

Implications of the Saudi-Pakistan Mutual Defence Agreement

Introduction

For Pakistan the last few months could not have been better as far as their foreign policy is concerned. They already have the closest alignment with China, which provides it both military and economic support. Coupled with that, General Munir was invited for lunch by President Trump signaling a turnaround in Pak-United States (US) relations and on 17 Sep Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif signed a 'Strategic mutual defence agreement with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman' (SMDA).¹ The ceremony at the Royal Court in Al-Yamamah Palace in Riyadh was witnessed by senior officials from Saudi Arabia, alongside representatives from Pakistan, which included the Army Chief Field Marshal Asim Munir.

To quote the joint statement, "This agreement, which reflects the shared commitment of both nations to enhance their security and to achieve security and peace in the region and the world, aims to develop aspects of defence cooperation between the two countries and strengthen joint deterrence against any aggression".²

The deal comes at a critical moment and adds a new layer in the complexity of Indo-Pak relations in the aftermath of Operation Sindoor. Regional politics have been upended by two years of Israeli aggression, including its war on Gaza and strikes on neighbouring states capped by last week's Israeli attack on Doha, Qatar's capital, which borders Saudi Arabia.³

Describing the deal as the culmination of 'Years of discussions', a senior Saudi said that, "This is not a response to specific countries or specific events but an institutionalisation of longstanding and deep cooperation between our two countries".

History of Pakistan–Saudi Military Relations

Saudi Arabia was one of the first countries to recognise Pakistan after its independence. In 1951, the two nations signed a 'Treaty of Friendship', laying the

foundation for decades of strategic, political, military, and economic cooperation.⁴ The military cooperation deepened in the following years between the two countries.

In 1982, the two sides institutionalised security ties through a Bilateral Security Cooperation Agreement, which further cemented this cooperation. According to reports, over 8,000 Saudis have been trained by Pakistan since 1967.⁵

Brigadier Feroz Hassan Khan, in his book *Eating Grass: The Making of the Pakistani Bomb* said Saudi Arabia provided “Generous financial support to Pakistan that enabled the nuclear programme to continue, especially when the country was under sanctions”.

But the pact comes at a time when the Middle East’s geopolitical chessboard is in flux. Saudi Arabia has two primary adversaries, Iran and Israel and relies on the US for its security needs. However, the fallout from Israel’s war on Gaza and its strikes on regional neighbours has made Gulf States uneasy, as America remains Israel’s closest ally.

While the deal is being viewed as a landmark moment in the decades-old alliance between the two nations whose ties stretch back nearly eight decades. But Zalmay Khalilzad, a former US diplomat with long experience in Afghanistan and Pakistan, expressed concern over the deal, saying it comes in ‘Dangerous Times’.

‘Pakistan has nuclear weapons and delivery systems that can hit targets across the Middle East, including Israel. It is also developing systems that can reach targets in the US’, Khalilzad wrote on X.⁶

The Agreement Strengthens Relations

Pakistan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs said the agreement with Saudi Arabia reflects the “Shared commitment” of both nations to strengthen security and promote regional peace, while also pledging to “Strengthen joint deterrence against any aggression”.⁷ However, the clause to strengthen defence cooperation and joint deterrence across various military and defensive means is important.

The agreement further states that “Any aggression against either country shall be considered an aggression against both”.⁸ This NATO-style wording will be viewed in Islamabad as a major diplomatic victory.

In his 2024 book *War*, American journalist Bob Woodward recounted a conversation in which Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed reportedly 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, Woodward wrote, Salman replied: “I don’t need uranium to make a bomb. I will just buy one from Pakistan”.⁹ No wonder Pakistan’s Defence Minister Khawaja Mohammad Asif said, “What we have, and the capabilities we possess, will be made available to (Saudi Arabia) according to this agreement”.¹⁰

Husain Haqqani, former Pakistan Ambassador to the US, posted on X, “Most likely, Pakistan will now be able to buy US weapons it needs, with Saudi money, which Trump administration seems willing to sell”. Basically, the pact secures Pakistan critical Saudi financial lifelines at a time of economic fragility.

Implications for India

While the deal appears to be aimed at Israel, Yemen and Iran, it has implications and consequences for India. The present state of Indo-Pak relations necessitates caution, as Pakistan entering into a formal defence pact with another country could affect India’s security, diplomatic, and foreign policy calculus. External backing could also lower Pakistan’s threshold for confrontation.

The agreement could rebalance the Pakistan-Saudi relationship, which in recent years has been defined by Saudi financial bailouts for a struggling Pakistani economy, even as Saudi Arabia and India have grown closer in recent years. The question remains as to whether Saudi Arabia has committed itself to Pakistan’s disputes with India, and potentially with the Taliban-led Afghanistan.

No wonder the MEA spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal stated, “We will study the implications of this development for our national security as well as for regional and global stability. The government remains committed to protecting

India's national interests and ensuring comprehensive national security in all domains".¹¹

While there are many unanswered questions regarding the pact specifically regarding what it does or does not cover, including deterrence, resource commitment, operational details, but that does not diminish the significance of this pact.

The India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor, which passes through Saudi Arabia, could also now face headwinds, as the defence pact with Pakistan complicates India's efforts to deepen strategic and economic ties with the kingdom.

But it seems that the pact is likely to have a limited role, as India is a close business partner of Saudi Arabia, which has invested billions of dollars and plans to invest more than USD 100 bn in five years. In fact, Saudi Arabia is India's fourth-largest trading partner, while India ranks as the Riyadh's second-largest partner. India is also one of the biggest importers of Saudi oil.

But is one of the warmest periods in Saudi-Indian relations, marked by deepening energy trade, high-level political visits, and joint military drills being diluted? A senior Saudi official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said "Our relationship with India is more robust than it has ever been. We will continue to grow this relationship and seek to contribute to regional peace whichever way we can".¹²

Conclusion

In the Cold War era, Pakistan signed a Mutual Defence Assistance Agreement with Washington in 1954 and became a member of the SEATO the same year. The following year, Pakistan joined Iran, Turkey and others in the Baghdad Pact or CENTO. However, these 1950s alliances did not yield any automatic US military intervention on Pakistan's behalf in its conflicts in 1965 and 1971, which points to the fact that defence agreements often come with caveats and context. Even with China, despite extensive defence cooperation, Pakistan lacks a formal mutual defence pact. But for Saudi Arabia it is a signal that it is willing to diversify alliances beyond traditional Western security guarantees and an acknowledgement of waning American influence.

For Saudi Arabia, it strengthens defence against threats from Iran, Yemen's Houthi militias, and the regional turbulence caused by Israel. However, Pakistan now risks entanglement in Saudi Arabia's regional rivalries, particularly with Iran.

For India, the agreement has strategic implications which are concerning. Pakistan is India's main security rival, armed with nuclear weapons. Hence, this pact with Saudi Arabia gives Pakistan political backing and financial cover, which could embolden it to escalate tensions.

But the question that needs to be answered is whether Pakistan which has always been India-centric, is now looking in the other direction also and is that direction Israel, which is a close ally of the US or is it Iran, which shares a border with Pakistan or is Pakistan seeing an economic benefit by assisting Saudi Arabia against Yemen? For the present it seems to be a counter-alignment tool. Saudi Arabia seeks protection against Iran and Israel, while Pakistan looks for allies to deter India.

Endnotes

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³ Abid Hussain, "'Watershed': How Saudi-Pakistan Defence Pact Reshapes Region's Geopolitics", *Al Jazeera*, Accessed 18 Sep 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/9/18/watershed-how-saudi-pakistan-defence-pact-reshapes-regions-geopolitics>

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⁷ Ibid

⁸ Sakshi Kuchroo, "Aggression against one, shall be considered against both': Pakistan, Saudi Arabia sign defence deal; India 'will study the implications'", *Financial Express*, Accessed 18 Sep 2025,

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⁹ Abid Hussain, “‘Watershed’: How Saudi-Pakistan Defence Pact Reshapes Region’s Geopolitics”, *Al Jazeera*, Accessed 18 Sep 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/9/18/watershed-how-saudi-pakistan-defence-pact-reshapes-regions-geopolitics>

¹⁰ “Pakistan Says Its Nuclear Program Available to Saudi Arabia under Defense Pact”, *The Times of Israel*, 2025, Accessed 22 Sept 2025, [timesofisrael.com/pakistan-says-its-nuclear-program-available-to-saudi-arabia-under-defense-pact/](https://www.timesofisrael.com/pakistan-says-its-nuclear-program-available-to-saudi-arabia-under-defense-pact/)

¹¹ *Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India*, “Official Spokesperson’s Response to Media Queries on Reports of the Signing of a Strategic Mutual Defence Pact between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan”, 2025, https://www.mea.gov.in/response-to-queries.htm?dtl/40146/Official_Spokespersons_response_to_media_queries_on_reports_of_the_signing_of_a_strategic_mutual_defence_pact_between_Saudi_Arabia_and_Pakistan

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Major General Jagatbir Singh, VSM (Retd) is a Distinguished Fellow at the USI of India. Commissioned in 1981 into the 18 Cavalry, he has held various important command and Staff appointments including command of an Armoured Division.

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