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SAUDI-PAKISTHAN STRATEGIC MUTUAL DEFENSE AGREEMENT

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Why in news: Recently, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan have signed a significant mutual defence pact

Introduction

The Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement (SMDA) signed by **Saudi Arabia** and **Pakistan** in **September 2025** is a significant development in **Middle Eastern** and **South Asian geopolitics**. This upgrade reshapes regional security and presents new challenges for **India** on the global stage.

Key highlights of the defence agreement

- 1) **Collective Defence** – The official statements from Riyadh and Islamabad specify that any act of aggression against either nation will be regarded as an act of aggression against both parties. This collective defence principle commits each country to respond to threats facing the other.
- 2) **Permanent Mechanisms** – Both states have agreed to establish enduring coordination structures, such as a joint military committee, intelligence-sharing protocols, and expanded training initiatives. Pakistan has maintained a military presence in Saudi Arabia for several decades.
- 3) **Transition from Informal to Formal Cooperation** – The mutual defence agreement formalises the longstanding military cooperation between the two countries by placing it within the context of a treaty framework.
- 4) **Position Regarding the Nuclear Programme** – While Saudi Arabia has reportedly extended substantial financial support to Pakistan's nuclear programme, the agreement remains silent on whether Pakistan's nuclear capabilities are applicable to Saudi defence.
- 5) **Symbolic Implications** – The agreement signals that Saudi Arabia seeks to strengthen its security arrangements, emphasizing an expanded role for Pakistan in the Persian Gulf region.

What and who are key triggers of the pact?

Gaza Conflict and Israeli Actions: The Hamas attack in October 2023 and Israel's subsequent military operations have contributed to regional instability, jeopardizing Saudi Arabia's efforts to normalize relations with Israel as envisioned in the Abraham Accords.

Houthi Activities in Yemen: The Houthis have significantly enhanced their missile and drone capabilities, launching attacks against Saudi oil infrastructure and maritime assets. Their control over approximately half of Yemen, including Sanaa, continues to pose substantial security challenges.

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United States Retrenchment: The strategic pivot of the United States toward East Asia, coupled with its lack of response to Iran-backed attacks on Saudi oil facilities in 2019, has called into question the reliability of U.S. support in the region.

What measures can India take to secure its strategic interests?

1. Strengthen Strategic Partnerships in the Gulf

- With Saudi Arabia deepening ties with Pakistan, India needs to solidify its own partnerships with Gulf states to maintain influence. Expand military and defense cooperation with UAE, Qatar, and Bahrain.
- **Example:** India signed the **Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with UAE in 2022**, which includes defense collaboration, intelligence sharing, and joint exercises.

2. Diversify Defence and Security Partnerships

- Reduce reliance on any single regional partner and maintain strategic autonomy. Engage in trilateral or multilateral security frameworks with the US, Israel, France, and Gulf states.
- **Example:** India participates in **I2U2 (India-Israel-UAE-USA) forum**, focusing on regional security and critical infrastructure.

3. Enhance Naval and Maritime Presence in the Indian Ocean & Gulf

- The IOR is crucial for trade and energy security; Pakistan-Saudi alignment may influence Red Sea and Arabian Sea dynamics. Increase naval deployments, joint exercises with friendly states, and develop port access agreements.
- **Example:** **Malabar Exercise (India-US-Japan-Australia)** and India's logistic agreements with Oman and Seychelles.

4. Strengthen Intelligence and Counter-Terrorism Cooperation

- Pakistan's strategic depth with Saudi support may embolden proxy operations. Enhance intelligence sharing with Gulf and Western allies to preempt security threats.
- **Example:** India's cooperation with **UAE and Saudi Arabia to counter radical financing and extremist networks**.

5. Maintain a Credible Nuclear Deterrence

- Pakistan's nuclear umbrella extended to Saudi Arabia could alter regional strategic calculations. Continue **credible minimum deterrence** and modernize missile defences.
- **Example:** Development of **Agni series missiles** and **Prithvi-II upgrade**, and participation in **Missile Technology Control Regime dialogues**.

6. Leverage Energy Diplomacy

- India is heavily dependent on Gulf oil; strategic leverage requires stable energy relations. Long-term oil agreements, investment in Saudi and Gulf energy projects, and diversified sourcing.
- **Example:** India's **strategic petroleum reserves and long-term contracts with Saudi Aramco**.

7. Engage in Track-II Diplomacy

- To mitigate tension from Pak-Saudi defence pact without direct confrontation. Promote dialogues through think tanks, strategic forums, and cultural diplomacy in Gulf states.

- **Example: Observer status in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) forums** and participation in regional security dialogues.

8. Invest in Regional Economic and Security Initiatives

- Economic influence strengthens strategic leverage. Invest in Gulf infrastructure, ports, and defence industries to intertwine interests.
- **Example: India-Saudi NEOM smart city collaboration** and investments in renewable energy projects.

How does the defence pact impact the current global order?

1. Alters Middle East Security Dynamics

- The pact introduces a new security alignment in the Gulf, potentially reducing Saudi Arabia's reliance on the U.S. as a security guarantor.
- **Example:** After the pact, concerns rose over **Israel-Gulf security calculations**, as Pakistan's nuclear capabilities could be extended to Saudi Arabia.

2. Strengthens Pakistan-Saudi Strategic Ties

- Deepens military, defense, and nuclear cooperation between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia.
- **Example:** Pakistan's explicit offer to make its **nuclear deterrent available to Saudi Arabia** is unprecedented.

3. Potential Strain on India-Pakistan Regional Calculus

- Changes strategic calculations in South Asia, complicating India's security environment.
- **Example:** India may face indirect pressure in the **Arab Gulf region**, where Saudi Arabia is a key economic partner.

4. Raises Nuclear Proliferation Concerns

- Extending Pakistan's nuclear umbrella to Saudi Arabia could encourage proliferation or destabilize the strategic balance in the Middle East.
- **Example:** The move may trigger discussions on nuclear posture among Gulf states and Israel.

5. Signals Reduced Reliance on the U.S.

- Saudi Arabia diversifies its defense alliances, signaling cautious distance from traditional U.S. security guarantees.
- **Example:** The pact came after regional tensions following the **Israeli airstrike in Qatar (2025)**, raising doubts over U.S. intervention reliability.

6. Influences Regional Power Balances

- Pakistan's strategic leverage increases in Gulf politics, affecting Iran, UAE, Qatar, and Israel.
- **Example:** The pact is likely to shift **Iran-Saudi-Pakistan strategic calculations**, especially concerning the Red Sea and Gulf security.

7. Implications for Global Strategic Order

- Adds complexity to U.S., European, and Chinese policies in the region.
- **Example:** NATO-like mutual defence commitments outside the Western alliance framework may challenge traditional security structures.

Conclusion:

The Saudi–Pakistan Defence Pact marks a significant shift in regional security architecture, introducing a nuclear dimension to Gulf geopolitics and altering traditional alliances. While it strengthens Pakistan-Saudi strategic ties, it also presents challenges and opportunities for other regional and global actors, including India. For India, proactive diplomacy, enhanced defence partnerships, and strategic engagement in the Gulf will be key to safeguarding its interests. Ultimately, the pact underscores the evolving multipolarity of the Middle East and the need for careful balancing of deterrence, diplomacy, and economic influence to maintain regional stability and protect national strategic interests.