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Article

# Bilateral Strategic Partnerships Between States as a Foundational Pillar for Strengthening International Relations: A Systematic Analytical Study (2015–2025)

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## Abstract

Amid the accelerating geopolitical transformations reshaping international order in the first quarter of the twenty-first century, bilateral strategic partnerships (BSPs) have emerged as a pivotal diplomatic instrument and an indispensable mechanism for interstate cooperation. Despite their proliferating deployment in diplomatic discourse, BSPs remain conceptually undertheorized, with significant lacunae in the systematic comparative analysis of their structural foundations, multidimensional functions, and resilience under shifting geopolitical conditions. This study addresses these gaps by pursuing three interrelated objectives: (1) constructing a rigorous conceptual framework that distinguishes BSPs from cognate forms of international cooperation, (2) identifying and analyzing the core dimensions and enabling conditions that underpin successful partnerships, and (3) evaluating leading contemporary models through structured comparative case analysis. Employing a qualitative multi-case research design grounded in thematic analysis and structured focused comparison, the study examines four paradigmatic BSPs—Franco-German, U.S.–Japan, Sino-Russian, and Saudi–U.S.—drawing on policy documents, treaty texts, institutional records, and peer-reviewed scholarship from 2015 to 2025. Findings reveal that BSP durability is contingent upon four interdependent pillars: value-interest alignment, structural economic complementarity, sustained political leadership, and robust institutional architecture. The study further identifies a typological spectrum ranging from deeply institutionalized, norm-convergent partnerships to strategically expedient, structurally fragile alignments. The paper concludes that BSPs constitute not merely bilateral instruments but systemic building blocks for a more stable and polycentric international order, while cautioning against the inflationary and ceremonial deployment of the concept.

**Keywords:** bilateral strategic partnerships; international relations; geopolitical transformation; qualitative comparative analysis; diplomatic cooperation; multipolar order

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## 1. Introduction

The contemporary international system is characterized by a degree of complexity that defines simple categorization. The post-2014 deterioration of Russian–Western relations, culminating in the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, fundamentally redrew the contours of European security and accelerated bloc consolidation across the transatlantic space (Mearsheimer, 2019; Sakwa, 2017). Concurrently, the intensifying Sino-American rivalry over technological supremacy, supply chain resilience, and geopolitical influence in the Indo-Pacific has generated a competitive dynamic with systemic reverberations (Allison, 2017; Brands & Beckley, 2022). Regional theatres in the Middle East, the Sahel, and Southeast Asia have witnessed their own realignments, driven by shifting power balances, normalization processes, and the growing assertiveness of major regional powers (Acharya, 2018; Hinnebusch & Ehteshami, 2014).

Within this landscape, bilateral strategic partnerships have assumed an increasingly prominent place on foreign policy agendas worldwide. The term itself has proliferated dramatically: whereas

fewer than a dozen state dyads formally described their relationship as a "strategic partnership" in 1990, by the early 2020s the number exceeded 250 declared partnerships globally (Wilkins, 2012; Strüver, 2017). Yet this very proliferation has generated analytical confusion. The concept is deployed to describe relationships as disparate as the deeply institutionalized Franco-German axis within the European Union and loosely framed declarations between states with minimal substantive cooperation (Grevi, 2010; Ferreira-Pereira & Vieira, 2016). The resulting ambiguity threatens to render the concept analytically vacuous at precisely the moment when its practical importance is at a peak.

This study contends that the analytical and policy significance of BSPs warrants systematic scholarly attention precisely because they occupy a distinctive niche in the architecture of international cooperation—one that is qualitatively different from traditional military alliances, multilateral regimes, or purely commercial agreements. BSPs combine the flexibility to adapt to evolving circumstances with a commitment to long-term strategic alignment across multiple domains, rendering them particularly suited to the fluid and multiplex geopolitical environment of the 2020s (Envall & Hall, 2016; Kay, 2000). Unlike formal alliances, which are typically anchored in specific security commitments and directed against identifiable threats, BSPs aspire to a broader and more generative form of cooperation that spans economic, cultural, technological, and security domains simultaneously.

Three research questions animate the inquiry. First, what constitutes a genuine bilateral strategic partnership, and how can it be rigorously distinguished from other modalities of international cooperation? Second, what structural, institutional, and political conditions enable BSPs to function effectively and endure overtime? Third, how do leading contemporary BSP models compare in terms of their dimensional composition, institutional depth, and resilience to geopolitical disruption? By addressing these questions through a qualitative multi-case design spanning the period 2015–2025, this paper seeks to advance both the conceptual precision and the empirical understanding of bilateral strategic partnerships as constitutive elements of the evolving international order.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews relevant scholarly literature, identifying key theoretical debates, typological contributions, and empirical gaps. Section 3 presents the integrative conceptual framework. Section 4 details the methodology, including case selection, data sources, and analytical strategy. Section 5 reports the results and cross-case analysis. Section 6 discusses the theoretical and policy implications of the findings. Section 7 offers concluding reflections, and Section 8 articulates targeted recommendations for policymakers and scholars.

## 2. Literature Review

The literature on bilateral strategic partnerships has expanded considerably over the past two decades, reflecting their growing importance in international relations and diplomatic practice. Scholars have grappled with defining the concept, distinguishing BSPs from traditional alliances, and situating them within broader theoretical frameworks. Early studies often focused on the ambiguous and sometimes inconsistent usage of the term "strategic partnership," highlighting both its conceptual appeal and its analytical challenges. As the number of declared BSPs has surged globally, academic attention has shifted toward developing typologies, constructing analytical frameworks, and examining the diversity of partnership models in practice. This section synthesizes key scholarly contributions, proceeding from theoretical debates through typological frameworks to empirical case studies, thereby establishing the analytical foundation for the systematic comparison that follows.

### 2.1. Conceptualizing Strategic Partnerships in International Relations Theory

The concept of strategic partnership has attracted growing scholarly attention since the early 2000s, yet it remains what Wilkins (2012, p. 53) described as a "linguistically attractive but analytically elusive" term. Early contributions sought to differentiate the concept from formal alliances. Grevi (2010) argued that strategic partnerships are distinguished by their non-adversarial orientation—they are not constituted against a common enemy but around a shared vision of mutual benefit and systemic governance. This stands in contrast to the alliance literature rooted in realist theory, where

cooperation is principally driven by the logic of external threat balancing (Walt, 1987; Waltz, 1979). Kay (2000) similarly emphasized that strategic partnerships transcend narrow security commitments, incorporating economic, political, and societal dimensions that alliances traditionally neglect.

From a liberal institutionalist perspective, BSPs are understood as instruments for reducing transaction costs, institutionalizing reciprocity, and creating issue-linkages across multiple policy domains (Keohane, 1984; Keohane & Nye, 2012). The multidimensional nature of BSPs—spanning security, economics, culture, and technology—aligns with the liberal emphasis on complex interdependence and the pacifying effects of dense institutional networks (Nye, 2011). Holslag (2011), examining the European Union's strategic partnership with China, demonstrated how institutional mechanisms can serve as stabilizing structures even when underlying political interests diverge. Constructivist approaches, meanwhile, foreground the role of shared identities, norms, and intersubjective meanings in constituting partnership relations, arguing that the "strategic" quality of a partnership is as much a discursive and social construction as it is a material reality (Wendt, 1999; Hopf, 2002). Each theoretical tradition captures important dimensions of the BSP phenomenon, yet no one alone provides a comprehensive analytical framework limitation that motivates the integrative approach adopted in this study.

## 2.2. *Typologies and Analytical Frameworks*

Subsequent scholarship sought to move beyond definitional debates toward the construction of typologies and analytical frameworks capable of distinguishing among the diverse forms that strategic partnerships assume in practice. Ferreira-Pereira and Vieira (2016) proposed a distinction between "effective" strategic partnerships—characterized by institutional depth, policy convergence, and societal engagement—and "label" partnerships that remain largely declaratory. This distinction has proven analytically productive, enabling scholars to differentiate between substantive cooperative arrangements and the ceremonial deployment of partnership rhetoric for diplomatic signaling purposes.

Strüver (2017), analyzing China's extensive network of declared partnerships, developed a graduated taxonomy ranging from "cooperative partnerships" to "comprehensive strategic partnerships of coordination," demonstrating that even within a single state's diplomatic practice the concept admits of significant internal differentiation. Envall and Hall (2016) advanced a framework emphasizing three constitutive elements: strategic alignment (convergent threat perceptions and policy objectives), institutional density (the presence of regularized consultation and coordination mechanisms), and partnership scope (the breadth of issue-areas covered). Renard (2016) extended this analysis by examining the compatibility between bilateral strategic partnerships and multilateral governance structures, arguing that well-designed BSPs can function as building blocks for, rather than alternatives to, effective multilateralism.

Kay (2000) underscored the role of institutionalized mechanisms in sustaining bilateral cooperation beyond the contingencies of individual leaders, a proposition with particular relevance to partnerships undergoing leadership transitions. More recently, scholars have elaborated the concept of "partnership resilience," defined as a BSP's capacity to absorb exogenous shocks—such as leadership transitions, economic crises, or geopolitical disruptions—without suffering structural degradation (Envall & Hall, 2016). This concept has gained salience in the context of the post-2022 geopolitical upheavals that have tested the structural integrity of partnerships across multiple regions.

## 2.3. *Empirical Studies of Leading BSP Models (2015–2025)*

The Franco-German partnership has been extensively studied as the paradigmatic case of a deeply institutionalized BSP (Krotz & Schild, 2013; Cole, 2001). Research has documented how the institutional infrastructure established by the 1963 Élysée Treaty and reinforced by the 2019 Treaty of Aachen has enabled the partnership to weather significant bilateral tensions—over eurozone governance, defense spending, and energy policy—without fundamental rupture. Krotz and Schild

(2018) demonstrated that the Franco-German "embedded bilateralism" has functioned as the political nucleus of the European integration project, generating systemic effects that extend far beyond the bilateral dyad. The partnership's institutional density—encompassing joint ministerial councils, a joint youth office, shared media institutions such as ARTE, and integrated industrial ventures such as Airbus—provides a template against which other BSP models can be evaluated.

The USA.–Japan partnership has received renewed scholarly attention following the 2022–2025 period of accelerated defense cooperation in response to China's assertiveness and North Korea's nuclear developments. Green (2022) documented Japan's evolving grand strategy under the Abe era and its implications for the alliance architecture. Hughes (2015) analyzed the transformation of Japan's foreign and security policy, including the expanded scope of intelligence-sharing arrangements, joint operational planning, and Japan's historic revision of its defense posture. The U.S.–Japan case illustrates how an alliance-origin partnership can evolve toward a genuine multidimensional BSP through progressive institutional deepening and dimensional broadening.

The Sino-Russian relationship has generated a contentious literature. Lo (2015) characterized it as an "axis of convenience" driven by shared opposition to Western hegemony rather than genuine value convergence. Korolev (2019) examined the military cooperation dimension, arguing that the relationship had moved closer to a *de facto* alliance than commonly acknowledged. Lukin (2021) offered a more nuanced assessment, contending that the partnership represents a genuine entente rooted in complementary strategic interests, while acknowledging the structural constraints imposed by divergent governance models and competing economic interests in Central Asia. Wishnick (2017) analyzed the identity dimensions of the partnership, demonstrating how Russia and China have constructed shared narratives of opposition to Western normative dominance. The debate over whether the Sino-Russian relationship constitutes a genuine strategic partnership or a strategically expedient alignment remains unresolved and constitutes a central analytical question for this study.

Scholarship on BSPs involving major Middle Eastern states and Western powers has expanded significantly in recent years, driven by tectonic shifts in the regional order and the recalibration of great-power engagement in the Gulf. The Saudi–U.S. partnership has been analyzed as a paradigmatic case of an evolving transregional strategic relationship, historically anchored in the energy-security nexus established by the 1945 Roosevelt–Abdulaziz meeting and the subsequent agreements of the early Cold War period (Bronson, 2006; Riedel, 2018). The partnership has undergone fundamental recalibration, driven by Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 economic diversification program (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016), shifting U.S. energy dynamics, and intensifying great-power competition for influence in the Gulf (Gause, 2010; Blanchard, 2024). Defense cooperation—with the United States remaining Saudi Arabia's principal arms supplier and security partner—has been complemented by expanding engagement in technology transfer, investment, and counterterrorism coordination (Lippman, 2012; Blanchard, 2024). The Saudi case is analytically significant because it illustrates how a partnership historically defined by a single functional domain can undergo deliberate transformation toward multidimensionality under the impetus of an ambitious national development strategy.

#### 2.4. Identified Gaps

Despite this growing body of literature, several gaps persist. First, most studies examine BSPs in isolation, and structured cross-case comparisons analyzing the conditions for partnership effectiveness across diverse geopolitical contexts remain scarce. Second, the literature has been disproportionately focused on partnerships among Western states or within the Indo-Pacific, with insufficient attention to evolving BSP models involving major Middle Eastern powers whose strategic alignments are undergoing rapid transformation (Gause, 2010; Riedel, 2018). Third, the post-2022 geopolitical environment—marked by the Ukraine conflict, intensified great-power competition, and the transformative impact of artificial intelligence and emerging technologies—has generated new dynamics that have yet to be systematically integrated into analytical frameworks for studying BSPs.

This study seeks to address these gaps through a comparative, multidimensional analysis of four contemporary BSP models.

**Table 1.** Bilateral Strategic Partnership Literature Review: Sections, Key Points, and Citations.

Section	Key Points	Authors/Works Cited
Literature Expansion	Growth in studies on bilateral strategic partnerships; focus on defining BSPs, distinguishing them from alliances, and theoretical frameworks	Wilkins (2012), Grevi (2010), Walt (1987), Waltz (1979), Kay (2000)
Theoretical Approaches	Realist: threat balancing; Liberal: transaction costs, reciprocity, issue-linkages; Constructivist: shared identities, norms	Keohane (1984), Keohane & Nye (2012), Nye (2011), Holslag (2011), Wendt (1999), Hopf (2002)
Typologies/Frameworks	Distinction between "effective" and "label" partnerships; graduated taxonomy; strategic alignment, institutional density, partnership scope; partnership resilience	Ferreira-Pereira & Vieira (2016), Strüver (2017), Envall & Hall (2016), Renard (2016), Kay (2000)
Franco-German BSP	Deeply institutionalized; survived tensions; template for other BSPs; embedded bilateralism	Krotz & Schild (2013, 2018), Cole (2001)
U.S.–Japan BSP	Accelerated defense cooperation (2022–2025); evolved from alliance to multidimensional BSP; expanded intelligence-sharing, joint planning	Green (2022), Hughes (2015)
Sino-Russian BSP	Described as "axis of convenience," military cooperation, entente, shared narratives, unresolved analytical debate	Lo (2015), Korolev (2019), Lukin (2021), Wishnick (2017)
Saudi–U.S. BSP	Evolving transregional partnership; energy-security nexus; recalibration via Vision 2030; multidimensional transformation	Bronson (2006), Riedel (2018), Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (2016), Gause (2010), Blanchard (2024), Lippman (2012)

Identified Gaps	Lack of cross-case comparisons; focus on Western/Indo-Pacific partnerships; insufficient attention to Middle Eastern BSPs; need for integration of post-2022 dynamics	Gause (2010), Riedel (2018), Blanchard (2024)
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### 3. Conceptual Framework

Building on the literature reviewed above, this study employs an integrative conceptual framework structured around four analytical axes derived from the theoretical contributions of Wilkins (2012), Envall and Hall (2016), Ferreira-Pereira and Vieira (2016), and Keohane (1984). The framework posits that the quality and resilience of a bilateral strategic partnership can be assessed along the following dimensions.

The first axis concerns **enabling conditions**, defined as the structural prerequisites that allow a BSP to take root and develop. Drawing on Envall and Hall (2016) and Keohane (1984), four enabling conditions are identified: (a) value-interest alignment, understood not as rigid ideological congruence but as convergent threat perceptions, policy priorities, and development trajectories; (b) structural economic complementarity, whereby the productive capacities and resource endowments of the two states generate mutually reinforcing gains exceeding what either could achieve independently; (c) sustained political leadership committed to long-term strategic horizons beyond short-term electoral or political cycles; and (d) robust institutional architecture, comprising regularized consultation mechanisms, joint ministerial councils, and formal treaty frameworks that insulate the partnership from the vicissitudes of domestic politics and leadership fluctuations.

The second axis addresses **partnership dimensions**, encompassing the substantive domains across which cooperation is operationalized. Four principal dimensions are delineated: (a) security and defense cooperation, including intelligence exchange, joint military exercises, and coordinated responses to transnational threats; (b) economic and developmental cooperation, encompassing trade, investment, infrastructure collaboration, and fiscal-monetary policy coordination; (c) cultural and humanitarian exchange, including student mobility, joint cultural institutions, and intellectual collaboration; and (d) scientific and technological cooperation, particularly in frontier fields such as artificial intelligence, clean energy, biotechnology, and cybersecurity.

The third axis examines **institutional depth**, operationalized as the density and formality of the institutional mechanisms governing the partnership, from ad hoc summitry to treaty-based institutional frameworks with regularized review processes. This axis draws on Kay's (2000) emphasis on institutionalized mechanisms as determinants of partnership continuity and Krotz and Schild's (2013) concept of embedded bilateralism.

The fourth axis assesses **partnership resilience**, defined as the capacity of the BSP to absorb and adapt to exogenous shocks—including geopolitical disruptions, leadership transitions, economic crises, and public opinion shifts—without suffering structural degradation (Envall & Hall, 2016; Keohane, 1984). Resilience is conceptualized not merely as the capacity to survive shocks but as the capacity to emerge from them with partnership structures intact or strengthened.

This four-axis framework provides the analytical scaffolding for the structured comparison of the four case studies examined in this paper. The axes are understood to be interdependent rather than independent: enabling conditions shape dimensional configuration; institutional depth mediates the translation of political commitment into operational cooperation; and resilience is an emergent property of the interaction among the preceding three axes.

## 4. Methodology

This section outlines the methodological approach employed in this study to investigate bilateral strategic partnerships (BSPs). Recognizing the complexity and context-dependent nature of BSPs, the methodology is designed to facilitate a structured, comparative analysis across diverse cases while maintaining sensitivity to each partnership's unique historical, cultural, and geopolitical circumstances. The following subsections detail the research design, case selection criteria, data sources, and analytical strategies used to ensure the rigor and validity of the findings. By integrating qualitative, multi-case methods with thematic and structured focused comparison techniques, the study aims to generate empirically grounded insights and theoretical propositions about the dynamics and resilience of BSPs.

### 4.1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative multi-case research design, appropriate for investigating complex, context-dependent phenomena that resist reduction to quantifiable variables (Yin, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The multi-case approach enables structured comparison across diverse contexts while preserving sensitivity to the particularities of each case balance essential for studying BSPs whose dynamics are shaped by distinctive historical, cultural, and geopolitical circumstances.

### 4.2. Case Selection

Four BSP models were selected because of purposive sampling guided by the principle of maximum variation (Patton, 2015), ensuring diversity across geographic regions, power configuration, institutional maturity, and partnership duration. The cases are: (1) the Franco-German partnership (Europe; symmetric power; deeply institutionalized; long-standing), (2) the U.S.–Japan partnership (Indo-Pacific; asymmetric power; alliance-based; post-WWII), (3) the Sino-Russian partnership (Eurasia; near-symmetric power; weakly institutionalized; post-Cold War), and (4) the Saudi–U.S. partnership (Middle East–North America; asymmetric power; energy-security nexus with evolving institutionalization; long-standing but undergoing fundamental transformation). This selection captures variation across the key dimensions of the conceptual framework and ensures representation of both established and transforming partnership models, as well as partnerships anchored in distinct functional logics. The inclusion of two U.S.-involved cases—one alliance-based in the Indo-Pacific and one rooted in the energy-security nexus in the Middle East—enables a within-actor comparison of how a single state manages structurally different BSP configurations across disparate regions, thereby controlling for certain actor-level variables while highlighting the role of structural, regional, and functional differences in shaping partnership dynamics.

### 4.3. Data Sources

Data were drawn from multiple source types to enable triangulation and enhance analytical validity (Yin, 2018). Primary sources include bilateral treaty texts, joint communiqués, official policy documents, and institutional records such as joint ministerial council proceedings and trade statistics from national and international databases. Secondary sources comprise peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports from research institutes, and scholarly monographs published between 2015 and 2025. Statistical data on bilateral trade volumes, defense expenditure, and investment flows were obtained from the International Monetary Fund (IMF, 2024), the World Bank, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI, 2024), the United States Trade Representative (USTR), and the U.S. Census Bureau (2024).

### 4.4. Analytical Strategy

Data analysis proceeded through two interrelated methods. First, thematic analysis following the six-phase protocol outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021) was employed to identify recurring patterns, core categories, and cross-cutting themes across the textual corpus. Themes were generated

both deductively—guided by the four-axis conceptual framework—and inductively, allowing for the emergence of unanticipated patterns from the data.

Second, structured focused comparison, as formulated by George and Bennett (2005), was applied to the four cases. A standardized set of analytical questions derived from the conceptual framework was posed to each case, enabling systematic cross-case comparison while preserving contextual depth. This method is particularly well-suited to small-N qualitative research where the objective is to identify causal patterns and generate theoretical propositions rather than to test statistical hypotheses. The combination of thematic analysis with structured focused comparison ensures that findings are both empirically grounded and analytically generalizable within the limits of the research design.

#### 4.5. Validity and Limitations

Analytical rigor was strengthened through data triangulation (the use of multiple source types), investigator triangulation (peer review of coding and interpretations), and the use of a transparent and replicable analytical protocol (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Yin, 2018). Limitations include reliance on publicly available documents, which may not capture confidential dimensions of strategic partnerships, and the interpretive nature of qualitative analysis, which privileges depth over generalizability. The findings should therefore be understood as analytically transferable propositions rather than universally generalizable laws (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

## 5. Results and Analysis

This section presents the findings of the qualitative multi-case analysis organized according to the three research questions guiding the study. Results are derived from the thematic analysis of the documentary and scholarly corpus and from the structured focused comparison of the four BSP models. The presentation proceeds from conceptual differentiation (RQ1) through enabling conditions (RQ2) to cross-case dimensional comparison and resilience assessment (RQ3), integrating tabulated evidence with interpretive analysis throughout.

### 5.1. Thematic Mapping: Overview of Emergent and Deductive Themes

The six-phase thematic analysis protocol (Braun & Clarke, 2021) applied to the corpus of treaty texts, joint communiqués, policy documents, and peer-reviewed scholarship yielded a thematic architecture organized at three levels. At the highest level, four overarching thematic domains were identified, corresponding to the four axes of the conceptual framework: enabling conditions, partnership dimensions, institutional depth, and partnership resilience. Within these domains, twelve primary themes and twenty-seven sub-themes were generated through the iterative interplay of deductive and inductive coding. Table 1 presents the complete thematic map.

**Table 2.** Thematic Map: Overarching Domains, Primary Themes, and Sub-Themes.

Overarching Domain	Primary Theme	Sub-Themes	Representative Sources
Enabling Conditions	Value-interest alignment	Convergent threat perceptions; shared developmental vision; normative proximity or divergence	Wilkins (2012); Envall & Hall (2016); Lo (2015)
	Economic complementarity	Resource-capability matching; trade balance dynamics; investment reciprocity	Webber (2017); Blanchard (2024); Korolev (2019)
	Political leadership	Visionary leadership catalysis; leader-dependency risks; bipartisan continuity	Krotz & Schild (2013); Green (2022); Riedel (2018)
	Institutional architecture	Treaty-based frameworks; regularized consultation	Krotz & Schild (2018); Hughes (2015); Kay (2000)

		mechanisms; adaptive institutional capacity	
Partnership Dimensions	Security and defense	Intelligence sharing; joint exercises; coordinated threat response; arms cooperation	Walt (1987); Hughes (2015); Blanchard (2024)
	Economics and developmental	Trade volumes; co-investment instruments; infrastructure collaboration; fiscal-monetary coordination	IMF (2024); Blanchard (2024); Lukin (2021)
	Cultural and humanitarian	Student and youth exchanges; joint cultural institutions; diaspora linkages; translation and media	Krotz & Schild (2013); Nye (2011); Bronson (2006)
	Scientific and technological	AI and quantum cooperation; clean energy R&D; space collaboration; cybersecurity coordination	Brands & Beckley (2022); Hughes (2015); Blanchard (2024)
Institutional Depth	Formal institutionalization	Binding treaty obligations; joint ministerial councils; standing secretariats	Krotz & Schild (2018); Kay (2000)
	Informal institutionalization	Summit diplomacy; personal leader rapport; back-channel communication	Lo (2015); Korolev (2019)
Partnership Resilience	Shock absorption capacity	Response to geopolitical crises; adaptation to leadership transitions; economic crisis management	Envall & Hall (2016); Sakwa (2017)
	Exit cost architecture	Interdependence density; sunk institutional investments; reputational costs of withdrawal	Keohane (1984); Ferreira-Pereira & Vieira (2016)

*Note.* Themes generated through iterative deductive-inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Representative sources are illustrative, not exhaustive.

The thematic map reveals that the four overarching domains are not independent but exhibit significant cross-domain interactions. Enabling conditions shape the initial dimensional configuration of a partnership; institutional depth mediates the translation of political commitment into operational cooperation; and partnership resilience is an emergent property of the interaction among the preceding three domains. This relational structure is examined in detail in the sections that follow.

### 5.2. RQ1: Conceptual Differentiation of BSPs

The first research question asked what constitutes a genuine bilateral strategic partnership and how it can be rigorously distinguished from other modalities of international cooperation. Analysis of the documentary corpus—particularly the preambles and operative clauses of bilateral treaty texts and the framing language of joint communiqués—reveals that BSPs are discursively and substantively constituted by five distinguishing markers that collectively differentiate them from traditional military alliances, bilateral trade agreements, and ad hoc diplomatic cooperation.

The first marker is **multidimensional scope**. Whereas military alliances are anchored primarily in the security domain (Walt, 1987; Snyder, 1997) and trade agreements are confined principally to the economic domain (Bagwell & Staiger, 2002; Dür et al., 2014), BSPs are characterized by the deliberate cultivation of cooperation across multiple, interconnected issue-areas. The Élysée Treaty of 1963 established parallel structures for foreign policy coordination, defense cooperation, and youth exchange simultaneously, institutionalizing multidimensionality as an organizing principle from the partnership's inception (Krotz & Schild, 2013). The Saudi–U.S. relationship, while historically anchored in the energy-security nexus, has progressively expanded into defense cooperation, counterterrorism, technology transfer, educational exchange, and economic diversification under the

Vision 2030 framework, signaling a deliberate pursuit of multidimensional partnership scope (Riedel, 2018; Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016; Blanchard, 2024). This multidimensionality generates cross-domain reinforcement effects whereby cooperation in one domain creates positive spillovers that deepen engagement in others—a dynamic consistent with the functionalist logic theorized by Keohane (1984) and empirically documented in the European integration literature (Krotz & Schild, 2018).

The second marker is **non-adversarial orientation**. The analysis confirms Grevi's (2010) proposition that BSPs are not constituted against a specific external adversary but around a shared affirmative vision. The U.S.–Japan partnership, while clearly animated by shared concerns about Chinese assertiveness and North Korean provocations, is framed in official documents as a partnership "for" a free and open Indo-Pacific rather than solely "against" any particular state (Green, 2022; Hughes, 2015). The Sino-Russian case represents a partial exception: while the February 2022 joint statement explicitly rejected the characterization of the relationship as a military alliance, the degree to which the partnership is animated by shared opposition to Western hegemonic structures raises questions about whether it fully satisfies this criterion (Lo, 2015; Korolev, 2019).

The third marker is **long-term temporal orientation**. BSP treaty texts and programmatic documents consistently employ the language of generational commitment, "enduring partnership," and "shared future trajectories," reflecting a temporal horizon extending well beyond specific agreements or the tenure of individual leaders (Ferreira-Pereira & Vieira, 2016). This orientation is operationalized through institutional mechanisms designed to ensure continuity—such as the Franco-German Joint Ministerial Council, which convenes irrespective of electoral outcomes (Krotz & Schild, 2018)—and through societal programs, such as youth exchanges and joint educational initiatives, that cultivate partnership constituencies across generations (Nye, 2011).

The fourth marker is the presence of a **normative-identity component**. Beyond material interest calculations, BSPs draw upon and actively construct shared narratives of identity, values, and civilizational affinity. The Franco-German partnership has been explicitly framed as a project of historical reconciliation and shared European identity (Krotz & Schild, 2013). The Saudi–U.S. partnership, while characterized by differences in governance models, has constructed shared narratives around mutual commitments to regional stability, counterterrorism, and economic modernization, with Saudi Vision 2030 providing a forward-looking normative framework emphasizing reform, openness, and global economic integration that has facilitated strategic alignment (Riedel, 2018; Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016). The constructivist insight that partnership is partly constituted by intersubjective meaning-making (Wendt, 1999) finds strong empirical support across the cases.

The fifth marker, which emerged inductively from the analysis, is what may be termed **strategic irreversibility aspiration**. Genuine BSPs are designed to generate such dense interdependencies and high exit costs that reversal becomes prohibitively expensive for both parties. This is achieved through the accumulation of institutional sunk costs, the creation of joint ventures and integrated production chains (Airbus in the Franco-German case; semiconductor supply chain coordination in the U.S.–Japan case), and the cultivation of societal constituencies with vested interests in the partnership's continuation (Krotz & Schild, 2018; Hughes, 2015). Table 2 synthesizes the five distinguishing markers and assesses their presence across the four cases.

**Table 2.** Presence of BSP Distinguishing Markers Across Four Cases.

Distinguishing Marker	Franco-German	U.S.–Japan	Sino-Russian	Saudi–U.S.
Multidimensional scope	Strongly present across all four dimensions (Krotz & Schild, 2018)	Strongly present, with particular depth in security and technology (Hughes, 2015)	Present but uneven; security and economic dimensions dominant, cultural and scientific underdeveloped (Wishnick, 2017)	Present and expanding; security and economic deeply developed; scientific-technological and cultural growing

				under Vision 2030 (Blanchard, 2024)
Non-adversarial orientation	Fully present; framed around shared European project (Krotz & Schild, 2013)	Substantially present, though shaped by convergent threat perceptions (Green, 2022)	Partially present; significant reactive-adversarial component vis-à-vis the West (Lo, 2015)	Substantially present; framed around shared interests in regional stability, energy security, and economic modernization (Riedel, 2018)
Long-term temporal orientation	Deeply institutionalized generational commitment since 1963 (Krotz & Schild, 2013)	Sustained over seven decades with periodic renewal (Green, 2022)	Declared but weakly institutionalized; vulnerable to leadership change (Korolev, 2019)	Deeply rooted since 1945; periodically renewed; Vision 2030 provides new long-term anchor (Bronson, 2006; Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016)
Normative-identity component	Strong: shared democratic values, European identity, reconciliation narrative (Krotz & Schild, 2013)	Moderate-to-strong: shared democratic values, rule-of-law commitment (Hughes, 2015)	Weak: divergent governance models; alignment based on strategic interest (Lo, 2015)	Weak to moderate: governance differences exist; shared narratives of modernization, stability, and counterterrorism partially compensate (Gause, 2010; Riedel, 2018)
Strategic irreversibility aspiration	Very high: Airbus, integrated supply chains, joint institutions, societal constituencies (Krotz & Schild, 2018)	High: deeply integrated alliance architecture, military basing, technology co-development (Hughes, 2015)	Low-to-moderate: limited joint ventures; energy creates some lock-in but asymmetric (Korolev, 2019)	High: deep defense dependencies, ARAMCO infrastructure, PIF investments in U.S. markets, extensive arms transfer architecture (Blanchard, 2024; Riedel, 2018)

*Note.* Assessments based on qualitative thematic analysis. "Strongly present" indicates consistent evidence across multiple sources; "partially present" indicates evidence with significant qualifications.

The composite picture reveals that the Franco-German partnership most fully instantiates the ideal-type BSP across all five markers, followed closely by the U.S.–Japan partnership. The Saudi–U.S. partnership satisfies the markers substantially, with notable strength in multidimensional scope, long-term temporal orientation, and strategic irreversibility, but is qualified by the weakest normative-identity component among the three substantive BSPs—a function of the differences in governance models between the two states (Gause, 2010; Lippman, 2012). Importantly, the trajectory of the Saudi–U.S. partnership under Vision 2030 suggests a deliberate effort to strengthen this weakest dimension through expanded cultural engagement, educational exchange, and the construction of shared narratives around modernization and global economic integration. The Sino-Russian partnership satisfies the markers only partially and unevenly, suggesting that it occupies an intermediate position between a genuine BSP and a strategically expedient alignment—consistent with Lo's (2015) characterization.

### 5.3. RQ2: Enabling Conditions and Their Interdependencies

The second research question asked what structural, institutional, and political conditions enable BSPs to function effectively and endure overtime. The analysis reveals that the four enabling conditions operate as an interdependent system in which the weakness of any single condition

constrains the effectiveness of the others. This interdependence constitutes the most analytically significant finding to emerge from the cross-case comparison.

**Value-interest alignment** functions as the foundational enabling condition, establishing the cognitive and strategic basis upon which the other conditions operate. In the Franco-German case, the post-1945 convergence around democratic governance, market economics, and the European integration project created a shared perceptual framework within which economic complementarity could be identified and institutional architecture could be constructed with popular legitimacy (Krotz & Schild, 2013). In the U.S.–Japan case, shared commitments to democratic governance and a free and open Indo-Pacific order have provided an analogous foundational alignment (Green, 2022). The Sino-Russian case illustrates the consequences of weak value alignment: in the absence of shared governance norms, the partnership's motivational base rests disproportionately on shared opposition to Western hegemony—a foundation inherently contingent on the persistence of the order it opposes (Lo, 2015; Wishnick, 2017). The Saudi–U.S. case presents an instructive intermediate configuration: while the two states differ in governance models, they share deeply convergent interests in regional stability, energy market order, counterterrorism, and the management of Iranian regional ambitions—an interest-based alignment that has proven sufficient to sustain the partnership over nearly eight decades (Bronson, 2006; Gause, 2010; Riedel, 2018).

**Structural economic complementarity** operates as the material condition that translates shared interests into tangible cooperative outputs. The Sino-Russian dyad exhibits significant complementarity—Russia's energy resources and China's manufacturing and technological capacities—yet this complementarity has not generated the deep institutional integration observed where complementarity is accompanied by stronger value alignment (Korolev, 2019; Lukin, 2021). The Saudi–U.S. case demonstrates how complementarity rooted in a specific resource dependency can serve as a durable foundation, particularly when accompanied by deliberate diversification strategies. Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 program has broadened the complementarity base from hydrocarbons to encompass technology, entertainment, tourism, and financial services, while the Public Investment Fund's (PIF) substantial investments in U.S. technology firms have created new interdependency channels (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016; Blanchard, 2024). Table 3 presents comparative economic complementarity indicators across the four cases.

**Table 3.** Economic Complementarity Indicators Across Four BSP Models (2024 Data).

Indicator	Franco-German	U.S.–Japan	Sino-Russian	Saudi–U.S.
Bilateral trade volume (USD, approx.)	~190 billion (Eurostat, 2024)	~230 billion (USTR, 2024)	~240 billion (General Administration of Customs of China, 2024)	~35 billion; supplemented by tens of billions in defense contracts (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024; Blanchard, 2024)
Trade balance	Relatively balanced with German surplus (Eurostat, 2024)	Persistent U.S. deficit; managed through coordination (Green, 2022)	Increasing Chinese surplus (Lukin, 2021)	Fluctuating; shifting with U.S. energy independence (Blanchard, 2024)
Key complementarity sectors	Aerospace (Airbus); automotive; energy; industry–agriculture (Webber, 2017)	Automotive; semiconductors; defense technology (Hughes, 2015)	Energy–manufacturing; raw materials–technology (Wishnick, 2017)	Energy–technology; defense–security; capital–innovation; emerging sectors under Vision 2030 (Riedel, 2018; Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016)
Reciprocal investment density	Very high; deeply integrated cross-border structures	High; significant FDI in both directions (Green, 2022)	Low-to-moderate; concentrated in energy (Korolev, 2019)	Growing; PIF in U.S. technology; U.S. corporate presence in Saudi energy,

	(Krotz & Schild, 2018)			defense, entertainment (Blanchard, 2024)
Institutional economic mechanisms	Single market; eurozone; Airbus (Krotz & Schild, 2018)	Bilateral trade committees; supply chain coordination; economic 2+2 (Hughes, 2015)	Limited bilateral payment mechanisms; yuan settlement experiments (Wishnick, 2017)	Joint Commission; Strategic Dialogue; TIFA; Vision 2030 cooperation agreements (Blanchard, 2024; Riedel, 2018)

Note. Trade data are approximate and drawn from the cited institutional sources. "Reciprocal investment density" is assessed qualitatively.

A critical pattern revealed by Table 3 is that trade volume alone is a misleading indicator of economic partnership depth. The Sino-Russian partnership exhibits the highest bilateral trade volume yet lags significantly in reciprocal investment density and institutional economic mechanisms. The Saudi–U.S. partnership, while exhibiting the lowest trade volume, compensates through massive defense cooperation expenditures, growing sovereign wealth fund cross-investments, and an institutional framework anchored by the Joint Commission and Vision 2030 agreements. This finding underscores the importance of qualitative indicators in assessing economic complementarity.

**Sustained political leadership** emerges as the catalytic condition that initiates and accelerates partnership development, but one carrying significant risks when it becomes the primary basis for continuity. The de Gaulle–Adenauer rapprochement was indispensable for launching the Franco-German partnership, but subsequent institutionalization ensured survival beyond the founding leaders (Krotz & Schild, 2013). The Saudi–U.S. case presents a distinctive pattern: personal relationships between Saudi and American leaders have served as critical drivers—from Roosevelt and king Abdulaziz to Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and successive U.S. presidents—but the partnership has also demonstrated a capacity to survive severe strains, most notably the post-September 11 deterioration and subsequent diplomatic challenges (Bronson, 2006; Riedel, 2018; Blanchard, 2024). This pattern suggests that the energy-security interdependency and defense architecture serve as structural stabilizers partially compensating for fluctuations in leadership rapport. The Sino-Russian case illustrates the vulnerability of excessive leader-dependency: the Xi–Putin rapport has been identified as the primary adhesive, raising concerns about structural resilience in the event of leadership change (Lo, 2015; Lukin, 2021).

**Robust institutional architecture** functions as the stabilizing condition insulating the partnership from domestic political volatility and leadership transitions. The Franco-German case, with the densest infrastructure, demonstrates the greatest shock-absorption capacity (Krotz & Schild, 2018). The Saudi–U.S. partnership occupies an intermediate position: substantial institutional infrastructure exists in the defense and energy sectors, but it is less comprehensive than the Franco-German or U.S.–Japan models, particularly in cultural and scientific-technological domains (Riedel, 2018; Blanchard, 2024). The Sino-Russian partnership's reliance on presidential summitry provides minimal structural insulation (Wishnick, 2017).

Interdependency among the four conditions may be synthesized as follows: value-interest alignment establishes the cognitive and strategic foundation; economic complementarity provides the material incentive structure; political leadership supplies the initiating energy; and institutional architecture furnishes the structural stability enabling the partnership to transcend the contingencies of individual leaders and short-term interest fluctuations. Institutional architecture possesses a particular capacity to compensate for fluctuations in the other conditions, functioning as a structural buffer that maintains continuity even when political leadership wavers or value alignment is temporarily strained.

#### 5.4. RQ3: Cross-Case Dimensional Comparison and Resilience Assessment

Bilateral strategic partnerships (BSPs) play a pivotal role in shaping the global economic and security landscape. These relationships, often forged between major state actors, are characterized by complex interdependencies spanning economic, political, and institutional domains. Understanding the underlying mechanisms and structural conditions that sustain such partnerships is essential for assessing their durability and resilience amid shifting international dynamics. This comparative analysis examines the multidimensional foundations of four prominent BSP models: Franco-German, U.S.–Japan, Sino-Russian, and Saudi–U.S. By evaluating institutional economic mechanisms, trade and investment patterns, leadership dynamics, and the robustness of institutional architecture, the study aims to identify the factors that drive partnership depth and stability. Through this lens, the research highlights the importance of qualitative indicators and dimensional balance in fostering enduring strategic cooperation.

##### 5.4.1. Dimensional Balance and Imbalance

A key finding concerns the relationship between dimensional balance and partnership resilience. Partnerships with more balanced engagement across the four substantive dimensions exhibit greater resilience than those with skewed profiles, even when the latter achieve greater absolute depth in individual dimensions. This finding is consistent with the logic of complex interdependence (Keohane & Nye, 2012), which predicts that dense, multidimensional linkages create stabilizing redundancies. Table 4 presents a synthetic dimensional balance assessment.

**Table 4.** Dimensional Balance Assessment Across Four BSP Models (2025).

Dimension	Franco-German	U.S.–Japan	Sino-Russian	Saudi–U.S.
Security & defense	Deeply embedded (Krotz & Schild, 2018)	Deeply embedded (Hughes, 2015)	Mature (Wishnick, 2017)	Deeply embedded (Riedel, 2018; Blanchard, 2024)
Economic & developmental	Deeply embedded (Krotz & Schild, 2018)	Mature (Green, 2022)	Mature (Lukin, 2021)	Mature (Blanchard, 2024; Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016)
Cultural & humanitarian	Deeply embedded (Krotz & Schild, 2013)	Mature (Green, 2022)	Nascent (Lo, 2015)	Developing (Bronson, 2006; Lippman, 2012)
Scientific & technological	Mature (Krotz & Schild, 2018)	Deeply embedded (Hughes, 2015)	Nascent-to-developing (Korolev, 2019)	Developing (Blanchard, 2024)
Overall balance	High	High	Low (security-economic skew)	Moderate-to-high (security-economic leading)

*Note.* Scale: nascent (minimal formal cooperation), developing (structured cooperation with emerging institutional mechanisms), mature (sustained and regularized cooperation with established frameworks), deeply embedded (comprehensive, treaty-based, multi-institutional cooperation with societal penetration).

The Franco-German partnership achieves the highest overall balance, creating a resilience surplus whereby stress in any single dimension is absorbed by others. The U.S.–Japan partnership achieves comparably high balance, with strength in the scientific-technological dimension reflecting post-2022 joint technology development (Hughes, 2015; Brands & Beckley, 2022).

The Sino-Russian partnership exhibits pronounced dimensional imbalance. The security and economic dimensions have reached maturity, but the cultural and scientific-technological dimensions remain nascent. This creates a structural vulnerability: the partnership lacks the deep societal interdependencies that would raise exit costs and generate constituencies beyond the political elite (Korolev, 2019; Lukin, 2021).

The Saudi–U.S. partnership presents a distinctive profile. The defense relationship—encompassing the U.S. Military Training Mission established in 1953, the Foreign Military Sales architecture, intelligence-sharing, and joint counterterrorism—constitutes the most deeply embedded dimension (Riedel, 2018; Blanchard, 2024). The cultural-humanitarian dimension, historically the weakest, has been enhanced through the King Abdullah Scholarship Program and expanding cultural engagement under Vision 2030 (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016). The scientific-technological dimension is growing rapidly, with cooperation in renewable energy, artificial intelligence, nuclear energy under negotiation, and space technology expanding substantially since 2020 (Blanchard, 2024). The overall trajectory under Vision 2030 is one of deliberate dimensional broadening—a strategic effort to move the partnership from a narrow energy-security foundation toward genuinely multidimensional cooperation.

#### 5.4.2. Institutional Depth: Formal and Informal Mechanisms

The analysis reveals an important distinction between formal and informal institutionalization. Formal institutions provide structural continuity relatively independent of individual leaders; informal institutions provide flexibility but are vulnerable to leadership transitions. Table 5 presents a comparative assessment.

**Table 5.** Institutional Mechanisms of Four BSP Models.

Mechanism Type	Franco-German	U.S.–Japan	Sino-Russian	Saudi–U.S.
Binding treaty framework	Élysée Treaty (1963); Treaty of Aachen (2019) (Krotz & Schild, 2018)	Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security (1960, revised) (Hughes, 2015)	Treaty of Good-Neighborliness (2001); no mutual defense clause (Wishnick, 2017)	Mutual Defense Assistance Agreement (1951); various defense cooperation agreements; TIFA (Riedel, 2018; Blanchard, 2024)
Regularized consultation	Joint Ministerial Council (biannual); Defense and Security Council (Krotz & Schild, 2018)	Security Consultative Committee; 2+2 Ministerial Meeting; Economic 2+2 (Hughes, 2015)	Annual presidential summits; limited sectoral consultations (Korolev, 2019)	Strategic Dialogue; Joint Commission on Economic Cooperation; defense consultations (Blanchard, 2024)
Societal-level institutions	Franco-German Youth Office; ARTE; joint textbook commissions; university partnerships (Krotz & Schild, 2013)	JET Programme; Fulbright exchanges; sister-city networks (Green, 2022)	Limited: Confucius Institutes (contracting); some exchanges (Lo, 2015)	King Abdullah Scholarship Program; Fulbright exchanges; growing tourism and entertainment exchanges (Bronson, 2006; Lippman, 2012)
Joint economic instruments	Airbus; single market; eurozone coordination (Webber, 2017)	Supply chain coordination; technology co-development (Hughes, 2015)	Energy pipelines; limited joint ventures (Wishnick, 2017)	ARAMCO partnerships; PIF investments; defense contracts; Vision 2030 agreements (Blanchard, 2024; Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016)
Adaptive capacity	High: Treaty of Aachen as institutional response to crises (Krotz & Schild, 2018)	High: progressive expansion post-2022 (Hughes, 2015)	Low: institutional innovation has not kept pace (Korolev, 2019)	Moderate-to-high: repeated crisis adaptation; comprehensive partnership under negotiation 2023–2025 (Blanchard, 2024)

*Note.* Compiled from treaty texts, official documents, and the cited scholarly sources.

The most significant finding is the identification of **adaptive institutional capacity** as a critical differentiator. The Franco-German partnership exemplifies this: the 2019 Treaty of Aachen was an institutional response to Brexit and the European integration crisis, adding consultation mechanisms in artificial intelligence, climate policy, and cross-border governance (Krotz & Schild, 2018). The Saudi-U.S. partnership has demonstrated notable adaptive capacity, having recalibrated in response to multiple crises—post-September 11, the 2018 diplomatic crisis, and Vision 2030-driven transformation—with the 2023–2025 negotiations toward a comprehensive strategic partnership framework representing the most ambitious adaptation in the partnership's history (Blanchard, 2024). The Sino-Russian partnership has not generated comparable innovations despite its declared deepening (Korolev, 2019).

#### 5.4.3. Partnership Resilience: Shock Response Analysis

To assess resilience, each case's response to three categories of exogenous shock was examined: geopolitical crises, economic disruptions, and domestic political challenges. Table 6 presents the findings.

**Table 6.** Partnership Resilience: Response to Exogenous Shocks (2020–2025).

Shock Category	Franco-German	U.S.–Japan	Sino-Russian	Saudi–U.S.
Geopolitical crises	Strengthened: coordinated EU sanctions; joint defense reinforcement; energy policy tensions managed institutionally (Krotz & Schild, 2018)	Significantly deepened: Japan's 2022 NSS; expanded intelligence sharing; defense spending increase (Hughes, 2015; Green, 2022)	Declared "strengthened" but structural fragilities exposed: growing Chinese leverage; long-term divergence unresolved (Korolev, 2019)	Tested but sustained: Saudi's independent diplomatic positioning on Ukraine created friction; partnership sustained through defense-energy interdependency and comprehensive partnership negotiations (Blanchard, 2024)
Economic disruptions	Managed within EU framework; joint recovery fund advocacy; bilateral friction resolved through consultation (Krotz & Schild, 2018)	Collaborative response: semiconductor cooperation; economic 2+2 activated (Green, 2022; Hughes, 2015)	Complementarity deepened by default as Russia's Western links severed; increasingly asymmetric (Wishnick, 2017; Lukin, 2021)	Resilient: energy market coordination; PIF investments continued; Vision 2030 diversification reduced vulnerability (Blanchard, 2024)
Domestic political challenges	Survived Merkel-to-Scholz transition; managed populist pressures institutionally (Krotz & Schild, 2018)	Sustained through multiple administrations; institutionalized continuity effective (Green, 2022)	Highly vulnerable: trajectory linked to Xi-Putin rapport; no succession mechanism (Lukin, 2021)	Demonstrated resilience across multiple U.S. administrations; defense-energy architecture provided structural continuity (Bronson, 2006; Riedel, 2018; Blanchard, 2024)

*Note.* Assessments based on thematic analysis of policy documents, scholarly analyses, and official communiqués.

The resilience analysis reveals a clear hierarchy. The Franco-German partnership demonstrates the highest resilience, absorbing multiple simultaneous shocks without degradation and often emerging strengthened. The U.S.–Japan partnership demonstrates comparably high resilience, with the post-2022 environment catalyzing qualitative deepening. The Saudi–U.S. partnership demonstrates substantial resilience, having absorbed more severe bilateral crises than any other

case—including the September 11 aftermath, the 2018 crisis, and repeated energy price disputes. That the partnership not only survived these shocks but advanced toward a comprehensive strategic framework by 2025 testifies to the depth of the underlying strategic interdependency (Riedel, 2018; Blanchard, 2024). The cultural-humanitarian dimension, however, remains vulnerable, and resilience has depended disproportionately on the security-energy pillars.

The Sino-Russian case presents the most complex profile. At the declaratory level, the partnership appears stronger than ever, and certain quantitative indicators support this. However, qualitative analysis reveals underlying fragilities. The growing asymmetry in China's favor is reshaping the partnership from one between near-equals into one characterized by asymmetric dependence—a dynamic that corrodes the spirit of partnership and may undermine long-term stability (Wishnick, 2017; Lukin, 2021). This illustrates that resilience in the face of external shocks is a necessary but insufficient indicator of partnership health: a partnership may appear to survive a crisis while undergoing internal transformation that degrades its quality.

#### 5.4.4. Typological Synthesis

Drawing together the findings, the four cases can be located on a typological spectrum of BSP quality. Table 7 presents this synthesis.

**Table 7.** Typological Placement of Four BSP Models.

Typological Attribute	Franco-German	U.S.–Japan	Saudi–U.S.	Sino-Russian
BSP marker satisfaction	Full (5/5)	Substantial (4.5/5)	Substantial (4/5)	Partial (2.5/5)
Enabling conditions strength	Very high across all four	High across all four	High; interest alignment strong; normative alignment weaker; institutional architecture expanding	Moderate; institutional architecture weak
Dimensional balance	High	High	Moderate-to-high (security-economic leading)	Low (security-economic skew)
Institutional depth	Very high; adaptive	High; adaptive	Moderate; expanding with significant adaptive capacity	Low; leader-dependent
Resilience	Very high	Very high	Demonstrated through severe crises; dependent on security-energy pillars	Apparent but structurally fragile
Typological classification	Consolidated strategic partnership	Consolidated strategic partnership	Consolidating strategic partnership	Strategic alignment with partnership aspirations

*Note.* BSP marker satisfaction is a composite qualitative score. Typological classifications are proposed by the authors based on integrated cross-case analysis.

The synthesis yields a four-category classification. **Consolidated strategic partnerships** fully or substantially satisfy all five BSP markers, exhibit strong enabling conditions, demonstrate high dimensional balance and institutional depth, and have proven resilience through multiple shocks. The Franco-German and U.S.–Japan partnerships merit this classification. **Consolidating strategic partnerships** exhibit a clear trajectory toward full BSP status but have not yet achieved equivalent institutional depth, dimensional balance, or resilience across all domains. The Saudi–U.S. partnership exemplifies this category: despite its nearly eight-decade history and deeply embedded security-economic cooperation, the partnership is undergoing fundamental transformation driven by Vision 2030, shifting energy dynamics, and comprehensive partnership negotiations that, if successfully institutionalized, could elevate it to consolidated status (Blanchard, 2024). The classification as "consolidating" reflects not the partnership's youth but its ongoing structural transformation from a

narrowly focused arrangement to a genuinely multidimensional strategic partnership. **Strategic alignments with partnership aspirations** are relationships that, despite declaratory framing as strategic partnerships, lack the institutional depth, dimensional balance, and structural resilience characterizing genuine BSPs. The Sino-Russian relationship, while geopolitically significant, is more accurately characterized here.

### 5.5. Emergent Cross-Cutting Findings

Three emergent patterns cut across thematic domains and merit explicit identification. The first concerns the **accelerating significance of the scientific-technological dimension**. Across all four cases, cooperation in frontier technologies—artificial intelligence, clean energy, semiconductors, biotechnology, cybersecurity—exhibited the most dynamic growth trajectory during 2020–2025. In the U.S.–Japan and Franco-German cases, technology cooperation has evolved from a secondary component to a co-equal driver of deepening. In the Saudi–U.S. case, technology cooperation has become central to the partnership's transformation under Vision 2030, with cooperation in AI, nuclear energy, space technology, and renewable energy emerging as new pillars (Blanchard, 2024; Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016). This suggests that future BSPs will be increasingly constituted around technology cooperation as a core dimension, potentially rivaling the traditional primacy of security.

The second concerns the **role of crises as partnership accelerants**. In three of four cases—Franco-German, U.S.–Japan, and Saudi–U.S.—major exogenous crises served not as threats to stability but as catalysts for qualitative deepening. The Ukraine crisis accelerated Franco-German defense coordination and U.S.–Japan alliance transformation; the post-September 11 crisis, paradoxically, ultimately led to a more institutionalized and diversified Saudi–U.S. partnership as both states recognized the inadequacy of the narrow energy-security formula (Bronson, 2006; Riedel, 2018). This is consistent with the proposition that shared crisis experience can strengthen intersubjective bonds and create political conditions for institutional innovation (Krotz & Schild, 2018). The Sino-Russian case represents a partial exception: the Ukraine crisis accelerated bilateral engagement, but toward asymmetric dependence rather than balanced deepening—suggesting crises function as accelerants only when underlying enabling conditions are sufficiently robust.

The third concerns **systemic spillover effects**. Successful BSPs generate positive externalities beyond the bilateral day. The Franco-German partnership functions as the political nucleus of European integration (Krotz & Schild, 2013). The U.S.–Japan partnership catalyzed broader Indo-Pacific architectures, including the Quad (Hughes, 2015). The Saudi–U.S. partnership has contributed to Gulf security architecture, global energy market functioning, and regional stabilization, with its potential comprehensive framework carrying implications for normalization processes and the broader Middle Eastern order (Gause, 2010; Blanchard, 2024). These spillovers confirm that BSPs possess systemic significance transcending their bilateral scope—a proposition with implications for understanding international order construction and the role of bilateral mechanisms in multilateral governance (Renard, 2016).

## 6. Discussion

The findings yield several theoretical and policy-relevant propositions that advance the scholarly understanding of bilateral strategic partnerships and illuminate their practical significance in the evolving international order. At the conceptual level, the analysis reinforces the argument that BSPs constitute a qualitatively distinct form of international cooperation that cannot be adequately captured by existing alliance theory or trade-agreement frameworks alone. The five distinguishing markers identified—multidimensional scope, non-adversarial orientation, long-term temporal orientation, normative-identity component, and strategic irreversibility aspiration—provide an empirically grounded basis for differentiating genuine BSPs from both traditional alliances and the inflationary use of the "strategic partnership" label in diplomatic discourse. The multidimensionality, non-adversarial orientation, and long-term temporal horizon demand an integrative analytical

framework accommodating both material and ideational variables, both structural and agential factors.

The cross-case comparison identifies a typological spectrum ranging from highly institutionalized, norm-convergent, and balanced partnerships—such as the Franco-German alliance—to strategically motivated, weakly institutionalized, and dimensionally restricted alignments, exemplified by the Sino-Russian relationship. Importantly, a given Bilateral Strategic Partnership (BSP)'s position on this spectrum is dynamic rather than static. The Saudi–U.S. partnership demonstrates that a relationship with deep historical foundations in a narrowly defined functional area can undergo deliberate transformation, achieving greater multidimensionality and institutional robustness, especially when driven by ambitious national development strategies like Vision 2030 and the competitive dynamics of a multipolar world (Riedel, 2018; Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016; Blanchard, 2024). By contrast, the Sino-Russian case highlights the potential vulnerabilities of advancing strategic alignment without equivalent institutional consolidation, resulting in notable quantitative outcomes but remaining structurally exposed.

The Saudi-USA partnership represents a significant alliance in international relations, established in 1945 through a formative meeting between King Abdulaziz Al Saud and President Franklin D. Roosevelt aboard the American warship “Quincy.” This foundational event laid the groundwork for a strategic collaboration encompassing energy, security, and investment. Over subsequent decades, the relationship has evolved to include economic, technological, and cultural dimensions, illustrating comprehensive integration and mutual respect that has enhanced Saudi Arabia’s global stature and safeguarded its national interests.

Joint coordination in security and defense—particularly counterterrorism initiatives—has been instrumental in promoting regional stability and addressing transnational threats. Mutual investments and energy projects have supported growth and fostered sustainable development, with a strong emphasis on technology transfer and human capital advancement through training and knowledge exchange programs. Since its inception, Saudi Arabia’s balanced foreign policy has reinforced its role as an engaged participant in bilateral relations and strategic alliances, positively impacting both local development and broader regional and international stability.

Saudi–USA relations are distinguished by their adaptability to evolving global conditions, enabling both nations to address challenges related to renewable energy, digital transformation, and health and environmental issues. Effective political and cultural communication, rooted in transparency, has built trust and fortified this enduring partnership. Through sustained integration, the Saudi–USA alliance functions as a pillar of regional stability, facilitates intercultural dialogue, and supports peace and development efforts. It stands as a model of bilateral cooperation that effectively balances national priorities with shared interests, contributing to a secure and sustainable future for generations ahead.

The Saudi–USA. case contributes a particularly instructive theoretical insight: that interest-based alignment, when sufficiently deep and structurally embedded, can sustain a strategic partnership over extended periods even in the absence of robust normative convergence. The nearly eight-decade duration of the partnership—despite periodic crises that would have terminated less strategically embedded relationships—demonstrates that shared interests in regional stability, energy market order, and mutual security can function as effective foundations for partnership durability, provided that institutional mechanisms exist to manage frictions generated by normative differences (Bronson, 2006; Gause, 2010). This finding qualifies the constructivist proposition that shared identity and norms are necessary conditions for partnership durability, suggesting instead that normative convergence is a facilitating but not indispensable condition, particularly when compensated by strategic interdependence and institutional infrastructure. Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 further demonstrates that a proactive national transformation strategy can serve as a powerful catalyst for partnership evolution, creating new domains of cooperation and new constituencies for partnership deepening even in the absence of full normative alignment.

From a systemic perspective, the analysis supports the proposition that BSPs function not merely as bilateral instruments but as constitutive elements of the broader international order. The web of interlocking partnerships creates incentives for cooperation and raises the costs of conflict, functioning as what Ikenberry (2018) termed the "infrastructure of restraint." The Saudi–U.S. partnership has served as a structural pillar of the Gulf security architecture and the global energy order for nearly eight decades, and its potential transformation into a comprehensive strategic framework carries implications for the broader Middle Eastern regional order, great-power competition, and normalization dynamics (Gause, 2010; Blanchard, 2024).

The analysis also cautions against the inflationary use of the "strategic partnership" label. Mere declaration—unaccompanied by institutional depth, dimensional breadth, and genuine political commitment—does not produce the cooperative dividends the concept promises. The distinction between "effective" and "label" partnerships (Ferreira-Pereira & Vieira, 2016) is empirically validated. Policymakers and scholars alike would benefit from greater analytical discipline in ensuring that the strategic partnership designation is reserved for relationships of genuine substance and commitment.

For the broader Middle Eastern context, the implications are particularly salient. The region possesses substantial integrative potential that remains underrealized due to the relative scarcity of deeply institutionalized inter-regional BSPs. The Saudi–U.S. case illustrates both the opportunities inherent in strategic partnerships with global powers and the importance of ensuring that such partnerships are structured based on genuine reciprocity, progressive diversification, and institutional depth. Saudi Arabia's proactive pursuit of partnership transformation through Vision 2030—broadening the cooperative base from energy and security to encompass technology, culture, education, and economic diversification—provides a model of how states can exercise strategic agency in shaping the terms and scope of their most important bilateral relationships (Hinnebusch & Ehteshami, 2014; Riedel, 2018).

## 7. Conclusion

This study has sought to advance the conceptual precision, empirical understanding, and policy relevance of bilateral strategic partnerships as a foundational pillar of contemporary international relations. Through the construction of a four-axis analytical framework and its systematic application to four paradigmatic BSP models spanning 2015–2025, the study has demonstrated that the durability and effectiveness of BSPs are contingent upon the interdependent satisfaction of four enabling conditions—value-interest alignment, structural economic complementarity, sustained political leadership, and robust institutional architecture—and that the breadth and balance of dimensional engagement across security, economic, cultural, and scientific-technological domains serve as critical determinants of partnership resilience.

The analysis has identified a typological spectrum of BSPs, ranging from deeply institutionalized and dimensionally balanced models to strategically expedient and structurally fragile alignments, and has demonstrated the systemic significance of BSPs as building blocks for a more stable and polycentric international order. The Saudi–U.S. case has provided a particularly instructive illustration of a partnership in transformation—one evolving from a narrowly defined energy-security arrangement into a potentially comprehensive strategic framework, demonstrating that BSPs are dynamic relationships whose quality and classification can shift in response to deliberate policy choices and structural changes in the international environment. At the same time, the analysis has cautioned against the inflationary deployment of the strategic partnership concept and underscored the importance of ensuring that declared partnerships meet the substantive criteria that distinguish genuine BSPs from their ceremonial counterparts.

## 8. Recommendations

Drawing on the analytical findings and cross-case comparison, the following recommendations are offered to policymakers, diplomatic practitioners, and scholars engaged in the construction,

management, and study of bilateral strategic partnerships. States seeking to establish or deepen BSPs should prioritize institutional architecture as the foundational infrastructure of partnership durability. The cross-case analysis has demonstrated that robust institutional mechanisms—treaty-based frameworks, regularized ministerial consultations, standing joint commissions, and societal-level exchange programs—serve as structural buffers insulating partnerships from the inevitable fluctuations in leadership relations, domestic politics, and short-term interest calculations. For the Saudi–U.S. partnership specifically, the formalization of the comprehensive strategic partnership framework under negotiation would represent a critical institutionalizing step, transforming a relationship that has historically relied on informal leadership dynamics and sector-specific agreements into a treaty-anchored, multidimensional partnership comparable in institutional depth to the Franco-German or U.S.–Japan models (Riedel, 2018; Blanchard, 2024).

The deliberate pursuit of dimensional balance should constitute a strategic priority in partnership design and management. The analysis has demonstrated that partnerships with balanced engagement across security, economic, cultural, and scientific-technological domains exhibit significantly greater resilience than those concentrated in one or two dimensions. For partnerships with historically narrow functional foundations—such as the Saudi–U.S. energy-security nexus—this implies a deliberate strategy of dimensional broadening, investing in cultural exchange programs, scientific collaboration, educational partnerships, and people-to-people ties that cultivate partnership constituencies beyond political and economic elites (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016; Lippman, 2012).

Technology cooperation should be elevated to a co-equal partnership dimension. The analysis has identified the scientific-technological dimension as the most dynamically growing area of BSP engagement across all four cases during 2020–2025, reflecting the broader transformation of international competition in which technological capacity has become a primary determinant of national power and strategic autonomy (Brands & Beckley, 2022). States participating in BSPs should set up institutional frameworks for technology cooperation—such as joint research, technology transfer, cybersecurity coordination, and AI governance—and incorporate these into the main structure of their partnership rather than as secondary measures.

Policymakers should adopt a more analytically disciplined approach to deploying the "strategic partnership" label in diplomatic discourse. The inflationary and ceremonial use of the concept dilutes its analytical utility and may generate unrealistic expectations that, when unmet, erode confidence in the partnership instrument. States should reserve the designation for relationships that satisfy the five distinguishing markers identified in this study and should develop graduated partnership nomenclatures more accurately reflecting the depth and quality of bilateral cooperation (Ferreira-Pereira & Vieira, 2016; Wilkins, 2012).

Scholars and research institutions should invest in comparative and longitudinal BSP research programs that track partnership evolution across multiple analytical dimensions and over extended time horizons. The predominantly single-case and snapshot approach characterizing much existing literature limits capacity for cross-case learning and theoretical development. Attention should be directed toward BSP dynamics involving Middle Eastern states, where the rapid pace of strategic transformation—exemplified by the Saudi–U.S. partnership's evolution and the broader realignment of Gulf foreign policies—has outpaced scholarly analysis and requires sustained, systematic research engagement (Gause, 2010; Hinnebusch & Ehteshami, 2014). Future research should extend this analysis through longitudinal studies, mixed methods design, and focused investigations of emerging partnership models in regions undergoing fundamental strategic realignment. As the international order continues its transformation, the systematic study of bilateral strategic partnerships will remain not only an academic imperative but a practical necessity for policymakers navigating the complexities of an increasingly multipolar world.

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