

Pakistan-Saudi pact reveals growing distrust of US-led security architecture

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OPINION

The Israeli attack on Qatar on September 9, 2025, failed to kill Hamas leaders but may have catalyzed a “Strategic Mutual Defense Agreement” (SMDA) between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, the first between key countries in South Asia and the Middle East since the Cold War. The decision by the two countries to sign a joint defense pact on September 17 reflects growing unease among wealthy Arab petrostates about the willingness of the United States to defend them against what they see as an increasingly unconstrained Israel, which has attacked multiple Arab countries and Iran since the Hamas attacks of October 7, 2023.

Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have long-standing military ties, with an estimated 1,500 to 2,000 Pakistani troops currently stationed in the kingdom. Under a 1982 agreement, Pakistan has provided military training to more than 8,000 Saudi military personnel. The new agreement intensifies these ties and, in language reminiscent of the NATO alliance, defines any attack on either country as an attack on both.

Pakistan, a nuclear-armed country with pan-Islamist aspirations but mounting economic difficulties, has an opportunity to broaden the security architecture of West Asia with this agreement. It offers significant benefits to Islamabad, including financial gain and prestige. Saudi Arabia is home to more than 2.5 million Pakistani immigrants, and Riyadh has pumped more than \$30 billion into Pakistan’s economy since the 1980s. The new agreement allows Pakistan to reinforce its image as the protector of the Muslim world, a role it claimed after nuclear tests in 1998.

In return, Saudi Arabia gains access to a nuclear umbrella and potentially nuclear weapons, a



Pakistan Army Chief General Syed Asim Munir (L) meets Saudi Arabia's Defense Minister Prince Khalid Bin Salman (R) in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, on November 6, 2024.
● ISPR

shift that gives Riyadh leverage in a post-October 7 regional order centered on US-backed Israeli military might. The Saudis also may acquire nuclear technology for civilian use and diversification from fossil fuels. In January, Saudi Energy Minister Prince Abdulaziz Bin Salman announced Riyadh’s readiness to enrich and sell uranium as part of a growing nuclear program. Although the agreement does not explicitly mention nuclear weapons, the history of the development of Pakistan’s program is replete with reports of Saudi financial assistance and quid pro quos. The Brookings Institution reported that in May 1998, when Pakistan was deciding how to respond to India’s testing of five nuclear weapons, the Saudis promised to give the Pakistanis 50,000 barrels of free oil a day. This significantly mitigated the effects of subsequent US and European sanctions against Pakistan, imposed as

punishment for its own nuclear testing. Saudi Arabia is reported to have obtained implicit nuclear guarantees in return. In his book, War, journalist Bob Woodward recounts a conversation in which Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman allegedly told US Senator Lindsey Graham that Riyadh planned to enrich uranium only for energy purposes. When Graham expressed concern about the prospect of a Saudi bomb, Salman is said to have replied: “I don’t need uranium to make a bomb. I will just buy one from Pakistan.”

Islamic or Arab NATO?

Israel’s attacks on Gaza, Iran, Lebanon, Yemen, Syria, and most recently Qatar, have shown Arab and other regional countries that the current security architecture, based on US promises of assistance against external attacks, may not only be insufficient but detrimental to their

interests. The idea of forming an “Islamic or Arab NATO” would oblige Israel and the US to plan for a world in which attacks on the region could lead to a conventional or nuclear response not from Iran, but from countries with long-standing US ties. In addition to Pakistan, Egypt or Turkey could be hubs for such a new military alliance. Following Israel’s strike on Qatar, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi proposed the formation of a rapid reaction force that could be deployed in the event of an attack on any Arab state and said Egypt would be willing to contribute 20,000 troops. However, at the moment, such a major shift remains unlikely due to the outsized role the US has played in terms of arms sales and troop deployments in the region. Pakistan has not ruled out the possibility of other Arab countries joining the defense pact with Saudi Arabia. In the wake of the new agreement, Ishaq Dar,



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Qatar’s Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani (L) and Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani (R) talk to US President Donald Trump at the Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar on May 15, 2025.
● BRENDAN SMIALOWSKI/AFP

Pakistan’s deputy prime minister and foreign minister, welcomed the notion of forming a joint Arab security force. “Why not? What’s wrong with that? They should [have such a force]. And according to their own capacity, their own strength, they should create some [defense] mechanism,” he said. Dar added that Islamabad would stand with Arab countries and “discharge its duty” toward the Muslim community. Rivalries among Muslim states make collective action hard to implement. However, the anger against Israel and the United States, nearly two years into the Gaza war, is real.

China the quiet winner

The US has been the guarantor of security in the Persian Gulf since Britain stepped back from that role in the early 1970s. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the takeover of the US embassy led to the creation of a Rapid Deployment Force that evolved into what became known as the Central Command, comprising Muslim countries from Egypt to Pakistan. In 2021, Israel — which had been part of the US European Command (EUCOM) — was incorporated into CENTCOM in what was seen by some as a major step toward Arab-Israeli peace in the aftermath of the Abraham Accords. Under those accords, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan formally recognized Israel, joining Egypt and Jordan. It was anticipated that Saudi Arabia, too, would become a party to the agreement, but the Hamas attacks and the brutal Israeli response have alienated Arab public opinion and made the Saudis condition any deal with Israel on an end to the Gaza war and a credible path to an independent Palestinian state — something Israel has vehemently rejected even as more and more Western countries have recognized Palestine.

With the Pakistan deal, Saudi Arabia is sending a clear signal to Washington and Tel Aviv that it is diversifying its security alliances. Washington now faces the difficult task of maintaining relations with Israel, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and India, which view each other with increasing suspicion.

The new agreement also appears to boost the power of China, a long-time ally of Pakistan, and possibly Russia as well. China has invested billions of dollars in infrastructure and energy projects under the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and is Pakistan’s largest trading partner, with bilateral trade of more than \$25 billion annually. China also accounts for 81% of Pakistan’s arms imports. At the same time, the Pakistan-Saudi defense agreement could pose risks if it embroils Pakistan in unending Middle Eastern conflicts or causes a rift between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan’s historic rival, India. The hope is that the agreement will induce Washington to push its closest ally in the Middle East to de-escalate the conflict rather than further expand the two-year-old war on its multiple enemies.

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