

Pakistan–Saudi Arabia Defence Agreement: Implications for India

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Introduction

On 17 Sep 2025, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia signed a landmark Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement, which formally commits the two nations to deepen defence cooperation and strengthen joint deterrence against any aggression. The agreement states that any aggression against either country shall be considered as an aggression against both.¹



Image: Signing of Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement

Source: Saudi Press Agency²

This agreement was signed almost immediately after the Extraordinary Session of the Supreme Council of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), held on 15 Sep in response to Israel's attack on Qatar. During the session, GCC members declared an attack on one member as an attack on all and resolved to accelerate efforts toward deeper Gulf defence integration.³

Israel's militarism has amplified instability and uncertainty in the region and compelled GCC member countries to review their strategic

challenges and security dependencies. Within this context, the Pakistan-Saudi Arabia agreement appears not only as a logical consequence of regional insecurity but also as a deliberate strategic repositioning by Riyadh. Forging a formal security pact with a militarily capable and nuclear-armed state can be seen as Saudi Arabia's attempt to enhance its deterrence independent of long-standing United States' (US) security umbrella.

Pakistan–Saudi Arabia Friendship

Pakistan and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia have their historic partnership extending for nearly eight decades and is based on bonds of brotherhood and Islamic solidarity, as well as shared strategic interests and close defence cooperation.⁴ Saudi Arabia was one of the first countries to recognise Pakistan during its independence in 1947. In 1951, the two nations signed a 'Treaty of Friendship'⁵, paving way for deeper cooperation in different areas.

In 1982, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia signed a Bilateral Security Cooperation Agreement enabling ongoing Pakistani military training, advisory roles, and deployments on Saudi soil. Since then, Pakistan has provided military training to more than 8,000 Saudi military personnel.⁶ An estimated 1,500 to 2,000 Pakistani troops are currently stationed in the Kingdom.

Pakistan and Saudi Arabia also share strong economic relations, characterised by trade, investment, labour migration, and financial assistance. These include bilateral trade of approximately USD 3 bn, Saudi investments in Pakistan nearing USD 3 bn, and the remittances from approximately 2.5 million Pakistani diaspora in the Kingdom who support Pakistan's economy. Historically, Saudi Arabia has provided approximately USD 30 bn in financial assistance to Pakistan since 1980s.⁷ The current agreement is likely to further encourage economic collaboration between the two countries. Against this backdrop, the Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement appears to be a natural consequence of this longstanding partnership and military ties, and a result of ongoing deliberations catalysed by Israel's attack on Doha.

India–Saudi Arabia Bilateral Relations

India and Saudi Arabia also enjoy close friendly relations. Diplomatic relations were established in 1947 and, since then, both the nations have made consistent efforts to elevate the relations to a strategic partnership through 'Riyadh Declaration' in 2010. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has visited the Kingdom three times in his tenure so far, highlighting growing ties between the two countries. Bilateral trade ties have steadily grown over the years. India is the second largest trade partner of Saudi Arabia, whereas Saudi Arabia is the fifth largest trading partner of India. Saudi Arabia remained India's third largest crude and petroleum products sourcing destination for financial year 2023-24. Indian investments in Saudi Arabia have also increased in the recent years, and major Indian companies and corporate groups have established a strong presence in the Kingdom. The Saudi investment in India has also grown to about USD 10 bn.

The bilateral defence partnership between the two nations has strengthened in the recent years. In Feb 2024, an agreement worth USD 225 mn was signed for export of defence ammunition from India to Saudi Arabia. Two editions of the bilateral naval exercise 'Al Mohed Al Hindi' have been concluded, in 2021 and 2023. The first ever bilateral Land Force Exercise 'Sada Tanseeq' was held in 2024. Service staff talks have already been initiated. 76 trainees from King Fahd Naval Academy of the Royal Saudi Naval Forces completed their Afloat Training Course with Indian Navy in Jul 2024.⁸ In Apr 2025, the Strategic Partnership Council expanded to include a ministerial committee on defence cooperation.⁹

2.7 million Indian diaspora constitutes the largest expatriate group in Saudi Arabia, serving as a living bridge between the two countries. The contributions made by the Indian community to the development of Saudi Arabia are well acknowledged.¹⁰ The annual Hajj pilgrimage is another important component of India-Saudi Arabia bilateral relations. Approximately 1,75,000 people performed Hajj in 2025.¹¹

The economy is the primary reason for development of strong relationship between India and Saudi Arabia. Riyadh is important for India's energy security; at the same time, it serves as an expanding market for Indian goods. For Saudi Arabia, commercial partnerships with large economies like India are crucial for its ambition to become the premier Middle East business hub.¹²

Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement: Implications

Saudi Arabia sees its relationship with India and Pakistan separately and practices policy of strategic balance. It is acutely aware of complexities of Indo-Pak relations, particularly, around the issue of cross-border terrorism. It is acutely aware of India's concerns regarding Pakistan-sponsored terrorist activities and has repeatedly voiced strong opposition to terrorism in all its forms. Saudi Arabia's strong condemnation of terrorist attack in Pahalgam in Jammu and Kashmir reaffirms its principled stance against all forms of violence, extremism, and the targeting of civilians.¹³ The unannounced visit of Saudi Arabia's Minister of State for Foreign Affairs to New Delhi on 08 May in order to diffuse the tension between the two countries not only reflected the Kingdom's concern over regional volatility but also demonstrated the depth of its bilateral engagements with both nations, and the diplomatic confidence to engage in quiet crisis management.

The strategic agreement between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia undeniably serves Islamabad's strategic and geopolitical interests in multiple ways. The pact not only embeds Pakistan in the security architecture of the Middle East and uplifts its regional stature but also gives access to Gulf's vast financial and economic resources. Pakistan may leverage this opportunity to revive its struggling economy and enhance its defence capabilities potentially to counterbalance its internal instability and external threats, particularly from India. Pakistan may also attempt to leverage Riyadh's diplomatic clout to garner support for its stance on Kashmir issue and corner India at international platforms.

Despite the strategic sensitivity, Saudi Arabia proceeded with the agreement, notably timed around Prime Minister Narendra Modi's birthday, a move that could be interpreted as a signal to India, possibly in response of its apparent pro-Israel tilt.

Another related issue is potential emergence of the broader military collaboration of Islamic nations, which may pave way for a 'Islamist North Atlantic Treaty Organization'¹⁴ kind of alliance, with nuclear Pakistan playing a major role, thus, reshaping the regional balance of power. Such a possibility would demand a major strategic recalibration and intense diplomatic engagement with key Middle Eastern actors by New Delhi.

For India, Saudi Arabia has always been a critical factor in its Pakistan policy calculus and the new defence pact enhances the 'Saudi factor'. It is unlikely that Riyadh will deploy troops and military equipment to openly side with Pakistan against India in the manner as claimed by Pakistani

Defence Minister¹⁵, especially when the issue revolves around terrorism. Given Saudi Arabia's longstanding condemnation of terrorism and its efforts to project itself as a responsible global actor, it is highly unlikely that Riyadh would risk its international credibility by overtly supporting state-sponsored or non-state terror operations directed at India. Nevertheless, covert or indirect support to Pakistan in a conflict scenario—through financial assistance, logistical support, diplomatic lobbying, or even non-military aid—is more likely, particularly, if Riyadh perceives Pakistan to be at the risk of international isolation.

Conclusion

It is important to note that India–Saudi Arabia relationship has evolved significantly in the recent years, maturing into a comprehensive strategic partnership underpinned by mutual respect, converging interests, and deepening economic and energy. This progress reflects the growing pragmatism in the bilateral relations.

Undeterred by the defence agreement, India should continue to strengthen bilateral engagement with Saudi Arabia, reinforce its presence in the broader Middle East, and present itself as a constructive regional actor. By leveraging its growing economic weight and strategic relevance, India can work to ensure that its interests are safeguarded, even as the geopolitical landscape of West Asia continues to evolve. At the same time, India should continue to practice zero-tolerance approach to terrorism, underscoring that any cross-border attack will elicit a swift and punitive response. This doctrine must remain central to India's counterterrorism strategy.

Endnotes

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