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EVALUATION OF THE PAKISTAN–SAUDI ARABIA JOINT STRATEGIC AGREEMENT



Weekly Analysis is one of the CSRS publications analyzing significant weekly political, social, economic, and security events in Afghanistan and the region. The prime motive behind this is to provide strategic insights and policy solutions to decision-making institutions and individuals in order to help them design better policies. Weekly Analysis is published in Pashto, Dari, English and Arabic languages.

In this issue:

- Evaluation of the Pakistan–Saudi Arabia Joint Strategic Agreement 3
- Overview of Saudi Arabia–Pakistan Relations 3
- The Significance of the Agreement for Pakistan 6
- The Significance of the Agreement for Saudi Arabia 6
- Implications of the Joint Strategic Agreement for India 7
- Implications of the Joint Strategic Agreement for Afghanistan 8
- Conclusion 9
- References 10



EVALUATION OF THE PAKISTAN–SAUDI ARABIA JOINT STRATEGIC AGREEMENT

Introduction

On September 17, 2025, a *Joint Strategic Defense Agreement* was signed between Pakistan and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia by Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in Riyadh. According to the provisions of this agreement, any attack on one of the two countries shall be regarded as an attack on both.

The formation of security alliances between states reflects their respective political, military, and economic needs. The signing of this agreement between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia marks a new chapter in their bilateral relations. It is the culmination of decades of cooperation and partnership between the two governments, through which each party seeks to fulfill its mutual needs via the other.

The core principle of the agreement rests on *collective defense*, stipulating that any aggression against one party will be considered an aggression against both. This principle closely resembles the provisions of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Charter, establishing a new mechanism for collective defense and deterrence.

Given the current political climate in the Middle East, dominated by Israeli aggression, regional rivalries, and the influence of global powers, the recent Pakistan–Saudi Arabia agreement may introduce a new dimension of security balance within the region.

OVERVIEW OF SAUDI ARABIA–PAKISTAN RELATIONS

Bilateral relations between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan date back to 1947, the year of Pakistan's establishment. In the early years, the connection between the two nations was primarily founded on shared religious and cultural ties as well as mutual trade interests. Over time, this relationship evolved into one of the closest and most enduring alliances in the Islamic world. Beyond common Islamic values, it came to rest on mutual trust, strategic cooperation, and a shared response to regional and global developments.

In recent decades, the two countries have supported each other not only in diplomacy but also during times of regional crisis, economic hardship, and international negotiations. The key milestones in their diplomatic and defense relations can be outlined chronologically as follows:

1. 1951 – Treaty of Friendship:

Saudi Arabia and Pakistan formalized their diplomatic relationship by signing a Treaty of Friendship, laying the foundation for long-term political and economic cooperation.

2. 1974 – OIC Summit in Lahore:



Pakistan, under the leadership of Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, hosted the Second Summit of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC). Saudi King Faisal bin Abdulaziz and several Muslim leaders attended, strengthening Islamabad–Riyadh ties.

3. 1970s–1980s – The Zia-ul-Haq Era:

Under General Zia-ul-Haq, bilateral relations reached their peak. Pakistan deployed troops for Saudi defense, while Saudi Arabia provided extensive financial assistance, oil supplies, and economic support. The Afghan Jihad further deepened their strategic cooperation.

4. 1988 – Inauguration of Faisal Mosque:

On June 18, 1988, General Zia-ul-Haq inaugurated the Faisal Mosque in Islamabad, with Saudi Prince Sultan bin Abdulaziz in attendance. The mosque was built in memory of King Faisal bin Abdulaziz Al Saud.

5. 1998 – Support During Nuclear Sanctions:

After Pakistan conducted nuclear tests in response to India's, it faced international sanctions. Saudi Arabia supported Pakistan by supplying oil and financial aid on deferred payment terms, helping the country withstand severe economic pressure.

6. 2000s – Expansion of Economic and Defense Cooperation:

Frequent high-level visits strengthened cooperation in energy, investment, and military training. Pakistani military personnel were stationed in Saudi Arabia for defense missions.

7. 2014 and 2018 – Financial Aid Packages:

In 2014, under Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, Saudi Arabia granted Pakistan \$1.5 billion to boost foreign reserves. In 2018, during Prime Minister Imran Khan's tenure, Riyadh pledged \$4.2 billion in financial assistance, including \$3 billion for Pakistan's central bank and \$1.2 billion in deferred oil payments.

8. 2019 – Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's Visit:

During his visit to Islamabad, the Crown Prince announced planned investments of \$20 billion, including a major oil refinery project in Gwadar—signaling a new phase in bilateral economic relations.

9. 2023 – Support During Economic Crisis:



Saudi Arabia played a crucial role in Pakistan's negotiations with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) by depositing \$2 billion into the State Bank of Pakistan, helping secure financial stability. **April 7–9, 2024 – Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif's First Foreign Visit:**

During his first overseas visit in his second term, Shehbaz Sharif traveled to Saudi Arabia. In discussions with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, both sides agreed to accelerate \$5 billion in Saudi investments and finalized 34 agreements worth \$2.8 billion, of which \$560 million was allocated to operational projects.

Beyond diplomacy, the two nations maintain deep security and defense cooperation, which includes troop deployment, joint exercises, and military training under various defense pacts. Major milestones in their defense collaboration include:

1. 1967 – Defense Cooperation Agreement:

The first formal defense agreement was signed, paving the way for Pakistani military deployment in Saudi Arabia.

2. 1970s – Troop Deployment:

At Riyadh's request, thousands of Pakistani soldiers were stationed in Saudi Arabia to strengthen its defense structure. Pakistani pilots also trained and flew missions with the Royal Saudi Air Force.

3. 1982 – Defense Protocol:

A formal defense cooperation protocol was signed, institutionalizing Pakistan's role in training Saudi military personnel.

4. 1990–1991 – Gulf War (Operation Desert Storm):

Pakistan deployed more than 11,000 troops—including air and ground forces—to Saudi Arabia for the defense of its territory during the Gulf crisis.

5. Post-2004 – “Al-Samsaam” Joint Exercises:

Since 2004, both countries have conducted biannual military exercises, reflecting their joint focus on contemporary security threats.

6. 2016 – “North Thunder” Military Exercise:

Held in Hafr al-Batin, this was one of the largest regional exercises, with Pakistan playing a leading role alongside Saudi forces.

7. 2025 – Joint Strategic Defense Agreement:



Signed on September 17, 2025, by Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in Riyadh, this landmark agreement stipulates that an attack on one country will be considered an attack on both. The principle closely mirrors Article 5 of the NATO Charter.

This latest defense pact represents the culmination of a long-standing partnership and serves as the focal point of this analysis.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE AGREEMENT FOR PAKISTAN

The *Joint Strategic Defense Agreement* between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia marks a new phase in their bilateral relations and represents a decisive strategic step for Pakistan. Under this agreement, Pakistan's role in ensuring the security and stability of Saudi Arabia is strengthened. This development comes at a time when Pakistan faces multiple internal challenges, economic, security-related, and political, while externally, it continues to confront a serious threat from India. Consequently, the agreement serves as a political and economic shield for Pakistan, granting it greater access to energy resources and financial assistance, both essential for managing its ongoing economic crisis and ensuring long-term national stability.

Furthermore, the agreement enhances recognition of Pakistan's nuclear capabilities and military expertise at the regional level, while globally, particularly within the Muslim world, it amplifies Pakistan's diplomatic influence.

Another dimension of this development lies in Pakistan's growing partnership with China. Following recent tensions between India and Pakistan, Beijing has intensified its support for Islamabad. The signing of this agreement further elevates Pakistan's international standing, potentially attracting greater economic, trade, and investment interest from other countries.

Equally significant is the impact of this mutual defense agreement on the regional balance of power. With Saudi backing, Pakistan is positioned as a key deterrent actor in South Asia. In the event of potential military aggression from India, this agreement introduces a powerful deterrent factor for New Delhi, compelling greater caution in its strategic and military calculations.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE AGREEMENT FOR SAUDI ARABIA

The defense agreement between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan plays a critical role in strengthening the Kingdom's security architecture and defense mechanisms. It provides Saudi Arabia with assurance that it will not stand alone in the face of external threats—an especially significant guarantee amid the ongoing instability in the Middle East, particularly the escalation of Israeli aggression and emerging efforts toward establishing a "Greater Israel." Such regional



developments could have adverse implications for Saudi security; this agreement, therefore, offers tools to mitigate these risks and ensure long-term national stability.

In terms of military capacity-building, Saudi Arabia stands to benefit from Pakistan's extensive experience, expertise, and defense technologies. This cooperation reduces Riyadh's dependence on Western military support, allowing the Kingdom to lay the groundwork for a more autonomous regional security framework. In doing so, Saudi Arabia takes meaningful steps toward achieving greater self-reliance in its defense and security policies.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE JOINT STRATEGIC AGREEMENT FOR INDIA

The signing of the *Joint Strategic Defense Agreement* between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia raises an important question: what are its potential implications for India? Given the extensive economic and technological relations between Saudi Arabia and India, could this agreement negatively affect their bilateral ties?

The key contextual factors are as follows: Saudi Arabia and India maintain robust cooperation in the fields of energy and technology. Approximately 2.7 million Indian workers are employed in Saudi Arabia, contributing significantly to the Kingdom's modern economy and development sectors. From a trade perspective, India is among Saudi Arabia's principal partners—the volume of bilateral trade between the two countries reached \$42.98 billion in the 2023–2024 period—illustrating the depth and maturity of their relationship.

Nonetheless, the new defense agreement is largely shaped by Pakistan's financial needs and strategic limitations, while for Saudi Arabia, it represents a cautious effort to leverage Pakistan's military capacity. The Saudi leadership seeks to strengthen the country's governance and defense structures without creating an overly autonomous or powerful domestic military that could pose internal challenges to the regime's continuity. Thus, rather than establishing a fully independent and expansive military force, Riyadh has shown a greater inclination to rely on external partners—especially Pakistan—for security support.

On the other hand, India rarely enters into formal defense commitments with other states and does not typically deploy troops to safeguard foreign governments. New Delhi's foreign policy remains primarily focused on economic cooperation, including technology transfer and trade relations. Consequently, Saudi Arabia can utilize Pakistani military expertise to fill its security gaps while continuing to sustain its broad-based economic and technological engagement with India.



IMPLICATIONS OF THE JOINT STRATEGIC AGREEMENT FOR AFGHANISTAN

The Saudi–Pakistan strategic defense agreement presents both opportunities and challenges for Afghanistan. If the pact is genuinely intended to enhance cooperation among Muslim countries and promote economic resilience, the growing alignment between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan—combined with China’s long-standing partnership with Islamabad—could open new avenues for Afghanistan’s regional integration and economic reconstruction. Moreover, the religious and political influence of these states could serve as a positive factor in the *de facto* government’s pursuit of international legitimacy.

However, if the agreement becomes an instrument of regional rivalry—such as Pakistan positioning itself against India or Saudi Arabia against Iran or Qatar—it could undermine Afghanistan’s delicate foreign policy balance and have adverse consequences for Kabul’s diplomatic relations.

A noteworthy element in this context is the statement by one of the Pakistani Prime Minister’s advisers in an interview with *Geo News*, who remarked:

“If any attack against Pakistan originates from Afghan territory, it will be considered an attack against Saudi Arabia as well.”

A closer reading of this statement suggests two overlapping intentions on Pakistan’s part:

- i. **Domestic signaling**—to project an image of strength while deflecting internal criticism by externalizing blame for insecurity; and
- ii. **Political leverage**—to exert pressure on the Afghan authorities through diplomatic and political means.

For its part, the *Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan* has repeatedly asserted that Afghan soil will not be used against any other state. Moreover, according to the terms of the Saudi–Pakistan defense pact, Saudi Arabia bears no responsibility for Pakistan’s internal security challenges, many of which stem from domestic militant groups or non-state actors. Consistent with this, Riyadh has refrained from making any direct statements implying involvement in such incidents.

Tensions between the two neighbors resurfaced on **October 8, 2025 (17 Mizan 1404 Solar Hijri)**, when Pakistan violated Afghan airspace. In retaliation, the Afghan authorities launched a limited cross-border operation along the disputed Durand Line, leading to several hours of armed clashes. Following these events, Saudi Arabia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement expressing concern over the escalation, urging both sides to exercise restraint, avoid



violence, and resolve their differences through dialogue in order to preserve regional peace and stability. The statement further emphasized Riyadh's support for any regional or international efforts that promote peace and development, underscoring that lasting security is a prerequisite for the prosperity of both the Afghan and Pakistani peoples.

Analyzed through the framework of the *Joint Strategic Defense Agreement*—which stipulates that an attack on one party constitutes an attack on the other—two plausible interpretations of Saudi Arabia's stance emerge:

1. The Azerbaijan–Armenia Precedent:

A parallel can be drawn to the 2020–2022 conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia, where Russia, despite Armenia's membership in a collective defense organization committed to mutual protection, refrained from direct intervention because the fighting occurred outside Armenia's officially recognized territory. Similarly, Saudi Arabia may choose not to intervene directly in disputes along *de facto* or contested borders such as the Durand Line, opting instead for diplomacy and calls for peaceful resolution. Riyadh's cautious reaction to the Afghanistan–Pakistan border clashes demonstrates a preference for restraint over costly involvement.

2. Saudi Arabia's Mediatory Role and Strategic Objectives:

The Kingdom views itself as a leader in the Islamic world and therefore seeks to prevent escalations among Muslim-majority states. The core purpose of the pact, from the Saudi perspective, is to harness Pakistan's security capabilities, not to commit Riyadh to direct regional conflict. If these two guiding principles, Saudi mediation and avoidance of entanglement, remain in place, the *practical effectiveness* of the agreement may prove limited over time. As a result, other regional actors might not view the pact as a strong deterrent, and Pakistan may find it difficult to leverage it as a credible strategic shield against India.

In conclusion, the Saudi–Pakistan Strategic Defense Agreement presents a mixed set of outcomes for Afghanistan. On the one hand, it could create opportunities for economic cooperation, regional connectivity, and greater political inclusion. On the other hand, if it evolves into a tool of regional competition, it risks disrupting Afghanistan's foreign policy equilibrium and endangering broader regional stability.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the *Joint Strategic Defense Agreement* between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia has largely emerged from Pakistan's economic vulnerabilities. The primary objective of the pact is to secure Saudi financial assistance, which Islamabad can utilize to address its internal challenges—whether related to domestic security, external defense, or economic instability.



Conversely, Saudi Arabia seeks to benefit from Pakistan's military and security expertise, thereby meeting its own defense requirements at a lower cost and with reduced dependence on Western powers.

At the regional level, Pakistan currently faces tense relations not only with India but also with Afghanistan, where bilateral ties have steadily deteriorated. The Saudi–Pakistani agreement is unlikely to play a constructive role in resolving these disputes. Saudi Arabia maintains strong economic, technological, and trade relations with India and is reluctant to jeopardize those ties due to its partnership with Pakistan. Similarly, Riyadh shares areas of cooperation and mutual interest with the *Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan*; therefore, this agreement is unlikely to undermine or damage Saudi–Afghan relations.

Overall, the agreement represents a pragmatic alignment rather than a transformative alliance—driven by Pakistan's search for financial stability and Saudi Arabia's pursuit of affordable security partnerships within the broader Islamic world.

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Contact Us:

Email: info@csrsaf.org

Website: www.csrsaf.org

Phone & WhatsApp: +93780618000



www.csrsaf.org



info@csrsaf.org