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Perspectives On the Issues Shaping Policy

From Makkah to Istanbul: Turning a Defense Pact into a Strategic Alliance

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The inaugural meeting of the Strategic Political and Defense Committee of Pakistan, Türkiye and Saudi Arabia in Istanbul is much more than a routine follow-up to the Makkah Joint Defense Agreement. It is the first opportunity for the three countries to translate a political declaration into a functioning system of collective security.

The Makkah Agreement, signed on August 7, contains a potentially powerful commitment: An armed attack against any one of the three states will be regarded as an attack against all. The three countries have also declared that the agreement is defensive in nature and is intended to strengthen deterrence and promote regional peace and stability.

But a collective-defense commitment is meaningful only when an adversary knows what will happen after an attack. Deterrence depends not merely upon political statements but upon capability, credibility and clarity. Istanbul should therefore begin the difficult work of defining what the Makkah Agreement actually means in military and political terms.

Building the Architecture of Collective Defense

From political declaration to military mechanism

The first priority should be to establish the institutional architecture of the agreement.

The three countries should consider establishing a permanent Makkah Joint Defense Secretariat, supported by a permanent military planning staff. It could be headed on a rotational basis and supported by officers from the three armed forces. Beneath it could be specialized directorates for operations, intelligence, logistics, communications, training, defense production and strategic planning.

The agreement also requires a mechanism for political decision-making. A crisis cannot wait for three governments to separately assess an emergency while military events unfold. There should therefore be a clearly defined crisis consultation mechanism, including secure communications between the political and military leaderships.

Equally important is the question of command. The alliance need not immediately create a NATO-style permanent integrated command. That would be premature and politically difficult. A more practical approach would be to establish a combined planning headquarters and develop contingency plans for different categories of aggression. If circumstances require military action, a designated combined command could then be activated.

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What does “attack on one is attack on all” actually mean?

This is perhaps the most important issue before the committee.

Does an armed attack automatically trigger military assistance? Does each member decide independently what assistance it will provide? Is there an obligation to deploy combat forces, or can a country provide intelligence, air defense, logistics, naval support, ammunition or financial assistance?

These questions must be answered before a crisis occurs.

The three governments should develop an agreed **activation protocol** defining:

- What constitutes an armed attack?
- Who determines that the collective-defense clause has been triggered?
- How quickly the other two governments must respond?
- What political consultations are required?
- What military assistance can be provided?
- Who authorizes the employment of national forces?
- How rules of engagement are determined?
- How the alliance moves from political consultation to military action?

This does not mean surrendering national sovereignty. Each state would retain control over its armed forces. But the procedures for collective action should be established beforehand rather than improvised during war.

Funding and burden-sharing

Another difficult question is money.

Collective defense requires collective resources. The three countries should agree on a funding mechanism for the permanent institutions, joint exercises, communications infrastructure, intelligence-sharing systems and common training.

They should also examine whether certain capabilities can be jointly financed or jointly acquired.

Saudi Arabia brings enormous financial resources and strategic energy importance. Türkiye brings a large, battle-tested military, a substantial defense-industrial base and NATO experience. Pakistan brings a large professional military, extensive operational experience and a nuclear deterrent.

The alliance should, therefore, seek *complementarity rather than duplication*.

Joint defense production could become the alliance’s strategic backbone

Defense-industrial cooperation should go beyond buying weapons from one another.

Türkiye’s rapidly expanding defense industry, Pakistan’s established experience in aircraft and defense production, and Saudi Arabia’s financial resources and growing ambition for indigenous defense manufacturing create an opportunity for a genuine trilateral defense-industrial ecosystem.

Projects could eventually include unmanned systems, electronic warfare, air-defense systems, armored vehicles, precision weapons, communications, cyber capabilities and aerospace technologies.

The objective should be to create interdependence in defense production. If the three countries depend upon one another for selected critical military capabilities, the political alliance becomes considerably more resilient.

Interoperability is more important than numbers

The three militaries should establish a program of regular joint exercises.

These should not be limited to ceremonial exercises. They should test actual wartime scenarios: air attacks, missile strikes, drone swarms, maritime threats, cyber-attacks, attacks on energy infrastructure and disruption of critical supply lines.

Joint exercises should progressively develop common procedures for intelligence

sharing, air-defense coordination, maritime surveillance, logistics and battlefield communications. A common secure communications architecture should be another priority.

An alliance whose commanders cannot communicate rapidly and securely during a crisis cannot provide credible collective defense.

Defense, Diplomacy and Regional Stability

The Iran question

The most immediate strategic issue confronting the three countries, however, is the war involving Iran and the United States. This makes the Istanbul meeting particularly important.

The Makkah Agreement was created against the backdrop of the regional conflict, but it should not become an instrument through which the three countries are automatically drawn into that war.

Indeed, the opposite should be the objective.

The three countries possess sufficient political weight to become a collective diplomatic constituency for peace.

Saudi Arabia has enormous influence in the Arab and Muslim worlds. Türkiye has maintained channels with multiple sides and possesses considerable diplomatic weight. Pakistan has traditionally maintained relations with both of the Gulf States and Iran and has repeatedly advocated negotiated solutions to regional conflicts.

Together, they could present a credible proposal for de-escalation.

The message should be clear: The Makkah Agreement is a shield, not a sword.

Its purpose should be to deter aggression while simultaneously creating the conditions for diplomacy.

A Joint Peace Initiative The three governments should consider establishing a trilateral diplomatic mechanism on the Iran crisis.

Its immediate objectives could include:

1. Cessation of hostilities.
2. Protection of civilian populations.
3. Protection of commercial shipping and energy infrastructure.
4. Prevention of attacks on neighboring states.
5. Reopening diplomatic channels between Washington and Tehran.
6. Development of confidence-building measures.
7. Negotiations aimed at a durable regional security arrangement.

Such an initiative would also answer an important criticism that could otherwise emerge: that the Makkah Agreement represents the creation of another military bloc in an already highly polarized region.

If the three countries simultaneously build a defense mechanism and champion diplomacy, the message becomes fundamentally different. They would be saying that credible defense and active diplomacy are complementary, not contradictory.

The alliance must avoid becoming sectarian

There is another strategic consideration.

The agreement brings together three important Muslim-majority states, but its legitimacy and longevity should not depend upon sectarian identity. Pakistan and Türkiye have already stressed that the agreement is defensive and not directed against another country. That principle should be preserved.

The alliance should remain open to cooperation with other regional states that accept its basic principles. Türkiye has already indicated that expansion could be considered, while Bangladesh has reportedly been considering whether to join.

Expansion, however, should be gradual. The three founding members should first demonstrate that the existing framework works.

The India factor

India will inevitably watch the development of the Makkah Agreement closely. The emergence of a security arrangement involving Pakistan, Türkiye and Saudi Arabia introduces a new variable into South Asian strategic calculations.

The best response by the three countries is not to define the alliance as anti-India. Instead, it should remain explicitly defensive and focused on collective security. That would make it more difficult for opponents to portray the arrangement as an offensive bloc.

For Pakistan, however, the agreement could provide an additional layer of strategic depth. Pakistan's defense relationship with Saudi Arabia and Türkiye can now potentially evolve from bilateral cooperation into a structured trilateral security framework.

The nuclear question

Pakistan's nuclear capability will inevitably add a strategic dimension to the alliance.

This makes it even more important that the Makkah framework establish clear political and military boundaries. The agreement should not be interpreted as creating a collective nuclear umbrella unless the three governments explicitly decide otherwise.

Pakistan's nuclear deterrent remains a national capability. The Makkah Agreement should initially concentrate on conventional collective defense, air and missile defense, intelligence, maritime security, cyber defense and other areas where practical cooperation can be developed. Strategic ambiguity should not be allowed to generate unnecessary instability.

From Agreement to Implementation

Istanbul must produce an implementation roadmap

The success of the Makkah Agreement will ultimately be judged not by the photographs from Makkah or Istanbul, but by what follows them.

The Istanbul meeting should ideally produce a concrete implementation roadmap covering:

1. **Institutional structure** — establishment of the permanent political and military mechanisms.
2. **Command arrangements** — creation of a combined planning staff and procedures for activating a joint command.
3. **Activation mechanism** — precise procedures for invoking the collective-defense commitment.
4. **Intelligence sharing** — establishment of mechanisms for real-time strategic and operational intelligence exchange.
5. **Interoperability** — regular trilateral military exercises and common operational procedures.
6. **Defense industry** — identification of priority projects for joint development and production.
7. **Funding** — agreement on contributions to the alliance's common institutions and activities.
8. **Crisis management** — establishment of secure communication channels between political and military leaderships.
9. **Diplomatic coordination** — a mechanism for common positions on major regional crises.
10. **Membership Criteria** — the procedure to add new member.
11. **Peace initiative** — consideration of a trilateral diplomatic effort to bring an end to the Iran-US conflict.

The Makkah Agreement has created the political framework. Istanbul must now begin building the machinery behind it. The greatest achievement of the agreement would not be the creation of another military bloc. It would be the creation of a credible regional security mechanism capable of deterring aggression while simultaneously promoting peace.

Pakistan, Türkiye and Saudi Arabia have different strategic interests, different geographical realities and different relationships with the major powers. Those differences should not be regarded as weaknesses. If managed intelligently, they can become the alliance's greatest strength.

Türkiye provides the military-industrial and NATO dimension. Pakistan provides military experience and strategic deterrence. Saudi Arabia provides economic power, energy influence and enormous political weight in

the Arab and Islamic worlds. The challenge before Istanbul is to combine these strengths without sacrificing the strategic autonomy of any member. The Makkah Agreement has established the principle: an attack *on one is an attack on all*.

The task now is to answer the harder question: *What exactly will all three do when that day comes—and what can they do together to ensure that the day never comes?* That is the real agenda for Istanbul.

