

**IPS INSIGHTS**

Perspectives On the Issues Shaping Policy

Pakistan–Saudi Arabia–Türkiye Defence Pact: Towards a New Regional Security Architecture or a Limited Strategic Understanding?

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Introduction

The trilateral defence agreement between Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Türkiye marks one of the most significant strategic developments in the Islamic world in recent decades. Although details remain confidential, the very decision of the three countries to institutionalize military cooperation reflects profound changes in the Middle Eastern security environment following the Iran-Israel conflict, the declining credibility of American security guarantees, and the growing desire among regional powers to assume greater responsibility for their own defence.

This agreement does not emerge in isolation. It builds upon the existing Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement (SMDA) between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, signed in 2025, which reportedly contains a collective defence provision whereby aggression against one party is treated as aggression against the other. The new arrangement therefore appears to expand an already existing bilateral security framework by incorporating Türkiye, the second largest military in NATO after the United States.

The central questions, however, remain

unanswered. Will Türkiye become a full member of a mutual defence alliance? Will the agreement include an Article-5 style collective defence clause? What threats are covered? Who constitutes the potential adversary? Under what circumstances would the three militaries actually fight together?

These unanswered questions will determine whether the agreement becomes a transformational regional alliance or merely an institutional framework for enhanced defence cooperation.

Why Now?

Timing is often as important as substance. The agreement follows several strategic shocks experienced by Saudi Arabia over recent years. First, Riyadh increasingly recognizes that American military guarantees are no longer automatic. During successive regional crises, Washington demonstrated increasing reluctance to become directly involved in protecting Gulf infrastructure. Second, Iran has demonstrated the ability to threaten Saudi critical infrastructure through ballistic missiles, drones and proxy organizations. Third, the recent regional conflicts have shown that Gulf security cannot depend exclusively upon external powers.

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Saudi Arabia therefore appears to be diversifying its strategic partnerships. Pakistan contributes experienced manpower, nuclear deterrence and operational expertise. Türkiye contributes advanced defence industries, drone technologies, naval capabilities and expeditionary experience. Together, they provide Saudi Arabia with strategic depth that Washington may no longer be willing to guarantee indefinitely.

Pakistan: The Bridge Between Two Rivals

Perhaps the most fascinating dimension of the emerging partnership is Pakistan's unique diplomatic position. Unlike Türkiye and Saudi Arabia, Pakistan enjoys cordial relations with both Riyadh and Tehran. Islamabad has repeatedly acted as mediator during regional crises while simultaneously maintaining extensive military cooperation with Saudi Arabia. Pakistan also played a significant role during the recent Iran conflict by balancing military commitments to Saudi Arabia with diplomatic engagement with Tehran. This dual credibility places Pakistan in the unusual position of serving both as military partner and diplomatic bridge. It is precisely this balancing role that may become increasingly difficult if the proposed trilateral pact evolves into an explicitly anti-Iran alliance.

Can Erdoğan and Mohammed bin Salman Truly Work Together?

Only a few years ago, such a partnership would have appeared impossible.

The murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi created one of the deepest diplomatic crises between Ankara and Riyadh. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan openly challenged the Saudi leadership, while Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman viewed Türkiye as actively undermining Saudi regional influence.

Strategic realities, however, have overtaken political grievances. Both governments now perceive instability in the Middle East as a greater danger than their previous rivalry.

Economic cooperation has expanded and military industries have become increasingly complementary. Similarly, shared concerns regarding regional security now outweigh historical disagreements.

Pakistan deserves considerable credit for maintaining excellent defence relations with both capitals throughout this difficult period. Islamabad is therefore uniquely positioned to facilitate strategic cooperation between two former rivals.

Will the Pact Include Collective Defence?

The Pakistan Ministry of Foreign Affairs press release of 7 August 2026 explicitly states that the Agreement is intended to strengthen collective deterrence against any act of aggression, and stipulates that any armed attack against any one of the three States shall be regarded as an attack against them all.²

Despite such a clause, its practical application is likely to be considerably narrower than NATO's Article 5.

However, several trigger scenarios appear plausible.

Scenario One: Direct attack upon Saudi Arabia

This remains the most likely operational trigger. Should Saudi territory, oil infrastructure, ports or strategic facilities come under sustained attack, Pakistan and Türkiye may provide air defence, intelligence, logistics, expeditionary forces and naval protection.

Scenario Two: Maritime security

Saudi Arabia has announced a coalition of 14 countries to provide security for the flow of oil through maritime chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz and the Bal El Mandeb Saudi Arabia. The members includes both Pakistan and Türkiye. The three countries possess major interests extending from the Red Sea through the Arabian Sea into

¹ Press Release, "Makkah Al-Mukarramah Summit for Joint Defence," MoFA, August 7, 2026, <https://mofa.gov.pk/press-releases/makkah-al-mukarramah-summit-for-joint-defence>

the western Indian Ocean. Thus, joint naval operations to secure sea lanes, energy shipments and maritime trade are highly probable.

Scenario Three: Protection of critical infrastructure

Drone and missile attacks against refineries, ports, desalination plants and communication systems may activate coordinated military responses without necessarily escalating into full-scale war.

Scenario Four: Counter-terrorism

The agreement could become operational against transnational terrorist organisations threatening any member state. Such missions would be politically less controversial than interstate warfare.

Is This Becoming a Sunni Alliance?

This question cannot be ignored. Objectively, the three principal members represent major Sunni-majority states. Their strategic concerns frequently overlap regarding Iranian regional influence and their defence establishments maintain long-standing institutional relationships. These realities naturally generate perceptions of an emerging Sunni security bloc. However, perception and reality need not be identical. None of the three governments has officially characterized the initiative in sectarian terms. Indeed, doing so would severely restrict its diplomatic utility.

Saudi Arabia itself has recently sought improved relations with Iran. Türkiye continues to engage Tehran on multiple regional issues despite areas of competition. Pakistan has consistently avoided joining explicitly sectarian military coalitions. Islamabad has repeatedly emphasised that Pakistan cannot afford hostility with Iran because the two countries share a long border, important economic interests and significant security concerns.

For Pakistan in particular, converting Iran into a permanent strategic adversary would create serious complications: it would open another potentially unstable frontier; increase sectarian tensions within Pakistan;

complicate relations with China, which maintains close strategic ties with Iran; and undermine Islamabad's traditional role as regional mediator. Consequently, Pakistan is likely to support a defensive alliance directed against external aggression while resisting any effort to transform it into an explicitly anti-Iran coalition.

Could Israel Become the Principal Strategic Concern?

Another important question concerns Israel. Following repeated regional conflicts involving Gaza, Lebanon, Syria and Iran, Israel has emerged as an increasingly significant military variable in Middle Eastern strategic calculations. Should future Israeli military operations threaten Saudi territory or wider regional stability, Riyadh may seek greater military reassurance from trusted partners.

Nevertheless, it would be premature to conclude that the proposed alliance has been established specifically to counter Israel. Saudi Arabia continues to balance deterrence with diplomacy. Türkiye's position toward Israel remains substantially more confrontational. Pakistan does not recognize Israel. Reconciling these differing political approaches would require careful diplomacy before any collective military response became conceivable.

The American Factor

Perhaps the greatest geopolitical implication concerns the United States. This agreement does not necessarily replace American security guarantees; rather, it supplements them. Regional powers increasingly recognize that they must prepare for contingencies in which Washington either cannot or chooses not to intervene. The alliance therefore reflects strategic hedging rather than outright strategic realignment.

For Washington, this development presents both opportunities and challenges. A stronger regional burden-sharing arrangement reduces demands upon American forces. Conversely, an increasingly autonomous regional security structure could gradually reduce American political influence over Gulf security decisions.

Conclusion

The Pakistan–Saudi Arabia–Türkiye defence pact has the potential to become one of the most consequential strategic developments in the Islamic world since the establishment of the Gulf Cooperation Council. Yet much depends upon the final text.

If limited to intelligence sharing, defence industrial cooperation, joint exercises and operational planning, it will strengthen regional security without fundamentally altering the strategic balance. However, the greatest challenge will not be military capability but political coherence.

Can Saudi Arabia, Türkiye and Pakistan maintain strategic unity while preserving

constructive relations with Iran? Can Pakistan continue acting simultaneously as Saudi Arabia's security partner and Tehran's trusted interlocutor? Can the alliance avoid being perceived as an exclusively Sunni military bloc?

The answers to these questions will determine whether the pact becomes a stabilizing pillar of regional security or another source of geopolitical polarization. For Pakistan, the ideal outcome is a defensive coalition that enhances collective security while preserving Islamabad's hard-earned reputation as a bridge between rival regional powers rather than a participant in sectarian or geopolitical confrontation.

