

From petrodollars to nuclear shield

Birth of new security axis in Asia



The illustration shows Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (C-R) embracing Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif during a meeting in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, on September 17, 2025.

● FT

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OPINION EXCLUSIVE

The signing of the strategic mutual defense agreement between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan on September 17, 2025, in Riyadh marks a turning point in the security architecture of the Middle East and South Asia. This pact, based on the principle of “mutual defense,” treating any aggression against one party as an aggression against the other, at first glance, comes in the wake of rapid and critical regional developments, especially the Zionist regime’s aggressions and the security gaps caused by the shifting policies of the United States. However, a deeper analysis shows this agreement is the product of a long history of close cooperation and, at the same time, the last piece in a domino effect falling amid a new global and regional order.

Historical roots of alliance: linking power, capital

The recent defense pact is not a spur-of-the-moment decision but has grown out of decades of strategic, economic, and military relations between the two countries.

Riyadh and Islamabad’s relationship has always hinged on a strategic equation: Saudi Arabia, relying on its oil wealth, has played the role of financial and economic backer for Pakistan, while Pakistan, with its military strength and strategic depth, has acted as a security pillar for Riyadh. The Brookings Institution estimates that since the 1960s, Pakistan has drawn the most financial support from Saudi Arabia. This backing, albeit indirectly, allowed Pakistan to push through its nuclear program despite severe international sanctions in the 1990s. Conversely, Pakistan has always stood by Saudi Arabia at critical security junctures — from deploying forces on Saudi Arabia’s northern borders during the Iran-Iraq war to acting as a mediator supporting Afghan mujahideen — creating the trust necessary for signing a defense pact now.

Regional catalysts

The past two years, especially following Operation Al-Aqsa Storm, have seen a surge in unprecedented tensions and military aggressions by Israel. The Gaza war and repeated attacks on neighboring countries, climaxing with the September 9, 2025, attack on Doha, set off alarm bells for all regional countries, including Saudi Arabia.

This attack near Saudi borders laid bare the reality that the US security umbrella, once the guarantor of stability in the Gulf, can no longer be solely relied on. This “security vacuum” and the recognition that America is unwilling or unable to shield its traditional allies from existential threats pushed Riyadh to look for more dependable security partners.

Riyadh’s nuclear ambitions

Saudi Arabia has long been aiming for nuclear capabilities. In 2018, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman openly stated that if Iran obtains a nuclear bomb, Riyadh would “immediately” follow suit. Saudi efforts to convince the US to cooperate on uranium enrichment, even as a precondition to normalizing relations with Israel, came up short.

Under these circumstances, Pakistan, the only nuclear power in the Islamic world, with an arsenal of over 170 nuclear warheads, emerged as an ideal and accessible option for Riyadh. Although Islamabad has previously rejected Saudi requests to directly transfer “technical knowledge,” the new defense deal could effectively serve up a proxy “nuclear shield” for Saudi Arabia, establishing necessary deterrence against regional threats.

Mutual interests in sensitive situation

Pakistan signed this agreement amid critical conditions as well. Severe tensions with India, which nearly escalated into full-scale war in May, alongside an urgent need for foreign investment to tackle the economic crisis, brought Islamabad closer to Riyadh than ever. Saudi Arabia’s announcement to consider increasing investment to \$25 billion in Pakistan and extending a \$2 billion deposit in Pakistan’s central bank highlights the strong economic element underpinning this strategic pact. In reality, this agreement carries through both economic security for Pakistan and strengthens its regional position against India. This convergence of interests, at a critical juncture, has drawn the two countries together tighter than before.

Message to Washington, Tel Aviv

This pact rings an alarm for Washington. Saudi Arabia, through this move, has shown it is shedding its exclusive reliance on the US and is branching out its security portfolio by strengthening ties with powers such as China, Russia, Egypt, and now Pakistan. The agreement poses serious challenges to US



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plans for the region, including the nuclear deal with Riyadh as a complement to normalization with Israel and the India-Middle East-Europe Corridor (IMEC) expected to run through Saudi Arabia. For Israel, this deal is a strategic setback; It shifts the balance of power by indirectly introducing a nuclear power into Gulf security dynamics, throwing Tel Aviv’s calculations off course.

Formation of new bloc, idea of ‘Islamic NATO’

Although the term “Islamic NATO” may seem exaggerated, this agreement clearly has the potential to kick off a new military-security axis composed of Muslim countries. Defense cooperation between the wealthiest Arab country and the most militarily powerful Muslim country could serve as a model for others, gradually leading to a regional power bloc operating independently of the West. India’s cautious reaction, calling for “mutual sensitivities” to be considered by Saudi Arabia, indicates that regional powers have picked up on this paradigm shift.

Operational, symbolic dimensions of deterrence

While full details of the agreement remain undisclosed, the mutual defense clause has operational and symbolic dimensions. Operationally, in the event of threats such as missile attacks on Saudi Arabia, we can expect to see intelligence collaboration, logistical support, and even symbolic or advisory Pakistani troop presence. More importantly, symbolically and strategically, the very existence of such a pact ramps up Saudi Arabia’s deterrence considerably. Although Pakistan may not directly use its nuclear weapons to defend Saudi Arabia, the shadow of this capability weighs heavily on any potential aggressor’s calculations, complicating their plans.

The Saudi-Pakistan defense pact is more than an immediate reaction to regional crises; It marks a defining point in the transformation of the Middle Eastern security order. This agreement results from a convergence of strategic interests amid dwindling trust in a declining US hegemony, unchecked Israeli aggressions, and regional powers’ efforts to redefine their global roles.

With this move, Riyadh has not only set up an effective deterrent shield but also demonstrated its independence in foreign policy, sending a clear message to Washington and Tel Aviv. This pact ushers power equations in the Arab world and the region into a new phase and could lay the foundation for a homegrown security architecture independent from extra-regional powers.

For the Islamic Republic of Iran, this development calls for careful and smart monitoring. While the decline of US influence and Israel’s isolation could be seen as an opportunity, the formation of a powerful military bloc next door also brings along new challenges that demand active diplomacy and a reassessment of regional strategies. The world is undergoing a transition, and the Riyadh-Islamabad pact is one of the most conspicuous signs of this fundamental change.



International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director General Rafael Grossi (2nd-L) visits Saudi nuclear facilities in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, on December 14, 2023.

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

By Mohammad Salami
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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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