

Third Time Is the Charm? The Mecca Pact and the Sad History of Collective Defense

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On August 7, 2026, in Mecca, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, and Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif signed a trilateral mutual defense agreement declaring that an armed attack on any one of Turkey, Saudi Arabia, or Pakistan would be treated as an attack on all three. The [joint statement](#) framed the agreement as collective deterrence against aggression; a Turkish official clarified that the treaty is [purely defensive](#), not directed at any specific actor, and open to other regional states; a Saudi official denied that it constituted a military axis or carried any nuclear dimension. The text has not been released. It was signed within hours of a senior Saudi official telling Reuters that the kingdom was [bracing for attacks](#) from Iranian proxies in Yemen and Iraq, which supplies the occasion for the agreement.

The argument of this brief is twofold. First, the pact is theater: a declaration of collective defense unsupported by the capacity or the intention to provide it. Second, there is a reason why states nonetheless keep staging such declarations. A mutual-defense pact in the Middle East operates as an instrument of signaling rather than of warfighting, a message addressed to Washington, to Tehran, and to domestic and pan-Islamic audiences.

The Mecca Joint Defense Agreement is the third iteration of a single Saudi effort, opened by the American non-response to the 2019 Iranian strike on the Abqaiq oil facilities, driven forward by the Gaza war, and sharpened by Israeli strikes on Doha and the war with Iran, to assemble a deterrence substitute for a diminished American security umbrella. Each iteration has publicly promised more while, operationally, committing to less. That effort has now produced a NATO-style clause among three states that are unlikely to fight one another's wars, which is to say the quadrilateral discussed in the spring minus its fourth member, Egypt—though Egypt's absence is not what empties this agreement of collective-defense substance, since the three remaining states would not amount to a functioning alliance even with Cairo present. Most importantly, this is just the latest expression of a regional pattern rather than a departure from it. The modern Middle East has generated many collective-defense agreements, and they have generated pomp and circumstance rather than defense. In the region's security politics, the vocabulary of collective defense is often detached from the activity of defending, and the announcement has repeatedly turned out to be the whole of the content.

One Effort, Three Iterations

The effort began with the Strategic Mutual Defense Agreement (SMDA) between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, signed on September 17, 2025, eight days after Israel struck Hamas leadership in Doha. For Riyadh, the strike on a Gulf capital that hosts American forces confirmed that the region's traditional security situation no longer held. The agreement committed each state to treat aggression against the other as aggression against itself, but its drafters left unstated whether that commitment extended to Pakistan's nuclear deterrent. The ambiguity allowed Riyadh to suggest that it now enjoyed extended deterrence while

allowing Islamabad to deny that it had offered any such thing. The pact, despite its NATO-style language, lacked the nuclear and political basis for genuine collective defense, and its reference to “aggression” rather than “armed attack” left the trigger far broader and less defined than NATO’s Articles 5 and 6. The agreement was, more than anything, a Saudi signal to Washington that the kingdom had other options.

The effort widened the following spring. On March 19, 2026, the foreign ministers of Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Pakistan [met in Riyadh](#) to discuss a quadrilateral security framework, the arrangement now renamed as “the quad.” It produced no binding commitment. The most careful assessment of the format concluded that the quadrilateral was not a defense alliance at all, that none of its members could offer the others collective defense, and that none had proposed to do so.

The Mecca agreement is that same grouping reconvened, with Egypt dropped, likely due to Egyptian unwillingness, a mutual-defense clause added, and staged this time at the holiest site in Islam with three national leaders in attendance. The membership has narrowed, the ceremony has grown more elaborate, and the language on paper has hardened, but the strategic conditions and the capacity to act have not changed. The result is a smaller alliance announced with greater solemnity and no more ability to fight than what it replaced.

The agreement is possible because its three signatories do not require it to mean the same thing. Saudi Arabia gains a visible alternative to exclusive dependence on the United States and the suggestion, without an explicit guarantee, of access to Pakistani military depth. Pakistan converts its longstanding defense relationship with Riyadh into money, diplomatic influence, and a larger place in Middle Eastern security, while preserving its nuclear forces for the Indian threat around which they were built. Turkey acquires a formal role in Gulf security and an Islamic diplomatic platform that extends beyond NATO, without surrendering the alliance that anchors its defense. Each state therefore receives something tangible from the pact, but none receives collective defense in the strict sense, because the interests that brought them together do not extend to the wars in which any one of them would most need the others.

The Limits of the Commitment

The divergence that makes the agreement politically useful also makes its military promise difficult to believe. The pact joins three military powers whose principal security problems lie in different theaters and arise from different adversaries: Saudi Arabia faces Iran and its Arab proxies; Pakistan remains organized around its rivalry with India; Turkey must reconcile its regional ambitions with its obligations and interests as a NATO member. A mutual-defense commitment is tested by the costs it is prepared to bear when invoked, not by the benefits each signatory can obtain in peacetime. The scenarios most likely to test the Mecca pact are precisely those in which the interests of its members cease to coincide.

The most immediate such scenario is the one the timing itself raises. Should Houthi or Iraqi proxy forces fire on Saudi territory, would Turkish and Pakistani forces respond militarily to rockets and drones launched from Yemen? The recent precedent offers little encouragement. During Operation Epic Fury, as Iranian missiles and drones repeatedly struck Saudi territory, hitting the Jubail petrochemical complex, the SMDA produced no Pakistani combat participation. Pakistan’s foreign minister invoked the agreement rhetorically, reminding Tehran that Islamabad was bound to Riyadh, and its army chief flew to Riyadh to discuss the pact, but the deployment of Pakistani aircraft to the kingdom arrived only after the ceasefire, as a post-hoc deterrent signal rather than a wartime intervention. Pakistan committed only conventional forces, sought to keep its nuclear deterrent outside the obligation, and calibrated every step to avoid combat with Iran and preserve its role as mediator. Pakistani Defense Minister Khawaja Muhammad Asif told Reuters at the time that nuclear weapons were “[not on the radar](#)” of the agreement, a clarification that stripped the agreement of the one commitment that might have altered a real

war. The precedent suggests that should the Houthis or Iraqi proxies strike Saudi Arabia, the likeliest Pakistani and Turkish response is the same sequence of statements and symbolic presence, not the offensive action that would draw either into a war it has every reason to avoid.

The reverse direction reveals a deeper asymmetry. Pakistan's most likely war is with India, and read literally, the pact would make aggression against Pakistan an act of aggression against Saudi Arabia and Turkey as well. Neither Riyadh nor Ankara will go to war with India over Kashmir. Saudi Arabia's economic partnership with New Delhi is substantial and growing, and Islamabad's own nuclear doctrine has always been directed at India rather than at any Middle Eastern country.

Turkey's position is the most difficult to reconcile with the pact. Ankara commands the second-largest army in NATO and has no intention of turning away from the alliance, accepting an obligation that would draw it into a shooting war against Iran in the Gulf, or entering a South Asian war against India. The Turkish official who described the agreement was careful to note that it [did not abrogate](#) or replace any existing bilateral or multilateral arrangement, which is the language of reserving the right not to be committed. When a signatory publicly subordinates a mutual-defense clause to its prior commitments, the clause is clearly meant to be displayed rather than honored.

Seventy-five Years of Collective Defense Announcements

The clearest recent illustration of the gap between announcement and defense lies one country away from Riyadh. Turkey has maintained roughly [3,000 troops](#) in Qatar under a defense partnership that deepened considerably after the 2017 Gulf blockade, a presence Ankara initially characterized as a real fighting force rather than a symbolic gesture. That presence was tested twice within a year, and twice it did nothing. When Iran struck the [Al Udeid air base](#) near Doha in June 2025, and again during the war in 2026, the Turkish presence neither deterred the attacks nor prompted a response. When Israel struck Hamas leadership in Doha in September 2025, the Turkish response was a condemnation at the United Nations and attendance at an emergency summit, not a military one.

What is missing from the Turkish presence in Qatar, and from every agreement examined here, is the conversion of solidarity into obligation: a common definition of the aggression that triggers the guarantee, forces assigned to it in advance, an integrated command, agreed rules of engagement, and a settled answer to who decides that the common war has begun. This is the difference between these pacts and the alliance they imitate. NATO functions not because its members pray next to one another but because a common threat and an American hegemon willing to underwrite the guarantee made it worth the surrender of sovereignty that integrated command requires. The Middle East's treaties reproduce NATO's language while omitting each of these foundations because their signatories face different adversaries, decline to place their forces under a partner's command, and have no hegemon prepared to compel or reassure them. A mutual-defense clause is cheap to sign and dear to honor, and one cannot collect its benefits without bearing its costs. The Mecca pact reproduces this arrangement on a larger scale, and with fewer troops actually deployed.

The pattern predates the present crisis by three-quarters of a century. The Treaty of Joint Defense and Economic Cooperation of Arab states in 1950, signed a year after the defeat in Palestine, contained the same clause declaring aggression against one member to be aggression against all, and it established a Joint Defense Council that never functioned as a coordinating body, most conspicuously in the 1967 war, in which the Arab League as such did not intervene at all. The United Arab Command, promised at the first Arab summit in January 1964 and placed under an Egyptian commander, was the only tangible product of that promise. When Israel raided the Jordanian-held West Bank village of as-Samu in November 1966, the command did nothing: its Egyptian core was tied down in the war in Yemen, and the frontline

states had refused to allow Egyptian troops onto their soil. There was only one instance in which such a mutual defense treaty was honored, and it led to a disaster when, in May 1967, King Hussein of Jordan placed his army under the Egyptian general Abdul Munim Riad in the days before the war. The sole consequence was that General Riad, acting on false reports of Egyptian victory relayed from Cairo, ordered the Jordanian front into an offensive that cost Jordan East Jerusalem and the West Bank within seventy-two hours. The pattern has persisted in the present decade. Egypt's proposal for a unified Arab force at Sharm el-Sheikh in 2015, and its NATO-style proposal at Doha in September 2025, never came to fruition.

Collective defense agreements in the Middle East have repeatedly functioned as projects of regional order and leadership before they functioned as mechanisms of war. This is why their ceremonial character is substantive rather than incidental. Thus, they repeatedly flounder because collective defense is never merely collective defense. To determine the supreme commander is to determine hierarchy. To place forces permanently in another regional country is to create political leverage inside it. To decide which threat activates the common force is to decide whose definition of regional order prevails. To institutionalize an alliance is therefore to settle, or at least freeze, the struggle for primacy among states that have rarely accepted one another's primacy.

NATO did not solve this problem through superior committee design. It solved it politically because there was never serious doubt that the United States sat at the apex of the alliance. Western Europeans could integrate because integration did not require Britain, France, West Germany, Italy, and Belgium to settle among themselves which one would dominate the others; an overwhelmingly superior external power already occupied the commanding position, and a massive Soviet adversary supplied a threat sufficiently common to make American hierarchy tolerable.

Assessment

Moreover, the Mecca Joint Defense Agreement is best understood as a message directed at Washington rather than a capability directed at Tehran. Since October 7, Saudi Arabia has worked steadily to advertise its strategic autonomy and its access to alternative partners, first through the bilateral pact with Pakistan, then through the quadrilateral that never materialized, and now through a trilateral agreement staged for maximum visibility. The aim of this sequence has been to raise the cost of American disengagement by demonstrating that the kingdom is prepared to seek elsewhere the guarantees it no longer trusts Washington to provide. The same message is being delivered on other fronts: when the Saudi commentator Ali Shihabi, a reliable barometer of official thinking, warned in the *Washington Post* that pressing Riyadh too hard on the terms of civil nuclear cooperation could [push](#) the Kingdom toward China instead, he was performing the same function as the pacts, reminding Washington that the Kingdom has options and intends to be seen holding them.

For American policymakers, the appropriate response is to read the pact as a piece of diplomatic theater designed to leverage security concessions from Washington. Riyadh's search for alternatives arises partly from a shortage of defensive capacity and partly from uncertainty about the conditions under which American power will actually be used to defend the Kingdom. Additional air-defense assets can reduce the first problem; only a clearer and more credible understanding of consultation, resupply, and response to proxy attack can address the second. The agreement is, in the end, an argument about American reliability conducted in the language of alliance, and in this region that language has a long history of describing commitments that no one genuinely intends to keep.