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OPINION PIECE

The Mecca Accord and the Rise of Middle-Power Diplomacy in a Multipolar World

Saudi Arabia | Türkiye | Pakistan

How Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, and Pakistan Are Redefining Regional Security, Cooperation, and Strategic Autonomy

By Dr. Muhammad Arslan Iqbal | MUSLIM Institute | August 2026

On 7 August 2026, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, and Pakistan signed the Mecca Joint Defense Agreement — a mutual-defense pact its signatories describe as defensive rather than directed at any state. This piece examines what the accord signals about middle-power diplomacy, the complementary strengths each country brings to the table, and the geoeconomic stakes — from Gulf energy security to Pakistan's Gwadar corridor — that tie defense cooperation to regional prosperity.

A New Model of Middle-Power Diplomacy

Strategies for national security are evolving rapidly. Safe shipping lanes, reliable energy supplies, and economic stability are now critical considerations for any nation's security. Middle-power countries are increasingly taking the initiative to secure their own futures rather than relying on other powers to resolve regional crises, building new partnerships that integrate military defense, trade, and economic cooperation to achieve long-term peace.

On 7 August 2026, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif signed the Mecca Joint Defense Agreement in Mecca. Under its terms, an attack on one signatory will be considered an attack on all. Participating officials, however, noted that the agreement's prevention mechanism is purely defensive in nature, naming no specific country and pledging no automatic or inflexible military operation.

This distinction is of real strategic importance. The Mecca Accord is not simply a traditional military alliance; it is better understood as a marker of middle-power diplomacy taking shape across South Asia, the Gulf, and the Eastern Mediterranean. In an increasingly uncertain security era, regional powers are taking direct responsibility for their own defense, trade, energy, and maritime security in order to build a more independent regional order. The agreement arrives amid sweeping geopolitical change: persistent chokepoint disruptions and energy-supply risk have made clear that exclusive dependence on outside security providers is being challenged, as middle powers across the Global South build flexible layers of regional cooperation alongside their traditional global partnerships.

The agreement's core mutual-defense clause, alongside its officially stated defensive character.

A Strategic Triad: Complementary Strengths

In today's multipolar world, strategic influence is no longer defined solely by military equipment. It also rests on economic power, technological self-sufficiency, defense-industrial capability, and the ability to sustain effective multi-state diplomacy. The Mecca Accord is, in part, an effort to translate that reality into an action plan for regional stability built around shared security concerns. What makes the arrangement notable is that each state brings a distinct, complementary asset to the table.

Saudi Arabia contributes vast financial resources, world-class energy leadership, and considerable diplomatic influence across the Arab and Muslim world; for Riyadh, securing its energy infrastructure and trade routes is a prerequisite for the economic diversification promised under Vision 2030. Türkiye brings a strategic position bridging Europe, the Middle East, and Central Asia, extensive NATO operational experience, and a fast-developing domestic defense industry — particularly in unmanned aerial systems, air defense, and naval engineering — that has earned it wide recognition for its military potential. Pakistan offers substantial military experience, nuclear capability, longstanding security commitments across the Gulf, and a naval presence that protects the Northern Sea Lines of Communication in the Arabian Sea. Together, the three form a balanced strategic triad: Saudi financial and energy weight, Turkish defense technology, and Pakistani military strength and sea routes.

Pakistan sits at the heart of this trilateral arrangement, which demands a high degree of statecraft. Islamabad occupies a geopolitically sensitive neighbourhood — a 900-kilometre land border with Iran, close defense ties with Saudi Arabia, and now emerging strategic ties with Ankara. Pakistan's objective should therefore be regional balance rather than a zero-sum contest. Its core national interests are protecting maritime trade, securing energy imports, and regenerating its domestic economy. What matters most is how effectively Pakistan can use defense cooperation as diplomatic leverage

— as a positive force for de-escalating tensions, securing maritime routes, and negotiating trade and disputed land-border issues.

Geoeconomics: When Security Meets Supply Chains

The new science of statecraft is, in many ways, the science of economic resilience. When a major shipping chokepoint — the Bab-el-Mandeb, the Red Sea, or the Strait of Hormuz — suffers a significant disruption, the price of fuel, food, and other goods along the supply chain rises, often thousands of miles away. The Mecca Accord places defense cooperation directly in the context of this geoeconomic self-interest. Gulf energy security helps ensure that energy supply and trade continuity are not disrupted for importing countries such as Pakistan and Türkiye. Alongside this, mutual technology transfer, capacity development, and defense manufacturing across Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan help diversify all three away from foreign arms suppliers, while helping to manage defense expenditure during periods of global economic pressure.

Pakistan's Maritime Corridor: Gwadar, Karachi, and CPEC

This sea-facing logic carries particular weight for Pakistan's long-term geoeconomic agenda. The continued development of the ports of Gwadar and Karachi matters greatly, as these ports connect the Arabian Sea to the interior of Pakistan, China, Afghanistan, and Central Asian states seeking routes that bypass the Gulf. In the second phase of the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), port logistics, transport infrastructure, and maritime security are not simply complementary — brought together, they become genuinely strategic. Infrastructure investment, by contrast, struggles to realise its full commercial potential without a secure maritime environment. In this way, Pakistan strengthens its maritime defense contribution to regional trade integration and reinforces its role as an anchor of maritime security across the Gulf and Red Sea regions.

Beyond traditional state-centric defense, cooperation against non-traditional maritime threats — piracy, terrorism, narcotics trafficking, and unprovoked attacks on commercial vessels — creates public goods of value to states well beyond the three signatories. This kind of operational focus offers a less politically charged sphere in which security coordination can have an immediate, practical impact. The trilateral partnership offers a concrete demonstration of the economic value of regional security cooperation: stabilising international shipping rates and insurance premiums in the region, and helping to avoid broader disorder.

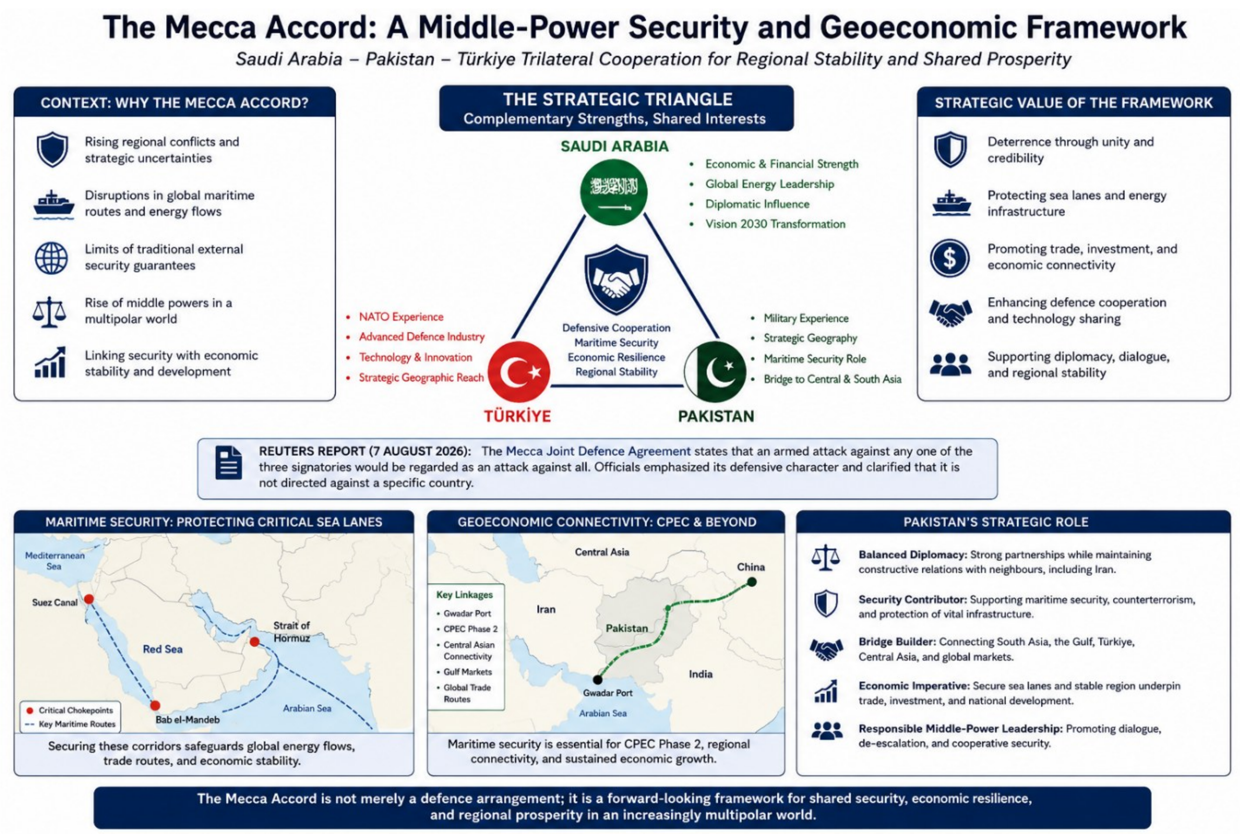
Avoiding the "Alliance Trap"

To remain a stabilising force, however, the Mecca Accord must avoid falling into the "alliance trap" — being perceived as a bloc, or a confrontational alliance that provokes counter-alliance reactions and deepens regional polarisation. It is essential that the signatories emphasise, in their public statements, a defensive posture, clear crisis communication, and a shared counterterrorism focus. The framework is at its most effective when aimed at positive-sum security objectives: commercial shipping security, energy-infrastructure protection, intelligence-sharing against non-state threats, and diplomatic channels for regional crisis management. If the signatories maintain this orientation toward inclusion and shared security, the arrangement can avoid becoming another vehicle for division in the region.

A Model for Middle-Power Cooperation

The Mecca Accord is, above all, a practical framework for regional agency. Its true test will not be its symbolic weight at signing, but its effectiveness in delivering a more predictable, economically viable, and peaceful regional environment. For Pakistan, the agreement offers a genuine opportunity to demonstrate statecraft — balancing national security, maritime security, trade connectivity, and regional diplomacy all at once. In building this arrangement, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, and Pakistan have developed a credible middle-power mechanism combining deterrence, diplomacy, and economic integration — one that could yet serve as a model for cooperation in an increasingly polarised world.

Furthermore, it has the potential to foster unity across the Muslim world—particularly among regional states—or, at the very least, mitigate regional polarization and division.



The Mecca Accord at a glance: the strategic triangle, maritime chokepoints, CPEC connectivity, and Pakistan's role.

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