

Hedging bets with a Turkey-Saudi-Pakistan pact



By Tim Chattell

Chief of the General Staff's
Research Fellow, Int'l
Security Program

OPINION

On January 9, Bloomberg reported that Turkey was 'likely' to join the defense pact between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, and that talks to do so were in an 'advanced' stage. Later that month Pakistan's Minister for Defense Production told Reuters that a draft defense deal between the three countries had been prepared.

Saudi Arabia and Pakistan agreed a defensive pact in September 2025, following American inaction on two occasions: Initially in 2019, when Iranian drone attacks on Saudi Arabia failed to elicit more than mild condemnation from Washington; and in 2025, when Israel's attacks on Qatar were met only with lukewarm rebuke.

The potential inclusion of Turkey into the alliance has received mixed reactions from Turkish commentators. Some interpret the anonymous briefing as more of a messaging strategy than concrete statement of intent. It remains to be seen whether the alliance will come to pass.

Opportunities

Certainly, a level of 'synergy' could exist in a Pakistan-Saudi-Turkey alliance. Turkey and Pakistan both have developed, modern defense economies which specialize in different sectors, and have become increasingly linked in recent years. The countries have a long history of cooperation on shipbuilding and fighter pilot training.

Turkey could provide access to NATO standards of training – by the standards of the Middle East, Turkey's military is highly effective and capable – as well as large-scale shipbuilding facilities. Saudi finance would be welcome in reinforcing Turkey's inflation-battered economy, just as it has been in Pakistan.

The idea that this might be an 'Islamic NATO' is misleading – most Muslim states sit outside the alliance, and religion lacks any real salience in regional foreign policy. But the alliance would likely be well-received by Turkish President Recep Erdogan's base, as well as playing into his own desire to be seen as a leader of the Muslim world.

Furthermore, historic tensions between Ankara and Riyadh have been more effectively managed since 2022, and no major international issue (currently) divides the three countries.

Turkey was content to side with Pakistan against India during their brief confrontation last year, going so far as



Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan (L) welcomes Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia Mohammed bin Salman during a ceremony in Ankara, Turkey on June 22, 2022.

● ADEM ALTAN/AFP

Opportunism

Some commentators have suggested the move indicates a lack of faith in NATO, following recent 'America First' belligerence. But such an explanation is insufficient. Even in the event of an American departure from NATO, European members would likely work hard to keep Turkey in the alliance, aligned against Russia, with whom it remains locked in competition.

The flexibility offered by an alternative defensive structure would allow it to shape NATO policy, by threatening to withhold its own forces.

If Turkey enters into a formal alliance with Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, it would represent a broader regional trend of 'hedging': should NATO become unreliable in the future, Turkey is made more secure by a new, separate defense agreement.

But a new alliance would also represent a continuation of a uniquely Turkish policy of opportunism. Just as Turkey has reached out (or loudly announced it is reaching out) to BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), 'hedging' affords not only alternatives to alliances like NATO, but crucially leverage within them.

A Saudi-Pakistan alliance, even with a less credible nuclear deterrent, gives the Turkish state options in the event of a NATO Article Five scenario.

The flexibility offered by an alternative defensive structure would allow it to shape NATO policy, by threatening to withhold its own forces, or to 'opt out' of alliance commitments. That can only have more weight as US commitment to NATO shrivels. Even just announcing the move has the desired effect of messaging Turkey's lack of dependence on its existing alliance partners – strengthening its hand.

The same effect can apply to other long-running Turkish foreign policy aims, whether EU accession, cooperation within BRICS; a move towards full SCO membership; partnership across the Turkic Central Asia region; and mediating international conflicts.

In each case, Turkey sees the opportunities provided by 'bridging East and West' as not just securing the state, but demonstrating its independence, offering it leverage within each successive power bloc.

The article was first published in English by Chatham House.



Talk of Turkey joining a Saudi-Pakistan defense pact reflects Ankara's broader hedging strategy: creating alternative security options not to replace NATO, but to gain leverage within it while projecting strategic autonomy.

with a NATO state such as Greece. Turkey could pursue a technology transfer from Pakistan without a binding alliance. But that would mean leaving the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and risking international isolation.

Most compellingly, within NATO, Turkey is already protected by American and British nuclear weapons: of considerably higher quality and reliability than Pakistan's. Up to fifty American nuclear bombs are already stationed at Incirlik air base.

Ankara may view the alliance as a way to shore up its regional power, build its export base, acquire foreign currency, or develop its ballistic technology. But it could achieve such goals without committing to a binding mutual defense agreement. Its own armed forces are comparatively strong. And the ongoing peace process with the PKK in Turkey, and integration of the SDF in Syria, leaves it yet more secure. A Saudi-Pakistan alliance offers Ankara nothing that NATO or other agreements cannot do better. So why bother?



Pakistan's military vehicles carrying missiles Nasr (Front) and Babur (Back) take part in the military parade to mark Pakistan's National Day in Islamabad on March 25, 2021.

● AAMIR QURESHI/AFP

Turkey at the threshold: Foreign policy tests in 2026



By Murat Yeşiltaş

Foreign policy expert

OPINION

As the world enters 2026, Turkish foreign policy has transitioned into a period of "threshold management." This period can be defined as a transition marked by the persistence of crises in the immediate neighborhood, the geographical and sectoral expansion of great power competition, and the increasingly visible need for alignment between economic and institutional capacity and geopolitical claims.

During this period, Turkey has been striving to adopt a diplomatic approach that is flexible, multitasked and fo-

cused on crisis management, rather than relying on a single strategic axis. As we enter 2026, the fundamental question is whether this flexibility will translate into a strategic advantage or whether tensions and costs between different issues will accumulate, narrowing the scope for action.

In this context, the general trend in 2025 has been to pursue the goals of maintaining Türkiye's claim to strategic autonomy more than ever before, while at the same time keeping its position within NATO functional and strengthening the regional security belt. On the other hand, 2025 was a year in which Türkiye learned from strategic and tactical lessons from multidimensional tensions, conflicts and constraints experienced

on many levels. The year 2026 may be a year in which these lines of tension, possible conflict dynamics, and constraints are tested, putting Turkey's strategic autonomy to the test even more.

Fragmented world politics

The overall outlook for world politics from 2025 to 2026 points to a scenario where four key dynamics are intensifying. The first is the expansion of great power competition, which is taking on a multidimensional character, not only through military balances but also through technology restrictions, supply chains, critical raw materials, data and digital infrastructure, sanctions regimes, and defense-industrial capacity (ammunition production, air defense, unmanned systems,

electronic warfare capabilities). Investments in conventional warfare capabilities among global powers, increasing global arms race trends, and military modernization processes stand out as developments aimed at altering the military power balance in great power competition. This situation both expands the bargaining power of middle powers and acts as a serious pressure factor on them.

Secondly, the international security architecture is undergoing simultaneous stress tests in four critical regions: Europe, the Middle East, the Indo-Pacific and East Africa. The interaction between these lines both divides the strategic attention of major powers and creates a perception of a "window of opportunity," albeit limited, for region-

al actors. The increase in the number of armed conflicts over the past decade, combined with the parallel trend of "national security-centered hardening" in states' foreign policies, shows that the dynamics of escalation are more complex and fragile. Therefore, the nature of the risk of escalation stems not only from regional rivalries but also from a systemic fragility that is multidimensional, multiactor and intertwined with nuclear dynamics. The most critical vulnerability of military-strategic competition in 2026 is the possibility that a minor tactical incident could rapidly escalate into a strategic crisis involving major powers.

The resurgence of the Iran-Israel conflict, the intensification of the