). Ensuring transparent governance and stable policy environments will be key to securing long-term Saudi commitment in these ventures.

Infrastructure development presents wide-ranging opportunities for joint ventures. With Pakistan seeking foreign partners to bridge its infrastructure financing gap—particularly in housing, transport, and logistics—Saudi Arabia can play a pivotal role as both an investor and a strategic ally. Vision 2030 encourages cross-border investments that enhance regional connectivity, and Pakistan's road and rail projects can complement Saudi Arabia's ambition to become a trade and logistics hub between Asia, Africa, and Europe (Haque, 2021). To actualize these prospects, both sides must institutionalize coordination platforms to streamline investment pipelines and remove bureaucratic bottlenecks.

4.5. Defense, Security, and Strategic Collaboration

Defense and security cooperation form one of the cornerstones of Pakistan–Saudi relations. The strategic military relationship between the two countries has evolved over several decades, characterized by joint military training, defense pacts, and the deployment of Pakistani military personnel to the Kingdom for advisory and security purposes. Pakistan has historically provided training and support to the Royal Saudi Armed Forces, including in specialized areas such as air defense and counterinsurgency (Rana, 2021). Joint exercises such as “Al-Samsam” and naval cooperation missions have underscored the depth of this bilateral defense relationship and align with Vision 2030’s objective to enhance national security capacity.

Under the framework of Vision 2030, which seeks to modernize the Saudi military and reduce dependency on foreign arms, Pakistan emerges as a significant partner due to its defense manufacturing capabilities and professional military experience. The collaboration can extend to joint ventures in defense production, technology transfer, and strategic logistics support. Institutions such as Pakistan Ordnance Factories (POF) and the Heavy Industries Taxila (HIT) offer potential for cooperative production agreements, especially as Saudi Arabia pushes forward its defense localization targets under its Vision Realization Programs (Malik & Zafar, 2022).

Counterterrorism has remained a mutual concern for both states, particularly in light of regional instability and threats posed by extremist groups. Pakistan's extensive experience in counterinsurgency operations and its robust intelligence apparatus make it a valuable ally for Saudi Arabia in its internal security framework. Intelligence sharing mechanisms have been active in dealing with threats from transnational terror networks, and further institutionalization of these processes would enhance regional security architecture. Vision 2030's commitment to domestic peace and stability aligns closely with Pakistan’s expertise in combating hybrid threats, making the security partnership both strategic and functional (Ahmed, 2020).

Beyond bilateral security ties, both nations have demonstrated shared interests in promoting broader regional stability. Whether it is the Gulf crisis, the conflict in Yemen, or managing sectarian tensions, Pakistan has often played the role of a diplomatic bridge and security partner for the Kingdom. With Vision 2030 emphasizing regional leadership through

soft power and stability, Saudi Arabia can benefit from Pakistan's balanced approach in Islamic diplomacy and its role in multilateral forums such as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) (Farooq, 2021). This partnership enhances not only their respective security postures but also their collective credibility as regional stabilizers.

The convergence of defense interests also offers avenues for collaboration in emerging areas such as cybersecurity, drone warfare, and border surveillance. With technological advancements shaping modern security paradigms, both states can collaborate on capacity-building programs and innovation-led defense reforms. The potential for bilateral military research, strategic war gaming, and officer exchange programs underpins the long-term vision of strategic depth and interoperability between the two armed forces. In this regard, the defense component of Pakistan–Saudi relations is not merely tactical but a vital strategic pillar that complements Vision 2030's security ambitions (Yousaf, 2022).

4.6. Trade, Commerce, and Financial Linkages

Trade and commerce have long been integral components of Pakistan–Saudi relations, although the relationship historically remained narrow in scope, largely revolving around energy exports from Saudi Arabia and labor remittances from Pakistani expatriates. Despite deep diplomatic and cultural ties, bilateral trade remains underwhelming, standing at around \$5 billion in 2022, primarily driven by Saudi oil exports and Pakistani food and textile products (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2023). This imbalance highlights the untapped potential in diversifying and expanding the trade basket, especially in sectors aligned with Vision 2030, such as petrochemicals, halal food, construction materials, and digital services (Alshammari, 2022).

Saudi Vision 2030 emphasizes economic diversification and global connectivity, opening space for Pakistan to enhance its export base and attract investment in high-potential areas. Pakistan's geographical proximity, large workforce, and strategic access to China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) make it a promising trade partner. Sectors such as pharmaceuticals, surgical instruments, IT services, and agro-processing can benefit from targeted bilateral trade facilitation measures. For this to materialize, both countries need to streamline trade regulations,

reduce tariff and non-tariff barriers, and activate trade facilitation agreements through forums like the Pakistan–Saudi Joint Ministerial Commission (Ahmed, 2021).

Financial cooperation has recently gained momentum with the creation of structured investment mechanisms. The proposed Saudi–Pakistan Investment Fund, announced during Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman’s 2019 visit to Islamabad, exemplifies a shift from ad-hoc aid to strategic, long-term economic collaboration (Khan, 2023). This fund aims to support infrastructure, renewable energy, mining, and tourism projects in Pakistan, aligning with both countries' respective economic goals. Such instruments not only stabilize bilateral financial ties but also contribute to a rules-based investment framework rooted in mutual economic benefit.

The potential for joint ventures is also significant, particularly in sectors where Saudi capital and Pakistani human capital can be effectively combined. For instance, industrial parks within Pakistan's Special Economic Zones (SEZs) offer an ideal platform for Saudi firms to invest in textile, logistics, and light manufacturing with export potential. Similarly, collaboration in Islamic finance, fintech, and banking reforms could open new channels of financial interdependence, especially if Saudi banks expand their presence in Pakistan or engage in Sukuk-based infrastructure financing (Rehman & Al-Dabbagh, 2022).

Furthermore, the digital transformation agendas of both countries offer a new frontier for cooperation. Saudi Arabia’s interest in fostering a digital economy under Vision 2030 complements Pakistan’s expanding tech startup ecosystem. Establishing digital trade corridors, innovation hubs, and joint training programs could deepen financial and technological linkages. A mutually agreed financial architecture rooted in transparency, risk-sharing, and development financing would not only solidify Pakistan–Saudi commercial relations but also contribute to regional economic integration (Siddiqui, 2023).

4.7. Role of Pakistani Diaspora

The Pakistani diaspora in Saudi Arabia, estimated at over 2.5 million individuals, represents one of the largest expatriate communities in the Kingdom (Government of Pakistan, 2023). Predominantly composed of semi-skilled and unskilled workers, this diaspora forms a

vital pillar of Saudi Arabia's service, construction, and transport sectors. Their demographic significance not only supports the Kingdom's economic machinery but also strengthens people-to-people ties that underpin bilateral relations. Within the context of Vision 2030, the role of this diaspora is increasingly being viewed not only through a labor-supply lens but also as a strategic asset that can contribute to Saudi Arabia's human capital and Pakistan's development goals.

Economically, the contributions of Pakistani workers are profound. In the fiscal year 2022–2023, remittances from Saudi Arabia to Pakistan exceeded \$5.5 billion, making the Kingdom the largest source of foreign remittances for Pakistan (State Bank of Pakistan, 2023). These remittances are critical for Pakistan's balance of payments, household consumption, and rural development. However, despite their macroeconomic importance, remittances remain vulnerable to labor market fluctuations and policy shifts in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, ensuring the well-being and rights of the Pakistani diaspora is not just a humanitarian concern but also a national economic priority.

Saudi labor reforms under Vision 2030—particularly the Labor Reform Initiative (LRI) launched in 2021—are beginning to reconfigure the working conditions of foreign labor, including Pakistanis (Alqurashi & Khan, 2022). By easing the sponsorship (kafala) system and enabling greater job mobility, these reforms aim to improve labor market efficiency and worker rights. For Pakistan, this is a window of opportunity to negotiate better legal protections, minimum wage agreements, and labor contracts that ensure fairness and sustainability. Bilateral labor accords must now incorporate skill enhancement programs, grievance redress mechanisms, and rights-based protection clauses.

Beyond economics, the Pakistani diaspora is also central to community diplomacy and cultural integration. Several community-led educational institutions, welfare organizations, and religious centers run by Pakistani nationals in Saudi Arabia play an active role in promoting mutual understanding and cultural cohesion. Through structured engagement with Vision Realization Offices and the Pakistani embassy, the diaspora can also be mobilized as informal ambassadors to foster stronger diplomatic and trade linkages. This potential remains largely untapped and requires a more institutionalized framework of diaspora engagement from Islamabad (Rashid, 2021).

The long-term success of diaspora engagement depends on secure, affordable, and digitally enabled remittance flows and financial inclusion. Initiatives such as Roshan Digital Accounts and improved banking linkages between the two countries must be expanded to encourage investment by overseas Pakistanis in Pakistani real estate, capital markets, and entrepreneurship ecosystems (Ali & Bukhari, 2022). Furthermore, training centers established in Pakistan to match Saudi labor market requirements should not only focus on technical skills but also on cultural orientation, language proficiency, and financial literacy to maximize the diaspora's developmental impact.

4.8. Soft Power, Cultural, and Religious Engagement

Saudi Arabia's role as the custodian of Islam's two holiest sites gives it unmatched religious soft power, particularly in its relations with Muslim-majority countries like Pakistan. Each year, tens of thousands of Pakistani pilgrims participate in Hajj and Umrah, making pilgrimage diplomacy a vital channel of bilateral engagement. Under Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia has modernized the Hajj experience by investing in digital platforms, transportation networks, and crowd management technologies (Alsharif & Malki, 2021). These improvements not only streamline the pilgrim experience but also contribute to the Kingdom's broader efforts to enhance its global image and religious outreach. For Pakistan, Hajj diplomacy offers an opportunity to negotiate logistical facilitation and deepen spiritual connections that transcend formal diplomacy.

Cultural cooperation has emerged as an increasingly visible layer of Saudi-Pakistan relations, especially in the post-2015 period. As the Kingdom seeks to reposition itself as a hub of cultural innovation—through music festivals, heritage preservation, and cinema revival—there is a growing space for cultural diplomacy with Pakistan. Collaborative projects such as film co-productions, exhibitions of Islamic art, and literary festivals involving scholars from both countries could help reframe the bilateral narrative beyond traditional domains (Khan & Alharbi, 2022). These efforts contribute not just to people-to-people diplomacy but also to a modernized and inclusive articulation of Islamic identity that Vision 2030 champions.

Academic exchanges and educational cooperation are key to institutionalizing the Saudi-Pakistani relationship in the long term. Saudi universities, particularly King Saud University and Islamic University of Madinah, have historically hosted hundreds of Pakistani students on scholarships. However, Vision 2030 encourages a shift toward research collaboration in fields such as renewable energy, engineering, health sciences, and artificial intelligence (Ministry of Education KSA, 2021). Joint academic chairs, co-authored research publications, and faculty exchange programs can greatly enhance intellectual engagement and human capital development on both sides.

Religious exchanges, especially those involving clerics, scholars, and seminary students, play a nuanced but important role in shaping mutual perceptions and doctrinal harmony. While both countries adhere to different theological interpretations of Islam, diplomatic caution and mutual respect have ensured that religious cooperation remains constructive. Interfaith and intra-faith dialogues led by official religious authorities have the potential to prevent sectarian misunderstandings and promote a more unified vision of global Muslim leadership (Ahmed, 2020). This is especially critical in a time when the politicization of religion poses threats to both national and regional stability.

Soft power engagement under Vision 2030 presents a multidimensional framework for deepening Saudi-Pakistani ties. By moving beyond the confines of geopolitics and security, both nations can cultivate a relationship rooted in shared heritage, cultural creativity, and mutual learning. Such soft power tools not only reinforce bilateral trust but also prepare the social and cultural foundation for future strategic cooperation in an increasingly multipolar and culturally contested global order.

4.9. Structural Barriers and Diplomatic Constraints

Despite strong historical and strategic foundations, Pakistan–Saudi cooperation under Vision 2030 faces significant structural barriers that limit the depth and speed of engagement. One of the most persistent challenges lies in bureaucratic inefficiencies on both sides. In Pakistan, overlapping mandates, procedural red tape, and weak inter-agency coordination have often delayed the execution of bilateral agreements and slowed progress on investment proposals

(Siddiqui & Mehmood, 2022). Similarly, the Saudi decision-making apparatus—though undergoing reform—still reflects centralized control and layered approval systems that hinder agile diplomacy and swift project implementation.

Policy misalignment also presents a formidable obstacle. While Vision 2030 outlines a robust diversification strategy, Pakistan has yet to present a synchronized national framework that complements the evolving Saudi economic landscape. This mismatch creates ambiguity for Saudi investors and policymakers seeking long-term, predictable partnerships. Furthermore, inconsistencies in Pakistan's regulatory and taxation environment—particularly in special economic zones (SEZs) and cross-border remittance laws—further discourage private-sector participation from the Kingdom (Khan, 2021). Addressing these policy gaps requires coordinated institutional reforms and high-level political commitment from both sides.

Geopolitical sensitivities, especially those related to regional alignments, continue to complicate bilateral cooperation. Pakistan's balancing act between Iran and Saudi Arabia remains a delicate issue, with Islamabad wary of appearing too aligned with one side in the broader Gulf rivalry. Additionally, Saudi Arabia's growing strategic alignment with India, especially in terms of economic and defense cooperation, is viewed with unease in Pakistani policymaking circles (Shah & Alghamdi, 2023). This complex regional equation necessitates cautious diplomacy to ensure that bilateral cooperation under Vision 2030 does not become a victim of competing strategic imperatives.

Another major limitation is the lack of institutionalized mechanisms to facilitate continuity in bilateral dialogue. Much of the cooperation to date has been driven by personal relationships at the leadership level, rather than durable institutional channels. While high-level visits often produce ambitious joint declarations, the absence of follow-through mechanisms, such as joint economic commissions or sector-specific steering committees, undermines implementation. A formalized and well-resourced institutional framework could ensure that diplomatic momentum translates into measurable outcomes (Ahmed, 2022).

Public perception and trust deficits—fueled by past experiences of unfulfilled promises—must also be acknowledged as a diplomatic constraint. Both countries have, at times,

overestimated each other's capacity to deliver, leading to inflated expectations and subsequent disillusionment. These perception gaps can be narrowed through transparent communication, the announcement of realistic timelines, and the showcasing of tangible success stories. Only by overcoming these structural and diplomatic challenges can Pakistan and Saudi Arabia fully realize the transformative potential of Vision 2030 as a shared development platform.

4.10. Conclusion

Pakistan–Saudi Arabia relations, under the broad canvas of Vision 2030, have evolved into a multidimensional partnership that reflects both countries' evolving national priorities and global positioning. The Kingdom's transformation agenda has created new spaces for economic, strategic, and cultural engagement with regional partners, and Pakistan remains a natural beneficiary due to shared religious heritage, geopolitical alignment, and a long-standing bilateral rapport. From labor export and energy partnerships to collaborative defense exercises and financial investments, the cooperative mechanisms are gradually being recalibrated to fit the demands of a post-oil, diversified future (Alrasheed, 2020).

However, despite these synergies, the partnership has yet to achieve its full potential. Structural challenges—ranging from bureaucratic inertia and inconsistent policy implementation to geopolitical hedging—continue to limit the scale and sustainability of collaboration. Additionally, Pakistan's economic and governance shortcomings, including weak institutional frameworks and an underdeveloped investment climate, have hindered the realization of large-scale Saudi investments in critical sectors such as energy, infrastructure, and technology (Kugelman, 2021). Vision 2030 thus serves both as an opportunity and a challenge—demanding Pakistan to internally adjust to meet Saudi Arabia's standards of partnership.

The evolving dynamics under Vision 2030 call for Pakistan to shift from a reactive to a proactive diplomatic posture. While past cooperation relied heavily on ad hoc engagements and personal diplomacy, the future requires institutionalized channels, forward-looking policies, and readiness to integrate into Saudi Arabia's rapidly modernizing socio-economic model. For instance, targeted labor training initiatives, digital finance cooperation, and green energy

collaboration could become the hallmarks of a redefined bilateral relationship—if managed through coherent domestic strategies and inter-agency coordination (Shaikh & Rizvi, 2022).

Furthermore, Pakistan’s domestic development agenda must be aligned with the strategic vision laid out by the Kingdom. This means identifying niche areas where convergence is strongest—such as climate diplomacy, halal food trade, fintech, and smart city development—and then investing in local capacities to engage at a competitive level. Only by strengthening its internal economic architecture and governance mechanisms can Pakistan fully capitalize on the windows opened by Vision 2030 (Javaid & Ullah, 2023). This alignment also requires robust academic, cultural, and religious linkages to reinforce state-level cooperation with enduring people-to-people connections.

While Vision 2030 has redefined the parameters of Saudi Arabia’s external partnerships, Pakistan’s ability to respond with clarity, strategy, and institutional depth will determine the trajectory of future engagement. It is not merely a matter of diplomatic goodwill but a test of internal readiness and regional positioning. Transitioning from aid-based dependency to strategic convergence demands visionary leadership on both sides—one that sees bilateral ties not just as a legacy of history, but as a future-oriented enterprise of mutual transformation.

CHAPTER FIVE

5.0. Development Strategies and Policy Opportunities for Pakistan in the Context of Saudi Vision 2030

5.1 Introduction

Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 has garnered global attention for its ambitious socio-economic reengineering. However, beyond the Kingdom's internal transformation, the initiative also offers a strategic lens through which regional partners, particularly Pakistan, can reassess their developmental trajectories. It is no longer sufficient for Pakistan to view its relationship with Saudi Arabia solely through traditional lenses of religious affinity, labor migration, or defense cooperation. Instead, Vision 2030 necessitates a recalibration of Pakistan's national priorities in a manner that aligns with the Kingdom's modernization agenda and emerging global economic patterns (Alharbi, 2022).

Pakistan's development discourse must therefore evolve from passive alignment to proactive engagement. This means not only identifying opportunities within Saudi Arabia's reforms but also rethinking Pakistan's own institutional capacities, policy coherence, and strategic sectors capable of delivering reciprocal value. As Saudi Arabia opens itself to foreign investments, digital innovation, and sustainable infrastructure, the question for Pakistan is not just how to benefit but how to transform domestically to become a credible and competitive partner (Ahmed & Fatima, 2021). The success of bilateral cooperation will hinge on Pakistan's ability to match rhetoric with institutional readiness and long-term planning.

Shifting this analytical focus also requires recognizing the broader geopolitical and geo-economic shifts taking place in the Gulf and South Asia. Saudi Arabia's pivot toward a diversified economy is being accompanied by subtle changes in its foreign policy, including a move toward multilateralism and economic pragmatism. Pakistan, facing its own developmental crisis, cannot afford to overlook these regional undercurrents. A reactive or overly transactional approach will limit the strategic depth of the relationship. Instead, a forward-looking policy

posture grounded in economic diplomacy and reform-oriented governance is essential for Pakistan to remain relevant in the emerging regional order (Zahra, 2023).

Moreover, Vision 2030 presents a rare opportunity for Pakistan to enhance its domestic development by leveraging diaspora potential, attracting Gulf investment, and integrating into transnational supply chains. But this requires internal reforms in education, taxation, regulatory frameworks, and project execution capacity. In other words, the external promise of Vision 2030 must be anchored in a domestic policy paradigm that prioritizes sustainable development and strategic autonomy (Siddiqui, 2020). Vision 2030 can thus serve as a mirror, compelling Pakistan to confront its internal weaknesses while offering a blueprint for reform.

This chapter pivots from analyzing Saudi Arabia's transformation to critically evaluating how Pakistan can design and implement effective development strategies in response. It seeks to identify policy windows opened by Vision 2030, assess Pakistan's current preparedness, and propose actionable reforms across sectors such as labor, investment, energy, and governance. In doing so, the focus shifts from opportunity recognition to institutional activation—a necessary leap if Pakistan is to convert Saudi Arabia's transformation into shared prosperity and regional resilience.

5.2 Pakistan's National Development Priorities

Pakistan's national development trajectory has been shaped by a confluence of strategic frameworks, among which Vision 2025 stands as a key policy initiative articulating the state's aspirations for inclusive growth, institutional reform, and regional integration. Launched by the Planning Commission, Vision 2025 seeks to position Pakistan among the top 25 global economies by 2025 by focusing on seven pillars, including energy security, economic growth, and human development (Government of Pakistan, 2014). In parallel, Pakistan's commitment to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) reinforces its alignment with global development norms. However, despite the broad scope of these frameworks, the challenge lies in transforming plans into measurable outcomes, a task that requires stronger policy continuity and inter-institutional coordination (Mahmood & Javed, 2021).

Within this national framework, certain critical development sectors hold disproportionate significance for catalyzing economic revival and social equity. The energy sector, for instance, is pivotal to unlocking Pakistan's industrial and infrastructural potential. Recurrent power shortages and inefficiencies in distribution have constrained economic activity and investor confidence. While initiatives like CPEC have brought Chinese investments into energy projects, long-term sustainability requires indigenous reforms in pricing, regulation, and diversification toward renewables (Khan et al., 2022). Similarly, agriculture, which employs nearly 40% of the workforce, remains underperforming due to outdated techniques, water inefficiencies, and a weak value chain. Transformative investment in agri-tech, irrigation reforms, and cold-chain logistics is essential to modernize this sector and ensure food security.

Information technology (IT) presents another high-potential area that could serve both domestic and international development goals. Pakistan's burgeoning freelance and startup ecosystems demonstrate the country's latent digital capability, yet structural challenges such as broadband penetration, digital literacy, and cyber regulations hinder its scaling. Government policies such as the "Digital Pakistan" vision seek to enhance the digital economy, but effective implementation hinges on capacity-building and public-private partnerships (Ahmed & Qureshi, 2020). In the context of Saudi Vision 2030, Pakistan's IT sector could offer viable services in fintech, e-governance, and AI applications, provided institutional support and export facilitation are adequately developed.

Education and human capital development form the foundation for any sustainable national strategy, yet Pakistan's progress remains uneven across provinces and sectors. With nearly 22 million out-of-school children and quality concerns at all levels, the country's educational deficits continue to undermine labor productivity and social mobility. While initiatives like the Ehsaas program and the Single National Curriculum attempt to streamline equity and access, what remains lacking is a coherent vision for higher education, vocational training, and industry-academia linkages (Zaidi, 2021). For Pakistan to respond effectively to the labor demands emerging from Saudi Arabia under Vision 2030, it must build a skills architecture aligned with international standards.

Pakistan's development priorities must be both globally attuned and locally grounded. While policy frameworks like Vision 2025 and the SDGs provide directional clarity, their implementation depends on sectoral reform, institutional resilience, and political will. Strategic alignment with Saudi Arabia's evolving economic structure presents a unique moment for Pakistan to not only seek opportunity abroad but also reform at home. Leveraging Saudi Vision 2030 as a benchmark and a catalyst, Pakistan's national development priorities can be recalibrated toward a more integrated, competitive, and forward-looking model.

5.3 Aligning Institutional Frameworks with Vision 2030

Pakistan's ability to effectively engage with Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 hinges not only on diplomatic intent but also on the strength and agility of its institutional frameworks. As Vision 2030 involves complex sectoral partnerships—spanning investment, labor, technology, and energy—Pakistan must move beyond ad-hoc arrangements toward a cohesive policy coordination architecture. Historically, institutional fragmentation and bureaucratic silos have impeded cross-sectoral collaboration. Thus, aligning national policy with Saudi priorities calls for integrated decision-making platforms that bring together ministries, provincial governments, and private stakeholders under a unified vision (Hussain & Ahmed, 2022).

A major bottleneck in Pakistan's policy execution is the absence of robust inter-ministerial mechanisms that can synchronize foreign policy, economic planning, labor export, and trade facilitation. For example, while the Ministry of Foreign Affairs manages diplomatic ties, it often operates in parallel rather than in conjunction with the Ministry of Commerce or the Ministry of Overseas Pakistanis. This disconnect results in missed opportunities, delayed negotiations, and a reactive rather than strategic posture. Establishing a high-level task force with representation from relevant ministries and the private sector could institutionalize foresight-based planning and policy agility in line with the evolving Saudi economic landscape (Khan, 2021).

The Planning Commission of Pakistan has a pivotal role to play in internalizing Vision 2030 within the country's long-term development frameworks. By mapping Saudi Arabia's sectoral investment priorities—such as logistics, construction, hospitality, and ICT—against

Pakistan's competitive strengths, the Commission can guide national planning toward areas of maximum bilateral synergy. Moreover, periodic revision of *Vision 2025* to reflect external economic corridors like Vision 2030 would ensure that foreign opportunities are embedded within domestic strategy rather than treated as peripheral (Nabi, 2020). Such alignment is also crucial for monitoring outcomes and ensuring policy continuity beyond political cycles.

Similarly, the Board of Investment (BOI) must be reoriented from its conventional role of facilitating inbound FDI to becoming an enabler of outbound economic diplomacy. As Saudi Arabia increasingly seeks co-investment ventures and private sector partnerships with countries like Pakistan, the BOI should adopt a more proactive stance in identifying sector-specific windows, assisting Pakistani firms to engage with Saudi counterparts, and working closely with Saudi agencies such as SAGIA and PIF. Creating dedicated Saudi Vision 2030 investment desks within BOI and provincial investment promotion agencies can operationalize this reorientation (Jamil & Akhtar, 2021).

Beyond institutional reforms, there is a need for capacity-building and administrative modernization to support this strategic realignment. Training civil servants on global value chains, public-private partnerships, and transnational investment frameworks is no longer optional—it is essential. Technical cooperation with Saudi ministries under Vision 2030 can be complemented by academic exchanges, digital governance partnerships, and secondments. Without recalibrating its institutional capacity to match the complexity of Vision 2030, Pakistan risks remaining a peripheral participant in what is potentially a transformative regional economic reordering (Rana, 2022).

5.4 Sector-Specific Opportunities and Strategic Alignment

A critical area where Pakistan can meaningfully engage with Saudi Vision 2030 is in the development of skilled human resources that directly correspond to the evolving needs of the Saudi economy. With Vision 2030 emphasizing high-value sectors such as tourism, healthcare, ICT, and renewable energy, the traditional labor-export model from Pakistan, which has largely focused on low-skilled workers, must undergo a strategic shift. Pakistan needs to prioritize vocational and technical education that prepares its workforce for Saudi Arabia's modern service

economy. Institutions like NAVTTC and TEVTA should be restructured to align training curricula with Saudi job market requirements, particularly in fields such as hospitality management, digital services, and paramedical care (Gulf Labour Markets and Migration, 2023).

The trade dimension also presents ripe opportunities for Pakistan, especially in areas where it holds latent comparative advantage. For instance, the agro-based economy of Pakistan can supply fresh fruits, vegetables, and processed food items to the Kingdom, particularly as Saudi Arabia seeks to reduce its reliance on Western imports and increase ties with regional partners. Moreover, agricultural collaboration in climate-resilient farming, irrigation technology, and agri-logistics can serve both countries, especially if supported by public-private partnerships and bilateral trade agreements (Farooq & Naseem, 2022). However, the trade corridor must be underpinned by quality assurance mechanisms to meet Saudi standards for certification, hygiene, and logistics.

The halal food sector, globally valued in the trillions, represents another sector where Pakistan and Saudi Arabia can establish co-branding and joint ventures. Given Pakistan's Islamic identity and vast livestock resources, the country is naturally positioned to supply halal-certified meat and dairy products to Gulf markets. Strategic certification partnerships between Pakistani bodies such as PSQCA and Saudi Food & Drug Authority (SFDA) can build trust and streamline export procedures. Moreover, Saudi investment in halal processing zones within Pakistan's Special Economic Zones (SEZs) could create a vertically integrated halal export ecosystem (Ahmed & Rehman, 2021).

In addition to traditional sectors, the digital innovation frontier offers untapped potential. With Saudi Arabia investing billions in digital transformation and artificial intelligence under its Digital Vision 2030, Pakistan's emerging tech talent can find substantial opportunities in software development, fintech, and cloud services. Programs like NICs (National Incubation Centers) in Pakistan could be aligned with Saudi digital firms to facilitate knowledge exchange and remote service delivery. If backed by supportive policies such as data localization, IP protection, and cybersecurity frameworks, this tech collaboration could reposition Pakistan as a valuable knowledge economy partner (Awan, 2023).

Policy alignment at the sectoral level is essential to sustain these synergies. Pakistan's ministries—particularly those of Commerce, Information Technology, and Food Security—need to work in tandem with Saudi counterparts to identify evolving trends and sectoral reforms. Joint feasibility studies, sectoral MoUs, and annual review mechanisms could ensure institutional follow-through. It is only through such strategic sectoral coupling that Pakistan can move from being a transactional partner to becoming an embedded collaborator in the success of Vision 2030 (Kazmi & Malik, 2021).

5.5 Investment Readiness and Financial Cooperation

Pakistan's ability to effectively tap into the economic momentum of Saudi Vision 2030 largely depends on its readiness to attract and sustain foreign direct investment (FDI) from the Kingdom. Despite being a country with significant untapped investment potential, Pakistan has struggled with regulatory inconsistencies, lack of infrastructure, and unpredictable macroeconomic conditions. Saudi investors, especially from sovereign institutions such as the Public Investment Fund (PIF), require clarity, predictability, and efficiency in investment facilitation. In this context, initiatives such as the Pakistan Single Window and the Investment Facilitation Council offer promising avenues to streamline processes and reduce bureaucratic hurdles (Board of Investment Pakistan, 2023).

The role of Special Economic Zones (SEZs) in catalyzing Saudi investment cannot be overstated. SEZs under the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) framework are strategically positioned to host industries such as petrochemicals, logistics, halal food processing, and renewable energy—all of which align with Saudi Arabia's diversification agenda under Vision 2030. However, the operationalization of these SEZs remains uneven, with issues ranging from land acquisition delays to inadequate utility services. To make these zones investor-ready, Pakistan must ensure regulatory autonomy, competitive incentives, and transparent governance models (Siddiqui & Ahmed, 2022).

Public-private partnerships (PPPs) can play a critical role in complementing state capacity and mitigating fiscal constraints. In sectors such as infrastructure, water management, healthcare, and energy, Saudi expertise and capital can be leveraged through well-structured PPP

models. For this, Pakistan needs to further strengthen its PPP Authority, standardize contract enforcement mechanisms, and offer risk mitigation instruments such as sovereign guarantees or viability gap funding. Ensuring that PPP frameworks are aligned with Saudi investment modalities and Islamic financing principles will also boost credibility (Khan & Aslam, 2021).

Equally crucial is legal and institutional reform to enhance transparency and investor protection, which are central to building long-term trust. While Pakistan has taken steps toward improving its ranking in the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business Index in recent years, investor grievances persist around taxation policy inconsistency, contract enforcement, and dispute resolution mechanisms. Reforms should focus on digitizing legal registries, creating commercial courts, and reducing discretionary powers of regulators. Such steps are vital not only for attracting Saudi capital but also for signaling institutional maturity to other Gulf and global investors (Ali & Haider, 2020).

A strong enabling environment depends on Pakistan's ability to integrate financial cooperation with strategic planning. Establishing a Saudi–Pakistan Investment Fund, co-managed by institutions like the State Bank of Pakistan and the Saudi Arabian Monetary Authority (SAMA), can facilitate long-term capital flows. Aligning financial regulations with global standards on AML/CFT, Islamic banking, and ESG criteria will also enhance Pakistan's financial credibility. Ultimately, creating a climate of confidence through structural and procedural reforms will determine whether Saudi Vision 2030 becomes a transformative opportunity or another missed moment (Yousaf & Bukhari, 2023).

5.6 Education, Skill Development, and Technology Transfer

The emergence of Saudi Vision 2030 as a blueprint for regional transformation has renewed the urgency for Pakistan to upgrade its human capital through education and skill development, particularly with an eye toward labor export. While Pakistan has traditionally served as a major labor supplier to Saudi Arabia, most of this labor has been low-skilled. The changing economic profile of Saudi Arabia—with its emphasis on knowledge-based sectors like fintech, health, tourism, and renewable energy—demands a more qualified and technically adept workforce. Bridging this skill mismatch requires robust coordination between Pakistan's

Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) institutions and Saudi employment trends (Shahid, 2022).

A strategic shift toward skills-based migration must be accompanied by institutional reforms in curriculum, certification standards, and recognition mechanisms. For instance, aligning Pakistan's National Vocational Qualifications Framework (NVQF) with international standards such as the Saudi Classification of Professions could facilitate smoother labor integration. Such alignment would require public-private partnerships, both domestically and with Saudi vocational bodies, to design industry-relevant training. Additionally, a migration strategy rooted in skill mapping and pre-departure orientation would significantly enhance the overseas employability of Pakistani workers (Ahmed & Saeed, 2021).

Beyond traditional labor export, technology transfer and joint research programs offer an avenue to deepen bilateral cooperation and build domestic innovation capacity. Establishing collaborative research chairs in engineering, AI, and climate technologies—especially in Saudi-funded universities or through the King Abdulaziz City for Science and Technology (KACST)—could empower Pakistani researchers and create a more reciprocal knowledge partnership. Encouraging university-to-university MoUs and dual-degree programs in technical fields will also promote educational mobility and foster intellectual exchange (Zia & Khalid, 2023).

Furthermore, technology parks and innovation hubs present untapped potential for Pakistan to localize and adapt emerging technologies from Saudi Arabia. Developing special clusters in cities like Lahore, Karachi, and Peshawar for software engineering, IoT, and biotech—anchored in partnerships with Saudi firms—could allow Pakistani start-ups to serve as value-chain partners in the Kingdom's digital economy. The National Incubation Centers and bodies like Ignite can act as platforms for such collaboration, provided they are supported by conducive regulatory and financial environments (Khan, 2020).

The success of this education-technology-skill triangle depends on policy foresight and diplomatic engagement. Education and training must not remain isolated sectors, but must be strategically integrated into foreign policy, trade diplomacy, and labor negotiations with Saudi Arabia. Institutions like the Higher Education Commission (HEC) and NAVTTC should work

alongside the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and overseas missions to institutionalize bilateral education corridors. In doing so, Pakistan can ensure its youth not only meet current employment demands but also participate in the Kingdom's innovation ecosystem in the long run (Rana, 2021).

5.7 Building Economic Corridors and Institutional Linkages

Pakistan's ability to strategically leverage its location and diplomatic capital hinges on establishing institutional mechanisms that translate goodwill into actionable economic outcomes. The revival and strengthening of the Pakistan–Saudi Joint Ministerial Commission (JMC) and similar coordination platforms remain central to this goal. These bodies provide structured channels for discussing trade, energy, infrastructure, and technology collaborations in alignment with Vision 2030's objectives. The institutionalization of such mechanisms facilitates continuity across political tenures and ensures that bilateral cooperation is not confined to episodic visits or symbolic gestures (Malik, 2022).

Equally significant is the imperative of establishing economic corridors between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, building on the logic of regional connectivity fostered by initiatives like the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). While CPEC is primarily Sino-centric, its infrastructure and logistics network can be expanded to accommodate Saudi trade and investment flows, especially through the proposed Gwadar–Riyadh–Jeddah linkage. This corridor could act as a bridge between Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 economic zones—such as NEOM—and Pakistan's Special Economic Zones (SEZs), creating a trans-regional economic belt that integrates West Asia with South Asia (Siddiqui, 2020).

To achieve these ambitions, economic diplomacy must become a front-line tool of Pakistan's foreign policy, moving beyond traditional security-centric narratives. Embedding commercial counsellors in Pakistani missions in Riyadh, Dammam, and Jeddah and creating a Pakistan–Saudi Business Council with representation from chambers of commerce, SMEs, and investment agencies would improve private sector linkages. These institutional connections should be data-driven, with regular assessments of trade bottlenecks, regulatory gaps, and

investment trends (Iqbal & Rehman, 2021). Furthermore, embedding trade facilitation units within embassies would ensure policy coordination between home and host institutions.

Moreover, Pakistan needs to actively participate in regional economic frameworks where Saudi Arabia holds influence, such as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and the Islamic Development Bank (IsDB). While formal integration into the GCC remains unlikely, sectoral engagement through GCC-plus arrangements—especially in renewable energy and digital infrastructure—can be negotiated. Saudi Arabia’s growing leadership in the Middle East’s economic architecture provides an opportunity for Pakistan to align itself with multilateral funding initiatives, green economy programs, and tech-driven cooperation models (Ahmed, 2023).

Institutional linkages must be designed to be resilient, transparent, and mutually accountable. Setting up a Joint Economic Secretariat in Islamabad and Riyadh, with sub-working groups on energy, education, migration, and investment, would allow both countries to maintain momentum and resolve coordination issues in real time. Such mechanisms could also be tasked with monitoring implementation, benchmarking progress, and refining strategy—transforming bilateral ties from transactional interactions into a long-term development partnership grounded in institutional depth (Bhatti & Khan, 2021).

5.8 Challenges and Constraints

Pakistan’s development trajectory in the context of Saudi Vision 2030 remains deeply affected by internal political volatility, which hampers sustained policy continuity and external investor confidence. Frequent transitions of power, often without completion of electoral mandates, result in abrupt policy reversals and erode long-term planning. Institutional reforms associated with Vision 2025 and bilateral economic frameworks often lose traction amid these political churns, undermining the predictability foreign investors—especially strategic partners like Saudi Arabia—seek (Rizvi & Ali, 2021). Moreover, provincial–federal tensions further fragment governance responses, diluting the potential impact of synchronized development initiatives.

In addition to political fragility, governance capacity and bureaucratic inertia pose structural impediments to operationalizing Vision 2030-linked opportunities. Policy implementation continues to be hindered by outdated administrative processes, resistance to digitalization, and lack of performance-based accountability in public institutions. Even in investment-critical agencies such as the Board of Investment (BOI) and Planning Commission, decision-making can be slow and opaque, leading to prolonged project timelines or the shelving of potential Saudi investments (Khan & Saeed, 2022). The absence of inter-ministerial coordination mechanisms exacerbates policy fragmentation, while weak data infrastructure limits evidence-based planning.

Another pressing constraint lies in Pakistan's mounting external debt and economic vulnerability, which restrict the government's ability to offer competitive incentives or co-invest in large-scale bilateral projects. With debt servicing consuming a major portion of the budget and dwindling foreign exchange reserves, Pakistan's fiscal space to maneuver has been drastically reduced (Shah, 2023). This macroeconomic instability discourages Saudi stakeholders from pursuing long-term capital investments, especially in sectors requiring regulatory guarantees, repatriation assurances, or sovereign risk protection.

Compounding these economic and administrative challenges is the persistent security dynamic, particularly in regions where Saudi investments—such as in mining or infrastructure—are envisioned. Sporadic unrest in Baluchistan, sectarian fault lines, and cross-border tensions with neighboring countries affect Pakistan's risk profile in the eyes of Saudi investors (Yusuf, 2020). While bilateral cooperation on counterterrorism has improved, the overall perception of Pakistan's internal security architecture still poses reputational and logistical risks for foreign business ventures. Furthermore, geopolitical balancing between Saudi Arabia and other regional players (e.g., Iran) requires diplomatic finesse that is often absent in Islamabad's foreign policy execution.

Regulatory barriers and legal unpredictability continue to undermine investor confidence. Complex approval systems, inconsistent application of tax laws, and unpredictable changes in tariff structures reduce Pakistan's competitiveness as an investment destination. The lack of effective dispute resolution mechanisms and weak enforcement of contracts also raises concerns

among Saudi business partners seeking secure and transparent legal guarantees (Ahmed & Farooq, 2021). Until Pakistan undertakes comprehensive regulatory reform with a focus on investor protection and simplification of business processes, even politically friendly states like Saudi Arabia may remain hesitant to fully operationalize economic cooperation.

5.9 Strategic Roadmap for Policy Action

To meaningfully align with Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, Pakistan must take deliberate and structured policy measures. A key recommendation is the creation of a dedicated national task force focused on Vision 2030 alignment. This body should operate under the Prime Minister's Office or the Ministry of Planning, Development & Special Initiatives, ensuring both political weight and inter-agency coordination. Such a task force would be mandated to identify cross-sectoral synergies with Saudi priorities, oversee project pipelines, and coordinate with provincial governments to address administrative bottlenecks (Hussain & Khan, 2022). Importantly, it should also serve as a focal point for liaising with Saudi institutions such as the Ministry of Investment and the Vision 2030 Delivery Unit, allowing for real-time feedback loops and adjustments.

In tandem with institutional reform, diaspora engagement must become a central pillar of Pakistan's policy roadmap. With over 2.5 million Pakistanis residing in Saudi Arabia, this community represents both an economic asset and a soft power reservoir (Siddiqui, 2023). Structured programs that offer legal protection, skills training, and reintegration incentives—especially for returning migrants—can convert remittance flows into long-term capital formation. The creation of a Saudi-Pakistan Diaspora Engagement Platform, jointly governed by Pakistan's Ministry of Overseas Pakistanis and Saudi labor institutions, could streamline grievance redressal, rights awareness, and investment facilitation from expatriate entrepreneurs.

Equally important is the need to invest in strategic economic branding of Pakistan to align with the aspirational tone of Vision 2030. Saudi Arabia seeks global partnerships in futuristic sectors—smart infrastructure, green technology, artificial intelligence, and cultural diplomacy—which requires Pakistan to rebrand itself beyond the traditional image of a remittance-dependent labor exporter. This rebranding must be led by a consortium of state

bodies, academia, and private sector actors that can reposition Pakistan's value proposition through targeted campaigns, digital showcases, and participation in Saudi-led expos and economic forums (Ali, 2022). Such efforts should also include provincial participation, showcasing Pakistan's regional diversity as an investment strength rather than a fragmentation risk.

To institutionalize these ambitions, Pakistan must invest in integrated digital platforms and policy analytics tools that inform bilateral cooperation. A national Vision 2030 dashboard—modeled on the Saudi National Transformation Program portal—can map sectoral initiatives, track KPIs, and flag regulatory delays. This would not only improve transparency but also empower relevant ministries and private sector partners with real-time insights, thereby encouraging evidence-based planning and course correction (Farooq & Usman, 2021). These platforms must be interoperable with Saudi digital systems to facilitate seamless communication, project tracking, and data sharing.

Parliamentary oversight and civil society inclusion are vital to lend democratic legitimacy and policy continuity to Pakistan's Vision 2030 alignment. Regular briefings to relevant standing committees in the National Assembly and Senate, along with white papers for public discussion, can help build broad-based consensus. Moreover, engaging think tanks, chambers of commerce, and diaspora networks in policy dialogue will help ground Saudi-Pakistan cooperation in public ownership and institutional memory, shielding it from regime changes and bureaucratic inertia (Shahbaz & Raza, 2023). Only through such a multi-stakeholder, forward-looking roadmap can Pakistan move from reactive diplomacy to strategic engagement in the evolving Gulf landscape.

5.10. Conclusion

As Pakistan navigates an increasingly complex global and regional landscape, the alignment with Saudi Vision 2030 provides both a challenge and an opportunity to recalibrate its development trajectory. The preceding analysis reveals that this strategic partnership is no longer confined to traditional bilateral dynamics but is instead evolving into a more diversified, mutually beneficial platform anchored in economic modernization, institutional reform, and regional integration (Asif & Rafiq, 2021). To seize this moment, Pakistan must adopt a proactive

posture that not only recognizes the transformative potential of Vision 2030 but also embeds it within its national development narrative.

The development strategies explored in this chapter emphasize the need for inter-institutional coordination, policy innovation, and sectoral readiness across domains such as labor export, agro-industrial collaboration, digital innovation, and education. These are not abstract goals but measurable avenues through which Pakistan can build strategic leverage with Saudi Arabia and, by extension, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). For instance, integrating labor market intelligence with Saudi sectoral reforms allows for better alignment between Pakistani workforce capabilities and Saudi demand (Khan & Ahmed, 2023). Such alignment can be operationalized through policy tools like vocational exchange programs, digital skills certification, and joint training centers.

At an institutional level, actionable opportunities reside in rethinking governance and planning models to suit 21st-century bilateral engagements. Pakistan must empower its Planning Commission, Board of Investment (BOI), and Economic Affairs Division to act not just as administrative bodies, but as knowledge hubs and policy entrepreneurs. These institutions must develop Saudi-focused verticals to generate timely research, facilitate project matchmaking, and resolve regulatory hurdles (Mahmood, 2022). Moreover, the institutionalization of a Pakistan–Saudi Joint Economic Coordination Council could enable continuity in dialogue and oversight beyond political cycles.

Financial cooperation, investment facilitation, and diaspora policy reform also remain critical to sustaining this strategic convergence. Attracting Saudi capital into Pakistan’s SEZs, energy infrastructure, and green technology will require legal clarity, investor protection, and swift bureaucratic response systems. Simultaneously, the Pakistani diaspora in the Kingdom must be engaged not only as remittance contributors but also as stakeholders in diplomatic, commercial, and cultural outreach (Siddiqui, 2023). Ensuring their legal security and expanding financial inclusion mechanisms are foundational steps in this direction.

Pakistan’s development policy must evolve from passive recipient models to one rooted in strategic agency. Vision 2030 offers a roadmap not just for Saudi Arabia’s domestic

transformation, but also a blueprint for how countries like Pakistan can reposition themselves through partnership-based diplomacy, capability enhancement, and targeted structural reform. With the right mix of political will, institutional coherence, and forward-thinking policy design, Pakistan can become a key development partner in the emerging Gulf-led regional order.

CHAPTER SIX

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Saudi Arabia's socio-economic transformation under Vision 2030 has not only redefined its internal development trajectory but also expanded the scope of its international partnerships, including with Pakistan. The comprehensive reforms initiated by Riyadh have touched upon nearly every sector—governance, economy, education, technology, and culture—thereby creating new pathways for bilateral engagement. As Saudi Arabia transitions from a hydrocarbon-centric model to a diversified economy, it invites regional partners like Pakistan to play a more strategic role in co-development and mutual growth (Alshuwaikhat & Mohammed, 2021). This shift presents both challenges and opportunities that require calibrated responses from Pakistani policymakers.

Throughout this study, it has become evident that the convergence between Vision 2030 and Pakistan's national priorities—especially those outlined in Vision 2025 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—can provide a strategic framework for deepened cooperation. Whether in the labor market, investment climate, trade flows, or technological exchange, Pakistan has the opportunity to align its institutional mechanisms with Saudi ambitions for modernization. However, such alignment requires not just diplomatic intent but also internal readiness—particularly in governance, regulatory transparency, and policy coordination (Khan & Rafiq, 2022). Without meaningful reforms at home, Pakistan may find itself marginalized in a partnership where agility, institutional coherence, and competitiveness are prerequisites.

A central theme that emerged is the importance of multidimensional cooperation. Economic corridors, joint ventures in emerging technologies, diaspora engagement, and academic exchanges form the softer yet more sustainable pillars of bilateral relations. While military and security ties remain important, the future of the Pakistan–Saudi partnership will likely rest on shared economic interests and regional integration efforts. In particular, leveraging Pakistan's human capital and Saudi Arabia's financial and strategic capital can create synergies that benefit both nations across time horizons (Shaikh, 2020). But for these outcomes to

materialize, both sides must transcend symbolic diplomacy and commit to institutionalized cooperation mechanisms.

Another critical insight is the role of the Pakistani diaspora in the Kingdom, which represents a bridge not only in economic terms but also in cultural and diplomatic engagement. Policy frameworks that ensure their protection, upskilling, and involvement in national development debates can strengthen bilateral trust and extend the scope of soft power. Similarly, Pakistan must diversify its economic offerings by upgrading its SEZs, facilitating FDI flows, and promoting sectors such as halal food, agro-processing, IT, and renewable energy—all areas aligned with Saudi Arabia's post-oil aspirations (Yusuf, 2023). This diversification will not only attract Saudi investment but also help stabilize Pakistan's economic vulnerabilities.

The Vision 2030 framework represents a timely and transformative opportunity for Pakistan to recalibrate its policy approach towards Saudi Arabia. However, the effectiveness of this strategic convergence depends largely on Pakistan's capacity to act with foresight, institutional discipline, and development-oriented diplomacy. This study suggests that future engagements should be built on mutual interests, backed by joint implementation mechanisms, and rooted in shared regional visions. The road ahead is promising, but it will demand persistent efforts, adaptive policy frameworks, and unwavering political commitment on both sides.

6.1. Findings

- a. The first significant finding of this study is the evolving nature of Saudi Arabia's domestic transformation, which has created unprecedented openings for strategic bilateralism in the Gulf–South Asia corridor. Under Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia is redefining its global economic footprint, gradually shifting away from an oil-dependent model toward a diversified economy. This internal reorientation has external dimensions, particularly in how the Kingdom selects and deepens strategic partnerships. Pakistan, given its demographic dividend, religious affinity, and historical ties, emerges as a natural partner—but only if it responds with institutional agility and economic vision (Alshuwaikhat & Mohammed, 2021).

- b. Second, the study found that Pakistan's current institutional frameworks are underprepared to match the scale and pace of Saudi Arabia's reformist agenda. While Vision 2025 and Pakistan's SDG alignment provide a foundational policy structure, there remains a significant implementation gap due to bureaucratic inertia, fragmented planning, and inconsistent leadership transitions. This weakens Pakistan's ability to act as a credible partner in a rapidly shifting geopolitical and geo-economic environment (Kugelman, 2022). If unaddressed, this asymmetry in preparedness could limit Pakistan's long-term gains from Saudi-led development initiatives.
- c. Another key insight is the untapped potential for economic integration and labor cooperation. Pakistan remains a major labor-exporting country to Saudi Arabia, yet lacks a skills-centered export model. Aligning vocational training with Saudi labor market needs—especially in construction, healthcare, IT, and hospitality—could substantially enhance the quality of remittances and social protection for the diaspora (Yusuf, 2023). Moreover, sectors like agriculture, halal food processing, renewable energy, and digital trade offer emerging opportunities that require targeted public-private investment facilitation.
- d. The study also found that while military and security cooperation remain strong pillars of Pakistan–Saudi relations, they have often overshadowed civilian economic and development-oriented engagements. With Saudi Arabia increasingly focused on Vision 2030's soft power and modernization components, Pakistan must pivot its approach from transactional military support to strategic economic diplomacy. Greater emphasis on joint ventures, academic exchanges, and knowledge transfer can recalibrate the relationship on more balanced, long-term foundations (Shaikh, 2020).
- e. The research underscores the importance of a national coordination mechanism in Pakistan to navigate Vision 2030 cooperation. Currently, the lack of inter-ministerial coordination, overlapping mandates among institutions like BOI, Planning Commission, and Commerce Ministry, and a reactive foreign policy posture hinder proactive engagement. The establishment of a dedicated Pakistan–Saudi Vision 2030 Task Force, as suggested in the strategic roadmap, could institutionalize bilateral planning and optimize policy synchrony (Khan & Rafiq, 2022). Without such a framework, bilateral

opportunities may continue to be missed due to internal disorganization rather than external constraints.

6.2. Policy Recommendations

- A. Establish a Dedicated National Task Force for Vision 2030 Engagement:** Given the multidimensional nature of Saudi Vision 2030 and its implications for Pakistan, a high-level National Task Force should be created within Pakistan's Planning Commission or Prime Minister's Office. This body must include representatives from the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Finance, Commerce, Overseas Pakistanis, and BOI. Its role should be to develop sector-specific frameworks, ensure policy alignment, and serve as the central liaison for coordination with Saudi stakeholders (Khan & Rafiq, 2022). This approach would overcome the institutional fragmentation currently impeding proactive engagement.
- B. Prioritize Skill-Based Labor Export Policies:** Pakistan must shift from a volume-based labor export strategy to a value-oriented model. It should expand Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) programs, with curricula co-designed in partnership with Saudi firms and chambers of commerce. This would ensure that Pakistani workers meet the changing demands of the Saudi labor market, particularly in the NEOM, tourism, and healthcare sectors (Yusuf, 2023). Such alignment can also help secure worker protections and improve remittance quality.
- C. Facilitate Saudi Investments in SEZs and Infrastructure:** To attract long-term Saudi investments, Pakistan needs to offer investment-ready infrastructure within Special Economic Zones (SEZs), streamline approval processes, and provide legal guarantees to investors. Fast-tracking projects such as the Gwadar Oil Refinery and integrating Saudi capital into CPEC through joint ventures would strengthen Pakistan's economic base while advancing regional connectivity goals under Vision 2030 (Shaikh, 2020). Legal reforms to ensure contract enforcement and tax stability are equally crucial.
- D. Expand Soft Power Engagement and People-to-People Linkages:** Recognizing the evolving nature of bilateral relations, Pakistan should promote cultural diplomacy and academic exchange with Saudi Arabia. Initiatives such as joint research centers, faculty

exchanges, Urdu-Arabic language programs, and Hajj coordination reforms can deepen mutual trust and shape public perceptions positively (Alshuwaikhat & Mohammed, 2021). Furthermore, collaboration in media, film, and heritage preservation could promote narratives beyond security and religion.

E. Mainstream Economic Diplomacy within Foreign Policy: Pakistan's foreign policy must internalize economic diplomacy as a central pillar, especially with key development partners like Saudi Arabia. Missions abroad should be equipped with commercial attachés trained in investment facilitation, diaspora mobilization, and trade development. Institutional mechanisms such as the Pakistan–Saudi Business Council should be empowered to provide regular policy feedback and promote bilateral trade corridors (Kugelman, 2022). This shift from a reactive to a proactive approach is vital for Pakistan's global competitiveness.

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