

The Saudi–Pakistani Agreement: A Signal to Rivals and a Reminder to the United States

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The recent agreement outlining security guarantees that Pakistan will provide to Saudi Arabia underscores Riyadh’s determination to diversify its strategic safety net. Yet, uncertainty lingers regarding the exact scope and nature of Islamabad’s commitments. What is becoming increasingly clear, however, is the prevailing perception that Pakistan might one day be prepared to extend a nuclear umbrella over the kingdom if circumstances demand it. For now, the deal functions less as a binding security framework than as a strategic signal: it warns Saudi Arabia’s rivals, and reminds Washington, that Riyadh is actively cultivating alternatives. In practice, this involves deepening the “Pakistani option,” advancing its domestic nuclear infrastructure, and simultaneously seeking civilian nuclear cooperation with the United States, thereby weaving a multilayered network of deterrence and security assurances.

On September 17, 2025, in Riyadh, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif [signed](#) a new security agreement. Its central clause—that any attack on one of them will be considered an attack on both—has been perceived as a strategic turning point, modeled after [NATO’s Article 5](#). However, behind this dramatic wording lies a more complex reality: More than a strategic turning point, the agreement reveals part of a longstanding, close-knit security and economic relationship between the two states, one that preserves deliberate ambiguity as well as Riyadh’s doubts about American security support.

Riyadh and Islamabad have extensive security ties, under which Pakistan has maintained on-and-off military presence in Saudi Arabia for decades. Today, Pakistani soldiers are deployed in Saudi Arabia in training, advisory, and security roles. Since the 1960s, Pakistan has trained thousands of Saudi soldiers and, at Riyadh’s request, even sent military units to Saudi territory to protect its long borders and signal to rivals, internal and external alike, that it stands by the kingdom. The current agreement therefore fits into a continuum of historic cooperation more than it represents a genuine turning point; the two states have transformed a decades-long secret relationship into a formal and binding one.

For many years, the Saudi–Pakistani relationship has symbolized strategic ambiguity: Saudi economic support interwoven with security ties. The new agreement only partially changes this picture—publicly declaring, for the first time, an explicit clause of mutual defense. Still, even after the “hidden” has been revealed, ambiguity does not disappear. On the contrary, new questions arise: How will the commitment be implemented in a crisis? What will be the scope of operational coordination? Are there unwritten understandings regarding nuclear weapons? It should be remembered that the alliance is not confined solely to security cooperation. Its strategic foundation also rests on economic and social pillars—oil credit,

financial aid, millions of Pakistani workers in Saudi Arabia, and the Hajj as a binding framework.

Few details about the content of the agreement were released during the signing ceremony and afterward. Even on the nuclear dimension, the most sensitive issue, the agreement deliberately does not dispel the ambiguity. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) estimates that Pakistan currently possesses about 170 nuclear warheads—a number that continues to rise with the ongoing accumulation of enriched material and the development of additional delivery platforms. SIPRI also assesses that Pakistan is striving to expand its nuclear arsenal in the coming years. Why does Pakistan require these capabilities? Is it only to deter India, or also to provide Saudi Arabia with a protective umbrella? When asked, after the signing of the agreement, whether Pakistan is now obligated to provide Saudi Arabia with a nuclear umbrella, a senior Saudi official responded that “[this is a comprehensive defense agreement covering all military means](#).” Following the signing, reports surfaced on social media suggesting that the United Arab Emirates and Qatar could also potentially come under the Pakistani umbrella, but this has yet to be officially confirmed.

Hints about a Pakistani “nuclear umbrella” for Saudi Arabia continue to accompany the discourse in light of the countries’ historic ties in this field, and in particular Saudi financial assistance to Pakistan in general and to Pakistan’s uranium enrichment program in particular. Yet in the little that has been published, there is no mention of nuclear weapons. Nor is there certainty that Pakistan has promised the transfer of nuclear weapons components to Saudi Arabia under certain conditions. Over the years, Pakistan has consistently declared that its nuclear weapons are intended solely to deter India and not as a means of deterring other states.

Is the timing of the signing accidental? Israel’s unusual strike in Qatar, a partner of the United States, about a week before the agreement was signed, has shaken the Gulf states and intensified doubts about the reliability of the United States as a security patron. At the same time, it seems that Iran and Israel are preparing for another confrontation, while the Houthis in Yemen continue their attacks—some of the missiles launched toward Israel disintegrated over Saudi airspace. In the reality of a protracted regional war, Riyadh seeks to make clear that it is not isolated: It has behind it a powerful and nuclear Muslim ally. Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia denied that the agreement was a response to the Israeli strike in Doha. Defense alliances anchored in legal agreements are not forged overnight, and there is therefore no reason to doubt the credibility of the senior Saudi official who stated (when asked about the timing of the move) that the agreement was the product of many years of discussions. He added: “This is not a response to specific states or particular events, [but rather the institutionalization of longstanding and deep cooperation between our two countries](#).”

Nevertheless, the vague wording may create differences in perception and expectations between Riyadh and Islamabad regarding its meaning: Saudi Arabia may view Pakistan and its capabilities as a potential future nuclear backup, while Islamabad regards it as a non-binding declaration of intent in the nuclear context. It can be assumed that the agreement does not include an unconditional commitment or assistance under all circumstances. Pakistan has already shown in the past—for example, in its 2015 decision not to join the war in Yemen alongside the Saudis—that it is capable of setting red lines in accordance with its national

interest. Similarly, Saudi Arabia will not be quick to intervene in the Indo–Pakistani conflict over Kashmir—its ties with India have expanded significantly in recent years, and it does not want to raise doubts in New Delhi about its intentions. Therefore, it seems that the agreement is first and foremost a political declaration: a signal to rivals and a reminder to the United States that the Gulf states are considering security alternatives.

Doubts about Riyadh’s intentions in the nuclear field have long been a source of concern. Although the kingdom emphasizes that its nuclear program is intended solely for peaceful purposes, the statements of senior Saudi officials—chief among them the crown prince himself—make clear that Riyadh views a military nuclear capability in Iran as a red line, the crossing of which would compel it to respond accordingly. Mohammed bin Salman publicly pledged that [“if Iran develops nuclear weapons, Saudi Arabia will also acquire such weapons as quickly as possible.”](#) Such declarations, coupled with the slow progress of the kingdom’s civilian nuclear program, raise the possibility that it will in the future choose “shortcuts”—that is, less transparent and less regulated paths to achieving nuclear capability through third parties, most likely in cooperation with Pakistan, particularly if it concludes that efforts to prevent Iran’s nuclearization have failed.

The Saudi–Pakistani agreement carries with it a series of possible implications. First, the very declaration that any aggression against one will be considered aggression against both is a clear deterrent message to Iran and perhaps also to other regional actors perceived as threatening stability, including, possibly, Israel. In this way, Saudi Arabia signals that it does not rely solely on the United States as the guarantor of its security but is building alternative backup mechanisms with real military weight. If there were previous security understandings between Riyadh and Islamabad, the new agreement renews their validity. However, rather than reducing concerns, the agreement increases fears of a nuclear arms race in the Middle East.

The Saudi–Pakistani agreement could also affect the prospects for advancing normalization between Saudi Arabia and Israel, in part through a proposed package of understandings on civilian nuclear cooperation between the United States and the kingdom. Close military cooperation with Pakistan could undermine trust between Washington and Riyadh and complicate the path toward a US–Saudi arrangement regarding approval of uranium enrichment on Saudi soil. In any case, the agreement strengthens Saudi Arabia’s bargaining position vis-à-vis the United States on the nuclear issue.

In addition, the agreement intensifies speculation about Israel’s place in Saudi Arabia’s threat perception. For many years, the kingdom regarded Iran as its central rival. Yet Israel’s military operations in the region in the past two years may have altered Gulf strategic thinking in ways that require Israeli attention: Israel must convey a public and consistent message of non-hostility toward the Gulf states, making clear that it does not view Saudi Arabia as a target or adversary. It is important that this message be based not only on political statements but also on operational conduct, such as by avoiding targeted killings on Gulf soil and exercising restraint in statements about strikes and eliminations. Even if Israel’s name was not mentioned in connection with the Saudi–Pakistani agreement, the timing—close to Israel’s unusual strike in Qatar—is no small matter. Strategic significance should also be attributed to Pakistan’s intentions in the Israeli context. Although Israel does not view Pakistan or the Gulf

states as enemies, the entry of a nuclear actor willing to extend a defensive umbrella over Arab states should be a matter for monitoring and analysis.

On the nuclear dimension, and in light of ongoing US–Saudi contacts on the issue, Israel would do well to systematically support a US–Saudi framework that limits the spread of sensitive nuclear technologies: an upgraded civilian cooperation agreement (“123+”) without an independent fuel cycle in the kingdom, but one that offers practical alternatives—guaranteed fuel supply (including possibly through [the establishment of a fuel bank in the kingdom](#)), processing services abroad, the accession of the Additional Protocol of the International Atomic Energy Agency, and enhanced transparency arrangements at nuclear sites. In the Pakistani context, Saudi Arabia seeks to reinforce the image that it enjoys nuclear guarantees. Over the years, Riyadh has benefited from ambiguity regarding such guarantees, and there is no reason for it to seek clarity on the matter. For Israel, this represents a long-term security challenge, requiring monitoring and adaptation of policy responses.

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