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Architects of a new order

The Saudi-Pakistan defence pact tilts the balance of power in the Middle East. A post-American order is taking shape, but with it comes new volatility

It is a geopolitical bombshell: the Saudi-Pakistani mutual defence pact shifts the balance of power in the Middle East. The agreement between Riyadh and Islamabad is further evidence of an increasingly post-American, multipolar world. With the growing interdependence of the Middle East and South Asia, not only does complexity increase, but so does the risk of conflicts spiralling out of control.

Even though it is primarily interpreted as such, the pact is *not* a purely spontaneous reaction to Israel's military strike against Qatar less than two weeks ago. The latter has permanently shaken the Gulf elites' confidence in their ability to remain impervious to the conflicts in the region. As a result, the chaos of the Middle East has broken into the idyllic, glittering world of Arabia.

The Saudi-Pakistani negotiations had been going on for years. However, the fact that their successful conclusion was announced at the meeting between the Saudi Crown Prince and the Pakistani Prime Minister at this particular moment is anything but a coincidence. The unspoken antagonist of the alliance is based in Tel Aviv. Nevertheless, the global power America may also feel addressed, as the once close Saudi ally is sending a clear signal: we have other options. For Pakistan, in particular the potential Saudi support against its long-standing rival India is a strategic success.

A long and complex relationship

Saudi Arabia and Pakistan have enjoyed a close security partnership for decades. Since the 1960s, billions have flowed from the oil monarchy into the country with the world's second-largest Muslim population after Indonesia. Without this generous support, especially in times of Western sanctions, Pakistan would probably never have been able to build its 'Islamic bomb' — the nuclear umbrella that may now also be stretched

over the guardian of the holy sites. Riyadh has always had a keen interest in the bomb. It is still unclear, however, whether the agreement explicitly covers the nuclear umbrella. This strategic vagueness is part of the agreement, which has not yet been published.

Relations between the dominant power on the Arabian Peninsula and the republic in north-western South Asia have never been entirely smooth. Cooperation was particularly close during the support for the mujahideen in Afghanistan. Although the Soviets were defeated, this campaign also gave rise to that particularly disastrous variant of violent Islamism that later destroyed the Twin Towers in New York. To this day, both sides of the Arabian Sea are still struggling with the consequences.

At the height of the sectarian rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, Islamabad managed – much to the annoyance of the royal court – not to let itself be drawn in. In 2015, when the young, overambitious defence minister and current Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman began his war against the Houthis in Yemen, who are allied with Iran, Pakistan refused to provide support. Islamabad did not want to jeopardise its relations with Tehran, with which it shares a long and troubled border.

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Iran and India, in particular, are now watching the agreement announced in Riyadh with eagle eyes. The pact, which, following the NATO model, declares that an attack on one signatory is an attack on all, inevitably changes the strategic calculations in Tehran and New Delhi. The risk lies in the fact that although Riyadh and Islamabad have a common interest in cooperation, the strategic direction in both capitals is different.

The agreement strengthens Pakistan's regional position at a time when the role of the United States in the Middle East appears increasingly uncertain and conflicts are intensifying. For Islamabad, the pact fulfils several simultaneous objectives. Firstly, it adds diplomatic weight to the country: alongside the influential Gulf state, Pakistan can demonstrate that it is by no means isolated internationally. Secondly, it opens up new security and economic opportunities — from increased military cooperation and training programmes to reliable Saudi financial and energy aid. Thirdly, the agreement has a stabilising effect on domestic politics: it strengthens the Pakistani military's claim to safeguard national security within an international alliance and offers the government a prestigious success amid economic difficulties.

However, it is clearly not in Islamabad's interest to get drawn into a conflict with Iran. Nor is Riyadh likely to be keen to put a noticeable strain on relations with India. After years of rapprochement, Saudi Arabia even has its own 'strategic partnership' with New Delhi, which, curiously enough, also includes the defence sector. Riyadh now clearly hopes that India will show understanding for the kingdom's security interests. However, in such a geopolitically volatile world, it is far from certain that this calculation will pay off.

Just one day after the agreement was signed, the Saudi foreign minister called his counterpart in Tehran. 'We are not conspiring against you' — that was apparently the message to the 'brotherly Islamic Republic'. The détente with Tehran is being cultivated with the utmost dedication in Riyadh. Not out of ideological affinity, but out of the calculation that a close embrace is a better way to keep the difficult neighbour under control than maximum antagonism.

Tel Aviv's comeuppance

From the Saudi perspective, the beleaguered Islamic Republic is no longer the biggest concern. The new 'rogue state' – a term that the Pakistani ally has been using for some time – is Israel. For Tel Aviv, the Saudi-Pakistani deal is indeed a bitter setback. After all, Israel pursues the ambition of reorganising the entire region according to its own ideas. The aggression against Doha has been the clearest signal yet that the Jewish state recognises neither international law nor borders in its militarisation efforts. The Israeli armed forces want to be able to strike anytime, anywhere. October 7 gave rise to a doctrine of maximum deterrence and unpredictability in Israel. As is now becoming apparent, however, it is also a doctrine of hubris.

Pakistan's entry into the Middle Eastern arena marks the end of Israel's nuclear monopoly. With 'Saudi-Pakistan', there is now a second nuclear power in the Middle East. This is Tel Aviv's comeuppance for failing to secure its military successes and the suppression of Iran in the Levant diplomatically. Despite the disastrous campaign against Gaza, the moderate Arabs were willing to normalise relations until the very end — but only in exchange for a political perspective for the oppressed Palestinians. But the liquidation of the Palestinian question seems to be more important to Israel than comprehensive regional peace. This strategy of maximum ruthlessness has not only favoured Pakistan's entry into the region, but has also promoted a rapprochement between those Muslim regional powers that had previously viewed each other with suspicion.

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A few years ago, there was still talk of a 'Mideast NATO' — an alliance between Israel and moderate Arab states directed against Iran. Now, the region is talking about an 'Islamic NATO' as a defence alliance against Israel. Given the extremely divergent political views, this scenario is hardly more realistic than the neoconservative pipe dreams of yesteryear. Nevertheless, the Saudi-Pakistani pact can be interpreted as a kind of embryo in this direction. According to the Pakistani defence minister, the agreement is, in principle, also open to other states.

In any case, it is undeniable that regional powers are beginning to balance Israel's supremacy through rapprochement and military cooperation. In Turkey, Tel Aviv is no longer considered a rival, but a military threat. Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, whose country actually holds a peace treaty with Israel, recently even described the latter as an 'enemy'. Egypt is not only pushing ahead with a military build-up in the Sinai, with more and more positions in the immediate vicinity of the Gaza border, but is now even conducting joint naval manoeuvres with long-unloved Turkey — once the closest ally of the Muslim Brotherhood government that was overthrown by Sisi's military in 2013.

All of this is met with little enthusiasm in Washington. However, the damage control efforts of the geopolitically erratic Trump administration appear half-hearted. Criticism of Israel's border violations in Doha did little to appease the Gulf powers. No matter how lavish the summits the Arab rulers organise for Trump, the bitter truth remains that Netanyahu has the upper hand when it comes down to it. The globally condemned Gaza campaign is being kept going by American arms deliveries. And these continue unabated.

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For years, the US had been promising the Saudi crown prince a defence agreement. It was supposed to be the crowning glory of the Abraham Accords and pave the way for diplomatic normalisation between the desert kingdom and Israel. But that goal now seems a long way off. Apart from Iran, hardly any other country is more radical in its anti-Israel rhetoric than Pakistan. The pact marks a turning away from the United States by what has been its most important Arab partner for decades — a

massive vote of no confidence in Washington, which is now considered hardly reliable. The crumbling Pax Americana in the Middle East is being replaced by autonomous, multipolar structures. The result is not greater security, however.

In view of the anti-Israeli repositioning of regional powers, Washington is losing influence, but could be drawn even more deeply into the region due to the increasing isolation of the Jewish state. As a reminder, the declared goal was actually to turn towards Asia and focus on China. Trump himself wanted to end the 'forever wars'.

In a geopolitical twist reminiscent of bitter irony, it is China, neglected by the global superpower, that is returning to the Middle East through the back door. Pakistan is the People's Republic's premium military ally. Over 70 per cent of Pakistan's weapons are Chinese-made, and Islamabad is by far the most important customer of the Chinese arms industry. The fact that the latter can count on billions from Saudi Arabia in the future will be noted with satisfaction in Beijing.

In the brave new world of multipolarity, everything is interconnected.



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