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Issue Brief

New Momentum in the Saudi Arabia–Pakistan Relationship

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Summary

The Saudi Arabia–Pakistan relationship has gained new momentum in recent months with the signing of a defence agreement and an economic cooperation framework. While Saudi Arabia will receive assured Pakistani military support, Pakistan stands to benefit from expanded trade and investment from Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia and Pakistan signed a Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement (SMDA) on 17 September 2025 during the visit of Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and Army Chief General Asim Munir to the Kingdom. The most striking feature of the agreement is the clause which states that “any aggression against either country shall be considered an aggression against both”.¹ The agreement was signed amid the ongoing Israel–Hamas conflict and persisting uncertainty in the West Asian region. The SDMA contributes to the strengthening of Saudi-Pakistani relations and is a matter of concern for India. However, a Saudi official stated that

This is a comprehensive defensive agreement that encompasses all military means. This is not a response to specific countries or specific events but an institutionalisation of long-standing and deep cooperation between our two countries.²

He also added that

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 in whichever way we can.³

This statement suggests Riyadh’s keenness to maintain a delicate balance between India and Pakistan despite signing the defence cooperation agreement with Pakistan.

Saudi–Pak Defence Cooperation

Saudi Arabia and Pakistan have a history of strong defence cooperation. Both countries signed their first defence cooperation agreement in 1967. Pakistan's military forces were deployed in Saudi Arabia, and this has helped the Kingdom strengthen its military and boost its defence. In return, Pakistan has received significant financial assistance from Saudi Arabia. Riyadh provided financial aid to help Pakistan recover from the 1971 India–Pakistan War. As Saudi financial strength grew in the aftermath of the 1973 oil boom, Saudi assistance to Pakistan increased substantially.

The instability in the Gulf region has also strengthened the Saudi–Pakistan defence relationship. The situation in the Gulf region changed significantly following the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979. The Saudi threat perception of revolutionary Iran

¹ Waseem Abbassi, “[Saudi Arabia, Pakistan Sign Landmark Defense Pact, Any Attack on One Seen as Attack on Both](#)”, *Arab News*, 18 September 2025.

² Maha El Dahan and Saeed Shah, “[Saudi Arabia, Nuclear-armed Pakistan Sign Mutual Defence Pact](#)”, *Reuters*, 18 September 2025.

³ Ibid.

grew significantly as Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini took power. Besides, in 1980, the Iran–Iraq War started, which continued till 1988. These two events further heightened Saudi threat perceptions and, thus, its reliance on Pakistan for military support.⁴

Both countries signed the 1982 Protocol on the Deployment of Armed Forces, which authorised the deployment of Pakistani troops in Saudi Arabia. As a result, around 20,000 Pakistani troops were deployed in Saudi Arabia. Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990 brought further instability in the Saudi neighbourhood. Saudi Arabia requested more troops, and 11,000 Pakistani soldiers were deployed to protect the holy sites and the Saudi borders.⁵

Recent Triggers

The situation in West Asia has deteriorated since the Hamas terrorist attack on Israel on 7 October 2023 and the subsequent declaration of war by Israel on Hamas. The war has witnessed the expansion of frontiers beyond Gaza to include the Hezbollah of Lebanon, the Houthis of Yemen, the 12-day Israel–Iran war and the United States’ attack on Iranian nuclear installations. Saudi Arabia expressed its concern regarding the ongoing war, but its apprehensions reached their peak when Israel attacked Doha, where Hamas leaders were supposed to meet.

This incident heightened Saudi wariness about the reliability of the United States as a security guarantor, as Qatar is a key American ally and hosts one of the largest American military bases in the world. It therefore sought to engage with other reliable military partners, such as Pakistan. For Pakistan, its defeat in Operation Sindoora, launched by India following the Pakistan-backed terrorist attack in Pahalgam, was an important reason to accelerate its engagement with Saudi Arabia. Pakistan has always sought the support of Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries against India. Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan visited India and Pakistan during Operation Sindoora and urged de-escalation.

The Nuclear Question

There has been speculation from time to time about Saudi Arabia’s keen interest in procuring nuclear weapons from Pakistan. The then Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah

⁴ For a history of Saudi–Pakistan relations, see Marvin G. Weinbaum and Abdullah B. Khurram, “[Pakistan and Saudi Arabia: Deference, Dependence and Deterrence](#)”, *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 68, No. 2, 2014, pp. 211–228.

⁵ Abdulaziz Sager, “[The Evolution of Saudi-Pakistani Security and Military Relations](#)”, Gulf Research Centre, 2025.

visited Pakistan in October 1998 after Pakistan conducted nuclear tests. This was followed by the visits of the Saudi Defence Minister, Prince Sultan, to the A. Q. Khan laboratories in 1999 and 2002. Saudi Arabia aims to enhance its deterrence capabilities amidst growing tensions in the region. It has been particularly concerned about Iran’s nuclear programme. Riyadh used to issue threats stating that it would go nuclear if Iran were not deterred from its uranium enrichment.⁶

Saudi Arabia has also put pressure on the United States to act against Iran. Although it has declared its intentions of adhering to the objective of the Middle East Nuclear-Free Zone,⁷ there are reports that Saudi Arabia could obtain nuclear weapons from Pakistan.⁸ As both countries have signed the SMDA, Saudi interest in atomic weapons and Pakistani willingness to supply those to Riyadh have once again come up for discussion. If the transfer of nuclear weapons from Pakistan takes place, it will have a devastating effect on regional security and may lead to a nuclear arms race in West Asia.

Saudi Expectations and Challenges for Pakistan

Strong defence cooperation, a key pillar of the Saudi–Pakistan relationship, has also been a source of friction between the two. The Arab unrest, marked by large-scale protests against the rulers, posed a significant challenge for Saudi Arabia. Riyadh expected Pakistan to play a more proactive role in West Asia, particularly in maintaining regional security during turbulent times. Still, Pakistan chose to pursue a balanced approach, keeping its interests in the region in mind. Prolonged protests in neighbouring Bahrain in 2011 were a primary concern for Saudi Arabia. It asked for Pakistan’s military support to help the Bahraini King control the situation. But given the gravity of the situation in the region, Pakistan refused to deploy its troops in Bahrain. However, it did allow Bahrain to recruit Pakistani nationals through private contractors.⁹

In 2015, Saudi Arabia asked for Pakistani military support as the Saudi-led coalition had then intervened in Yemen against the Houthis. Pakistan again refused to send its military but assured Saudi Arabia of support in case of a violation of its territorial integrity or a threat to the holy places. Pakistani refusal to provide military support

⁶ [**“Saudi Arabia Threatens to Develop Nuclear Weapons Against Iran”**](#), *The New Arab*, 18 November 2020.

⁷ [**“Statement of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia at the Sixty-fifth Session of the General Conference of the International Atomic Energy Agency”**](#), IAEA, 20–24 September 2021.

⁸ Mark Urban, [**“Saudi Nuclear Weapons ‘On Order’ from Pakistan”**](#), BBC, 6 November 2013; Simon Henderson, [**“Renewed Saudi-Pakistan Contacts Revive Nuclear Fears”**](#), The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 27 April 2022.

⁹ [**“Pakistani Veterans Beef Up Bahrain Security Forces”**](#), *Voice of America*, 17 August 2011; Ikram Junaidi, [**“Bahrain Recruiting Former Military Men to Quell Protests”**](#), *Daawn*, 15 March 2014.

when it was most needed displeased Saudi Arabia. Later, General Raheel Sharif, former CoAS of Pakistan, was appointed Commander of the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC) in May 2017, which helped ease tensions between the two countries.

Under the latest agreement, while Pakistan seeks economic benefits from its defence pact with Saudi Arabia, it also faces several political and strategic challenges. The deal increases the likelihood of Pakistan becoming entangled in potential military conflicts in West Asia should Saudi Arabia become involved in future hostilities. Previously, Pakistan maintained a threshold on military participation if it deemed the situation unfavourable. However, under the new agreement, Islamabad may be obliged to extend military support to Riyadh, even when it might prefer to remain uninvolved.

Mutual Benefits

The Saudi–Pakistani defence agreement appears to advance the strategic interests of both states. Saudi Arabia, despite possessing substantial financial resources, has a limited military capability while confronting significant security challenges in its neighbourhood. The protracted conflict in Yemen continues to threaten the Kingdom’s national security. Although relations with Iran have improved following the March 2023 rapprochement, Tehran remains a traditional rival. Additionally, the persistent activities of militia groups in Iraq remain a challenge for Saudi security.

Pakistan, by contrast, faces acute economic difficulties yet possesses a robust military establishment and nuclear capability. It is also willing to deploy troops abroad in exchange for financial benefits. Within this context, Saudi Arabia is likely to seek Pakistani military support most urgently in Yemen. For Pakistan, the agreement offers an opportunity to enhance its strategic profile by deepening ties with a major actor in the Islamic world and maintaining relevance alongside partners such as the United States and China. Consequently, Pakistan is expected to gain increased economic assistance from Saudi Arabia, while Saudi Arabia stands to benefit from expanded Pakistani military cooperation.

The Israeli attack on Hamas targets in Qatar in September 2025 raised a question mark on the reliability of the United States security umbrella for the Gulf countries. There is a growing perception in the Gulf that the United States prioritises Israel over them when it comes to regional security. The dissatisfaction of the Gulf countries with the United States’ security umbrella in the region coincides with the growing US–Pakistan relationship and the evident friction in India–US relations. President Donald Trump has expressed his interest in regaining control over the Bagram

Airstrip in Afghanistan, for which the support of Pakistan is crucial. The United States and Pakistan have realigned their relationship, while the United States has imposed higher tariffs on India. In September 2025, both the countries signed a US\$ 500 million investment deal on critical minerals.¹⁰

Saudi–Pakistan Economic Cooperation Framework

In October 2025, during the Pakistani Prime Minister’s visit to the Kingdom, both countries agreed to launch an Economic Cooperation Framework. This agreement, coming in the immediate aftermath of the signing of the Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement in September, shows a new momentum in the Saudi–Pakistan bilateral relationship. Both sides have decided to enhance agriculture, further trade and investment relations, prioritising sectors such as energy, industry, mining, information technology, tourism, agriculture and food security.¹¹ Pakistan’s Defence Minister Khawaja Asif stated that the relationship between the two countries “has entered a new era of confidence and economic collaboration”.¹²

Saudi Arabia’s Balancing Act: Between a Friend and a Brother

There has been some concern in India about the likely implications of the Saudi–Pakistan defence cooperation agreement, especially the clause stating that any aggression against either country shall be considered an aggression against both. On 18 September, India noted that “We will study the implications of this development for national security as well as for regional and global stability”.¹³ On the very next day, India expressed optimism and confidence in the strength of the wide-ranging India–Saudi Arabia strategic partnership, expressing that “this strategic partnership will keep in mind mutual interest and sensitivities”.¹⁴

Saudi Arabia is India’s fifth-largest trade partner, whereas India is Saudi Arabia’s second-largest trade partner. Total bilateral trade between the two countries is over US\$ 41.8 billion.¹⁵ Indian investment in the Kingdom is over US\$ 3 billion, while

¹⁰ “[US Firm Agrees \\$500 Million Investment Deal with Pakistan for Critical Minerals](#)”, *The Economic Times*, 9 September 2025.

¹¹ “[Saudi Arabia, Pakistan Agree to Launch Economic Cooperation Framework](#)”, *Saudi Gazette*, 28 October 2025.

¹² Kashaf Rehman, “[Pakistan, Saudi Arabia Ties Enter ‘New Era’ with Investments Planned in Key Sectors - Minister](#)”, *Arab News*, 3 November 2025.

¹³ “[Official Spokesperson’s Response to Media Queries on Reports of the Signing of a Strategic Mutual Defence Pact between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan](#)”, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 18 September 2025.

¹⁴ “[Weekly Media Briefing by the Official Spokesperson](#)”, Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 19 September 2025.

¹⁵ Department of Commerce, Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Government of India.

Saudi investment in India is around US\$ 10 billion.¹⁶ India is an essential market for Saudi crude oil. Saudi Arabia is the third-largest source of imports for India, valued at US\$ 20 billion.¹⁷ In recent years, both countries have moved beyond the transactional buyer-seller relationship and, in 2019, signed a strategic partnership agreement. India and Saudi Arabia signed a defence cooperation agreement in 2014. Saudi Arabia will not want to lose India to Pakistan. It will undermine the progress of the India–Saudi relationship built over the last two decades.

Given its interests with India and Pakistan, Saudi Arabia has adopted a balanced approach towards both these countries. Riyadh has stated that India is a friend, and Pakistan is a brother. One of the main reasons for Saudi Arabia's balancing act in recent years is that India has emerged as a significant power in global politics and an essential player in the global economy. For Saudi Arabia, bilateral cooperation would help in economic development and cooperation in scientific and technological arenas as well. Riyadh's position on Kashmir has also changed significantly, as it now supports a bilateral resolution of the issue. At the same time, it intends to cultivate ties with Pakistan based on Islamic brotherhood, strengthening defence cooperation and Pakistan's enduring loyalty towards the Kingdom. Therefore, any military escalation between India and Pakistan is not in favour of Saudi interests in South Asia.

For India, the growing Saudi–Pakistan defence cooperation is a matter of strategic concern. This development comes at a time when India–United States ties are at a low, and United States–Pakistan engagement appears to be strengthening. A key question for India is whether Saudi Arabia would support Pakistan militarily in the event of a future India–Pakistan conflict. Given that Saudi Arabia has historically avoided fighting wars beyond its immediate neighbourhood and remains primarily focused on its own national security, this likelihood looks remote.

This was also reflected during the Pakistan–Afghanistan confrontation in September 2025, when Pakistan launched aerial attacks on Kabul, and Afghanistan attacked the Pakistani military post along its border. Saudi Arabia urged both sides to de-escalate and end the conflict. But Qatar and Turkiye conducted the actual negotiations, and both sides signed a ceasefire agreement in Doha.¹⁸ For Saudi Arabia, intervening in any future India–Pakistan conflict would jeopardise the substantial economic, political and strategic gains it has made with India in recent years. Thus, it remains doubtful that Riyadh would risk these broader and long-term interests with India by siding with Pakistan in a military confrontation.

¹⁶ “[India–Saudi Arabia Bilateral Relations](#)”, Embassy of India in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

¹⁷ Department of Commerce, Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Government of India.

¹⁸ “[Pakistan and Afghanistan Agree to an Immediate Ceasefire During a Round of Negotiations in Doha](#)”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, State of Qatar, 19 October 2025.

Conclusion

Deepening ties between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan can be understood within the broader context of regional turmoil in West Asia and the convergence of interests at this point. The shifting regional order following the events of 7 October 2023 and the subsequent Israel–Hamas War has created conducive conditions that encourage both countries to re-energise and strengthen their relationship. The rapid spillover of the War into Lebanon, Syria, Yemen and Iran—and the resulting involvement of the United States, including its strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities—has further reshaped regional security dynamics in the Gulf. In this environment, Saudi Arabia seeks military cooperation from Pakistan, while Pakistan looks to benefit from Saudi financial assistance and diplomatic support in international forums. As before, their partnership continues to draw on the ideological foundation of Islamic brotherhood. The evolving Saudi–Pakistan relationship is a matter of concern for India, though it poses no direct or immediate security threat to India.

About the Author



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