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From Makkah to Tehran: Can Pakistan Bridge the Gulf's Deepening Security Divide

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Field Marshal Syed Asim Munir's visit to Tehran on August 24 comes at a moment when diplomacy in the Middle East is once again being tested by war, mistrust and competing security arrangements. The visit is important not merely because Pakistan is attempting to revive negotiations between the United States and Iran, but because it appears to connect two seemingly separate developments: Islamabad's mediation between Washington and Tehran and the emergence of a new regional defense architecture centered on the Makkah Joint Defense Agreement.

According to Reuters, US President Donald Trump spoke with Field Marshal Munir last week and urged Pakistan to use its influence to bring Iran back to the negotiating table.² Munir subsequently travelled to Tehran, accompanied by Interior Minister Mohsin Naqvi. The timing is significant. Washington is preparing a major new sanctions offensive against Iran, while Tehran has threatened measures affecting Gulf oil exports and shipping through the Strait of Hormuz.

Pakistan therefore finds itself in an unusual but potentially influential position: it has

close strategic relations with Saudi Arabia and Türkiye, the two principal partners in the newly established Makkah Joint Defense Agreement, while simultaneously maintaining working relations with Iran. Islamabad may be attempting to use this unique position to prevent the Gulf crisis from becoming another uncontrollable regional war.

From mediation to strategic architecture

The Makkah Joint Defense Agreement, signed in Makkah on August 7 by Saudi Arabia, Türkiye and Pakistan, represents a significant development in the security politics of the Muslim world. The agreement stipulates that an armed attack against one of the three states will be regarded as an attack against all three, while also calling for enhanced defense cooperation.

It would be premature, however, to describe it as a full-fledged "Islamic NATO". Unlike NATO, the Makkah Joint Defense Agreement does not yet possess an integrated military command, standing forces, common budget or the elaborate institutional mechanisms developed by NATO over decades. Nevertheless, its political significance should not be underestimated.

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² Asif Shahzad, Ariba Shahid, and Mubasher Bukhari, "Pakistan's Munir spoke to Trump ahead of Tehran visit, sources say," Reuters, August 24, 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/pakistans-munir-spoke-trump-ahead-tehran-visit-sources-say-2026-08-24/>

For Saudi Arabia, it offers an additional layer of strategic reassurance at a time when the traditional American security umbrella is being questioned. For Türkiye, it provides an opportunity to expand its strategic influence in the Gulf. For Pakistan, it places Islamabad at the centre of an emerging security network linking South Asia, the Middle East and the eastern Mediterranean.

The reported possibility of bringing Iran into this arrangement would be even more consequential.

Iran: From potential adversary to potential participant?

For decades, the central security problem of the Gulf has revolved around the Saudi-Iranian rivalry. Riyadh has viewed Iran's missile program, regional influence and support for armed groups with deep suspicion. Tehran, meanwhile, has regarded Saudi Arabia as closely aligned with Washington and therefore part of an American security structure designed to contain Iran.

The agreement initially brought Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Türkiye together without Iran. However, if Tehran is brought into this arrangement, this could potentially transform it from a defensive grouping of selected Muslim states into a much broader regional security mechanism. That would be an extraordinary diplomatic achievement.

The Houthi problem

Yet enormous obstacles remain.

The most immediate obstacle is Yemen. Iran's relationship with the Houthis has been one of the most contentious issues in Saudi-Iranian relations. Houthi attacks and the wider disruption of maritime traffic have directly affected Saudi security and the safety of commercial shipping.

Reuters reports that the Houthi issue and the new defense agreement are among the subjects expected to be discussed during Munir's Tehran visit.

For Saudi Arabia, an Iranian commitment to regional de-escalation would have to

mean more than diplomatic assurances. Riyadh would want evidence that Tehran is prepared to use its influence to restrain attacks threatening Saudi territory and regional shipping.

For Iran, however, surrendering or substantially reducing its leverage through regional partners would carry considerable strategic costs. Tehran has historically regarded these relationships as an important element of its deterrence against stronger conventional military powers.

This is where Pakistan's diplomatic role becomes particularly important.

Pakistan's unique position

Pakistan is perhaps one of the few countries capable of speaking simultaneously to Riyadh, Tehran, Ankara and Washington. Its relationship with Saudi Arabia is longstanding and deeply rooted in defense cooperation. Its relationship with Türkiye has also acquired a strong strategic dimension. At the same time, Pakistan shares a long border with Iran and has repeatedly sought to maintain constructive relations with Tehran.

Islamabad therefore has an incentive to prevent the emergence of a rigid regional bloc in which Iran stands permanently on one side and Saudi Arabia, Türkiye and Pakistan on the other.

The danger is obvious. If the Makkah pact becomes perceived in Tehran as an anti-Iran alliance, it could intensify Iranian insecurity rather than reduce it. Conversely, if Iran were brought into a broader security framework, the pact could become an instrument of confidence-building rather than confrontation.

Pakistan's challenge is to make the latter outcome possible.

The American factor

There is also a larger question: what does Washington make of all this?

Trump's reported conversation with Munir indicates that Washington sees Pakistan

as possessing useful leverage with Tehran. Yet the United States may not necessarily welcome an autonomous regional security architecture that gradually reduces American influence.

On the other hand, Washington could regard a regional mechanism capable of restraining Iran, protecting shipping and preventing another major war as useful—provided it does not evolve into an arrangement hostile to American interests.

Pakistan consequently has to perform a delicate balancing act. It must persuade Iran that the Makkah agreement is not designed to encircle it, while reassuring Saudi Arabia and Türkiye that dialogue with Tehran does not undermine their security commitments.

The real prize: the Strait of Hormuz

Ultimately, the most important issue may not be the formal membership of any alliance but the security of the Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz.

The world's energy markets cannot easily absorb prolonged disruption to this maritime artery. Iran's ability to threaten shipping lines gives Tehran considerable leverage, but using that leverage carries enormous economic and political risks. Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states likewise have strong interests in preventing the crisis from escalating into a wider conflict.

A regional security arrangement involving Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, Pakistan and potentially Iran could therefore provide something the Middle East has historically lacked: a mechanism through which regional powers themselves assume responsibility for regional security.

That would not eliminate the United States. Nor would it resolve every dispute between Riyadh and Tehran. But it could gradually

reduce the dependence on external military intervention.

A moment of opportunity for Pakistan

Field Marshal Munir's Tehran mission should therefore be viewed in a broader context. It is not simply another attempt by Pakistan to mediate between Washington and Tehran. It may be the beginning of a more ambitious effort to connect diplomacy with a new regional security architecture.

The immediate objective should be modest: restore communication, secure a ceasefire or cessation of hostilities, and create conditions for negotiations on the nuclear issue, sanctions and maritime security.

The longer-term objective could be far more ambitious: transforming the Makkah agreement from a three-country defense arrangement into the nucleus of a wider regional security framework.

Whether Iran has actually received an invitation remains unclear. But the debate itself is significant.

If Pakistan can persuade Tehran that Makkah is not an anti-Iran alliance, and persuade Riyadh that engagement with Tehran can strengthen rather than weaken Saudi security, Islamabad could achieve something that larger powers have repeatedly failed to accomplish.

The real test of Pakistani diplomacy will therefore not be whether Iran joins the Makkah pact immediately. It will be whether Pakistan can help transform the emerging architecture of regional competition into one of regional coexistence.

For a Middle East exhausted by war, sanctions, proxy conflicts and disruption of energy supplies, that would be a strategic achievement of historic proportions.

