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NUCLEAR UMBRELLA, GREEN CRESCENT: THE MAKKAH DEFENCE PACT AND SOUTH ASIAN STRATEGIC STABILITY

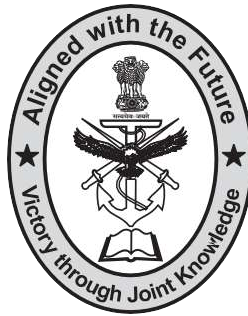
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**NUCLEAR UMBRELLA, GREEN CRESCENT: THE
MAKKAH DEFENCE PACT AND SOUTH ASIAN
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CENTRE FOR JOINT WARFARE STUDIES



CENJOWS

Nuclear Umbrella, Green Crescent: The Makkah Defence Pact and South Asian Strategic Stability



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"The state immediately bordering one's own is, by nature, a rival. The state beyond it is a natural ally."

Paraphrased from the Mandala doctrine of Kautilya's Arthashastra, fourth century BCE

Introduction

On 7 August 2026, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Türkiye signed a trilateral defence agreement at Al-Safa Palace in Makkah, formally titled the Makkah Joint Defence Agreement.¹ It converts into a three-way arrangement the bilateral Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement that Riyadh and Islamabad had concluded in Riyadh in September 2025.² Within hours, commentators were calling it an "Islamic NATO".³ India's Ministry of External Affairs offered a narrower assessment the same day. Spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said New Delhi was "closely following" the pact and would "keep you updated",

language that echoed the government's studied neutrality toward the original bilateral agreement eleven months earlier.⁴ That posture held in the weeks that followed. External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar later questioned the pact's practical relevance given the live military situations confronting its signatories, while stressing that New Delhi weighs every such development in its calculus.⁵

This restraint is worth taking seriously. The label 'Islamic NATO' captures the pact's ambition rather than its substance, and the most sensitive question it leaves open, whether it extends Pakistan's nuclear deterrent to Saudi Arabia, remains genuinely unresolved rather than secretly settled. This article sets out the documented chronology of the pact and tests the Islamic NATO comparison against the evidence. It then examines the nuclear question before turning to what the pact means for India's western strategic flank, its Gulf partnerships and its own deterrence posture.

Genesis and What the Text Says

The idea of a pan-Islamic military alliance is not new. The concept goes back to the 1969 creation of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, and it resurfaced again in December 2015 when Riyadh unveiled a 34-member Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition based in the Saudi capital. That coalition has never run a joint operation, and a decade later its command structure is still little more than a shell. The Makkah pact breaks from this pattern in one key way: it builds on a bilateral treaty already carrying binding mutual-defence obligations, agreed between two states with genuine and expanding military strength, rather than emerging from a coalition that had no prior treaty behind it.

Riyadh and Islamabad put their names to the Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement on 17 September 2025, when Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif made a state visit to the Saudi capital. Its core clause treats aggression against either signatory as aggression against both.⁶ The agreement builds on a defence relationship dating to the 1960s, when Pakistani troops were first deployed to the Kingdom, and on decades of Saudi financial support that, according to retired Pakistani officers, helped sustain Pakistan's nuclear programme through its formative years.⁷

By January 2026, Turkish media were reporting that Ankara was in advanced talks to join the arrangement.⁸ Those talks concluded on 7 August 2026, when Sharif, accompanied by army chief Field Marshal Asim Munir, travelled to Makkah, performed the Umrah pilgrimage, and joined Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan at the Makkah Al-Mukarramah Summit for Joint Defence.⁹ The choice of Islam's holiest city for the signing was widely read as deliberate, adding symbolic weight that a Riyadh or Ankara venue would not have carried.¹⁰ The joint statement commits each state to treat an armed attack against any one of them as an attack against all three and pledges to enhance "all aspects of defence cooperation", language grounded in what it calls the signatories' shared strategic interests and historical ties.¹¹ Sources close to the three governments said the agreement would not disturb any signatory's other alliance commitments, a clear reference to Türkiye's NATO membership.¹²

What can be verified is narrower than the public discussion suggests. No published treaty text specifies force-generation commitments, command arrangements or trigger thresholds. There is no evidence of a standing joint command or a combined planning staff, the institutional scaffolding that took NATO decades to build. What exists at the time of writing is a political and legal commitment to mutual defence layered onto existing bilateral defence-industrial and training relationships.

Testing the "Islamic NATO" Label

The NATO comparison is useful mainly for showing what the pact lacks. NATO's Article 5 rests on seventy-five years of integrated command, common doctrine and a standing secretariat, and the alliance has invoked it just once, in the aftermath of the September 2001 attacks. None of that institutional depth exists in the Makkah pact. The three signatories also bring a recent record of mutual wariness to the table: Ankara supported Arab Spring protest movements that Riyadh regarded as a threat to its own governing order, and within the past decade Saudi Arabia and the UAE backed forces in Libya opposed to those Türkiye supported.

Even so, writing the pact off as mere symbolism would be a mistake. It is a treaty-based commitment binding three states that carry genuine weight. Saudi Arabia is the Arab

world's only G20 economy and custodian of Islam's two holiest sites. Pakistan fields the Muslim world's only nuclear-armed military, and Türkiye maintains NATO's second-largest standing army alongside a fast-growing drone export industry.¹³ Pakistan and Türkiye are both emerging as significant arms exporters, giving the pact a defence-industrial dimension, joint production and technology transfer that the 2015 coalition never had. One Pakistani analyst close to policy circles has argued that the trilateral framework matters chiefly because it institutionalises coordination among partners who already cooperate bilaterally, rather than because it adds genuinely new partners.¹⁴

The more accurate reading treats the pact as a bundle of separate bilateral hedges rather than a collective-security architecture. Riyadh is hedging against a decline in the reliability of American protection, a concern sharpened by the Israeli strike inside Qatar in September 2025. Islamabad's motive is more transactional. It is seeking financial and diplomatic support after its 2025 conflict with India. Ankara's calculation is different again: an attempt to assert itself as a power broker across the Middle East and South Asia at a moment when NATO's own guarantees look less certain than before. Bundling these separate motives into a single trilateral instrument gives the arrangement more political weight than its thin institutional structure would otherwise carry.

The Nuclear Question

The most contested part of the pact is whether it extends Pakistan's nuclear deterrent to its partners. Officials on both sides have kept their language general. A senior Saudi official told Reuters in 2025 that the arrangement is "a comprehensive defensive agreement that encompasses all military means."¹⁵ Pakistan's defence minister, Khawaja Asif, said around the same time that his country's capabilities would be made available under the pact, before later telling Reuters that nuclear weapons were not on its radar.¹⁶ The gap between the minister's reassurance and the official's formula looks less like sloppiness than policy. Pakistan's National Command Authority, the body that controls the arsenal, has issued no statement on either the Riyadh or the Makkah agreement.¹⁷

Analysts at the Belfer Centre, the Asia-Pacific Leadership Network and the CSIS Nuclear Network project have each judged that a credible Pakistani nuclear umbrella over Saudi

Arabia is not plausible in the near term.¹⁸ A credible extended-deterrence guarantee requires demonstrated delivery capability and a doctrinal willingness to risk escalation on another country's behalf. It also requires a degree of strategic alignment that Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have not shown. Pakistan's declared doctrine remains oriented toward India, and there is no public evidence that Islamabad has altered its command, basing or targeting posture to cover a Gulf contingency. The Middle East Institute has cautioned against reading too much into a pact whose exact terms are known only to a small circle of officials.¹⁹

The ambiguity still carries costs. The International Institute for Strategic Studies has noted that even before Türkiye joined, the original bilateral agreement set a precedent for extended deterrence by a nuclear-armed state outside the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, describing it as intended to address the strategic and conventional deterrence deficit relative to a nuclear-capable Israel.²⁰ The International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons has warned that this kind of calculated ambiguity normalises the idea of importing another state's nuclear protection and raises the risk of miscalculation in an already volatile region.²¹

For India, the nuclear dimension matters in a narrower sense than the public debate suggests. A perception that Pakistan's arsenal now serves a purpose wider than deterring India, regardless of the operational reality, could gradually change how Islamabad discusses that arsenal at home. Deeper Saudi financial support also gives Islamabad more cushion to absorb the economic fallout of provoking India, easing one of the historical constraints on Pakistani risk-taking. India's own track record of nuclear restraint and its no-first-use commitment contrast sharply with a neighbour whose public signalling on the subject looks considerably more improvised. That contrast is a genuine diplomatic asset, but on the evidence so far it is not grounds for India to revisit its own doctrine.

Reading the Three Capitals

Of the three capitals, Pakistan's calculus is the most transactional. Islamabad's bilateral defence ties with Riyadh and Ankara are already substantial, so what the trilateral pact mainly adds is institutional scaffolding, standing consultation channels and pooled

resources, rather than any genuinely new partnership.²² Officials have not hidden the fact that the arrangement doubles as a conduit for arms sales, joint production, training and Saudi financing at a moment of continued economic strain. Following the four-day conflict with India in May 2025 and persistent tension along the Afghan border, Pakistan's security establishment views the pact as bolstering deterrence against India, adding Saudi money and Turkish defence-industrial depth to its own military capacity.

Saudi Arabia's calculation centres on the deterrence gap with a nuclear-capable Israel, sharpened by the Israeli strike inside Qatar in September 2025, a strike against a fellow Gulf Cooperation Council member that exposed the limits of American protection for even close partners.²³ Continued Houthi missile and drone attacks on Saudi-backed forces in Yemen, including a barrage that killed dozens of troops in the same week the trilateral pact was signed, reinforce Riyadh's sense of an unresolved threat along its southern border.²⁴ The pact also fits Vision 2030's broader push to diversify Saudi Arabia's international partnerships beyond reliance on Washington.

President Erdoğan's aim is to establish Ankara as an indispensable power broker across the Middle East, the Mediterranean and South Asia, building on Turkish diplomatic roles in Gaza-related negotiations and in efforts to end the 2026 war between the United States and Iran.²⁵ It also reflects a hedge against uncertainty in American Article 5 guarantees, unusual for a NATO member, pursued while Türkiye remains formally inside the alliance. For Turkish defence firms such as Baykar, the pact reinforces already substantial arms-export relationships with Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, particularly in drones, an area where Pakistan has moved from customer to co-producer. Erdoğan has since signalled that the pact is open to further members. Turkish officials, including Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan, have said Egypt could join,²⁶ though Cairo has so far held back pending a review of the pact's legal and constitutional implications.²⁷ Syrian and Bangladeshi officials have separately voiced interest in some form of association with the arrangement,²⁸ and Arab media have reported that Tehran received, and is reviewing, an invitation to join a wider arrangement, though this has not been confirmed by Iranian officials, and Turkish officials maintain the pact is not directed at Iran.²⁹

Implications for India

The most immediate operational concern for India is the demonstrated flow of Turkish military technology to Pakistan. During Operation Sindoor in May 2025, Pakistan used Turkish-origin platforms, including Bayraktar TB2 and YIHA drones and Asisguard Songar systems, for surveillance and strikes along the border, reportedly launching several hundred drones at Indian targets over the course of the conflict.³⁰ A trilateral pact built around joint production and defence-industrial cooperation is likely to deepen this relationship rather than dilute it, and Saudi financing gives Pakistan more fiscal room to sustain defence spending through a future crisis with India.

India's relationship with Saudi Arabia carries real weight of its own. The Kingdom supplies roughly a seventh of India's crude oil and LPG imports, is home to an Indian diaspora of about 2.7 million people, has pledged investment of up to 100 billion US dollars in India, and signed a 225-million-dollar Indian artillery-ammunition contract in 2024.³¹ This ballast gives New Delhi genuine leverage, and it also means India has real stakes if Riyadh's orientation tilts further toward Islamabad. How Riyadh actually behaves in a future India-Pakistan crisis, not what it says today, will be the real test of the relationship. One early signal came on the day the pact was signed, when Prime Minister Modi and Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu spoke by phone, a call read in Israeli commentary as touching on the agreement's implications for the India-Israel relationship.³²

Ties with Ankara deteriorated sharply once Türkiye backed Pakistan during Operation Sindoor, and it was confirmed that Turkish-origin drones had been deployed against Indian targets.³³ New Delhi's response included diplomatic signalling, such as skipping Turkish National Day events in the capital, alongside a five-year defence-cooperation roadmap agreed with Cyprus in May 2026 and closer naval engagement with Greece.³⁴ Relations with Armenia have warmed as well, and Cyprus has reportedly expressed interest in the Indian BrahMos missile and the loitering munitions that featured prominently in Operation Sindoor. At the same time, recent diplomatic contacts with Türkiye point to a pragmatic thaw, driven by shared economic interest and by India's wish to safeguard alternative connectivity routes at a moment when regional conflict has

disrupted both the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor and the International North-South Transport Corridor.

A more institutionalised Saudi-Pakistan-Türkiye axis also strengthens Pakistan's hand in forums where it pushes to internationalise Kashmir, notably the OIC, whose statements on the subject have long grated on New Delhi despite India's substantial bilateral ties with individual OIC member states. The danger here is gradual rather than dramatic: the pact could simply become part of the backdrop against which Pakistan's Kashmir narrative finds a slightly more receptive multilateral audience, even without any formal change in the OIC's own position.

Policy Recommendations for India

The pact's substance will likely evolve over years rather than resolve itself in the coming months. Indian policy should pair steady bilateral diplomacy with tangible investment in capability.

On the diplomatic and economic front, India should hold to the calibrated line the MEA has already staked out, treating the pact without alarm while making clear that its bilateral ties with Saudi Arabia and the UAE stand on their own merits. Sustained leader-level contact with Riyadh and Abu Dhabi would help keep the Makkah pact from becoming the lens through which Gulf capitals default to viewing South Asian security. New Delhi should keep building its Eastern Mediterranean relationships with Cyprus, Greece and Armenia, both for their own strategic value and as a signal to Ankara that backing Pakistan carries costs elsewhere in Türkiye's neighbourhood. At the same time, it should pursue the pragmatic thaw with Türkiye wherever that serves Indian interests in connectivity and trade. Deepening joint ventures and defence co-production with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, together with renewable-energy partnerships and continued diversification of energy sources, would reduce India's exposure over the next decade rather than leaving it fixed in place.

On the defence and nuclear side, India should put counter-drone and electronic-warfare capability at the top of its investment list, drawing directly on what Operation Sindoor showed about the scale of Turkish-origin drone use by Pakistan, and should expand

defence-export ties with Gulf states as an alternative to Turkish and Pakistani suppliers. It should also resist any pressure to alter its own doctrine in response to Pakistan-Saudi nuclear ambiguity: the case for an operational Pakistani umbrella over the Gulf remains weak, and India's declared restraint functions best as a diplomatic asset used by contrast in international forums. The intelligence community should be tasked with sustained monitoring of any genuine change in Pakistan's nuclear command arrangements or basing that relates to the Gulf, rather than leaning on public statements. A standing interagency watch, run through the National Security Council Secretariat, should track how the pact's institutions evolve, particularly its command structures and procurement integration, since these are the indicators that would signal whether it is maturing into an operational alliance.

Conclusion

The Makkah pact represents a genuine, treaty-based deepening of defence cooperation among three states of real consequence. It is rooted in real anxieties about American reliability and regional threats, and it leaves the nuclear question deliberately unresolved for reasons that suit all three signatories. For India, the most tangible near-term consequence runs through Pakistan's expanded access to Turkish defence technology and Saudi financing, which strengthens Pakistan's position on India's Western Front without altering the underlying military balance. The longer-term effects are harder to pin down. They touch the multilateral setting in which Kashmir is debated, and they touch how durable India's own partnerships with Saudi Arabia and the UAE turn out to be.

India's task now is to deepen its own Gulf and Eastern Mediterranean partnerships on their own merits and to invest in the capabilities that Operation Sindoor showed actually matter. It should treat the Makkah pact as a significant data point, not a doctrinal alarm bell. The broader reshaping of Middle Eastern and South Asian security that produced this agreement was under way well before Makkah and will continue long after it. India's posture should be built for that longer horizon rather than for this week's headlines.

Declaration

I declare that this manuscript is being submitted exclusively to CENJOWS for publication consideration, is original, and has not been published or submitted elsewhere. I further certify that it contains no classified, restricted, or sensitive information and is based entirely on open-source material suitable for publication in the public domain.

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