

Pakistan's nuclear projection should worry Israel, America

Islamabad believes that it finally is getting its 'Muslim bomb' dream. This is bad news



Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and Pakistan Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif shake hands in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, September 17, 2025. (Reuters)

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A mutual defence agreement signed in September 2025 by the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, Mohammed bin Salman, and the Prime Minister of Pakistan, Shehbaz Sharif, at Al-Yamamah Palace in Riyadh left non-proliferation officials around the world confused. The agreement stated that any aggression towards either country would be considered an aggression towards both countries.

Responding to this question specifically, a senior Saudi official said that the agreement means the “covering of all military capabilities”. A Pakistani minister also said that the agreement was “nuclear sharing” but later retracted the statement. Currently, one year after the signing of the agreement, this dispute regarding the intentions and implications of the agreement has not been resolved. Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have made a trilateral defence

agreement with Turkey called the Mecca Joint Defence Agreement. This agreement is modelled on NATO's Article 5. Riyadh funds the agreement, while Ankara provides defence technologies and Islamabad provides labour, and, even though it is not mentioned, Pakistan is the only country in the region to produce and retain 'Muslim' nuclear bombs.

Most cautious analysts would advise against interpreting this as Pakistan's nuclear umbrella. Pakistan's declaratory policy has never indicated that it intends to defend non-allied, non-contiguous states with nuclear weapons, and Islamabad has repeatedly denied that any such arrangement exists. However, both Washington and Tel Aviv would be making a very serious mistake if they were to consider this technical caveat as a way to avoid concern. The merits of ambiguity in nuclear diplomacy do not depend on the actual existence of the ambiguity. They depend on perception — perception by Riyadh's rivals, by Ankara's rivals, and eventually by the Muslim world's publics, who have spent decades hearing that the Islamic bomb, which was constructed with clandestine Saudi financing during the 1970s and 1980s, was always more than a Pakistani national asset.

Pakistan's nuclear programme has never been a purely bilateral Indo-Pakistani issue. It was international right from the start. After 1998, Saudi money filled the gap. During the 1980s and 1990s, China provided design assistance, enriched uranium and missile technology that the US intelligence community determined was well beyond the scope of peaceful collaboration. Later, the A.Q. Khan network provided the plans for uranium enrichment to Libya, Iran and North Korea. Since then, China has framed this within the context of civilian energy cooperation and built the Chashma nuclear complex, the seventh reactor of which is operational, with an eighth currently under construction that will become operational by 2030. China considers this an extension of its clean energy diplomacy and the export of its Hualong One reactor. Civilian cooperation and strategic patronage have never been distinct in China-Pakistan relations, which both governments consider to be an "all-weather" partnership designed to balance India and complicate US regional planning.

What has changed is the target audience. Pakistan, along with China's assistance, no longer aims only to deter India; now it is marketing, albeit tacitly, a prolonged deterrence relationship with two of West Asia's most important states.

For years, Saudi Arabia's logic has been clear. It has often stated through Mohammed bin Salman that it would counter any nuclear breakout by Iran "as soon as possible", and with the recent defensive alliance established with a nuclear state, it is clear that this sort of "deterrence" is quicker and cheaper with an alliance than with a decade-long, sanctioned pursuit of nuclear capabilities at home. Saudi Arabia does not need to have nuclear missiles in Pakistan to threaten Iran; it only needs to have Iran and Israel believe nuclear missiles do exist.

President Erdoğan has clearly articulated his belief that a world in which some countries are allowed to have nuclear weapons and Turkey is not is not acceptable. Saudi Arabia has always avoided such statements. Turkey's inclusion in the Mecca pact, coupled with its expansion of its defence industry and the increasing friction between Turkey and its NATO allies, especially over Syria, the Kurds and the eastern Mediterranean, gives Erdoğan the opportunity to have the same sort of obscurity regarding his nuclear capabilities without having to formally withdraw from the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

For half a century, Israel has relied on regional ambiguity regarding nuclear capabilities, while Pakistan has done the opposite. Living within the context of the region, Israel has relied on psychological dominance to deter state aggression against Israel through the use of conventional weaponry. Israel has long relied on this deterrence despite the absence of a declared stockpile of nuclear weapons. Now, the creation of an alliance that stretches from the Gulf to northern Turkey and potentially has nuclear capabilities would undermine this psychological dominance. Deterrence equations are further complicated by the creation of a Saudi-Turkish-Pakistani alliance and by the ambiguous

nuclear capabilities of these nations. Under these conditions, Israel may need to consider that there are new direct nuclear threats that it has yet to face.

In contrast to the issue of Israel, the nuclear deal creates immediate security concerns, but in later years the concern will be more structural. The US has constructed a security architecture for the Gulf over the last seventy years based on the premise that Riyadh and Ankara will remain safe as long as there is extended deterrence through the US. The creation of alternative deterrence, very much ambiguous, will provide both capitals with the leverage to make demands of the US, while preparing for the eventuality that the partnership will cease. Moreover, this alternative addresses the concerns of China, which has helped create and finance Pakistan's nuclear weapons capabilities, creating a foreign policy tool that constrains the US on issues related to arms sales and the NPT.

This doesn't mean that missiles are being placed in Hejaz or Anatolia. The Belfer Center, Chatham House and similar reputable institutions are correct in that the agreement's language comes well short of nuclear sharing, and Pakistan's military has some doctrinal and diplomatic reasons for keeping it that way. Vague nuclear policies have a troubling way of becoming irreversible. They don't even have to be exercised for them to be considered a fact. Pakistan doesn't have to extend its nuclear policy to Saudi Arabia or Turkey for Israel and the United States to reassess alliances and consider the erosion of the Non-Proliferation Treaty. What Islamabad, Riyadh and Ankara will not say is possibly more important than what they say.

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