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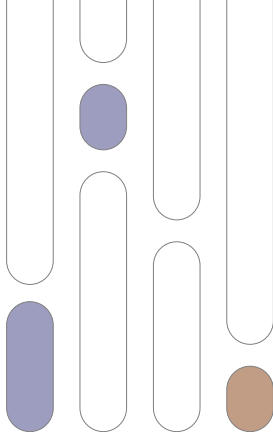
PAKISTAN'S PRESENCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR REGIONAL SECURITY

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Introduction

Pakistan consolidated its presence in the Middle East by participating in the Makkah Summit on August 7, 2026, which culminated in the signing of the Makkah Joint Defense Agreement among Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Türkiye. The agreement marked a significant milestone in Islamabad's expanding regional engagement, which had intensified in the aftermath of the 2025 India-Pakistan conflict. Pakistan's involvement in the Middle East subsequently accelerated and assumed a more pragmatic character, signaling a broader recalibration of its foreign policy priorities beyond its immediate geographical neighborhood. Islamabad increasingly positioned itself as a security and defense actor in the region, with its joint defense arrangements with Saudi Arabia providing a clear indication of this emerging role. At the same time, Pakistan sought to leverage its diplomatic standing to mediate regional disputes, including the highly complex and consequential confrontation between the United States and Iran. Its engagement also extended to the economic sphere, as Islamabad deepened its commercial ties with Middle Eastern states and expanded its access to regional markets. Pakistan has additionally sought to establish itself as an emerging supplier in the region's arms market, further broadening the scope of its strategic engagement with the Middle East.

Amid the turbulence in the Middle East, Pakistan's growing presence reflects the emergence of a significant middle power whose influence over the region's strategic balances and political interactions is greater than ever. This expanding role could have important implications for the region's security architecture, shifting power dynamics and the conflicts that continue to destabilize it.

Pakistan's growing regional profile appears to have been enabled by fundamental transformations within the country, combined with Islamabad's ability to adapt its policies to a wide range of regional and international circumstances. These developments have coincided with a growing regional demand for stability, deterrence and alternative channels of engagement, creating conditions that have allowed Pakistan to expand its presence and enhance its effectiveness.

Despite the strategic importance of this role and its potential contribution to regional security and coordination among key actors — particularly amid the heightened tensions that have gripped the Middle East since October 7, 2023 — it remains constrained by a range of political, strategic and structural challenges. While some regional and international powers have

welcomed Pakistan's growing engagement, others may view its expanding influence as a challenge to their own strategic interests and established spheres of influence.

This study examines the impact of Pakistan's growing presence in the Middle East and on the existing structure and balance of regional security. It approaches this question primarily through the lens of defensive realism, which holds that states seek to safeguard their security and ensure their survival by maintaining a balance of power. This framework is complemented by other theoretical perspectives, including regional security complex theory, which views Pakistan's regional engagement in relation to security threats emanating from geographically interconnected areas, and interdependence theory, which highlights the reciprocal links between Pakistan's economic ties with the Middle East and the region's complex security requirements.

Hence, these theoretical approaches provide a broader analytical framework for assessing the nature, drivers and implications of Pakistan's regional role and offer a more comprehensive understanding of how its expanding presence may affect the Middle East's evolving security landscape.

Accordingly, the study argues that Pakistan, as a major military and nuclear power, has the capacity to play a significant role in shaping the Middle East's regional security environment. It can also function as a "transregional actor," contributing to de-escalation and confidence-building in regional flashpoints through its historically balanced relationships with key actors, particularly Iran and Saudi Arabia.

The study further contends that the deeper Pakistan's security and military engagement becomes in the Middle East, the greater its potential to reinforce regional balance and deterrence. Over time, this expanding engagement could contribute to the convergence of South Asian and Middle Eastern security dynamics within a broader, interconnected regional security framework.

At the same time, Pakistan's geopolitical rivalry with India and the intersection of their competing interests in the Middle East, alongside the broader US-China strategic rivalry in the region, constrain the prospects for a fully stable security environment. These competing dynamics can generate indirect forms of polarization within the Middle Eastern security landscape, complicating efforts to establish a durable and balanced regional order.

The study employs an inductive approach to examine the relationship between Pakistan's presence in the Middle East and the region's security dynamics, focusing on the period from the aftermath of October 7, 2023 through the current US-Iran conflict. This approach involves systematically collecting and analyzing relevant data and tracing the connections among them to identify broader patterns and general relationships. The study also draws on complementary methodological approaches to address different dimensions of the research, including systems analysis. Under this framework, Middle Eastern security is treated as a "regional order" composed of interconnected actors and interactions, with Pakistan's presence understood as an external factor — or input — that can influence the order's behavior and outcomes.

Thus, the study is organized around four main areas of analysis: first, Pakistan's motives and objectives; second, indicators of its growing regional presence; third, its effects on regional security and strategic balances; and fourth, the challenges that could constrain or reshape this presence.

Pakistan's Motivations and Objectives in a Turbulent Region

Pakistan's presence as an influential actor in the Middle East hinges on several factors and objectives. These can be enumerated as follows:

The Region's Strategic Significance for Pakistan

Pakistan's ties to the Middle East have deep historical roots, extending back to the period before its independence from British India in 1947. Large numbers of Pakistani soldiers served in British Indian Army units stationed in key Middle Eastern cities, including Jerusalem, Amman, Baghdad, Cairo and Muscat. Following independence, Pakistan's armed forces inherited this legacy, helping establish Islamabad as an important military partner for several states across the region.

Pakistan subsequently played a role in developing the military capabilities of a number of Arab countries, particularly in the Gulf, while Pakistani personnel also served alongside the armed forces of Egypt, Jordan, Syria and other Arab states during their conflicts with Israel in the 1960s and 1970s. This longstanding military engagement created institutional ties, professional networks and a reservoir of historical familiarity that few other Muslim-majority countries can match.

As a result, Pakistan entered the contemporary Middle Eastern security landscape with an unusually deep legacy of military cooperation and long-

standing relationships with regional states. This history has contributed to broad acceptance of Pakistan's presence and has given Islamabad a degree of strategic credibility and access that many external actors have struggled to replicate.⁽¹⁾

Geographically, Pakistan sits at the crossroads of Asia, linking three strategically vital regions: the Middle East, South Asia and Central Asia. This position has enhanced its geopolitical value to Middle Eastern states, particularly by positioning Pakistan as a potentially important trade and economic partner. It has also fostered deep, organic ties with several countries in the region, particularly the Gulf states, with Islamabad emerging as a longstanding partner in safeguarding regional security and stability. In turn, the Gulf states have provided Pakistan with important diplomatic and economic support since its independence.

Yet the same geography that has encouraged a close strategic partnership between Pakistan and the Gulf states has also required Islamabad to maintain a careful balance in its relations with Iran. Pakistan shares a nearly 900-kilometer border with Iran, making the security and stability of this frontier a critical national priority. This imperative is reinforced by Pakistan's interest in accessing the markets of Central Asia and the Caucasus through Iranian territory, giving Islamabad a strong incentive to preserve functional and stable relations with Tehran.

Amid intensifying geopolitical competition and overlapping regional and international rivalries, Pakistan's strategic location has increasingly become an asset that Islamabad can leverage to strengthen its geopolitical standing and expand its role on the global political and economic stage.⁽²⁾

Culturally and politically, Pakistan's distinctive Islamic identity is an important factor in understanding its relationships with key actors in the Middle East. Pakistan's Constitution and broader political outlook emphasize the principle of Islamic solidarity,⁽³⁾ creating a strong ideological and social connection with issues that resonate across the Muslim world. As a result, Middle Eastern issues — most notably the Palestinian question — have long carried significant weight in Pakistani public discourse and have generally enjoyed broad popular and official support.

Pakistan does not recognize Israel and has consistently supported Palestinian rights, a position rooted in both its foreign-policy principles and the broader religious and political identity of the state. This stance broadly aligns with the positions of many Middle Eastern governments and with

widespread public sentiment across the region, reinforcing Pakistan's political affinity with Arab and Muslim societies.

Islamabad has also sought to translate this religious and cultural affinity into greater influence across the Islamic world, using its identity and diplomatic ties to build political support, advance its strategic interests, and strengthen economic relationships.⁽⁴⁾

The economic dimension is therefore central to understanding Pakistan's engagement with the Middle East, particularly as the country has faced persistent structural economic challenges for years. These include chronic trade deficits, declining foreign direct investment, dwindling foreign-exchange reserves, a weakening currency against the US dollar, high levels of external debt and recurring balance-of-payments pressures.

The US-Iran conflict has further intensified these economic vulnerabilities,⁽⁵⁾ increasing the pressure on Islamabad to safeguard external sources of financial and economic support. Hence, backing from the Gulf states has become particularly important to Pakistan, with successive governments seeking to preserve these relationships as a critical pillar of the country's economic resilience and political stability.

At the military level, Pakistan's substantial armed forces, advanced scientific capabilities and nuclear arsenal give it considerable weight in regional security calculations. Islamabad has also contributed to military training programs in several Gulf states, reinforcing its reputation as a capable security provider and defense partner.

Pakistan's military standing was further bolstered by its reported victory over India in May 2025, which enhanced Islamabad's ability to project itself to Middle Eastern partners as a credible military power and a reliable defense supplier. The rise of Army Chief General Asim Munir has also contributed to a broader recalibration of Pakistan's foreign-policy posture, with Islamabad seeking to move beyond a predominantly security-driven approach toward a more explicitly geopolitical role centered on strategic flexibility, mediation and dependable partnerships.

This evolution could further expand Pakistan's strategic leverage and give Islamabad greater room for maneuver in managing its regional relationships, particularly its complex and enduring rivalry with India.⁽⁶⁾

A Volatile Middle East

The Middle East is of vital strategic importance to Pakistan, and developments in the region have direct implications for Islamabad's interests, security and geopolitical standing. For years, the region has been undergoing a period of profound and uncertain transformation, as major international and regional powers seek to reshape the regional order and consolidate their influence.

The United States remains at the center of these efforts, seeking to develop an alternative regional security framework amid what many perceive as a gradual reassessment of its longstanding role in the Middle East. China, meanwhile, has sought to establish itself as an increasingly important economic partner for regional states, expanding its trade, investment and strategic ties across the region.

Since the October 7 attacks, Israel has likewise pursued far-reaching changes to the regional balance, seeking to decisively weaken Iran and its network of regional allies and thereby create conditions for a broader expansion of Israeli strategic influence. This ambition could extend beyond the Middle East into Central Asia and the Caucasus, particularly as the Abraham Accords have increasingly attracted interest from countries in those regions after gaining ground among several Gulf states — areas where Pakistan has maintained decades-long and particularly close relationships.

Israel's attack on Qatar underscored Israel's reliance on the unrestricted use of force to expand its influence across the region, including among the Gulf states, and to pressure them toward participation in the Abraham Accords rather than pursuing a more balanced and durable framework for peace. At the same time, the attack exposed vulnerabilities in the security architecture of several regional states and highlighted the limits of existing deterrence mechanisms.

The episode was particularly significant for Gulf countries that depend heavily on the US military presence as a central component of their security arrangements, including Qatar, Bahrain and Kuwait.⁽⁷⁾

Amid this emerging security vacuum and declining confidence in Washington as a security and defense partner, Pakistan had little reason to remain on the sidelines as regional dynamics underwent profound changes that could directly affect its interests. Islamabad therefore moved to deepen

its engagement with regional affairs, recognizing that developments in the Middle East could have far-reaching consequences for its security, economy and geopolitical position.

At the same time, the Gulf states have sought to strengthen regional defense arrangements in response to the security imbalances exposed by the conflict. This has increased demand for Pakistan as a potential strategic partner capable of contributing to a more balanced regional security environment, given its military capabilities, nuclear deterrent and longstanding ties with the Gulf states. In parallel, the Gulf countries' economic resources and ambitious development projects offer Pakistan long-term opportunities for investment, trade and broader economic cooperation.

Although Iran and Pakistan have a long history of rivalry and periodic tensions, their shared interests have also created incentives for rapprochement and pragmatic cooperation. This dynamic was reflected in the relative restraint shown by Iranian officials and media outlets in responding to Pakistan's recent defense agreement with Saudi Arabia, despite the strategic implications of closer Pakistan-Saudi security ties. Economic considerations have further reinforced this pragmatic relationship. Following the imposition of US sanctions on Iran, Pakistan's border became an important economic lifeline for Iran, while Islamabad has benefited from its role as a transit corridor for Iranian goods and trade. Some analysts have gone further, suggesting that Pakistan could increasingly assume a role traditionally associated with the UAE as a key destination and conduit for Iranian trade with international markets amid continuing sanctions and blockade.⁽⁸⁾ Among countries outside the Middle East, Pakistan was particularly vulnerable to the potential spillover effects of the US-Israel war against Iran. Its exposure stems from a combination of geographical, demographic, economic and security factors. Pakistan shares a long and volatile border with Iran, is home to the world's second largest Shiite population and remains heavily dependent on energy supplies originating in the Middle East. At the same time, millions of Pakistani nationals live and work across the Gulf, leaving Islamabad highly sensitive to any escalation that could threaten the safety of its citizens or disrupt regional economic activity. The continuation of the conflict therefore poses direct risks to Pakistan's economic stability, domestic security and broader strategic interests. For Islamabad, the war is not a distant geopolitical confrontation but a crisis with the potential to generate immediate consequences across its borders, energy supplies, diaspora communities and internal security environment.⁽⁹⁾

Policies of the International Actors in the Region

Pakistan maintains a close strategic partnership with China, which views Islamabad as an important counterweight to India and a means of strengthening its strategic position in South Asia. Pakistan is also central to several Chinese connectivity and infrastructure initiatives, most notably the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), providing China with access to the Arabian Sea and a potentially important overland route for trade and energy flows.

Beyond its role as a transportation and connectivity hub, Pakistan has also served as a conduit for Chinese defense cooperation and arms exports to countries across the region, further enhancing the strategic value of the partnership. Its geographical position could become even more important during periods of heightened instability, particularly when disruptions or threats to maritime routes such as the Strait of Hormuz create demand for alternative land-based corridors.

Pakistan, for instance, can facilitate the movement of goods and economic exchange between China and Iran, giving Beijing an additional route for maintaining commercial ties with Tehran. Islamabad is acutely aware of the strategic value of its geography to China and has sought to leverage this interdependence to strengthen its own geopolitical standing, expand its strategic relevance and increase its bargaining power with regional and global actors.

Pakistan's relationship with the United States was marked by limited engagement and mutual frustration before Donald Trump's return to the White House. Despite substantial US assistance to Islamabad over the years, Washington remained dissatisfied with Pakistan's level of cooperation in confronting the Taliban and other groups opposed to the US presence in the region. Islamabad, for its part, resented Washington's growing strategic and economic support for India, which Pakistan viewed as part of a broader US effort to strengthen New Delhi's position and promote a regional balance favorable to Indian dominance in South and Southeast Asia.

The relationship has since undergone a gradual, if limited, shift. The US withdrawal from Afghanistan removed one of the principal sources of friction between the two countries, while the resumption of intelligence-sharing arrangements has helped ease some of the longstanding tensions. Pakistan has also sought to reposition itself in Washington as a multifaceted partner — with roles spanning security, diplomacy and economic coopera-

tion — in part to preserve strategic room for maneuver amid its deepening relationship with China.

At the same time, Islamabad has become increasingly attentive to the risks associated with excessive dependence on Beijing, particularly concerns that China's expanding involvement in Pakistan's ports and strategic infrastructure could narrow Islamabad's autonomy in making key geopolitical and economic decisions.

Pakistan cultivated close ties with President Trump and his administration through a carefully coordinated diplomatic campaign focused on influential figures within his inner circle. This approach enabled General Munir to navigate around some of the institutional complexities that had historically constrained US-Pakistan relations and to pursue a more personalized form of diplomacy. Munir presented himself as a central decision-maker with a disciplined and decisive leadership style, positioning Pakistan's military establishment as a key interlocutor in Washington.

This strategy helped Munir build a direct relationship with Trump and secure a high-profile visit to the White House, an episode widely interpreted as a visible acknowledgment by Washington of the military's central role in Pakistan's political and strategic decision-making. The improved relationship also coincided with a reduction in the US tariff proposed for Pakistani imports, from an initially threatened 29% to 19%. By comparison, Washington imposed a 50% tariff on Indian imports, following India's continued purchases of Russian oil despite US sanctions.⁽¹⁰⁾

This strategic positioning has also strengthened Pakistan's ability to advance its interests in the Middle East. The weakness of existing multilateral frameworks and international institutions responsible for maintaining peace and security has created additional space for Islamabad to maneuver, allowing it to move from the periphery of the international system toward a more prominent position within it.

This expanded diplomatic space has enabled Pakistan to pursue several objectives simultaneously: presenting itself as a potential mediator and peace broker, establishing itself as an emerging international actor and pursuing a more autonomous foreign policy. Rather than committing exclusively to a single major power, Islamabad has increasingly sought to diversify its strategic partnerships and maintain flexible relationships with competing centers of global power.

Because the Middle East occupies a central position in global politics and remains a major arena of competition among international powers, Pakistan has increasingly viewed the region as an important platform for projecting its influence and expanding its diplomatic reach. Greater engagement in the Middle East gives Pakistani leaders more direct access to the US president and to influential regional decision-makers, strengthening Islamabad's ability to advance a foreign policy aligned with its strategic interests.

This expanded diplomatic presence also provides Pakistan with an opportunity to articulate its positions on issues of national and strategic importance while generating tangible political, security and economic benefits. Deeper engagement can strengthen security cooperation with the United States and key Middle Eastern partners, while helping Islamabad preserve access to foreign assistance and other forms of external economic support. Pakistan also sees its growing regional profile as a means of elevating the Kashmir dispute on the international agenda. By expanding its diplomatic relationships and assuming a more active role in Middle Eastern affairs, Islamabad can seek greater political support and international attention for its position on Jammu and Kashmir, thereby linking its regional engagement to one of its longstanding foreign-policy priorities.⁽¹¹⁾

Pakistan's Ties With Influential Regional Actors

Pakistan occupies an important position in the Middle East through a network of longstanding relationships with key regional powers, with Saudi Arabia standing out as its most consequential partner. The depth of the Saudi-Pakistan relationship has been demonstrated repeatedly at critical junctures in both countries' modern histories and rests on a combination of religious affinity, strategic interests and economic interdependence.

Saudi Arabia holds particular spiritual significance for Pakistan as the custodian of Islam's two holiest sites, Makkah and Medina. Over the decades, this religious connection has evolved into a close strategic partnership characterized by significant mutual dependence. Pakistan has provided security cooperation and defense commitments to the kingdom, which occupies a central position in the Islamic world, while Saudi Arabia has provided Pakistan with crucial financial assistance, energy supplies and economic support.

The presence of approximately 2.26 million Pakistanis in Saudi Arabia further reinforces the relationship, creating extensive social and econom-

ic ties between the two countries. Riyadh also played an important role in supporting Pakistan following its independence, while its assistance to Islamabad has extended to strategically sensitive areas, including Pakistan's nuclear program, which strengthened the country's deterrent capabilities in its rivalry with India.

The two countries also cooperated during the Cold War, particularly in the context of the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. Their security relationship has since evolved further, culminating in a joint strategic defense agreement that elevated bilateral ties to the level of a formal strategic partnership. For Pakistan, the relationship with Saudi Arabia therefore extends well beyond conventional diplomacy. It represents a critical source of political backing, economic assistance, energy security and strategic support.⁽¹²⁾

Pakistan also maintains a close strategic partnership with Türkiye, with both countries providing political, diplomatic and security support to one another in addressing challenges within their respective regional environments. Islamabad benefits from Türkiye's growing military and technological capabilities, while the two countries share broadly aligned positions on a range of regional and international issues. Their strategic interests also converge across Central Asia, the Caucasus and the Middle East — regions that both countries regard as important areas of historical, political and strategic interest. Their defense cooperation has expanded significantly in recent years, with Pakistan emerging as an important military partner for Türkiye. Islamabad played a prominent role in supporting Ankara's position in the Azerbaijan-Armenia conflict and has also participated in Türkiye's efforts to develop its fifth-generation fighter aircraft capabilities. Pakistan's support for Türkiye extends beyond the Caucasus and into the Eastern Mediterranean. Islamabad has backed Ankara in its disputes with Greece over the Aegean Sea, while Pakistani military cooperation with Türkiye has drawn concern in Athens, which has viewed the expanding defense relationship as a potential strategic challenge.⁽¹³⁾

Despite longstanding differences between Pakistan and Iran, both countries have demonstrated an ability to manage their disputes. Their shared priority has been to contain areas of disagreement while preserving border stability and protecting overlapping economic and security interests.

This ability to balance its relationships with Saudi Arabia, Türkiye and Iran is central to the character of Pakistan's growing presence in the Middle East. Islamabad's involvement in Libya has not undermined its strategic partnership with Türkiye, just as its engagement with Iran has not come at the ex-

pense of its close alliance with Saudi Arabia. Rather than choosing sides in the region's rivalries, Pakistan has sought to maintain working relationships with competing regional powers, reinforcing its image as a flexible and pragmatic actor.

Pakistan's defense partnerships also extend to other countries across the region. Bahrain and Oman, for example, have benefited from the service and expertise of Pakistani military personnel within their armed forces. Pakistan has also provided military training to Iraqi pilots, including in counterterrorism operations, while the Iraqi government has publicly acknowledged Islamabad's assistance in the campaign against ISIS following the liberation of Mosul.⁽¹⁴⁾

Pakistan has therefore consolidated its regional presence as an actor capable of navigating competing geopolitical blocs and balancing relationships with rival powers. By drawing on its economic, defense and diplomatic capabilities, Islamabad has gradually expanded its influence across the Middle East and positioned itself as a potential bridge between competing regional actors. This balancing role has created opportunities for Pakistan to contribute to the management and resolution of regional disputes, whether between Arab and non-Arab states or among Arab countries themselves.

The circumstances surrounding the region's current transformation have provided Pakistan with a window to deepen its presence in the Middle East and pursue several strategic objectives.

First, Islamabad Seeks to Build Deeper Partnerships Across the Region

Its strained relationship with Afghanistan, continuing strategic competition with India and the declining effectiveness of some traditional regional security frameworks have increased the importance of developing alternative partnerships. A stronger presence in the Middle East can provide Pakistan with greater strategic depth, helping offset India's regional influence while giving Islamabad additional room for maneuver and opportunities to expand its geopolitical reach without becoming directly entangled in South Asia's complex balance of power.

Second, Pakistan Seeks to Mitigate the Potential Consequences of Regional Conflicts

Islamabad has a direct interest in preventing major changes to the Middle Eastern security architecture that could disproportionately benefit Israel or undermine the strategic position of Pakistan's regional partners. At the

same time, it has strong economic incentives to protect its extensive ties with the Gulf states, including the interests and security of millions of Pakistani workers living across the Gulf and the continued flow of remittances and financial assistance that are important to Pakistan's economy.

Finally, Pakistan Is Seeking to Strengthen Its Position Within the Emerging International Order

By expanding its role in the Middle East, Islamabad can pursue greater recognition as a consequential middle power, capitalize on shifts in the global balance of power and increase its diplomatic leverage. This strategy also offers Pakistan a means of managing the risks arising from intensifying US-China competition by maintaining relationships with both sides rather than becoming overly dependent on either major power.

Nature and Tools of Pakistan's Presence

Several key developments reflect Pakistan's growing Pakistani presence in the region, including:

The Strategic Mutual Defense Agreement Between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan

Following Israel's attack on Qatar, confidence in US security guarantees declined across parts of the Gulf, prompting Saudi Arabia to sign the Strategic Mutual Defense Agreement (SMDA) with Pakistan on September 17, 2025. The agreement was intended, in part, to address the security gap exposed by changes in Israel's military doctrine and the apparent expansion of its strategic reach into the Gulf.

Under the agreement, the signatories committed to taking the necessary measures in response to an armed attack against either party, formalizing a principle of collective security and mutual defense. The accord represented a significant development in a region where successive attempts to establish effective collective defense arrangements have struggled to gain traction, dating back to initiatives such as the 1991 Damascus Declaration.

The agreement also created a framework for deeper cooperation in intelligence sharing, joint military exercises and training, counterterrorism and defense industries. Although nuclear capabilities were explicitly kept outside the agreement's formal scope, the partnership carries strategic significance beyond its conventional defense provisions, given Pakistan's nuclear deterrent and the high level of strategic trust that has developed between Islamabad and Riyadh.⁽¹⁵⁾

The Iranian attacks on Gulf states may have provided an early test of the newly established Saudi-Pakistani defense partnership. Pakistan reportedly deployed military personnel, JF-17 fighter jets, drones and an HQ-9 air defense system to Saudi Arabia, following earlier instances in which Islamabad dispatched fighter aircraft after Iranian attacks on Saudi energy infrastructure. The scale and composition of the reported deployment suggest a role extending beyond symbolic or advisory support, potentially marking the first operational test of the SMDA.⁽¹⁶⁾

Pakistan's role in Yemen provides another indication of how the partnership could translate into a broader regional security role. In 2015, Islamabad declined to join the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen, citing the security and geopolitical pressures it faced along its own borders at the time. Its subsequent reemergence in the Yemeni theater, however, signals a shift in the scope of its regional military engagement.

Reports have indicated the deployment of Pakistani forces to areas of Yemen controlled by Saudi-backed forces, particularly in the governorates of Hadramawt and Shabwa. The deployment has been linked to a Saudi initiative to assume control of positions previously held by UAE-backed forces, potentially giving Pakistan a more direct role in the evolving security and political dynamics of Yemen.⁽¹⁷⁾

The Makkah Joint Defense Agreement

Saudi Arabia has been a key driver of efforts to strengthen Pakistan's security role in the Middle East and promote more integrated regional security arrangements capable of responding to ongoing instability and coordinating positions on major regional crises.⁽¹⁸⁾ These efforts culminated in the announcement of the Makkah Joint Defense Agreement on August 7, 2026. According to a joint statement, the agreement is designed to strengthen collective deterrence against potential aggression and established the principle that an armed attack on any one of the three signatories would be treated as an attack on all three. The framework is intended to deepen security coordination and broaden the scope of defense cooperation among the parties. The agreement effectively creates a trilateral defense framework centered on collective defense, with Saudi Arabia potentially serving as the host of a secretariat tasked with coordinating cooperation among the three countries. The signatories emphasized that the arrangement was not directed against any specific country and was not intended to encourage a regional nuclear arms race. Instead, they presented it as an effort to strengthen national

self-defense capabilities and develop sustainable defense capacities among the three parties. The agreement represents an important development in the evolution of regional security arrangements. Its significance extended beyond the three participating states, particularly given the Middle East's centrality to international strategic competition and the possibility that the region's rapidly changing security environment could produce structural shifts with consequences extending well beyond its borders.⁽¹⁹⁾

A New Arms Supplier

Pakistan is seeking to establish itself as a reliable arms supplier to countries across the Middle East and surrounding regions. Its standing in the defense market has benefited from the performance of the Pakistan Air Force during the confrontation with India in May 2025, giving Islamabad an opportunity to showcase its military capabilities, defense technologies and domestically produced weapons to potential regional buyers.

One indication of this expanding ambition is Pakistan's reported \$4 billion arms agreement with the Libyan National Army led by Khalifa Haftar. Islamabad was also reportedly close to finalizing a separate \$1.5 billion deal with the Sudanese armed forces, although Saudi Arabia subsequently delayed funding for the agreement in support of international efforts to advance the Sudanese peace process. Pakistan is also reportedly engaged in negotiations with Saudi Arabia over an arms package intended to complement and reinforce the SMDA.

Taken together, these developments point to growing regional interest in Pakistani defense products, which are generally less expensive than comparable Western systems. Pakistan's emergence as a defense exporter could therefore serve objectives extending well beyond arms sales. Increased defense exports could generate foreign-currency revenues, improve the country's balance of payments, ease external financing pressures, strengthen Pakistan's domestic industrial base, and contribute to long-term economic growth.

At the strategic level, defense exports also offer Islamabad a means of extending its geopolitical reach. By establishing military-industrial relationships with partners across the Middle East, North and East Africa, Central Asia and other conflict-affected regions, Pakistan can expand its influence westward while deepening the security partnerships that underpin its broader regional strategy.⁽²⁰⁾

An Economic Partner and a Trade Crossing

Pakistan is seeking to deepen its economic partnerships with countries across the Middle East and position itself as a strategic geo-economic gateway for regional trade and connectivity. Beyond its geographical importance to international transport and economic corridors — particularly the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) — there are growing signs of economic interdependence between Pakistan and the Gulf economies.

This trend was underscored in early July 2025, when the World Bank moved Pakistan from its South Asia regional grouping into a newly configured regional category covering the Middle East and North Africa, Afghanistan and Pakistan (MENAAP). The reclassification reflected Pakistan's increasingly close economic and institutional ties with the Gulf states, as well as broader shifts in its economic and diplomatic orientation. The World Bank's regional classification is based primarily on institutional, operational, and financing considerations rather than geopolitical alignment alone.

According to available data, Pakistan received a record \$38.3 billion in workers' remittances during fiscal year 2025, with Saudi Arabia and the UAE alone accounting for \$17.2 billion. The Gulf states as a whole contributed approximately \$20.9 billion, underscoring their central role in sustaining Pakistan's external finances.

These inflows provide a critical source of foreign currency, helping bolster Pakistan's foreign-exchange reserves, reduce pressure on the balance of payments and strengthen the country's financial position in dealings with international institutions. Every year, tens of billions of dollars are transferred by Pakistani workers across the Gulf, making the region indispensable to Pakistan's economic stability and external liquidity.

Pakistan is also heavily dependent on the Gulf for its energy needs. The country imports roughly 85% of its oil consumption, with the majority sourced from Gulf producers under preferential arrangements that can include subsidized pricing and deferred payment terms. These mechanisms help ease pressure on Pakistan's public finances, reduce immediate foreign-exchange requirements and provide Islamabad with greater flexibility in managing its chronic external financing constraints.⁽²¹⁾

Although the Gulf states have increasingly shifted away from traditional forms of unconditional financial support toward an economic model centered on reciprocal interests and commercially viable partnerships, Paki-

stan has sought to adapt its economic strategy accordingly. Islamabad established the Special Investment Facilitation Council (SIFC), a high-level mechanism designed to streamline investment procedures, attract foreign capital and provide greater institutional coordination for major investment projects. The SIFC operates with substantial involvement from Pakistan's military leadership and is intended, among other objectives, to facilitate direct investment by Gulf sovereign wealth funds in strategically important sectors of the Pakistani economy.

However, Iran remains an important economic partner for Pakistan. Seeking to maximize the benefits of this relationship, strengthen Tehran's confidence in Islamabad and establish Pakistan as a trusted intermediary, Pakistan's Ministry of Commerce issued the "Goods Transit Order through Pakistan 2026" on April 25, 2026, with immediate effect.

The order formally permits the transit of goods originating in third countries through Pakistani territory en route to Iran. In practical terms, this could allow goods from China and other parts of Eurasia to move through Pakistan before reaching Iranian markets, creating an alternative trade route at a time when Iran faces extensive restrictions on international commerce. The measure represented an attempt to circumvent the US blockade imposed on Iran on April 13, 2026. Moreover, by facilitating Iran's access to external trade, Islamabad can strengthen its position as a regional transit hub while deepening its economic relationship with Tehran. It also demonstrates how Pakistan can leverage its geographical position and control over key trade corridors to expand its influence within the regional balance of power.^[22]

Pakistan is also seeking to expand its economic cooperation with Türkiye, which serves as an important gateway between Asia and Europe. On July 4, 2026, Pakistan's Minister for Maritime Affairs Muhammad Junaid Anwar Chaudhry, met with Türkiye's Minister of Transport and Infrastructure Abdulkadir Uraloğlu, to discuss expanding bilateral cooperation in maritime infrastructure and modern transportation systems.

The two sides emphasized the importance of these sectors in facilitating trade, strengthening regional connectivity and supporting sustainable long-term economic growth. Deeper cooperation with Türkiye would also enable Pakistan to strengthen its links with European markets while integrating its maritime and transport networks more closely with broader Eurasian trade corridors.^[23]

Mediator and Catalyst for Peace

In a clear indication of its expanding role as a potential peacemaker in the Middle East, Pakistan announced on January 29, 2026, that it would join the Board of Peace established by Trump. The move reflected Islamabad's broader effort to strengthen its position in a region undergoing profound strategic realignment, while also responding to Washington's search for capable partners that could help manage escalating crises without requiring a large-scale US military commitment.⁽²⁴⁾ Pakistan's participation placed it within an emerging diplomatic framework addressing one of the Middle East's most complex and consequential conflicts.⁽²⁵⁾

The US-Iran war, which erupted in late February 2026, accelerated Pakistan's transition from a relatively peripheral actor into a power of growing strategic importance in the Middle East. Islamabad succeeded in positioning itself as a potential mediator between the two sides, gaining a degree of acceptance from the principal actors involved in the crisis.

On the Iranian side, Pakistan strengthened Tehran's confidence by publicly condemning the US attack, characterizing it as a violation of international law and a threat to regional peace and security. Islamabad also affirmed Iran's right to self-defense and took steps to facilitate Iranian foreign trade by keeping its borders open to the movement of Iranian goods. At the same time, Pakistan maintained direct channels of communication with the US president who welcomed Islamabad's mediation efforts. Regional governments likewise viewed Pakistan's involvement favorably, given their shared interest in containing the conflict and preventing further escalation. Pakistan itself had a direct stake in ending the war: approximately 90% of its energy imports pass through the Strait of Hormuz, leaving its economy and energy security highly vulnerable to any prolonged disruption of the waterway.⁽²⁶⁾

As part of this effort, Pakistan hosted the first direct talks between US and Iranian officials. Although the initial round failed to produce a breakthrough, Islamabad continued working to bring the two sides closer together. Its diplomatic efforts ultimately contributed to a temporary ceasefire and the subsequent signing of a memorandum of understanding aimed at ending the conflict and establishing a framework for substantive negotiations over the issues separating the two sides.

Pakistan's proactive diplomacy consequently strengthened its position in West Asia,⁽²⁷⁾ expanding its role beyond that of a security partner to that of

an increasingly relevant diplomatic actor. This enhanced profile also helped Islamabad counter efforts by India to constrain its regional influence and isolate it diplomatically, while improving Pakistan's international standing and strengthening its image among major global powers.

The mediation effort also served a direct national-security purpose. By positioning itself as an intermediary rather than a party to the conflict, Pakistan reduced the risk of being drawn into the war, particularly if Iran were to expand the scope of its military operations against countries across the region.⁽²⁸⁾

Reuters, citing Pakistani sources, reported that Islamabad had begun mediating between Libya's Government of National Unity in Tripoli and the administration based in Benghazi and appointed by the House of Representatives. Washington was reportedly aware of Pakistan's involvement, which also enjoys Saudi support, providing another indication of Islamabad's expanding role as an active mediator in regional conflicts.⁽²⁹⁾

Limits of Impact on Regional Security

Pakistan is pursuing a coherent strategy that combines defensive, economic, and diplomatic initiatives to expand its room for maneuver in the Middle East. Crucially, this growing presence has not required Islamabad to sever or substantially weaken its relationships with any of the region's major competing powers, nor has it involved direct participation in their conflicts. This approach suggests that Pakistan is pursuing a calculated strategy of risk management, seeking to maximize its strategic gains while minimizing exposure to conflicts that do not directly serve its vital interests. Rather than aligning itself exclusively with one regional camp, Islamabad has sought to preserve its extensive network of relationships across competing political and security blocs.⁽³⁰⁾ Such a strategy allows Pakistan to expand its influence while maintaining flexibility and avoiding disruptions to its domestic stability, regional relationships and broader strategic balance. This would unfold as follows:

Bringing Forth a New Geostrategic Identity for Pakistan in the Middle East

The Middle East, understood in its broadest geopolitical sense as a space extending from Central Asia in the east to the Red Sea in the west, has not traditionally been a primary focus of Pakistani foreign policy. Yet this does not diminish Pakistan's deep connection to the region. Positioned along the eastern periphery of the broader Middle Eastern geopolitical space, Paki-

stan both shapes and is shaped by regional developments. Its geographical proximity, historical ties and strategic interests make the region a natural extension of Pakistan's geopolitical environment. Pakistan's growing engagement with the Middle East therefore represents more than an expansion of its foreign-policy activity. It has become an additional dimension of Islamabad's geopolitical identity, strengthening its international profile and expanding its strategic competitiveness.

This trajectory has been reinforced by a broader regional push for greater strategic autonomy and a growing desire among Middle Eastern states to reduce their dependence on major external powers as security guarantors. Some regional actors have sought to exploit the strategic space created by the gradual adjustment of the US military and political footprint, while China has attempted to capitalize on Washington's changing role by expanding its economic and diplomatic influence.

Within this shifting environment, Pakistan's role could become increasingly significant. China views Pakistan as an important partner in advancing its interests across the Middle East and Central Asia and in connecting these regions to wider markets extending toward Russia and Europe. At the same time, growing doubts among regional states — particularly in the Gulf — about the reliability of their security and defense relationships with Washington have created additional space for alternative partnerships.

These doubts have intensified amid concerns that the United States could involve regional partners in major conflicts without adequately consulting them or accounting for their interests. As a result, some Middle Eastern states are increasingly interested in developing security arrangements based on greater regional self-reliance rather than exclusive dependence on external guarantees. If this trend continues, it could fundamentally reshape the region's balance of power.⁽³¹⁾

Furthermore, Pakistan's growing presence in the Middle East reinforces its potential role as a strategic geo-economic gateway for regional states, particularly the Gulf countries, to the heart of Asia. Its geographical position provides a critical link between the Middle East and major markets and strategic corridors across Central and South Asia, the Caucasus, and the wider Eurasian landmass.

These areas are also of growing importance to Türkiye, which has sought to deepen its political, economic, and strategic ties with them on the basis of shared interests and historical and cultural connections. Ankara has

increasingly focused on the development of regional trade corridors and on securing a role in major international infrastructure and connectivity projects linking these markets. The Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia, likewise have strong interests in expanding their economic footprint across Central Asia and beyond, including through investment in and along the INSTC. Pakistan's geographical position can therefore serve as an important bridge between Gulf capital, Eurasian markets and emerging trade routes across the broader Asian continent.⁽³²⁾

Pakistan's expanding engagement with the Middle East could also affect the evolution of major international trade corridors, including the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC). Its growing role illustrates how Pakistan's Middle Eastern engagement is contributing to the gradual redrawing of the geographical and strategic boundaries of a region whose definition has historically remained fluid, expanding or contracting according to shifting political and economic dynamics.

In this sense, Pakistan's expanding regional role is not merely reinforcing its own geopolitical identity; it is also contributing to the emergence of a broader strategic space extending from the heart of Asia toward India, across the Middle East, and into East and parts of North Africa.⁽³³⁾

A New Regional Security Structure

The SMDA has the potential to reshape the Gulf's security landscape by demonstrating Islamabad's willingness to formalize regional defense commitments that extend beyond traditional military training, technical consultations and security coordination. Given Pakistan's military and nuclear capabilities and Saudi Arabia's considerable economic and political weight, the agreement represents a significant development in the evolution of the Gulf security architecture.

Strategically, the partnership could serve as a counterweight to multiple sources of regional power. It provides Saudi Arabia with an additional means of addressing concerns over Iranian military capabilities, regional influence and control of critical maritime routes, while also offering a potential counterbalance to Israel's military superiority and its broader regional ambitions to impose a *fait accompli* under the concept of a "New Middle East." These developments are unfolding amid questions about the extent of US security commitments to its Gulf partners and growing uncertainty over the reliability of Washington's role as the region's principal external security guarantor.

The agreement could therefore elevate Pakistan's role from that of a bilateral defense partner of Saudi Arabia to a more consequential actor in the broader Gulf security equation, particularly if other Gulf states pursue comparable defense arrangements or security understandings with Islamabad. Such developments would give the Gulf states greater scope to shape a regional security architecture based on diversified partnerships and shared capabilities, potentially addressing emerging security threats and the strategic vacuum created by shifting US engagement.

The Makkah Joint Defense Agreement among Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Türkiye marked a potentially significant turning point in the Middle East's evolving security architecture. The agreement not only reinforced Pakistan's emerging defensive role in the region alongside two influential regional powers but also signaled a potential shift in the regional balance of power by strengthening deterrence and creating a framework for coordinated responses to threats affecting the three countries' security and strategic interests.

For years, Middle Eastern states have experimented with various security arrangements in an effort to establish a more stable regional order. The trilateral framework could represent a distinctive form of strategic integration by bringing together complementary sources of political, military, economic and technological power. Its potential influence derives in large part from the diversity of its members' capabilities. Saudi Arabia possesses substantial economic resources and considerable political weight at both the regional and international levels. Pakistan brings significant conventional military capabilities and a nuclear deterrent, while Türkiye contributes growing technological and defense-industrial capabilities.

This combination creates a degree of strategic complementarity that could generate benefits across multiple domains, including defense, intelligence, security cooperation, technology, investment and trade. By pooling distinct but mutually reinforcing capabilities, the three countries could develop greater strategic autonomy and create additional options for responding to regional crises.^[34]

The agreement's broader significance, however, lies in its potential implications for the region as a whole. The three states share an interest in regional stability and have expressed opposition to efforts that they view as promoting expansionism, instability or prolonged conflict. If the framework develops beyond trilateral cooperation, it could become the nucleus of a broader

regional security arrangement and contribute to reshaping a Middle Eastern balance of power that remains deeply fragmented and uneven.

The Balance of Power, Filling the Vacuum and Realizing Deterrence

Pakistan's alignment with influential regional powers such as Saudi Arabia and Türkiye serves several strategic objectives, foremost among them strengthening deterrence, influencing the regional balance of power and filling the security vacuum created by uncertainty surrounding US policy. The emerging alignment also supports a broader vision of regional stability shared by the three countries, whose respective political weight, strategic interests and stated preference for greater regional security give them incentives to promote stability and contain prolonged conflict.

The strategic significance of this alignment is reinforced by the complementary geographical and geopolitical positions of its members. Türkiye occupies the northern flank of the broader Middle Eastern strategic space and has emerged as a significant military power with a capable armed forces and an increasingly sophisticated defense industry. Its extensive operational experience in regional and adjacent theaters — including Syria, Iraq, Libya, Somalia and Sudan — has further enhanced its ability to project power and influence. Its geographical position also gives it a unique role as a bridge between Europe, the Middle East, and Asia.

Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, occupies a central position in the southern part of the region. Its considerable economic resources, political influence, and status as the center of the Islamic world give it substantial regional and international weight. Within the emerging partnership, Riyadh could provide much of the financial capacity needed to sustain joint initiatives, while its diplomatic influence could help secure broader international support. Its religious significance also gives the partnership an additional source of political and symbolic legitimacy.

Pakistan adds another critical dimension through its large manpower base, substantial conventional military capabilities and nuclear deterrent. Its strategic position on the eastern edge of the Middle Eastern geopolitical space also gives the partnership access to South and Central Asia, while its defense capabilities could strengthen the collective deterrence posture of the three countries.⁽³⁵⁾

By establishing their cooperation around the principle of collective defense, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Türkiye are signaling their opposition to attempts by any single power to unilaterally impose a new strategic reality

on the region. The emerging alignment conveys that the region possesses alternative centers of military, economic, and political power capable of deterring coercion and challenging efforts to reshape the Middle Eastern order without broader regional consent.

Providing Alternative Options and Cooperation Frameworks

While Pakistan's growing security role in the Gulf may be welcomed by Washington — and could be viewed as complementary to rather than a substitute for US security guarantees — it also gives some Gulf states an additional strategic option beyond the Abraham Accords, which the United States has strongly promoted. Despite Trump's efforts to encourage Pakistani participation, Islamabad declined to join the accords and instead moved toward a deeper role as a defense partner in the Gulf following Israel's attack on Qatar.

The US-Israel war against Iran also highlighted the potential costs that participation in broader regional alignments can impose on Gulf states, particularly when their interests diverge from those of Israel. This could encourage other Gulf countries to consider defense agreements with Pakistan along the lines of the Saudi model. Such arrangements would not necessarily be directed against Israel; rather, they could provide Gulf states with additional security options and strengthen their ability to counterbalance Iran amid its increasingly hostile posture toward the Gulf.

Pakistan's integration into the broader regional security architecture through its partnership with Saudi Arabia on one side and Türkiye on the other gives Riyadh greater strategic flexibility and diversification. By maintaining relationships with multiple centers of regional power, Saudi Arabia can reduce its dependence on any single external security partner while strengthening its own regional influence. This diversification could also contribute to greater stability by creating additional mechanisms for deterrence and crisis management.

For Pakistan, the arrangement further elevates its position alongside Türkiye as an increasingly consequential actor in the Middle East's security landscape. The Makkah Joint Defense Agreement could also serve as a foundation for broader security cooperation among Muslim-majority states, particularly through the exchange of military expertise, intelligence cooperation and joint exercises.

Over time, the partnership could expand into the defense-industrial sphere, including joint production, technology transfers and the development of an

integrated defense-industrial base. Such cooperation would strengthen the military capabilities and international standing of the three countries while reducing their dependence on external arms suppliers and limiting their exposure to the political conditions and strategic constraints that can accompany foreign weapons procurement.⁽³⁶⁾

Containing Chaos and Conflicts

Following its participation in the Board of Peace, mediation between the United States and Iran, and efforts to de-escalate tensions in Libya, Pakistan's role as a regional mediator appears likely to expand. This growing diplomatic profile could enable Islamabad to contribute to the management and resolution of ongoing regional crises, particularly as its mediation efforts have generally received political acceptance and it has cultivated a reputation for maintaining channels with competing sides.

The durability of this role is rooted in structural factors that have developed over decades and gained additional momentum since October 7, 2023. Pakistan is increasingly moving beyond the role of a regional observer toward that of an active and potentially influential participant in Middle Eastern affairs. Its defense agreement with Saudi Arabia and its mediation efforts between Washington and Tehran demonstrate Islamabad's growing capacity to influence regional interactions rather than simply respond to them.

Pakistan's trajectory also illustrates the opportunities available to middle powers amid the transformation of the international system. By combining military capabilities, diplomatic flexibility, economic relationships, and geographical advantages, middle powers can position themselves as contributors to stability and balance without possessing the resources or ambitions of a global superpower.

The partnership with Saudi Arabia and Türkiye further strengthens Pakistan's position as a regional actor and could enhance its credibility as a mediator. The three countries share a stated interest in strengthening security and stability and view these objectives as central to their strategic cooperation. This convergence could provide a broader political foundation for Pakistan's mediation efforts and enable the emerging partnership to play a more active role in addressing regional conflicts and preventing further escalation.

Pakistan's role in the turbulent Middle East has therefore undergone a significant transformation, evolving into a more flexible, proactive and confident form of engagement. This shift has strengthened Islamabad's interna-

tional profile and could position it to play an important role in the regional security architecture that emerges after the current conflict. It also reflects a broader trend among regional powers, particularly Türkiye and Saudi Arabia, toward diversifying their security partnerships and reducing reliance on any single external guarantor.

Amid the region's strategic uncertainty, Saudi Arabia's efforts to establish a distinctive security arrangement with Ankara and Islamabad have given Pakistan a potentially enduring place within the emerging regional order. Its growing role is likely to remain carefully calibrated, however, so that deeper engagement does not come at the expense of its relationships with competing regional powers, including Saudi Arabia and Iran.

This balancing strategy could give Pakistan a distinctive diplomatic advantage. By maintaining channels with rival actors while strengthening its security partnerships, Islamabad may be able to offer the region alternatives to confrontation, escalation and rigid bloc politics.

Challenges and Constraints on Pakistan's Role in the Middle East

The Pakistani presence in the Middle East faces internal, regional and international challenges. These are elucidated as follows:

Historical Experience and Internal Constraints

Pakistan and the countries of the Middle East are increasingly linked by a framework of mutual security interests and economic interdependence. Yet historical experience continues to shape the calculations of Pakistani policymakers as Islamabad considers expanding its strategic partnerships beyond the Gulf. Pakistan has long viewed itself as having supported several Arab states in their conflicts with Israel, while receiving comparatively limited backing from the Arab world during its decades-long confrontation with India. This history may make Islamabad more cautious about undertaking open-ended defense commitments or becoming deeply entangled in regional conflicts.

Pakistan's domestic vulnerabilities also impose significant constraints on its ambitions. As a middle-income country facing persistent political, economic, and institutional challenges, Islamabad must carefully assess the costs of expanding its strategic footprint beyond its immediate neighborhood. Sustaining a broader regional role requires a stronger economic foundation and institutional capacity capable of supporting long-term foreign-policy commitments. Without meaningful economic reform and

stronger state institutions, Pakistan's ability to act independently and sustain an ambitious external strategy will remain limited.⁽³⁷⁾

Moreover, Pakistan's status as a major nuclear power should not be interpreted as giving it unlimited strategic freedom. Its military capabilities undoubtedly provide substantial deterrence and geopolitical weight, but its ability to translate that power into sustained regional influence remains constrained by economic vulnerabilities, domestic pressures, and the interests of larger global powers.

Priorities in the Immediate Neighborhood and Constraints on Sustainability

Pakistan's regional role remains constrained by the demands of its own national security priorities. Islamabad has been locked in a longstanding rivalry with India, punctuated by a fragile ceasefire that requires repeated efforts to maintain. It also faces persistent security challenges along its border with Afghanistan, where instability has continued since the US withdrawal, as well as threats from militant groups operating in Balochistan and Punjab.

Under these circumstances, expanding Pakistan's military involvement into conflicts beyond its immediate security environment and far from its borders could carry significant consequences for its strategic position in South and Central Asia. A sustained external military role in the Middle East would also place additional demands on Pakistan's resources, particularly given its fragile domestic economic conditions and the changing economic policies of some Gulf states, which have increasingly shifted from traditional financial assistance toward commercially oriented investment.

Pakistan's regional involvement could also produce unintended destabilizing effects. Any deeper military engagement in Yemen, for example, would likely encounter Iranian opposition because of its potential to alter the local balance of power. Similarly, greater Pakistani involvement in Libya could complicate Türkiye's strategic calculations and constrain Ankara's influence. A deepening Pakistani partnership with the Gulf states could likewise be viewed by other regional actors as a threat to their own interests or as an attempt to alter their standing in relation to Gulf capitals.

Pakistan therefore could face a delicate strategic dilemma while expanding its regional presence. It can increase its diplomatic leverage and strategic influence, but excessive involvement in competing regional conflicts could

generate new rivalries, complicate existing partnerships and undermine the very stability that Islamabad seeks to promote.

India's Moves to Counteract Pakistan's Influence in the Middle East

India is unlikely to remain passive in response to Pakistan's expanding role in the Middle East. New Delhi may seek to deepen its own economic, security, and diplomatic presence across the region, positioning itself as an increasingly consequential geopolitical and geo-economic actor. India enters this competition with several advantages, particularly its demonstrated ability to maintain relationships with competing regional powers without allowing one partnership to undermine another.

New Delhi has managed to sustain a deep technological and defense partnership with Israel while simultaneously developing extensive economic and strategic ties with the Gulf Arab states. At the same time, it has preserved important economic and logistical interests in Iran, including its engagement with Iranian transport and connectivity projects, without allowing these relationships to produce a direct confrontation with other major regional actors. This diplomatic flexibility gives India considerable room to maneuver and could make it a formidable competitor to Pakistan's growing regional ambitions.

As such, the transfer of strategic competition between the two South Asian powers into the Middle East could introduce a new layer of polarization into an already fragmented regional environment. If India and Pakistan increasingly compete for influence, partnerships, markets, and strategic access across the Middle East, their rivalry could complicate Pakistan's efforts to expand beyond its traditional sphere of influence.⁽³⁸⁾

Scope of Abiding by the Joint Defense Principle and Intersecting Interests

The attacks on several Gulf states, and Pakistan's decision to respond primarily through mediation rather than direct military intervention, have highlighted the limitations of its existing defense relationships. The same question may ultimately apply to the trilateral defense partnership among Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Türkiye. Although the arrangement represents an important development that could contribute to a fundamental evolution in the region's security architecture, its practical effectiveness and long-term durability remain uncertain.

The partnership offers several potential benefits, including expanded joint military training, the exchange of operational and technical expertise, co-operation in defense industries, stronger economic ties and greater consultation and coordination on regional security issues. Yet the partners' commitment to the principle of collective defense has not been fully tested, and its credibility will ultimately depend on how the three governments respond when their security interests are placed under genuine pressure.

There is also a risk that the alliance could prove to be a circumstantial arrangement formed in response to immediate regional pressures rather than a durable strategic partnership. The Middle East has witnessed similar alignments in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, many of which emerged rapidly but subsequently weakened or disappeared because they lacked a sufficiently strong foundation of shared values, enduring strategic interests and institutional mechanisms. The trilateral partnership also faces practical constraints arising from overlapping interests, competing priorities and differences over specific regional conflicts and political issues.

The Potential Confrontation With Israel

Although Pakistan has viewed the Board of Peace as a potentially effective mechanism for ending the war in Gaza, Islamabad is unlikely to deploy military forces to the strip unless clear conditions are established in advance. Pakistan's military leadership has indicated that any deployment would require an unambiguous agreement on the mission, including the size and composition of the force, its funding arrangements and the precise scope of its mandate.

Israeli concerns constitute an additional constraint. Israel is likely to view Pakistan's expanding regional role and its potential impact on Israeli strategic interests with caution, particularly where new security arrangements could limit Israel's freedom of action or alter the existing regional balance of power. Islamabad's involvement could provide an additional counterweight to Israel's military superiority. Beyond potentially complicating efforts to expand the Abraham Accords, Pakistan's growing regional role could also encourage efforts to secure a just settlement of the Palestinian issue. This concern is particularly significant given Islamabad's deepening defense partnerships with Türkiye and Saudi Arabia, whose growing regional influence and increasingly critical positions toward Israeli policies that violate international law are viewed with concern in Israel.⁽³⁹⁾

Although Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Türkiye have all rejected any religious or sectarian rationale for their trilateral alliance, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu voiced deep concern over these structural shifts in the regional order during the US-Israeli war on Iran, which began on February 28, 2026. He said Israel was preparing to confront an emerging Sunni alliance in the region following the elimination of the Shiite alliance.

Although some regional states aspire to come under Pakistan's nuclear umbrella, Islamabad remains cautious about expanding its nuclear capabilities. Such a move would require a change in Pakistan's nuclear doctrine, which was developed primarily around its strategic confrontation with India. Pakistan does not want the Middle East to become an arena for confrontation between competing regional blocs in which nuclear weapons serve as instruments of rivalry. Such a development could expose Islamabad to greater scrutiny from Israel and Western powers and intensify hostility and confrontation. Pakistan also fears that its nuclear capabilities could come to be portrayed as an Islamic asset, a characterization that could generate significant political and strategic challenges for the country.⁽⁴⁰⁾

Global Powers Taking Advantage of the Emerging Regional Competition

Pakistan's influence in the Middle East remains subject to the competing interests and pressures of major powers, which could assign Islamabad functional roles that ultimately undermine regional security. Washington, for its part, is seeking to pull Pakistan away from China and views Pakistani leadership as a potential component of its future security arrangements in the Middle East. Trump's invitation for Pakistan, alongside countries such as Saudi Arabia, to join the Abraham Accords is part of this broader effort, reflecting Washington's interest in integrating its partners into a multilateral security framework for the region.

At the same time, the region's growing polarization and competition could encourage greater intervention by major powers, potentially exhausting the resources and capabilities of regional states through an arms race and possibly even triggering a nuclear arms race. Such developments could pose additional threats to maritime routes, constrain regional economies and disrupt trade. Gulf states, which depend heavily on oil exports transported through these routes, could consequently face security arrangements that conflict with their strategic interests or come under pressure to align themselves with competing regional blocs.

Diverging positions among Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states within these competing alignments could weaken their collective coordination and potentially turn the Middle East into a theater of confrontation between rival blocs.⁽⁴¹⁾ Pakistan's regional role therefore remains heavily shaped by external factors arising from the broader global balance of power, raising the possibility that its presence could prove difficult to sustain or remain more formal than substantive.

Conclusion

The Middle East has been undergoing an exceptional period since October 7, 2023. The scope of conflict has expanded to unprecedented levels, with the region experiencing multifront wars that have reached the Gulf, a genocide in Gaza on a scale unlike anything previously witnessed in the region and increasing Israeli aggression that has encouraged talk of redrawing the Middle East's map. The escalation ultimately culminated in the confrontation between the United States and Israel and Iran, drawing the Gulf states into an unexpected conflict and imposing substantial costs on them in a war they did not choose.

This exceptional environment has created strategic challenges for Pakistan while also compelling regional states to seek reliable partners capable of providing a regional security umbrella that addresses the weaknesses exposed by the conflict. Regardless of the strongest underlying motivation, the changes in Pakistan's approach reflect a shift in its regional priorities and a redefinition of its role beyond South and Central Asia. They point to a gradual transformation in Pakistan's functional role that could expand over time.

This emerging role is based primarily on Pakistan's defense capabilities as an instrument of influence and rests on Saudi Arabia as a reliable ally and regional pivot, giving Pakistan's regional engagement a distinctive identity. A new geopolitical landscape is consequently taking shape for Islamabad, potentially accompanied by greater economic opportunities. Given Pakistan's military capabilities and strategic weight, its expanding presence could have a positive effect on regional security by contributing to stability and helping redirect regional interactions toward peace.

Pakistan is increasingly viewed as a potential catalyst for peace and regional equilibrium. Economic cooperation could provide a critical foundation for consolidating this role and expanding cooperation into other strategic areas. Such developments could enable the region to establish a new secu-

rity framework that moves beyond approaches that have proven ineffective and opportunistic.

The realization of this potential, however, depends on several factors: Pakistan's willingness to assume this role within the delicate balance governing its regional engagement alongside Saudi Arabia and Türkiye; its readiness to bear the costs and responsibilities associated with an expanded regional presence; regional conditions, including the ability of both allies and adversaries to accommodate Pakistan as an active participant in the regional security architecture; international factors that facilitate rather than obstruct this role; and, above all, the willingness to implement the joint defense agreement among Saudi Arabia, Türkiye and Pakistan.

Effective implementation of the agreement would strengthen the emerging alliance, reinforce deterrence and create new security arrangements capable of promoting regional security and stability.

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