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Can Pakistan Defend Saudi Arabia Without Confronting Iran?

By

Gulf State Analytics



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Page | 2

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	Page 3
Introduction.....	4
Preserving Strategic Equilibrium.....	4
Managing the Risks of Escalation	5
NOTES	6



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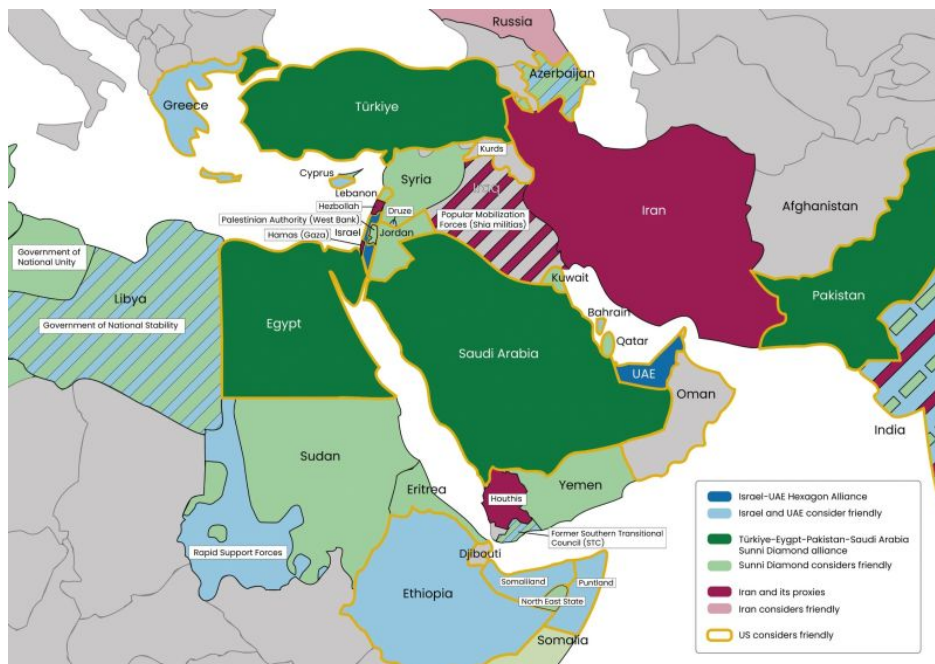
10 August 2026

Executive Summary

Page | 3

- ✦ The 2025 Strategic *Mutual Defence Agreement* elevated Saudi Arabia–Pakistan security ties into a formal mutual defence partnership, marking their strongest defence commitment in decades.
- ✦ Pakistan has declared attacks on Saudi Arabia a “red line” and pledged to support the Kingdom’s defence against external threats.
- ✦ Pakistan is expanding its Gulf security role through military cooperation with Saudi Arabia and other states such as Kuwait, including troop deployments, training, and defence support.
- ✦ Pakistan has extended its security commitments to maritime protection, including defending Pakistani-flagged vessels and participating in efforts to secure Red Sea shipping routes.
- ✦ Saudi Arabia is seeking more diversified defence partnerships as it becomes less confident in the United States as a security guarantor.
- ✦ Pakistan views closer ties with Saudi Arabia as a way to gain strategic benefits as well as investment, energy cooperation, and financial support.
- ✦ Islamabad is strengthening relations with Gulf Arab states while avoiding alignment with any explicitly anti-Iran coalition in order to preserve diplomatic flexibility.
- ✦ Pakistan’s cautious approach toward Iran is shaped by border security concerns, militant threats, domestic political considerations, and the need for regional stability.
- ✦ Pakistan’s history of neutrality in conflicts among Muslim-majority states reflects its longstanding preference to avoid direct involvement in intra-Muslim rivalries.
- ✦ Pakistan’s ability to balance closer Gulf defence ties with continued engagement with Iran will be tested if U.S.-Iran tensions escalate or Gulf partners demand greater military involvement.

Key Picture: The Emerging New Security Architecture in the Middle East



Source: [International Relations and Affairs Group](#)

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Introduction

As Saudi Arabia comes under mounting attack from the Iranian-led “Axis of Resistance” amid the continuing U.S.-Iran confrontation, Pakistan faces an increasingly delicate foreign policy test. Since signing a Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement (SMDA) with Riyadh in September 2025, Islamabad has repeatedly reaffirmed its “unwavering commitment” to the pact in the wake of Houthi missile strikes against the Kingdom, declaring that attacks on Saudi Arabia constitute a “red line” and are effectively tantamount to attacks on Pakistan itself.^{1, 2}

Page | 4

The SMDA that Riyadh and Islamabad signed in September 2025 represents the strongest formal bilateral defence commitment in decades, elevating previous military cooperation into an explicit mutual security obligation. Islamabad has pledged to honor all of its defence commitments to Saudi Arabia, while also extending similar assurances to other Gulf defence partners, including Kuwait which ratified a 2023 defence agreement with Pakistan in late July 2026.³ Thousands of Pakistani soldiers are reportedly deployed in Saudi Arabia, alongside Pakistani fighter aircraft assigned to help defend the Kingdom.⁴

Pakistan has also declared attacks on Pakistani-flagged vessels in the Red Sea to be a “red line,” extending its security commitments beyond the defence of Saudi territory to the protection of critical maritime routes.⁵ Reflecting this broader strategic role, Saudi Arabia’s Ministry of Defence announced on 30 July 2026 the establishment of the Multinational Maritime Defence Alliance (a 14-member coalition comprising Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar, Somalia, Sudan, Turkey, and Yemen) to safeguard freedom of navigation in the Red Sea, the Bab al-Mandeb Strait, and the Gulf of Aden.⁶

Although Saudi Arabia and Pakistan have maintained close defence and security ties since the 1970s, their strategic partnership has assumed renewed importance amid today’s increasingly volatile regional environment. As Riyadh grows more uncertain about the United States’ long-term commitment to Saudi and Gulf security, Saudi Arabia, like other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members, seeks to diversify its defence partnerships and reduce its dependence on Washington. Within this evolving strategic landscape, Pakistan has emerged as an increasingly important security partner as Saudi Arabia confronts mounting regional threats.

From Pakistan’s perspective, Saudi Arabia is a crucial partner within the emerging “Islamic Quad”—an informal geopolitical grouping comprising Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Turkey, with support from Jordan and Qatar—that seeks to counter Israel’s borderless aggression while encouraging diplomatic efforts to de-escalate tensions amid the U.S.-Iran confrontation.⁷ Beyond strategic considerations, Pakistani officials also hope that deeper defence ties with Riyadh will translate into increased Saudi investment, energy cooperation, and financial support at a time when the country faces significant economic pressures.

Preserving Strategic Equilibrium

Despite the strength of the Saudi-Pakistan alliance, Islamabad is proceeding cautiously to avoid being drawn into any coalition or geopolitical bloc explicitly directed against Iran. Pakistan has consistently sought to avoid entanglement in conflicts involving Tehran-backed actors, including Yemen’s Ansar Allah, as it attempts to preserve strategic flexibility and maintain stable relations with its western neighbor.

Pakistan’s foreign policy has long been shaped by a commitment to Islamic solidarity while its most consequential strategic rivalries have historically been directed toward non-Muslim adversaries, including Armenia, India, Israel, and, during the Cold War, the Soviet Union. This orientation has generally encouraged Islamabad to remain outside disputes between Muslim-majority countries. Its neutrality during the Iran-Iraq War (1980–88), decision not to participate in the Saudi-led intervention against the Iranian-backed Houthis in Yemen in 2015, and measured response to the 2017–21 Gulf dispute involving Qatar all illustrate this consistent preference. Although Pakistan has not hesitated to denounce Iranian attacks against Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, it continues to view a stable relationship with Tehran as a strategic imperative.

That imperative became especially evident following the tit-for-tat missile and drone strikes exchanged by Pakistan and Iran in January 2024, after which both governments moved deliberately to restore diplomatic

stability and security cooperation. Pakistan's calculations extend beyond the bilateral relationship. Concerns over growing strategic coordination between Israel and India have heightened Islamabad's reluctance to see developments that would strengthen Israel's regional position while reinforcing Pakistan's perception of strategic encirclement. Security considerations along the Iran-Pakistan frontier are equally important. As Pakistani forces continue operations against militant organisations such as the Balochistan Liberation Army and Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, Islamabad has little desire to see instability or governance vacuums emerge across the border that could further fuel insurgent activity in Balochistan. Domestic political dynamics also reinforce this cautious approach, given the presence of influential pro-Iran constituencies within Pakistan's Shia community.

Taken together, these strategic, security, and domestic considerations—alongside Pakistan's increasingly constructive relationship with the second Trump administration—help explain Islamabad's interest in preserving its role as a credible intermediary in periods of U.S.-Iran tension. Sustaining that diplomatic position requires avoiding policies that Tehran could reasonably interpret as alignment with an anti-Iranian coalition. To date, Pakistan's SMDA with Saudi Arabia and its defence cooperation with other Gulf Arab monarchies under attack by Iran remain broadly compatible with this balancing strategy.

However, this delicate balancing act could become more difficult to maintain if these partnerships were to evolve into arrangements requiring Pakistani combat forces to support states directly confronting Iran. For the foreseeable future, defence cooperation with Kuwait is likely to remain concentrated on relatively low-risk areas, including professional military education, training programs, personnel exchanges, advisory roles, and institutional cooperation, while stopping short of participation in any security architecture that seeks to weaken, isolate, and squeeze Tehran. Even so, Pakistan's persistent economic vulnerabilities may ultimately alter this calculus. Expanded Gulf Arab investment, energy collaboration, or financial assistance could create incentives for more extensive defence cooperation, potentially complicating Islamabad's carefully managed relationship with Tehran.

Managing the Risks of Escalation

Pakistan's evolving security partnerships with Saudi Arabia and other GCC members underscore a broader recalibration of its regional strategy, one that seeks to reconcile expanding defence commitments with the enduring necessity of preserving stable relations with Iran. The SMDA with Riyadh has undoubtedly elevated Pakistan's role in Gulf security and reflects both Saudi Arabia's search for more diversified security partners and Islamabad's desire to strengthen political, economic, and military ties with wealthy Gulf allies. Nonetheless, Pakistan's longstanding preference for avoiding direct involvement in intra-Muslim conflicts continues to shape the limits of this cooperation. Rather than joining an explicitly anti-Iranian security bloc, Islamabad is likely to prioritise defensive, deterrent, and maritime security roles while preserving diplomatic channels with Tehran.

Whether this delicate balancing strategy remains sustainable will depend largely on the trajectory of the U.S.-Iran confrontation and the evolving regional security environment. A significant escalation involving Iran itself, or pressure from GCC partners to participate in military operations directed against Tehran and its regional surrogates, would test Pakistan's ability to maintain its delicate geopolitical balance in the Middle East. For now, however, Islamabad appears determined to maximise the benefits of closer Gulf Arab partnerships without abandoning its traditional role as a pragmatic regional balancer capable of engaging all sides.

NOTES

¹ <https://www.dw.com/en/will-pakistan-intervene-amid-houthi-attacks-on-saudi-ships/a-78144890>

² <https://the arabweekly.com/pakistan-fears-houthi-attacks-saudi-arabia-raise-risk-wider-war>

³ <https://www.dawn.com/news/2019378>

⁴ <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/pakistan-worries-about-being-drawn-into-us-iran-conflict-after-houthi-attack-2026-07-16/>

⁵ <https://www.dawn.com/news/2019605/pakistan-backs-saudi-right-to-self-defence-after-iraq-strikes>

⁶ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/7/30/saudi-arabia-announces-maritime-defence-alliance-to-secure-vital-waterways>

⁷ <https://timesofislamabad.com/15-04-2026/islamic-quad-pakistan-hosts-key-meeting-with-turkey-saudi-arabia-egypt-ahead-of-turkey-summit/>