

Emerging Security Alignments in the Muslim World: Pakistan–Türkiye–Saudi Arabia Strategic Cooperation and Implications for South Asian Security

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Abstract

The evolving security relationship among Pakistan, Türkiye, and Saudi Arabia represents an important development in the changing strategic architecture of West and South Asia. The signing of the Makkah Joint Defence Agreement in August 2026, under which an armed attack against one signatory is to be regarded as an attack against all three, has generated discussion about the emergence of a new collective-security arrangement among major Muslim-majority states. This paper examines the strategic drivers, institutional foundations, and regional implications of this emerging trilateral alignment, with particular attention to South Asian security and India. It argues that the arrangement should not be understood simply as the creation of an “Islamic NATO.” Rather, it represents an evolving form of minilateral security cooperation shaped by converging concerns over territorial security, regional instability, defence capabilities, strategic autonomy, and changing geopolitical alignments. Pakistan contributes military and nuclear capabilities, Türkiye provides defence-industrial and military expertise, while Saudi Arabia contributes economic resources and strategic geographical significance. The paper assesses the opportunities and constraints associated with this alignment and examines its possible implications for India, Pakistan–India relations, Gulf security, and the broader South Asian security complex. It concludes that the durability of the arrangement will depend on institutionalisation, threat convergence, and the management of divergent national interests.

Keywords: *Islamic NATO; Pakistan; Türkiye; Saudi Arabia; South Asian Security; Strategic Alignments*

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I. Introduction

The international security environment has undergone significant transformation in recent years. The post-Cold War expectation of predominantly US-led security arrangements has increasingly been accompanied by the emergence of regional partnerships, minilateral groupings, and issue-specific strategic coalitions. These developments have been particularly visible in West Asia and South Asia, where regional states have sought greater strategic autonomy amid intensifying geopolitical competition. The evolving strategic relationship among Pakistan, Türkiye, and Saudi Arabia is one manifestation of this broader transformation.

The signing of the **Makkah Joint Defence Agreement** by Pakistan, Türkiye, and Saudi Arabia on 7 August 2026 represents an important development in this context. According to Pakistan's Foreign Ministry, the agreement provides that an armed attack against any one of the three countries shall be regarded as an attack against all three, while the participating governments have described the arrangement as defensive and consistent with the right of individual and collective self-defence under Article 51 of the United Nations Charter (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan, 2026).

The agreement has generated considerable discussion about whether a new form of collective security arrangement is emerging among Muslim-majority states. Some commentary has referred to the possibility of an “Islamic NATO,” while other assessments caution against equating the Makkah arrangement with NATO because its institutional structures, command arrangements, force commitments, and strategic objectives remain considerably different. The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), for example, identifies the pact as an important geopolitical realignment but also highlights differences in threat perceptions among its members (Alhasan & Wajid, 2026).

This paper therefore avoids treating “Islamic NATO” as an established institutional reality. Instead, it examines the emergence of **security alignment among Pakistan, Türkiye, and Saudi Arabia** and asks what this development means for the security architecture of South Asia. The central research question is: **What**

factors are driving Pakistan–Türkiye–Saudi Arabia strategic cooperation, and what are its potential implications for South Asian security, particularly India's strategic environment?

The paper argues that the emerging trilateral alignment is better understood as a form of **minilateral security cooperation** rather than as a fully institutionalised military alliance. The three states possess complementary capabilities: Pakistan provides substantial military experience and nuclear deterrence; Türkiye possesses a large military establishment and an increasingly important defence-industrial sector; and Saudi Arabia provides considerable economic resources, geographical significance, and access to the Gulf. At the same time, divergent threat perceptions and different relationships with Iran, the United States, China, Israel, and India create constraints on the depth of their cooperation.

II. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The concept of **security alignment** occupies an important position in international relations. States form alliances and strategic partnerships primarily to address perceived security challenges, increase their bargaining power, or reduce dependence on a dominant external power. Walt's (1987) balance-of-threat theory suggests that states respond not simply to the distribution of material power but to perceived threats, including geographical proximity, offensive capabilities, and intentions.

The emerging Pakistan–Türkiye–Saudi Arabia arrangement can partly be interpreted through this framework. Each state faces a distinct security environment, but their strategic interests have increasingly intersected. Pakistan seeks stronger strategic partnerships beyond its traditional relationships; Saudi Arabia seeks greater diversification of its security relationships; and Türkiye has sought a stronger role in regional affairs while expanding its defence-industrial partnerships.

The **Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT)** developed by Buzan and Wæver (2003) is also relevant. RSCT emphasises that security problems tend to cluster regionally because geographical proximity creates strong patterns of security interdependence. South Asia and West Asia are not completely separate security spaces. Pakistan's geographical position connects the Arabian Sea, South Asia, the Gulf, Afghanistan, and Central Asia. Saudi Arabia's security is closely linked to Gulf and Red Sea dynamics, while Türkiye occupies a strategic position linking Europe, the Middle East, the Caucasus, and the Mediterranean.

The trilateral arrangement consequently demonstrates how security complexes can overlap. The security interests of Pakistan and Saudi Arabia are linked through the Gulf and Arabian Sea, while Türkiye's role introduces a wider West Asian and Mediterranean dimension. The development therefore deserves analysis not only as a bilateral or trilateral relationship but also as part of a broader transformation of regional security structures.

The concept of **minilateralism** is equally useful. Unlike large multilateral organisations, minilateral arrangements generally involve a limited number of states whose interests converge around specific strategic objectives. Such arrangements can provide flexibility and rapid coordination but may lack the institutional depth and broad legitimacy of established alliances. The Makkah arrangement reflects this tension between flexibility and institutionalisation.

III. Evolution of Pakistan–Türkiye–Saudi Arabia Strategic Cooperation

The strategic relationship among the three countries did not emerge suddenly in 2026. It is based on longstanding political, religious, economic, military, and diplomatic connections.

3.1 Pakistan and Saudi Arabia

Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have maintained close relations for decades. Their relationship has included economic assistance, religious ties, labour mobility, political cooperation, and defence relations. Pakistan has historically provided military training and security assistance to Saudi Arabia, while Saudi Arabia has been an important economic partner for Pakistan.

The relationship acquired a stronger security dimension during periods of regional instability. In September 2025, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia endorsed a Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement, creating an additional institutional basis for their security partnership. The 2026 Makkah agreement can therefore be viewed partly as an extension of a pre-existing bilateral security relationship (Alhasan & Wajid, 2026).

3.2 Pakistan and Türkiye

Pakistan–Türkiye relations have similarly developed beyond traditional political solidarity. Defence cooperation has become an important component of the relationship. In February 2025, the two countries agreed to strengthen institutional mechanisms dealing with security, defence, and intelligence and established a dedicated Joint Standing Committee in this field (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan, 2025).

Defence-industrial cooperation has also become increasingly important. Türkiye's expanding defence industry and Pakistan's military requirements create possibilities for joint production, technology cooperation,

training, and defence procurement. This relationship gives the trilateral arrangement an industrial and technological dimension beyond conventional diplomatic cooperation.

3.3 Türkiye and Saudi Arabia

Türkiye and Saudi Arabia historically experienced periods of competition over regional influence, particularly following the Arab Spring. However, their relationship has gradually improved. Economic interests, regional instability, and changing geopolitical calculations have encouraged rapprochement.

The Makkah agreement represents a significant institutional step in this rapprochement. The IISS notes that the agreement moves Saudi–Turkish relations from diplomatic rapprochement toward a more formal security relationship, although differences in strategic priorities remain significant (Alhasan & Wajid, 2026). The convergence of these three bilateral relationships created the foundation for the 2026 trilateral security arrangement.

IV. The Makkah Joint Defence Agreement and the Emerging Security Architecture

The Makkah Joint Defence Agreement is the most significant recent development in the trilateral relationship. Signed in Makkah on 7 August 2026, the agreement establishes the principle that an armed attack against one of the three signatories shall be considered an attack against all. Pakistan's government has explicitly characterised the arrangement as defensive and not directed against any particular state (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan, 2026).

The agreement is significant for three reasons.

First, it introduces a **collective-defence principle** into relations among the three states. This is more substantial than ordinary diplomatic consultation because it creates an expectation of mutual support in the event of external aggression.

Second, it brings together three states with complementary strategic resources. Pakistan possesses nuclear weapons and a substantial military establishment. Türkiye has NATO experience, a large conventional military, and a growing defence industry. Saudi Arabia possesses considerable financial resources, energy significance, and strategic geographical importance.

Third, the agreement illustrates the growing willingness of regional states to develop security arrangements that provide alternatives or supplements to dependence on external security providers.

Nevertheless, it would be premature to describe the arrangement as a fully developed “Islamic NATO.” NATO possesses decades of institutional development, integrated command structures, established procedures, common military standards, permanent headquarters, and extensive operational experience. The Makkah arrangement is at a much earlier stage of institutionalisation.

Recent analysis also indicates that the agreement's practical significance will depend on how its collective-defence commitment is interpreted and implemented. The IISS has highlighted uncertainty concerning the extent to which the pact can overcome divergent threat perceptions among its members (Alhasan & Wajid, 2026).

Thus, the most appropriate conceptualisation is an **emerging trilateral security alignment** rather than an established Islamic military alliance.

V. Strategic Motivations of the Three States

5.1 Pakistan's Strategic Objectives

For Pakistan, the trilateral arrangement provides an opportunity to strengthen its international strategic position. Pakistan has historically sought strong relationships with Gulf monarchies and Türkiye while maintaining its strategic partnership with China.

The arrangement may provide Pakistan with additional diplomatic and security leverage at a time when its relationship with India remains competitive and its security environment is affected by instability in Afghanistan and the wider region.

However, Pakistan's participation should not be interpreted solely through an India-centred framework. Pakistan also has interests in Gulf stability, economic security, defence cooperation, and maintaining relations with Saudi Arabia and Türkiye.

5.2 Saudi Arabia's Security Diversification

Saudi Arabia has traditionally depended heavily on external security partnerships, particularly with the United States. However, changing regional conditions have encouraged Riyadh to diversify its diplomatic and defence relationships.

The Makkah agreement provides Saudi Arabia with access to Pakistani military capabilities and Türkiye's defence-industrial expertise. It also offers a regional mechanism through which Saudi Arabia can strengthen deterrence.

At the same time, Saudi Arabia maintains extensive economic and strategic relationships with India. Consequently, its participation in the trilateral arrangement does not automatically imply an adversarial posture toward India.

5.3 Türkiye's Regional Role

Türkiye has increasingly sought a more autonomous role in regional and international politics. Its NATO membership gives it experience with collective defence structures, while its domestic defence industry has expanded significantly.

The partnership with Pakistan and Saudi Arabia allows Türkiye to extend its strategic and defence-industrial relationships. It also enhances Ankara's influence in the Gulf and South Asian strategic environment.

Yet Türkiye's interests cannot be assumed to be identical to those of Pakistan or Saudi Arabia. Different approaches toward Iran, Israel, Russia, the United States, and regional conflicts could constrain long-term strategic convergence.

VI. Implications for South Asian Security

The emergence of this trilateral alignment introduces a new variable into South Asian security. The most direct implication concerns Pakistan's strategic environment.

Pakistan is the only South Asian state participating in the arrangement. Consequently, enhanced Pakistani military cooperation with Türkiye and Saudi Arabia could increase Pakistan's access to defence technology, training, intelligence cooperation, and diplomatic support.

For India, the significance of the development lies primarily in the possibility of Pakistan acquiring additional strategic partnerships outside its traditional China relationship. However, the implications should not be overstated.

India maintains substantial relations with Saudi Arabia, including economic, energy, investment, diaspora, and security cooperation. The importance of these bilateral relations creates an incentive for Riyadh to maintain balanced relations with both Pakistan and India.

Similarly, India and Türkiye maintain extensive economic and diplomatic contacts despite differences on several political questions. Therefore, Türkiye's participation in the trilateral arrangement does not necessarily translate into a comprehensive anti-India alignment.

The Indian strategic response is consequently likely to depend on the actual institutional evolution of the arrangement rather than its initial symbolism.

VII. Implications for India

The emerging alignment presents India with several issues requiring careful strategic assessment.

7.1 Pakistan's Enhanced Strategic Partnerships

The most immediate concern for India is the strengthening of Pakistan's military and diplomatic relationships. If trilateral defence cooperation develops into sustained joint exercises, intelligence sharing, technology cooperation, and defence production, Pakistan's strategic capabilities could be affected.

However, the extent of this impact remains uncertain because the Makkah agreement is still developing institutionally.

7.2 Gulf Security and India's Interests

India's interests in Saudi Arabia and the wider Gulf are substantial. Energy security, trade, investment, remittances, and the welfare of the Indian diaspora make Gulf stability a major component of India's external security environment.

India therefore has an interest in preventing the emergence of rigid bloc politics in West Asia. A highly polarised regional security architecture could complicate India's efforts to maintain relationships with competing regional powers.

7.3 India's Strategic Partnerships

India's broader foreign-policy approach emphasises strategic autonomy and diversified partnerships. Its relationships with the United States, Russia, France, Gulf states, Israel, Japan, Australia, and ASEAN members provide multiple channels for balancing emerging strategic developments.

The trilateral arrangement therefore reinforces the importance of India's policy of maintaining multiple strategic relationships rather than relying on a single security partner.

7.4 Maritime Security

The geographical positions of Pakistan and Saudi Arabia connect the trilateral arrangement to the Arabian Sea, Gulf of Oman, Red Sea, and wider Indian Ocean. Maritime security could therefore become an important area of cooperation.

For India, developments affecting the Arabian Sea and western Indian Ocean have direct consequences for energy transportation and commercial shipping. Any expansion of defence cooperation involving naval capabilities and maritime surveillance would therefore merit attention.

8. Constraints and Challenges

Despite its strategic significance, the trilateral arrangement faces several constraints.

Divergent Threat Perceptions

The three states do not perceive all regional threats in the same way. Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan have different strategic relationships with Iran, Israel, the United States, China, and Russia. The IISS has specifically identified divergent threat perceptions as a potential constraint on the durability of the pact (Alhasan & Wajid, 2026).

Institutional Limitations

The effectiveness of a collective-security arrangement depends on institutions. NATO's experience demonstrates the importance of permanent structures, integrated command systems, military interoperability, and agreed procedures.

The Makkah agreement is relatively new. Its long-term effectiveness will depend on whether the three countries establish durable mechanisms for consultation, intelligence sharing, military planning, exercises, and crisis response.

Economic and Strategic Interdependence

Saudi Arabia's economic relations extend well beyond Pakistan and Türkiye. India is an important economic and energy partner for Riyadh. Similarly, Türkiye maintains significant relations with European and Asian economies.

These interdependencies may limit the willingness of members to adopt policies that impose substantial economic costs.

Avoiding Sectarian Polarisation

The emergence of a security grouping based substantially on shared Muslim-majority identity creates a potential risk of sectarian or bloc-based interpretations. The participating governments have emphasised that the agreement is defensive rather than directed against a particular state (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Government of Pakistan, 2026).

For regional stability, the distinction between **religious solidarity and military bloc formation** will therefore remain important.

9. “Islamic NATO” or Emerging Minilateralism?

The phrase “Islamic NATO” is useful as a popular description but requires analytical caution. NATO is a highly institutionalised military alliance with a permanent organisational structure, integrated military command, common defence planning, and extensive operational capabilities.

The Pakistan–Türkiye–Saudi Arabia arrangement does not yet possess comparable institutional depth. The central similarity is the collective-defence principle. The broader political and military architecture remains under development.

The more analytically useful concept is therefore **Muslim-majority minilateral security cooperation**. This formulation recognises the religious and political connections among the participants without assuming that religious identity automatically produces strategic unity.

The arrangement may eventually develop into a broader regional security framework, but its future trajectory depends upon whether the three governments can reconcile divergent interests and create effective institutions.

10. Future Prospects

The future of the trilateral security alignment can be understood through three possible trajectories.

The first is **limited strategic cooperation**, in which the arrangement remains primarily a mechanism for political consultation, defence cooperation, intelligence exchange, and diplomatic coordination.

The second is **institutionalised minilateralism**, in which the three countries develop regular military exercises, defence-industrial projects, intelligence mechanisms, maritime-security cooperation, and permanent consultation structures.

The third is **broader collective security cooperation**, in which additional states eventually participate or cooperate with the framework.

The second trajectory appears particularly relevant for analytical purposes because it does not require the arrangement to become a NATO equivalent. A flexible minilateral framework could remain strategically significant even without developing into a fully integrated military alliance.

Its expansion, however, could also produce counter-alignments. Regional states such as Iran may perceive greater strategic pressure, while India, Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and other actors could adjust their own security partnerships depending on how the arrangement evolves. Recent analysis has already identified the

possibility that divergent interests among the three members could limit the depth of the alignment (Aryal & Nair, 2026).

11. Conclusion

The emerging security cooperation among Pakistan, Türkiye, and Saudi Arabia represents an important development in the evolving security architecture of West and South Asia. The Makkah Joint Defence Agreement of August 2026 provides the most significant institutional expression of this convergence by establishing a collective-defence commitment among the three states.

The arrangement should nevertheless not be automatically characterised as an “Islamic NATO.” Such a description risks overlooking major differences in institutional structure, strategic objectives, military integration, and threat perceptions. A more appropriate interpretation is that the three states are developing a form of **minilateral security alignment** based on complementary capabilities and converging strategic interests.

Pakistan contributes military capabilities and nuclear deterrence; Türkiye brings conventional military strength, NATO experience, and defence-industrial capacity; and Saudi Arabia provides economic resources and strategic geographical significance. These complementary assets create the basis for cooperation, but divergent national interests place limits on the depth of strategic convergence.

For South Asia, the most important consequence is the possibility that Pakistan's strategic partnerships may become increasingly diversified beyond China. For India, the development requires close observation because it intersects with Pakistan's security environment, Gulf politics, maritime security, and India's relations with Saudi Arabia and Türkiye.

At the same time, Saudi Arabia's extensive relations with India and the different strategic interests of Türkiye and Pakistan indicate that the trilateral framework should not automatically be interpreted as an anti-India bloc. India's strategic interests are better understood in the broader context of the changing regional security complex linking South Asia, the Gulf, and the wider Indo-West Asian region.

Ultimately, the significance of the Makkah arrangement will depend less on its symbolic designation and more on its institutional development. Its future relevance will be determined by the extent to which the three states transform political solidarity into sustained defence cooperation, intelligence coordination, military interoperability, and crisis-management mechanisms. The emerging alignment therefore represents not the completion of a new “Islamic NATO,” but an important experiment in regional minilateral security cooperation whose implications for South Asian security will depend on its evolution.

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