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The Saudi Arabia-Pakistan Defence Agreement: Perspectives from India and the Middle East

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Introduction

Kabir Taneja

In September 2025, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan signed a Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement (SMDA). The agreement revitalises an old strategic cooperative arrangement between Islamabad and Riyadh and comes amid a churn in the international order that has impacted both the Middle East and South Asia alike. While

strategic and fraternal ties between the two states are not new, what requires examination is the recalibration, intent, language, and timing of this renewed understanding between the home of the two Holy Mosques, on one side, and on the other, the Islamic world's only state with nuclear weapons.

Relations between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan go back seven decades, and Pakistani military personnel being deployed for Saudi security requirements is also an institutionalised process cemented over the years. In essence, the signing of the SMDA itself is not a tectonic geopolitical event. However, a section of the language used in the statement, although vague, calls for a “collective defence” framework, which piqued the interest of analysts, including in India.

The timing of the agreement between the two countries also offers a glimpse into why New Delhi, while downplaying the agreement, has highlighted that it was aware of the negotiations that were taking place, and that its own interests and concerns regarding the same were communicated to Riyadh. However, the actualisation of this deal—a boon for Pakistan in the post-Operation Sindoor landscape—had more to do with the events taking place in the Middle East, not necessarily those between India

and Pakistan. Nonetheless, the impact on Indian strategic interests could be severe.

The ongoing geopolitical shifts in the Middle East, such as Israel’s stamp of outright, and often unchallenged, military superiority, and the state’s decision to strike Hamas in Doha, have played a role in escalating the language of the SMDA. While Saudi Arabia has no shortage of funds in its national coffers, it does lack a military that has either a qualitative edge over Israel or the numbers and deep experience on the battlefield. From bolstered Israeli ambitions following the 7 October terror attacks, the war in Gaza, and the possibility of a nuclear Iran remaining largely intact despite a ‘12-day war’ in May this year, Riyadh’s anxieties have offered Pakistan an unexpected economic and strategic lifeline. Today, Pakistan is seen as an extension of the Middle East, a posture it has not particularly been allowed to have for much of the past 20 years, despite being a Muslim state and part of multiple Islamic forums.

This report aims to investigate this agreement between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan from multiple lenses: strategic, geopolitical, economic, bilateral, and regional, to assess the impact it could have in both the near and distant future. The first chapter by *Sushant Sareen* examines what the SMDA means for Islamabad politically and, in general, for Rawalpindi. This is a critical start to understanding Pakistan's own dynamics, as the country's Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif acclimatises to the reality of not being able to conduct any foreign visit without Army Chief Asim Muir shadowing him.

In the second chapter, *Kartik Bommakanti and Rahul Rawat* take a deeper look into the impact the Saudi-Pakistan arrangement could have on Indian defence posture. This is particularly relevant after the successes of Operation Sindoor, which has fundamentally remoulded Indian defence thinking at scale for the first time since the Kargil war in 1999.

Moving forward, the Saudi-Pakistan deal will likely have a profound impact on regional and international positions as well. In the Middle East, the ongoing war in Gaza, Israel's stated aims of disintegrating entities such as Hamas and Hezbollah, Syria's delicate revival under a former

jihadi of the name Ahmed Al Sharaa, Iran's continuing quiet contestation with Israel following the '12-day war', are all geopolitical realities that have played a part in Riyadh's requirements from its own bilateral relationship with Pakistan.

Mahdi Ghuloom, in the third chapter, looks at the SMDA from two lenses: the Saudi-Pakistan bilateral, and how the Gulf region views the same. Some argue that Pakistan has, after a long time in the peripheries, moved back into the mainstream of Middle East geopolitics. The impact of this has wider repercussions and not just regional ones.

In the fourth chapter, *Samriddhi Vij* analyses how India's 'geoeconomics first' outreach to the Gulf, seen as a success story of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government since 2015, could be impacted by a 'return' of Pakistan in the region's security calculus. *Eszter Karacsony* then adds another layer to the discourse and describes how the European Union would try to calibrate its ties with India and Saudi Arabia when the question of Pakistan is thrown into the mix. As an economic bloc with a dwindling geopolitical footprint, the European continent remains a driver of both global trade and politics.

Finally, *Atul Kumar* writes about the elephant in the room: China. The Pakistan-China bonhomie is well-known, and during Operation Sindoor, Chinese weapons were on Pakistan's frontlines. Beijing is an economic power and influencer in the Middle East—involved in critical domains like defence, energy security, and high technology—and utilises its power to shape geopolitical realities in a region fraught with upheavals and uncertainties.

The report looks to add colour to the different dimensions of the Saudi Arabia-Pakistan agreement, which can have a direct impact on New Delhi's relationship with Islamabad. How other powers, capitals, and interlocutors handle these divergences between two nuclear powers in a fragile global order will have far-reaching impacts on international politics and diplomacy.

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Pakistan's Expectations

Sushant Sareen

The announcement of the Saudi-Pakistan Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement¹ SMDA has generated euphoria inside Pakistan. It is viewed as Pakistan's arrival on the global stage as a pivotal, strategically relevant net security provider in the region.² Pakistan sees the security pact as a recognition of its military prowess, placing it at the centre of what is being seen as the beginning of an "Islamic NATO".³

That the agreement was signed just months after the conflict with India and days after the Israeli attack on Doha was seen as validation of Pakistan's long-held belief that it is the "Fortress of Islam" and the sword-arm of the Islamic world, capable of protecting other Islamic countries. But the recognition of Pakistan's military strength was only part of the reason for the enthusiastic domestic response. The other half of the story was that Pakistan also expects to reap rich financial dividends from the Saudi deal.⁴ In their view, Pakistan would provide the military muscle, and the Saudis would write the cheques and make investments that would make Pakistan rich and financially solvent again.

Interestingly, despite the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and Pakistan being in close contact over the last couple of years, that an SMDA was being negotiated came as a surprise to most Pakistani analysts. Only after the deal was concluded did some analysts connect the confabulations⁵ and the frequent visits to KSA by Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif.^a The hybrid military-civilian regime did not hold any consultations in the Cabinet or Parliament before signing the deal; the cabinet rubber-stamped⁶ it after the signing. What is remarkable—despite the deal being widely welcomed in Pakistan, including by the main opposition, Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaf⁷—is that no one knows the details of what has been agreed between KSA and Pakistan.

There are two pillars around which Pakistani analysts, commentators, and politicians are comprehending this deal. The first is the sentence in the joint statement:⁸ “The agreement states that any aggression against either country shall be considered an aggression against both”. The second is the expectation that the Saudis will pour billions of dollars into Pakistan’s economy. Pakistan’s renewed dependence on Saudi money marks a full circle. About a decade ago, Pakistan had refused Saudi requests to send troops to assist in the Yemen campaign. Back then, the

China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) was taking off and was hyped as a ‘game changer’ that would catapult Pakistan onto the global economic stage and make it a linchpin of global trade. The “Chinese assurance of economic investment and assistance⁹ to the tune no Arab country—let alone Saudi Arabia—could match” drove Pakistan’s decision to rebuff Riyadh. Ten years later, CPEC has failed to meet its hype, Chinese investments have all but dried up, and Pakistan has been forced to fall back on its old benefactors.

In a sense, Pakistan is reverting to its time-tested revenue model of acting as a mercenary state and extracting geopolitical rents to remain financially viable. In its latest iteration, Pakistan is trying to monetise its nuclear assets by promising a nuclear umbrella¹⁰ to Saudi Arabia, and possibly later to other Arab rulers. The word ‘strategic’ in the SMDA is seen as signalling Pakistan’s readiness to use its nuclear weapons in Saudi Arabia’s defence. As Pakistanis see it, they have the muscle that KSA needs, and KSA (and presumably other Gulf states) has the money that Pakistan desperately needs, making this a perfect marriage. The only problem is that it is unclear where and how Pakistan’s muscle would be used, and equally unclear how much money KSA would commit and in which areas.

a A Pakistani friend told this author, perhaps half in jest, that the PM and the Army Chief, who had served in Riyadh as defence attaché and developed close ties with the Saudi security establishment, had probably visited Riyadh more than Raiwind in the past two years.

For many years, there was talk of Saudi investments in Pakistan. In 2019, during the visit of the Saudi Crown Prince to Pakistan, an MoU was signed to set up a US\$10-billion oil refinery in Gwadar¹¹—an old proposal that had been resurrected.¹² In 2023, the same proposal was revived one more time,¹³ but this time Saudi Arabia wanted Pakistan to invest US\$7 billion in the project. Needless to say, the project was stillborn, although Pakistan continued to speak of it as if it were a done deal.

In April 2024, the Saudi Foreign Minister led a high-powered delegation¹⁴ to Pakistan to explore investment opportunities, followed by business delegations led by senior ministers and officials.¹⁵ Despite Pakistan pitching projects worth around US\$32 billion¹¹⁶ for Saudi investment, all it has so far are numerous MoUs¹⁷—not investments—which, if realised, would total less than US\$3 billion. The grapevine is that the Saudis have not been offered any bankable proposals; most of what Pakistan has offered are poorly crafted ideas suited for headlines but lacking substance or detail. The Saudis also appear to have lost interest in taking an equity stake in the Reko Diq¹⁸ copper mine project. In tangible terms, Pakistan has secured a rollover¹⁹ of old loans

and the operationalisation of a US\$1.2 billion annual facility to buy oil on deferred payment.²⁰ Despite this uncompromising investment record, Pakistanis remain hopeful of a windfall, with expectations of Saudi Arabia doubling the number of Pakistani workers in KSA.²¹ They also expect financial pay-offs from the deployment of Pakistani troops in Saudi Arabia and hope that both countries will “unlock the full potential of their strategic partnership”.²²

On the strategic side, the focus is on the clause that aggression against one country will be considered aggression against both. But beyond the headline, what this means on the ground is unclear. During recent border skirmishes between Afghanistan and Pakistan, some Pakistanis wondered if Afghan attacks on Pakistan would be construed as attacks on Saudi Arabia under the SDMA.²³ Saudi support, however, was limited to counselling both Afghanistan and Pakistan to show restraint. The terms of engagement, and level of involvement and expectation are quite fuzzy. For instance, what is the worth of Pakistan’s nuclear umbrella? Given that Pakistan denied any nuclear signalling²⁴—let alone any threat or danger of nuclear exchange—during Operation Sindoor with India, the chances of Pakistan engaging in nuclear sabre-rattling, or worse, in response to a conventional threat to KSA appear remote.

Saudi Arabia may want to showcase the presence of Pakistani troops as a guarantee of their security. But what is their actual threat matrix? Israel has no real conflict with Saudi Arabia. Pakistan, however, has been surprisingly open in claiming that the SMDA will protect KSA from Israel and that Pakistan would use its military, missiles, and nuclear weapons if Israel posed any threat. The threat from Iran has been severely degraded. In any case, Pakistan would think hard before attacking Iran. Given the current downturn in Afghanistan-Pakistan relations, the last thing Pakistan would want is for its entire western front to ignite through hostilities with Iran. That leaves Yemen. Yet Pakistan is unlikely to commit troops to a Yemen campaign; at most, it might deploy troops along the border but not inside the country. Pakistani troops could also be deployed in other parts of KSA as a show of force to reassure the Saudis that Pakistan stands with them. In a way, Pakistan's calculation is that the SMDA will not drag it into any serious regional conflict.

Then there are the logistical complications that will act as a limiting factor in this security pact. Pakistan is primarily equipped with Chinese weapons, while Saudi Arabia operates on US systems. How far will Americans allow access to certain US weapons in Saudi possession if they are to be used by Pakistani personnel who could share information with China? Even otherwise, introducing Chinese weapon systems in KSA will seriously undermine US domination and the security architecture it has constructed in the region, something the US is unlikely to allow. It is one thing for Pakistan to enter a pact with KSA and deploy a limited number of troops; it is quite another to serve as guarantor of Saudi security. Taken together, these factors suggest that Pakistan hopes to secure diplomatic dividends and economic benefits from the Saudis without getting in too deep.

More than protecting KSA under the SMDA, Pakistan thinks the pact will provide it an additional layer of protection against India.²⁵ The economic aid from Saudi will provide sustenance to Pakistan's struggling economy, and more importantly, could help fund its defence acquisitions and modernisation programmes.

The chances of Saudi Arabia providing US equipment are low unless Washington permits it—which is unlikely unless US-India relations collapse entirely. Even otherwise, there are limits to how far KSA will back Pakistan against India. The Pakistanis know the Saudis will not come out guns blazing on their behalf. Nevertheless, they feel that their security relationship with the Saudis, especially the clause that an attack on one will be treated as an attack on both, will tie India's hand and complicate its military and strategic calculus. The Saudi media attaché²⁶ in Islamabad endorsed this thinking when he accepted that “it [SMDA] may heighten India's caution in dealing with Pakistan”.

For now, the hybrid regime is leveraging the SDMA to project itself as having enhanced Pakistan's diplomatic prestige and restored its strategic relevance. It is also using the pact to

signal to domestic audiences that Pakistan has been entrusted with the honour and responsibility of protecting Islam's holiest places. The feel-good factor and hype surrounding the SMDA are quite similar to the early days of the CPEC project. But just as that initiative lost momentum, the SDMA faces inherent limitations.

Pakistan's problem is internal decay—no amount of external “glue” in the form of foreign assistance can fix it. If anything, the quest for securing geopolitical rents has only allowed for domestic problems to remain unaddressed, leading them to metamorphose into existential crises, a multiplicity of which are today afflicting the country. Neither Saudi money, American support, nor Chinese backing can save Pakistan from itself. And if Pakistan cannot save itself from itself, it is delusional to think it can defend and protect any other country.

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The Implications for India's Defence Strategy

Kartik Bommakanti and Rahul Rawat

The recently concluded Saudi-Pakistan defence deal cements a longstanding partnership between Riyadh and Rawalpindi. Pakistan has had a military presence in Saudi Arabia since the 1980s to defend the Kingdom—which is also home to Islam's most holy place, the Mecca—from both adversaries within and without. The latest deal, called 'Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement', only reinforces and strengthens it. It states that "any aggression against either country shall be considered an aggression against both."¹ This effectively gives the pact the texture of a formal alliance. Although Saudi Arabia has

maintained that it is not directed at any specific state, the agreement follows growing tensions in the Middle East.

For Pakistan, the deal reaffirms their commitment to extend their nuclear capabilities in defence of Saudi Arabia and secure crucial monetary resources in exchange. These resources will likely improve their conventional military capabilities through purchases from either China, Europe, Türkiye, or the United States (US). This analysis assesses the weaknesses in Pakistan's existing conventional capabilities as exposed during Operation Sindoor and their implications for India's defence strategy as a result of the Saudi-Pakistan defence deal.

Pakistan's Conventional Capabilities

Pakistan's armed forces, while still formidable, face a shortfall in capabilities relative to their primary adversary—the Indian armed forces.² Among these weaknesses, air defence is key. The Pakistan Air Force (PAF) has historically been responsible for territorial defence or airspace defence, and not base defence, as was evident during Operation Sindoor. Consequently, Pakistan's immediate challenges will lie in addressing the gaps in its Air Defence (AD) capabilities. To be sure, Rawalpindi's conventional military weaknesses are not just confined to AD systems; they extend to the space and unmanned airborne systems, a smaller navy than its Indian counterpart, and the lack of a significant conventional rocket force capability.

During Operation Sindoor, China assisted Pakistan with their space-borne capabilities, which could become available to the latter again in the event of another India-Pakistan military encounter. Turkish drones were extensively used against India during the brief war fought between the two countries in May 2025. More critically, the establishment of an Army Rocket Force Command (ARFC) announced by Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif on Pakistan's 78th Independence Day is intended to compensate for the shortfall in Pakistan's offensive capabilities.³ Pakistan is likely to turn to a number of other countries for assistance and supplies to redress the imbalance in conventional forces with India. Table 1 lists the countries and the diversity of capabilities from where Pakistan has sourced its conventional arms between 2014-24.

Table 1: Pakistan's Arms Imports (2014-2024)

Supplier	Designation	Description	Weapons Category	Order Year	Number Ordered	Delivery Years
United States	M-113	Armoured Personnel Carrier	Armoured vehicles	2014	500	2015
China	IBIS-150	Air-search Radar	Sensors	2014	8	2017
China	WZ-10	Combat Helicopter	Aircraft	2014	3	2015
Switzerland	GDF 35mm	Anti-aircraft Gun	Air-defence systems	2014	12	2017
United States	MaxxPro	Armoured Personnel Carrier	Armoured vehicles	2014	350	2018
United States	Cessna-208 Caravan	Light Transport Aircraft	Aircraft	2014	1	2015
Switzerland	Skyguard GR	Air-search/Fire-control Radar	Sensors	2014	6	2017
China	LY-80	SAM	Missiles	2014	300	2018
China	LY-80 SAMS	SAM System	Air-defence systems	2014	3	2018
Canada	Challenger-604	Light Transport Aircraft	Aircraft	2014	1	2015
China	Kashmir -	Patrol Ship	Ships	2015	2	2021
Malta	ATR-72	Transport Aircraft	Aircraft	2015	1	2015
Jordan	M-113	Armoured Personnel Carrier	Armoured vehicles	2015	73	2015
China	FN-6	Portable SAM	Missiles	2015	636	2016
China	Wing Loong-1	Armed UAV	Aircraft	2015	5	2015
United States	Cessna-208 Caravan	Light Transport Aircraft	Aircraft	2015	2	2016
United Kingdom	ship engine 6001-8000	Ship Engine	Engines	2015	4	2021
Türkiye	T-37B	(armed) Trainer Aircraft	Aircraft	2015	34	2015

Supplier	Designation	Description	Weapons Category	Order Year	Number Ordered	Delivery Years
China	MPVs-6HT	Patrol Ship	Ships	2015	4	2018
Russia	Mi-35M	Combat Helicopter	Aircraft	2015	4	2018
Germany	ATR-72MP -	Anti-submarine Aircraft	Aircraft	2015	2	2019
United States	Cessna-208 Caravan	Light Transport Aircraft	Aircraft	2015	2	2016
Italy	Puma-4	Armoured Personnel Carrier	Armoured vehicles	2015	79	2018
Italy	M-109A1 155mm	Self-propelled Gun	Artillery	2015	162	2019
United States	AAQ-33 Sniper ATP	Aircraft Electro-optical System	Sensors	2015	15	2016
Russia	Mi-17	Transport Helicopter	Aircraft	2015	2	2016
Ukraine	vehicle engine 1101-1500	Vehicle Engine	Engines	2016	90	2023
United States	MaxxPro	Armoured Personnel Carrier	Armoured vehicles	2016	30	2016
United States	Cessna-U206	Light Aircraft	Aircraft	2016	4	2017
United Kingdom	Seaspray	Maritime Patrol Aircraft Radar	Sensors	2016	3	2022
Italy	AW-139	Helicopter	Aircraft	2016	5	2017
Turkiye	ASELPOD	Aircraft electro-Optical System	Sensors	2016	8	2017
Italy	AW-139	Helicopter	Aircraft	2016	5	2019
United States	Island PC	Patrol Boat	Ships	2016	2	2017
United States	Cessna-208 Caravan	Light Transport Aircraft	Aircraft	2016	2	2016
Sweden	Saab-2000	Transport Aircraft	Aircraft	2016	4	2018
United Kingdom	Sea King-3	Transport Helicopter	Aircraft	2016	1	2018
Italy	AW-139	Helicopter	Aircraft	2017	15	2018

Supplier	Designation	Description	Weapons Category	Order Year	Number Ordered	Delivery Years
United States	MaxxPro	Armoured Personnel Carrier	Armoured vehicles	2017	40	2017
Türkiye	ASELPOD	Aircraft Electro-optical System	Sensors	2017	16	2018
United States	ship engine 2501-4000	Ship Engine	Engines	2017	8	2020
The Netherlands	OPV-1900 -	Patrol Ship	Ships	2017	2	2020
China	Type-054A	Frigate	Ships	2017	4	2023
China	FN-6	Portable SAM	Missiles	2017	295	2018
Sweden	Saab-2000 AEW	Airborne Early-warning Aircraft	Aircraft	2017	3	2024
Russia	Kornet	Anti-tank Missile	Missiles	2017	500	2019
Ukraine	vehicle engine 601-800	Vehicle Engine	Engines	2017	79	2019
United Kingdom	Commando AC	Transport Helicopter	Aircraft	2017	4	2018
China	JY-27	Air-search Radar	Sensors	2018	1	2019
China	Rizwan	Signals Intelligence Ship	Ships	2021	1	2023
Türkiye	Bayraktar TB-2	Armed UAV	Aircraft	2021	9	2024
Qatar	Commando AC	Transport Helicopter	Aircraft	2021	4	2021
Belgium	C-130H Hercules	Transport Aircraft	Aircraft	2021	7	2023
The Netherlands	Tripartite	MCM Ship	Ships	2021	2	2022
The Netherlands	OPV-2600 -	Patrol Ship/Frigate	Ships	2022	2	2024
Lithuania	A-319	Transport Aircraft	Aircraft	2022	1	2022
United States	Cessna-208 Caravan	Light Transport Aircraft	Aircraft	2023	3	2024

Source: SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, March, 2025

As per SIPRI data, Pakistan's arms imports between 2020-2024 constituted almost 4.6 percent of global arms imports in that period.⁴ In comparison, its share during 2015-2019 was 2.8 percent, recording a 61-percent increase between the two periods.⁵

Between 2020 and 2024, China, the Netherlands and Türkiye were the top three sources of arms imports for Pakistan.⁶ Their share in the latter's arms imports comprises 81, 5.5 and 3.8 percent, respectively.⁷ Although China tops the list of arms suppliers and Türkiye follows in third place with military sales, especially armed drones such as the Bayraktar TB-2 and aircraft electro-optical sensors in augmenting Pakistani capabilities, it is the Dutch (among European suppliers) who are the second largest arms exporters to Pakistan. Besides the Netherlands, as Table 1 shows, other European countries such as the United Kingdom (UK), Sweden, Italy, Belgium, and Germany have also exported military hardware and equipment to Pakistan in the 2014-24 period. However, their supplies have mostly been limited to augmenting the conventional military strength of Pakistan.

The latest Saudi-Pakistan defence deal may open up greater opportunities in the form of financial resources for Rawalpindi to access some key capabilities from European suppliers, China, and potentially Saudi Arabia, with American acquiescence. This will have real implications for India as per the analysis in the subsequent section, because it gives Pakistan the financial muscle to leverage the advanced military capabilities not just of the Europeans, but the Chinese and the US, which would otherwise be beyond the financial capacities of the Pakistani state.

Implications for India

Saudi Arabia, despite this agreement with Pakistan, will be compelled to balance its burgeoning trade ties with India and the imperative to honour its security commitments to Pakistan. Accomplishing this will be challenging for Riyadh. For India, a key, yet ominous possibility is Saudi monetary transfers that allow Pakistan access to advanced air defence systems, drones, and manned aerial strike platforms that were previously out of reach for the country's armed forces.

However, these transfers need not just be monetary in nature; Riyadh could directly transfer some part of its stock of Patriot Missile Defence systems to Rawalpindi, provided it has Washington's approval. Saudi Arabia operates the Patriot Advanced Capability-2 (PAC-2) and its more advanced variant, the PAC-3. The Patriot battery system is capable of intercepting ballistic and cruise missiles and aircraft.⁸ In addition, Riyadh could also transfer some of the F-16s in service with the Saudi air force. However, the monetary resource contribution by the Saudis to Pakistan is highly plausible. If Saudi Arabia were to open up their coffers to Rawalpindi, some of the European suppliers listed in Table 1 could potentially supply Rawalpindi with crucial capabilities. One key example is Germany expressing its willingness to sell the InfraRed Imaging System Tail/Thrust Vector-Controlled (IRIS-T) short- to medium-range air defence system, which has had some

success in intercepting the Russian P-800 Oniks supersonic cruise missile in Ukraine.⁹ The P-800 Oniks is similar to the BrahMos supersonic cruise missile operated by India. The IRIS-T or PAC-2, or PAC-3, in the possession of Pakistan will have operational and military consequences for India.

Advanced conventional weapons financed with Saudi money, regardless of whether they are sourced from China, Europe or the US, will be used against India by Pakistan. India will need to enhance its capabilities not just by increasing spending, but through diplomatic measures as well. New Delhi will need to engage in a dialogue with Saudi Arabia about the scope and nature of its latest defence deal with Rawalpindi. It will need to underline that limiting the extent to which Riyadh extends defence-related support to Rawalpindi is necessary for stability in the Indian subcontinent and vital to preserving the burgeoning Saudi-India economic and strategic relationship.

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A Wider Geopolitical Viewpoint of the GCC

Mahdi Ghuloom

In 2015, former Saudi Arabian intelligence chief, Prince Turki bin Faisal, was quoted describing ties between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia as “probably one of the closest relationships in the world between any two countries without any official treaty.”¹ Such an official treaty has now been signed, under a Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement formalised during Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif’s visit to the Kingdom in September 2025.²

The agreement, though nearly coinciding with regional escalations such as the Israeli and Iranian attacks on Qatar, has been long in consideration. It follows some high-level visits from the Pakistani side to Saudi Arabia in the past year: the November 2024 visit of the Pakistani Army Chief General Asim Munir;³ the February 2025 visit of the Pakistani Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee General Sahir Shamshad Mirza for the 8th round of the Pakistan-Saudi Joint Military Cooperation Committee (JMCC) meetings;⁴ and Prime Minister Sharif again in June 2025.⁵ This makes a reported statement of an anonymized Saudi official quoted by *Reuters* more believable:

“This [agreement] is not a response to specific countries or specific events but an institutionalisation of long-standing and deep cooperation between our two countries.”⁶ Indeed, this is likely a move to deepen previous cooperation and smooth out any gaps identified by Saudi Arabia.

For instance, Pakistan has made manifold contributions to the establishment of the Saudi Arabian armed forces, the introduction of their first fighter jets, and the training of security and military personnel to date.⁷ However, there have been frustrations lately, as expressed indirectly by the United Arab Emirates’ (UAE) then-Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Anwar Gargash.⁸ Saudi Arabia had requested Islamabad to join its military coalition against the Houthis in 2015, but a special session of the Pakistani parliament rejected those demands. Gargash said this “moment of truth distinguishes between the real ally and the ally of media and statements.”⁹

The threats from Yemen are ongoing, albeit to a much lower scale than when Saudi Arabia was actively intervening in the civil war. Reports from September 2025 indicate that two Houthi-

fired ballistic missiles aimed at Israel broke apart mid-flight over Saudi territory.¹⁰ It is thus in Saudi Arabia’s interest that Pakistan becomes more cooperative in the future should such a development arise again. With this agreement, a repeat of the 2015 demurrals is less likely.¹¹

Saudi Arabia’s Backup Avenues for the U.S.

Despite the recent optics, the United States (US)-Saudi security partnership is here to stay. If anything, it remains likely to expand as President Donald Trump’s May 2025 visit to Riyadh resulted in one of the largest arms deals by Washington, considering it “covers deals with more than a dozen US defence companies in areas including air and missile defence, air force and space advancement, maritime security and communications,” per the US government fact sheet reported in the media.¹² Moreover, Saudi Arabia is still pursuing a defence treaty with the US, as well as a US-sponsored nuclear programme—and this does not necessarily have to be preconditioned on normalising relations with Israel.¹³

Instead of replacing the US, the view for Saudi Arabia is that the former may want backups when it is distracted by other priorities: such a limitation may explain, for example, the lack of US intervention in deterring the Iranian or Houthi attacks against two Saudi oil installations in 2019.¹⁴ That Saudi Arabia chose a mutual US partner for this new security partnership with Pakistan exemplifies the centrality of the US in the Saudi Arabian and Gulf security framework.¹⁵

This centrality of the US in Gulf agreements is also found in the model developed by Bahrain and the UAE's Abraham Accords with Israel. The Gulf States may be slowly hand-picking diversified yet US-aligned defence partnerships: a role that may be traditionally filled by the UK, but is now increasingly being led by Israel and, seemingly, Pakistan. In the case of Israel, joint maritime exercises, arms deals, and defence system deployments on top of a joint intelligence platform have solidified this US-“plus” model of security partnerships with the Gulf States.¹⁶

Gulf Second Movers Towards Pakistan

While Saudi Arabia was the first mover towards an agreement with Pakistan, the country, along with the Gulf States in general, rarely makes such moves in a completely bilateral fashion. There are indications that other Gulf states may follow, with the strongest likelihood of Qatar and Bahrain replicating or joining the Saudi-Pakistan agreement.

There have been some high-level indications about Qatar on this accord. In October 2023, the Chief of Staff of Qatar's armed forces, Lt Gen Salem Al-Nabet, met with Pakistan's Army Chief General Asim Munir in Rawalpindi to discuss enhanced defence cooperation.¹⁷ In September 2025, the Chairman of the Pakistan Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee (CJCSC) met with Qatar's Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister Sheikh Saoud bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani, as well as Qatar's Armed Forces Chief of Staff Lt Gen Jassim Mohammad Ahmed Al-Mannai, in Doha to discuss the future dimensions of cooperation in defence and security domains.¹⁸

Moreover, ahead of the Doha World Cup, it was reported that Pakistan was the only country to send soldiers to the capital city, with more than 4,500 infantry troops arriving in Qatar ahead of the event.¹⁹

Bahrain has also seen high-level visits as late as September 2025. Field Marshal Sheikh Khalifa bin Ahmed Al-Khalifa, Commander-in-Chief of the Bahrain Defence Force (BDF), received Lt Gen Tabassum Habib, Director General of the Joint Staff of the Armed Forces of Pakistan, during the 21st meeting of the Bahrain-Pakistan Joint Military Cooperation Committee in Manama.²⁰ Earlier that month, both countries agreed to boost cooperation in naval training and regional maritime security operations during Bahrain's Chief of Defence Staff Lt Gen Thiab Al-Nuaimi's meeting with Pakistan Navy Chief Admiral Naveed Ashraf at the Naval Headquarters in Islamabad.²¹ Moreover, in March 2024, Bahrain's National Guard Commander, General Sheikh Mohammed bin Isa Al-Khalifa, held a meeting with Pakistan's Army Chief General Asim Munir at the Pakistani Army Headquarters in Rawalpindi to discuss ways to enhance military cooperation between the National Guard and the Pakistani Army.²²

A bolder move may see the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) signing a security framework with Pakistan. The 2001 GCC Joint Defence Treaty mirrors collective defence commitments²³ and was accelerated in its goals by the 2024 GCC's Vision for Regional Security,²⁴ as well as the GCC Joint Defence Council extraordinary meeting following the Israeli strike on Qatar in September 2025.²⁵ The next step may be signing external-party frameworks. Such a framework would boost Pakistan's interest in defence cooperation with the Gulf states. For one, joint exercises would likely increase, especially as the Gulf's Peninsula Shield expands its own exercises,²⁶ and Pakistan is likely interested in them due to the exposure to Western-produced weapons systems.²⁷

Conclusion

While the Saudi-Pakistan pact does not replace Riyadh's security reliance on the US, it provides the Kingdom with greater confidence in US-aligned support should regional escalations resurface. The move also sets a precedent for other Gulf states, especially Qatar and Bahrain, to deepen their own defence ties with Islamabad, potentially paving the way for a GCC-wide framework.

In this sense, the agreement reflects a diversification of US-aligned security partnerships that could reshape the region's defence architecture in the coming years.

Looking ahead, there might be other partners for the Gulf States to consider adding to their US-aligned security diversification efforts. Türkiye is a particularly strong contender, with precedents including the country's expanding military base

in Qatar²⁸ and Riyadh's co-production efforts with Turkish companies in weapons manufacturing.²⁹ South Korea is a less likely contender with its increasing arms exports to the Gulf and Saudi Arabia, in particular.³⁰ Time will tell whether this will be an isolated bilateral agreement, a repeated or minilateral one, or the beginning of similar parallel agreements.

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The Pakistan Premium on India–GCC Economic Integration

Samriddhi Vij

Forged in the corridors of Riyadh's Al-Yamamah Palace, the Saudi Arabia-Pakistan Strategic Mutual Defense Agreement (SMDA)¹ could disrupt the prevailing narrative of a new, frictionless era of India–Gulf integration. The trajectory of the India–GCC relationship has uninhibitedly ascended, with growing GCC-wide economic linkages.² The SMDA does not dismantle this architecture but introduces a Pakistan risk premium into India's foreign policy of economically engaging multiple poles of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to maximise strategic autonomy. As the agreement brings

South Asian security rivalries into the GCC-India trade calculus, it is important to view the Saudi-Pakistan deal not only as a security partnership but also as a pivotal geoeconomic event.

India-Gulf Economic Ties

In recent years, India has been engaging assertively with all regional players by building deep, bespoke partnerships. The strategy rests on economic necessity, but its strength lies in creating a multi-layered architecture of trust.

The foundation of this architecture is a powerful geoeconomic synergy. In FY 2024–25, India’s total trade with the GCC reached US\$179 billion.³ Energy is central: Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) supplies remain core to India’s crude oil basket, with OPEC’s share rising to 51.5 percent in 2024 from 49.6 percent in 2023, alongside sustained volumes from Saudi Arabia.⁴ This is reinforced by human and financial capital. India is the world’s largest remittance recipient,⁵ with five GCC countries (the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, and Oman) among its top 10 inward remittance sources. Cumulatively, these countries account for 36.4 percent of the total US\$118.7 billion remittance flows in 2023–24.⁶ Further, about 9 million Indians live in the GCC (see Table 1), underscoring the depth of societal and economic

ties. Gulf sovereign investors have also expanded activity in India across infrastructure, healthcare, and technology.⁷ This economic interdependence has created a shared trust upon which more ambitious multilateral ventures like the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC)⁸ and the India, Israel, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and the United States (I2U2)⁹ have been built.

However, GCC-India economic ties are not monolithic. While the UAE accounts for 55 percent of the total trade, Bahrain constitutes only 1 percent (see Table 1). A similar trend is visible in diaspora distribution, with the UAE and Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) hosting 70 percent of all Indians in the GCC. Therefore, the impact of this new pact needs to be evaluated by considering the differentiated geoeconomic trajectories.

**Table 1: India–GCC Trade and Indian Diaspora
(FY 2024–25)**

Country	Total Trade FY 2024–25 (US\$ bn) ¹⁰	Size of Indian diasporic community ¹¹
United Arab Emirates (UAE)	100	3,554,274
Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA)	42	2,460,603
Qatar	14	835,175
Oman	11	684,771
Kuwait	10	993,284
Bahrain	2	323,908
Total	179	8,852,015

Sources: Ministry of External Affairs, India and Embassy of India, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

Geoeconomic Impact of SMDA

The announcement of the SMDA transforms a landscape of predictable economic cooperation into one of strategic uncertainty. Its most immediate effect is that it contaminates the India–Saudi economic relationship with intensifying

India–Pakistan security tensions. While KSA has historically extended strong support to Pakistan, this NATO-like guarantee has the ability to switch support for Pakistan to combat against India.¹² The SMDA formally commits Riyadh and Islamabad to respond jointly to aggression, injecting a Pakistan risk premium into all long-term economic calculations.

The India-Saudi Arabia economic partnership is built upon a massive energy trade,¹³ a significant size of Indian diaspora, and growing investments from the Public Investment Fund (PIF) into the Indian market.¹⁴ The Kingdom is India's fourth-largest trading partner.¹⁵ Strategists note that KSA probably predicted that this pact would unsettle India,¹⁶ given recent border tensions with Pakistan,¹⁷ yet proceeded with it. Therefore, for New Delhi, the geoeconomic relationship with Riyadh now shifts from one of increasing strategic trust to one of managed risk. Indian corporations and international financiers involved in ambitious ventures in KSA or in projects like IMEC must now model the potential risk of supply-chain disruptions or political complications during an India-Pakistan crisis. While energy trade, born of mutual necessity, will most likely continue, the appetite for new, capital-intensive strategic projects might be tempered. The India-Saudi Arabia relationship will likely become more cautious, with a greater focus on de-risking existing assets rather than launching new ventures.

This emerging dynamic will create strong incentives for India to diversify its partnerships away from Saudi Arabia and deepen ties with other Gulf partners. India's strategic focus will shift towards states that combine established relationships with aligned economic interests. The UAE, as the region's premier geoeconomic counterweight and India's closest economically, will remain a "de-risked" hub for economic cooperation. With Abu Dhabi emphasising strategic autonomy and diversified security ties, the SMDA increases the UAE's geoeconomic value for India. However, given the already mature India-UAE economic partnership, an opportunity now emerges for New Delhi to broaden its focus. India might look to deepen relationships with other GCC states, where significant and untapped potential for deeper economic integration exists.

In energy security, while Saudi Arabia will remain a supplier, India is likely to accelerate engagement with Kuwait for more long-term crude arrangements. Kuwait is already a crude partner¹⁸ and among India's top suppliers in FY 2024-25, and this trade relationship is likely to grow.

For its critical LNG needs, Qatar's independent foreign policy becomes even more valuable. With QatarEnergy and India's Petronet renewing India's largest long-term LNG supply arrangement in 2024,¹⁹ Qatar will remain central to India's energy security. For strategic investment, India may expand on rising Qatar Investment Authority activity in India and seek deeper ties with the Kuwait Investment Authority,²⁰ one of the region's largest sovereign funds with assets exceeding US\$1 trillion.²¹ These partners offer more predictable, de-risked avenues for long-term growth. This diversification offers a mutual benefit: India mitigates strategic risk, while these Gulf states gain deeper access to one of the fastest-growing markets in the world.

This recalibration will extend to people-to-people ties. While the considerable Indian diaspora of 2.4 million in Saudi Arabia cannot be substituted overnight, the new security pact introduces a layer of perceived risk for the community. New Delhi could more actively promote labour agreements and encourage future migration flows towards the politically

stable environments of Kuwait and Oman, which already host a large number of Indians (see Table 1). Thereby, seeking to gradually diversify its deployment of human capital across the region.

The Possibility of SMDA Expansion

This strategic recalibration, however, depends on the SMDA remaining a bilateral agreement between Riyadh and Islamabad. The possibility of the pact's expansion looms large over India's calculations, as any new signatory would trigger a far more severe geoeconomic crisis for New Delhi. Given the degree of economic interdependence, the potential accession of the UAE or Qatar to the pact would have the most severe and immediate impact on the India-GCC trade relationship. The prospect of Oman and Kuwait joining the agreement would moderately impact these interests, given the extent of trade and diaspora ties. Bahrain's accession, while symbolically significant in broadening Pakistan's influence in the region, would have a minimal impact on India's relationship with the Gulf, as it accounts for the smallest Indian diaspora and trade relationship (see Table 1).

In conclusion, this pact also poses a fundamental challenge to the central narrative of India's successful regional strategy. India's rising economic weight and neutral diplomatic posture has made it an indispensable partner for the Gulf's future. The SMDA forces a reassessment of this assumption. By formally elevating Pakistan to a

mutual-defence partner of Saudi Arabia, the pact shatters the illusion that economics and security could be kept in separate, manageable spheres. Riyadh broadening its deterrence options with a long-standing hard-power partner exposes the limits of economic statecraft when core security dilemmas surface.

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Exploring the European Perspective

Eszter Karacsony

Three symbolically and strategically significant events took place on 16 and 17 September 2025, which could impact the European Union's (EU) pursuit of its multi-regional strategic interests. The protagonists of these events, other than the EU, are the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), India, and Pakistan: three countries with which the Union has established partnerships to varying degrees and in multiple forms.¹

On 16 September, H.E. Faisal F. Alibrahim, Minister of Economy and Planning of the KSA, and Luigi Di Maio, EU Special Representative for the Gulf region, met in Brussels.² The enhancement of bilateral “economic and trade ties”,³ and the planned launch of the parties’ Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA) negotiations⁴ were among the key topics discussed⁵—all of which align with the EU’s objective of strengthening relations with Gulf Cooperation Council countries (GCC), like the KSA.⁶ The EU perceives these states as strategic partners in a region of critical importance.⁷ It stated explicitly that the “security and stability situation of the Gulf region bears direct consequences for the EU.”⁸

The day after, on 17 September, the European Commission and the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy adopted a Joint Communication on a New Strategic EU-India Agenda.⁹ The EU describes this development as a “significant milestone”¹⁰ in the parties’ relations. This Strategic Agenda “deepens, broadens, and better coordinates EU-India cooperation – delivering mutually beneficial and transformative outcomes [emphasis in original] for both partners and for the wider world.”¹¹ Its elaboration marks a step toward the implementation of the EU’s “new economic foreign policy”,^{a,12} which seeks to establish and advance the Union’s economic relations in line with its geopolitical interests.¹³

On the same day, the KSA and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan announced the signing of a bilateral Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement (SMDA).¹⁴ Contrary to the first two events in which the EU played a direct role consistent with its strategic objectives, it is neither a party to nor

directly concerned by the third. However, even if the Saudi-Pakistan Agreement has no direct bearing on Brussels, it may have ramifications on the region’s geopolitical and geoeconomic interests. These could result from extra-European power dynamics that might play out in fields and regions—like the Middle East and the Indo-Pacific—that are strategically important to the Union. Within these aforementioned two geographies, interest constellations and the interplay of tensions might alter the relations between key EU partners, like India and Saudi Arabia, and hinder the achievement of the Union’s goals.

Thus, from an anticipatory EU standpoint, it could be particularly relevant to assess the Agreement’s potential implications for some key strategic matters that are important to the EU’s security, stability, and economic prosperity; and that the Union wants to bolster partially through its relations with New Delhi and Riyadh. These matters are: a) stability in the EU’s wider neighbourhood; and b) multi-regional trade and connectivity.¹⁵

a An explicit reference is made to “a new Strategic EU-India Agenda” in Ursula von der Leyen’s political guidelines for the 2024-2029 European Commission, under the sub-chapter titled ‘A new economic foreign policy’. In Ursula von der Leyen, *Europe’s Choice: Political Guidelines for the Next European Commission 2024–2029*, 18 July, 2024, pp 27-28.

The EU's Middle East Security and Stability Approach Put to a Test

The EU perceives the Gulf countries as actors with significant regional stabilising potential that could be instrumental in conflict de-escalation and settlement in the Middle East,¹⁶ and as key partners in the “promot[ion] of global and regional security”.¹⁷ More specifically, and in line with the EU rationale, these countries could play a key role in “region-led processes”¹⁸ to restore and preserve stability in the Middle East, with the Union’s support if required.¹⁹

The KSA-Pakistan Agreement could challenge this logic and approach, should it result in a military intervention by an extra-regional power and lead to conflict escalation. The agreement was announced in a context marked by Israel’s attack on Hamas leaders in Doha,²⁰ which could put into question the United States’ (US) standing as a main security provider for the region. In

view of these dynamics, seeking to prevent further destabilisation and hostilities, the EU might aim to adapt and further enhance its existing and foreseen sectoral cooperation with the Gulf states on “regional stability and global security”.²¹ The planned SPA negotiations, set to “addres[s] common challenges and harne[s] joint opportunities across the rapidly evolving Middle East region,”²² might also serve this purpose.

Is Multi-Regional Connectivity at Risk?

In addition to its potential security implications on the EU’s wider neighbourhood, the extent to which the Saudi Arabia-Pakistan Agreement could affect the Union’s connectivity with the Middle East and the Indo-Pacific might also be assessed. The India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) is a multi-regional project whose implementation is highly scrutinised under these circumstances. The EU, the KSA, and India are all signatories to the latter.^b

^b The signatory parties to the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) are the following: European Union, France, Germany, India, Italy, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, United States.

There is one scenario in which the project's implementation might be jeopardised due to a shift in cooperation dynamics between Saudi Arabia and India. This is based on the assumption that the KSA-Pakistan defence rapprochement might erode political trust between Riyadh and New Delhi²³ and hinder the realisation of the project. Such an eventuality could undermine the Union's economic interests as IMEC is expected to serve both as a facilitator and catalyst for EU-India trade flows, especially since the corridor's implementation could come together with the conclusion of a bilateral Free Trade Agreement that is currently being negotiated²⁴ between the parties.²⁵ Based on estimates presented by France's IMEC Special Envoy in April 2025, Europe-India trade flows are predicted to "increase by 6%, or even 7% on average per year until 2032 and possibly beyond."²⁶ Therefore, should Riyadh or New Delhi disengage, the project's disruption could be detrimental for the EU's commercial prospects.

However, as expert sources interviewed by this author stated, the aforementioned scenario is highly unlikely: even following the announcement of the KSA-Pakistan Agreement, the parties have not suspended exchanges on the Corridor's future development and are not expected to do so.²⁷ This might be explained by the countries' economic interest in IMEC, which may take precedence over potential political grievances.²⁸ Additionally, the project's logic resonates with a key component of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030:²⁹ to leverage the Gulf state's central position at the crossroads of continents. As this vision-plan states, "We will use our strategic location to build our role as an integral driver of international trade and to connect three continents: Africa, Asia and Europe."³⁰

Another factor suggesting that the Saudi-India relations will not hinder IMEC is a statement made by the Official Spokesperson of the Indian Ministry of External Affairs, Shri Randhir Jaiswal, on 19 September.³¹ As he pointed out, "Our expectation is that our strategic partnership with Saudi Arabia will be pursued keeping in mind mutual interests and sensitivities, within the framework of this partnership."³²

In this context, the EU might focus on steering IMEC's implementation in areas within its ambit, like conducting and completing “economic analysis”³³ or “mapping and feasibility studies”³⁴ with IMEC signatory EU member states, and engaging with the private sector.³⁵ The European Commission “will, as appropriate, mobilise relevant EU instruments, and is exploring technical assistance, soft connectivity and ways to leverage both private and public investment for hard infrastructure.”³⁶

Conclusion

In the context of a complex set of interest constellations and the interplay of tensions, the Saudi-Pakistan Mutual Defence Agreement might have implications for geographies—like the

Middle East and the Indo-Pacific—and for some strategic matters that hold particular importance for the EU's security, prosperity, and stability. Multi-regional connectivity, and regional stability in its wider neighbourhood are such matters.

Against the potential backdrop of changing power dynamics within these geographies and between key EU partners, the Union might adopt an agile and proactive approach. The latter could entail advancing initiatives that serve the EU's strategic interests in fields within its reach. As such, the Union might take the opportunity presented by the SPA planned to be negotiated with Riyadh to bolster—to the extent possible—its security and stability approach for the Middle East, and carry out concrete operational steps to advance IMEC's implementation.

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China Evaluates the Saudi Arabia-Pakistan Military Compact

Atul Kumar

Saudi Arabia's ties with Pakistan have warmed in recent years, and this trend is well understood in Beijing. Chinese policymakers were well aware¹ of Riyadh's growing eagerness to formalise Pakistan's role in its security architecture, especially after Islamabad refused to join the military coalition in 2015 against Houthi rebels in Yemen.² However, Beijing did not expect those discussions to evolve into a mutual security alliance that included provisions on collective defence.

The announcement on 17 September,³ therefore, came as a calculated but unexpected move, one that caught many off guard, especially as Beijing had long viewed such an arrangement as politically ambitious but practically unenforceable.⁴ Islamabad, for its part, has shown enthusiasm for defending the Saudi kingdom from internal or external threats, particularly to the regime's stability. This chapter examines the strategic logic of the defence pact and shows how China's assessment shapes its implications for the emerging security order across South and West Asia.

Saudi Arabia–Pakistan: Traditional Security Requirements

The Saudi-Pakistani security relationship is defined less by strategy than by necessity. Riyadh has deliberately kept its army weak, investing in a tightly controlled National Guard to shield the monarchy. The rise of Nasserism^a and militarised Arab states in the 1950s and 1960s convinced Saudi rulers that strong conventional forces threatened regime survival.⁵ Subordinating the army to loyal confidants and maintaining a domestic force under direct royal command insulated the monarchy from internal challenges.

Pakistan's vulnerabilities complemented Saudi caution.⁶ Chronic poverty and persistent insecurity vis-à-vis India, leading to the accumulation of substantial military capabilities, made Islamabad a natural recipient of Saudi financial and political support.⁷ Riyadh's donations helped sustain Pakistan's defence posture, Saudi rulers mediated its internal political tensions, and extended the kingdom's influence. The relationship is therefore less an alliance than a symbiosis of dependency, apprehension, and political calculation.

Saudi military neglect was brutally exposed during the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, prompting King Faisal bin Abdulaziz Al Saud to modernise the armed forces: infrastructure was expanded, advanced weapons were purchased, and foreign trainers, including Pakistanis, were brought in.⁸ The 1973 oil windfall funded advanced Western and Chinese weapons platforms. However, operational integration, even at present, remains bare minimum—a vulnerability that the Houthis have repeatedly exploited by finding gaps in military planning, air defence, and aerial strike campaigns.

Additionally, Riyadh has remained reliant on the US nuclear umbrella and American strategic interests in the Middle East to protect its own interests. However, over the years, the reduction of Washington's focus on Middle Eastern conflicts and a general war weariness among the American public have pushed Riyadh to hedge through Pakistan's programme, albeit cautiously.⁹ Ideology has only occasionally aligned with interest.

a The term 'Nasserism' refers to the nationalist ideology associated with Gamel Abdel Nasser, who led the Free Officers revolt in Egypt in 1952. As an ideological movement, it can be characterised as a system of ideas encompassing some or all aspects of anti-imperialism, pan-Arabism, and Arab socialism.

During the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Pakistan declared that an attack on the Arab world would be treated as an attack on itself.¹⁰ The statement revealed the limits of Islamabad's capacity despite its self-image as defender of Islam, as it was limited to symbolism.

Israel's strikes on Qatar in September this year,¹¹ however, underscored the limits of American protection and Israel's perceived precedence in the US calculations, prompting Saudi urgency for a regional hedge. Religious affinity, financial incentives, and Sunni solidarity brought Islamabad on board, producing a collective defence pact. For Riyadh, it signals options to Washington; for Islamabad, it delivers a crucial financial lifeline amid economic crises.

China: The Third Leg

Beijing understands the strategic calculations underpinning the Riyadh-Islamabad relationship. China interprets Saudi moves as an effort to diversify security partnerships, assert strategic autonomy, and deepen ties with a fellow Sunni state.¹² Chinese analysts also anticipate that other Gulf actors, including Qatar and the United Arab

Emirates (UAE), may pursue similar security arrangements with Pakistan,¹³ particularly in light of eroding trust after America's apparent tolerance, or indifference, toward Israel's strikes on Qatar.

Historical precedent reinforces Saudi confidence in Pakistan.¹⁴ During the 1960s-'80s, and again during the 1991 Gulf War, Islamabad deployed around 19,000 troops to the kingdom.¹⁵ About 1,700 Pakistani forces remain deployed today in Saudi Arabia,¹⁶ where they benefit from enduring goodwill. Their reputation draws heavily on claims that they defended Mecca during the 1979 Grand Mosque seizure, an account whose accuracy is uncertain but politically convenient for both governments.

Consequently, Saudi financial backing has been an enabler of Pakistan's defence capabilities. In 1981, for instance, Pakistan acquired 40 F-16s from Washington for US\$1.1 billion, with Riyadh covering roughly half of the cost.¹⁷ The pattern appears consistent: in December 2021, reports circulated suggesting that a US\$3-billion Saudi loan¹⁸ may have indirectly financed Islamabad's procurement of J-10 fighter aircraft from China.¹⁹

Such transactions underscore that the relationship is not merely ideological or strategic but materially grounded, with Saudi funds directly shaping Pakistan's military posture and reinforcing the kingdom's leverage.²⁰

This emerging alignment generates measured optimism in Beijing. Pakistan remains one of the largest buyers of Chinese arms, and the new Saudi connection opens two clear avenues of benefit.²¹ First, Saudi financing could allow Islamabad to acquire more advanced Chinese systems, stealth fighters, drones, and other high-end platforms that it could not otherwise afford. Second, Pakistan could serve as China's conduit into Gulf defence markets, where Beijing's reputation has long lagged behind Western and Russian competitors.²²

Saudi Arabia has previously purchased limited Chinese hardware,²³ such as the CH and Wing Loong drone series and some munitions, but concerns about reliability and performance have curbed enthusiasm. Riyadh, which consistently maintains the world's second-largest defence budget, treats arms procurement as both a prestige exercise and a diplomatic instrument, strengthening ties with suppliers as much as improving capabilities. In this environment,

China's relative technological weakness and persistent low-quality defence production remain a constraint.

Still, the Pakistan connection offers Beijing an indirect path to credibility. If Chinese systems, financed by Saudi capital and operated by Pakistani forces, perform effectively, they could soften Gulf scepticism and expand China's defence footprint. For now, Chinese optimism remains guarded, but the potential for Pakistan to act as Beijing's bridge into the Arab arms market is unmistakable.²⁴

China's tempered expectations, however, rest on grounded realities.²⁵ Over the past decade, Saudi Arabia's economic ties with India have improved substantially. In 2024–25, bilateral trade reached US\$42 billion, giving the relationship strategic weight and paving the way for closer political engagement, while narrowing Islamabad's space for manoeuvring.²⁶ In the future, Riyadh may counsel restraint in a South Asian crisis, but its deepening ties with India make any military support for Pakistan improbable.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the Saudi Arabia-Pakistan agreement reflects a new phase of pragmatic multilateralism in global politics, where states increasingly weave overlapping and sometimes contradictory partnerships to secure their national interests. For Saudi Arabia, the defence pact with Pakistan enhances strategic flexibility without compromising its expanding ties with India. For Pakistan, it signals continued relevance in a shifting regional order, albeit within sharply defined limits.

The pact opens a financial lifeline for Pakistan's ailing economy. A defence commitment to Riyadh is likely to attract Saudi investment into Pakistan's military sector, channelling funds into weapons procurement and dual-use technologies, especially from an eager Beijing, that could tilt its conventional balance with India. If calm prevails in Gaza, the arrangement may yield limited strategic value for Saudi Arabia but expand Islamabad's leverage with Beijing, Riyadh, and even Washington. In this evolving landscape, New Delhi will need a nimble diplomatic strategy to constrain Saudi defence investments in Pakistan, before a hypothetical Saudi threat becomes a tangible challenge to India's western regions. [ORF](#)

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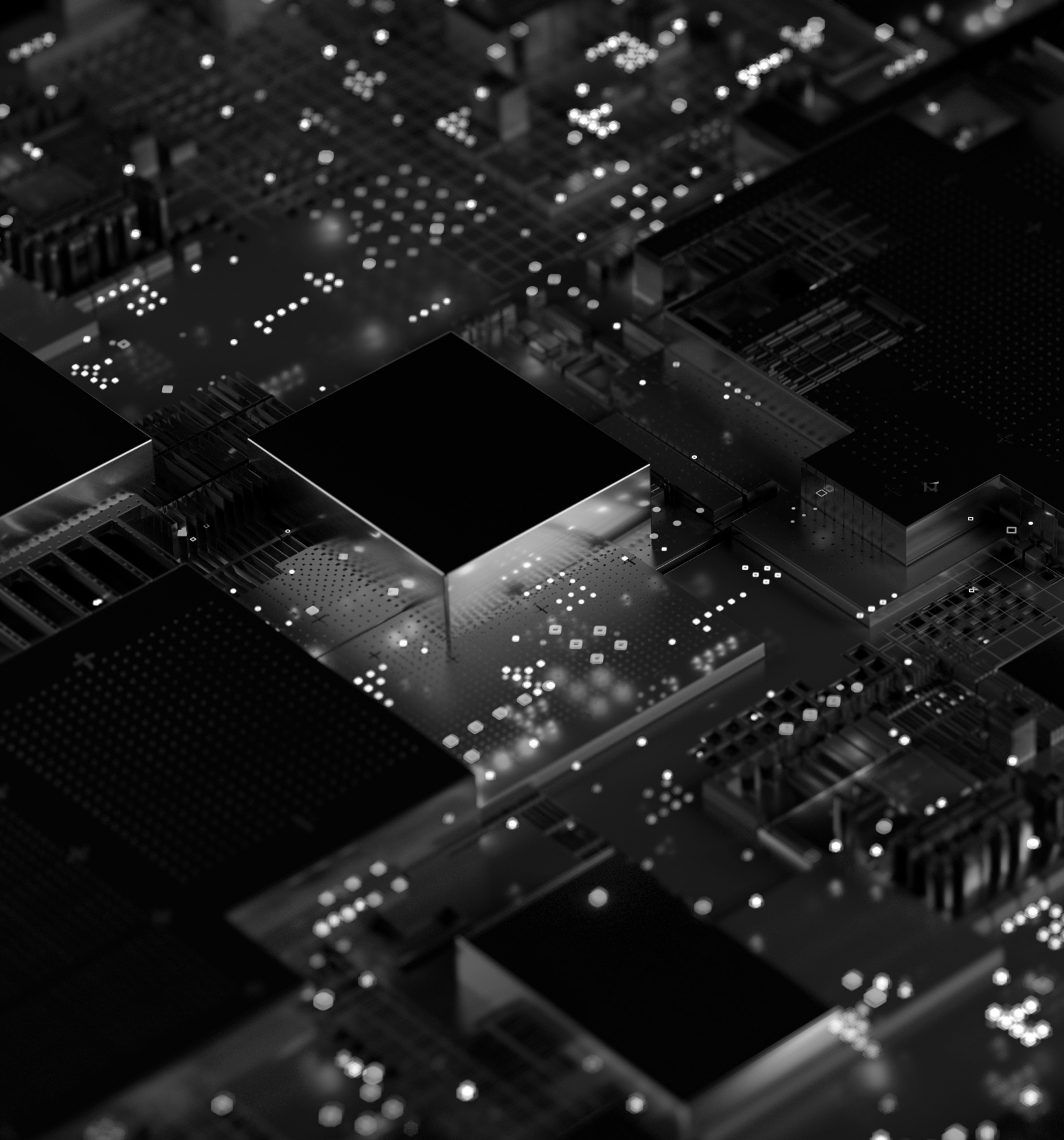
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