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The Trilateral Defence Pact of Saudi Arabia, Türkiye and Pakistan: A Fragile Alliance amid Conflicting Interests and U.S. Calculations for Temporary Relief from Mounting Crises

The trilateral defence pact between Türkiye, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, signed in Mecca on 7 August 2026, may at first glance be seen as a sign of an emerging new security balance in the Middle East. The central principle of the pact is that an armed attack against any one of the three countries will be regarded as an attack against all three. However, the real significance of the agreement lies not in its title or formal wording, but in a more fundamental question: do these three countries genuinely share the same interests, face the same threats, and possess the same willingness to bear the costs of a common war? Initial reports also indicate that, despite its mutual-defence principle, the agreement does not yet establish specific and operational military obligations for wartime situations (Reuters, 2026).

In reality, the three countries have entered this pact on the basis of three different calculations. Saudi Arabia needs security above all; Pakistan needs financial resources and economic support; and Türkiye is primarily seeking to expand its regional strategic room for manoeuvre. This divergence is the first indication of the pact's inherent fragility.

For decades, Saudi Arabia has relied heavily on the American security umbrella. However, developments in recent years, particularly the war involving Iran, have strengthened the perception in Riyadh that complete reliance on Washington may not be sufficient in a moment of crisis. Saudi Arabia is therefore pursuing a dual approach: maintaining its strategic relationship with the United States while simultaneously seeking additional security options. Its closer ties with Pakistan and Türkiye can be viewed as part of this broader policy of diversification.

Yet Saudi Arabia must distinguish between having an ally and having an ally that is actually willing to fight. Pakistan has long maintained close military relations with Saudi Arabia, and Pakistani forces have previously been stationed on Saudi territory. Nevertheless, this history does not necessarily mean that Islamabad would enter a large-scale war with Tehran in the event of a direct Saudi-Iranian confrontation.

Pakistan shares a border with Iran and cannot ignore the consequences of a wider regional war. At the same time, India remains Pakistan's principal security rival, while Islamabad's military and economic resources are limited. Pakistan may therefore benefit from expanded defence cooperation with Saudi Arabia, but that does not necessarily mean it would be willing to incur costs on behalf of Saudi security that could ultimately endanger Pakistan's own national security.

From this perspective, one of the fundamental questions surrounding the Mecca pact is this: Would Pakistan, in return for economic and financial support, accept obligations that it might be unable or unwilling to fulfill when confronted with an actual war?

Türkiye, meanwhile, has a different set of calculations. Although it is a member of NATO, Ankara's foreign policy in recent years has demonstrated that it does not wish to align all of its regional policies automatically with Washington. Türkiye is pursuing its own interests in Syria, the Caucasus, the Gulf and the Eastern Mediterranean, while its policies toward both Iran and Israel have not always followed a single, consistent line.

For Türkiye, therefore, the Mecca pact may represent less an ideological commitment than a form of strategic insurance—an insurance policy for a future in which Ankara might face serious pressure or a direct threat from one of the region's major powers.

Thus, from the very beginning, the three countries have signed a common pact without necessarily pursuing a common strategic objective. This gap between the interests and objectives of its three members constitutes the pact's most fundamental structural weakness.

The Iran War and the Pact's Real Test

The Iran War: Where “One for All” Will Be Put to the Test

If the Mecca pact is to evolve into a genuine defence alliance, its real test will not come at the signing ceremony but on the battlefield. The principle that “an attack against one is an attack against all” has genuine deterrent value only when an adversary believes that any attack on one member will trigger a military response from all three. In the case of the Türkiye-Saudi Arabia-Pakistan pact, however, it remains uncertain whether such a shared willingness to act collectively would exist in the event of an actual war.

This question is particularly significant in relation to Iran. The pact does not officially identify Iran as an adversary, and the leaders of the three member states have emphasized its defensive character. Nevertheless, the regional environment in which the pact has emerged has undoubtedly been shaped by the war between Iran and the United States and by growing concerns among the Gulf states about its potential consequences (Reuters, 2026). The Iran war has also exposed the limitations of American military power. This does not mean overlooking the United States' overwhelming military superiority; rather, it highlights the distinction between military superiority and the ability to achieve a desired political outcome. Senator Jack Reed, a senior member of the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee, criticized the administration's handling of the war, arguing that the United States entered the conflict without a clear strategy or a credible plan for ending it, while still failing to achieve the objectives presented as the justification for the war (Reed, 2026a). He has also criticized the rising costs, declining ammunition stocks, and increasing economic pressure on Americans resulting from the conflict (Reed, 2026b).

These criticisms are significant because they demonstrate that even within the American political and security establishment, there is no universal confidence that military power alone can resolve a complex regional crisis.

Iran has also demonstrated that a war with the country would not necessarily remain confined to Iranian territory. The presence of forces and groups aligned with Tehran in Iraq, Yemen and other parts of the region, combined with Iran's missile and drone capabilities, increases the possibility that a conflict could spread across multiple geographical fronts. Under such circumstances, Saudi Arabia could be among the countries most directly exposed to the consequences

of a wider war. But would Türkiye and Pakistan actually be prepared to enter a direct war with Iran in order to defend Saudi Arabia?

There is no simple answer to this question.

As noted earlier, Pakistan shares a border with Iran while simultaneously depending on Saudi financial support. Islamabad therefore faces a fundamental tension between maintaining its strategic relationship with Riyadh and avoiding a dangerous confrontation with Tehran.

Türkiye likewise maintains important economic and security relations with Iran and has direct strategic interests in Syria. At the same time, its membership in NATO creates an additional complication. If a crisis between one of the members of the Mecca pact and Iran were to escalate, Ankara would have to reconcile its various security commitments with its own national interests.

For this reason, the principle of mutual defence may appear extremely powerful on paper. In international politics, however, the real strength of an alliance is determined not by the wording of the agreement but by the willingness of its members to bear the costs required to implement it.

Another factor affecting regional calculations is the war in Gaza and the political cost to Washington of its support for Israel. A peer-reviewed study published in *The Lancet Global Health* estimated that more than 75,000 Palestinians in Gaza were killed by violent causes during the first 16 months of the war—substantially higher than the official figures available at the time (*the Lancet Global Health* ;2026 ,Reuters, 2026). The study also estimated that women, children and older people accounted for approximately 56 percent of those killed by violence.

The scale of these casualties has imposed significant political and moral costs on the United States, particularly because Washington's support for Israel has continued amid growing sensitivity across the Muslim world and throughout much of the region toward American policy.

The wars in Iran and Gaza therefore convey a broader message: the Middle East can no longer be treated as a region in which a stable security order can be imposed or maintained simply through reliance on external military power.

It is precisely this reality that raises a fundamental question about the true significance of the Mecca pact: Is it genuinely a new defensive security mechanism, or merely a temporary response to the shared fears of its three members?

Why the Pact Is Unlikely to Develop into a Durable Alliance

From a “Defensive Alliance” to a “Fragile Coalition”

The Mecca pact should not be dismissed as insignificant; however, exaggerating its importance could also lead to analytical error. The agreement has emerged at a time when the three countries feel insecure for different reasons, but a shared sense of insecurity does not necessarily mean that they share common interests.

Saudi Arabia seeks security; Pakistan seeks resources and economic support; and Türkiye seeks greater strategic autonomy and regional influence. These three objectives may converge at certain moments, but that convergence does not necessarily produce a durable alliance.

For Saudi Arabia, the central issue is its political and security survival. Riyadh wants to ensure that it will not be left alone if it faces a major attack in the future. The problem, however, is that both Pakistan and Türkiye face significant constraints.

Pakistan cannot simultaneously contend with India, domestic economic difficulties, complex relations with China and the United States, and its sensitivities toward Iran while becoming deeply involved in a major Saudi war with Tehran. Islamabad may be willing to provide military cooperation, training, equipment and even a limited deployment of forces in Saudi Arabia; but this is fundamentally different from committing itself to an all-out war.

Türkiye faces an even more complicated set of calculations. Its NATO membership, relations with the United States, rivalry with Israel, ties with Iran and Russia, and direct strategic interests in Syria create a web of competing considerations. Ankara is therefore unlikely to enter a war merely on the basis of a political pact without first calculating the potentially heavy regional and international costs.

If the principal purpose of the pact is to create a balance against Iran, another question arises: Can these three countries actually form a coherent military front against a power such as Iran? In addition to its domestic military capabilities, Iran possesses considerable geographical depth, missile capabilities, asymmetric warfare capacities and a network of regional relationships. The ongoing war has also demonstrated that even overwhelming military superiority does not

necessarily make it easy to compel a large and complex state to accept a desired political outcome.

From this perspective, the Mecca pact may function more as an instrument of political deterrence than as a fully operational military alliance.

At the same time, the American factor cannot be ignored. Washington may welcome the emergence of regional security arrangements because they could relieve some of the security burden carried directly by the United States. Yet the same process could, over the longer term, contribute to greater strategic autonomy for Türkiye, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan.

This issue becomes even more significant when viewed within the broader transformation of the international system. China maintains strategic relations with Pakistan, extensive economic and energy ties with Saudi Arabia, and important cooperation with Iran. Russia likewise maintains close relations with Iran and Türkiye and has expanded its ties with Saudi Arabia in recent years. Consequently, the Mecca pact does not necessarily have to remain permanently aligned with the strategic orbit of the United States.

For this reason, perhaps one of the most important analytical mistakes would be to portray the pact as an “Islamic NATO” or as a permanent anti-Iranian bloc. International alliances are formed around interests, and when interests change, alliances can also change.

Conclusion: Unity on Paper, Divergence in Practice

The trilateral defence pact between Saudi Arabia, Türkiye and Pakistan is politically significant, but its significance should not be confused with genuine strategic cohesion. In the short term, the Mecca pact sends a powerful message: Saudi Arabia no longer wants to entrust its security entirely to a single external power, while Türkiye and Pakistan seek greater roles in shaping the region’s evolving security architecture. Yet political messaging is not the same as military capability, and strategic partnership is not necessarily the same as collective defence.

The three countries have also entered the pact with different priorities. Saudi Arabia primarily seeks greater security and strategic reassurance; Pakistan has important economic and financial interests alongside its security calculations; and Türkiye seeks greater regional influence, strategic autonomy and a stronger position in the emerging Middle Eastern order. These interests may converge

temporarily, but they do not automatically provide a solid foundation for a durable military alliance.

The real test will therefore come when one of the three members faces a serious military crisis. If Saudi Arabia were to face a major attack, for example, the decisive question would not be whether Türkiye and Pakistan would issue statements of solidarity. It would be whether they would be prepared to risk the lives of their soldiers, commit financial and military resources, and potentially damage their relations with Iran and other regional powers in order to defend Saudi Arabia.

If that commitment remains uncertain, the pact is more likely to function as a fragile deterrence coalition and a mechanism for political reassurance than as a fully operational collective-defence alliance. Its members may cooperate when their interests overlap, but cooperation in peacetime does not necessarily demonstrate a willingness to fight together when the costs become substantial.

The pact may also serve some of Washington's immediate interests by encouraging regional partners to assume greater responsibility for their own security. Yet paradoxically, the same process could, over time, contribute to greater strategic independence among the three countries and reduce their reliance on traditional external security guarantees.

Ultimately, the Mecca pact should therefore be understood within a broader transformation of the Middle Eastern security order. The old architecture—one in which a dominant external power could largely define the region's security framework—is gradually weakening. However, a stable alternative has not yet emerged. Regional powers remain divided by competing interests, strategic rivalries and differing relationships with the major global powers.

The Mecca pact has emerged precisely within this vacuum: between declining confidence in external security guarantees and the continuing inability of regional powers to establish sufficient mutual trust to create a genuinely integrated security system.

Its future, therefore, will not be determined simply by the number of aircraft, missiles or soldiers its members possess. Nor will it be determined by the declarations made at the signing ceremony. Its real value will be revealed only when one member is confronted with a crisis serious enough to impose a genuine cost on the others.

The fundamental question is simple:

Will three countries that have come together for three different strategic purposes actually be willing to fight for one another when the moment comes to pay the real price?

If the answer is no, the Mecca pact will not become an “Islamic NATO.” It will instead become another example of the fragile coalitions that have repeatedly emerged in the Middle East—coalitions that may appear powerful in times of peace, but whose true strength is revealed only when war arrives.

In that sense, the pact may be less a sign that a new regional security order has already emerged than evidence that the old order is eroding faster than a new one can take its place.

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