

Why The Saudi–Pak–Turkey Defence Pact May Actually Be An 'Intel' Network



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The crisis in the Middle East, now running in its eighth month, is widely seen as a conflict stuck between a 'hot' and –a 'cold' war. Targeted and controlled military exchanges continue in gray areas, specifically in and around the now contested Strait of Hormuz; however, the recent flare–up between the Yemen–based Houthis (also known as Ansarullah) and Saudi Arabia has opened a new front in the region's ongoing troubles.

Since February, when US and Israeli strikes against Iran pushed the Middle East towards a region–wide disruption, Riyadh spent the early part of the conflict keeping its distance as the US, Israel, and Iran exchanged missiles and other Gulf states faced the brunt of Tehran's response. Today, the Houthis have managed to shut down Riyadh's main international airport using missiles and drones, forcing the postponement of the Kingdom's flagship 'Davos in the desert' event and making Saudi Arabia look vulnerable and toothless.

Enter the Mecca Agreement, a security pact between Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Pakistan, signed on August 7 this year, with language suggesting a NATO–like alliance between the three states. The agreement, a symptom of a collapsing US security order in the region, was an inevitability. The Saudis had started preparing much earlier. The China–facilitated diplomatic normalisation with Iran in 2023 was a construct meant to distance the Kingdom from any US or Israeli war against Iran. However, this was a challenging endeavour, as US bases in Saudi Arabia were also targeted by Iran in response to American air strikes and the decapitation of the Islamic Republic's civilian and military leadership.

But what is the Mecca Agreement, beyond the announcement and photo ops? How does it function? And is it an

alliance by definition, or an arrangement to fill urgent security gaps? There are no easy answers to these questions. The full text of the agreement remains under lock and key. The Houthi strikes against Saudi Arabia have brought the Mecca Agreement into play without wasting much time—in fact, even before the Turkish parliament has had a chance to ratify it. Pakistan, in the meantime, has not wasted too much time in its posturing. Former Pakistan Army Lieutenant General Nauman Mahmood has been selected as the first Secretary General of the alliance.

The Houthi strikes against Saudi Arabia have immediately tested the alliance's resolve, which, arguably, has already fallen short. Neither Pakistan nor Turkey has joined Riyadh in any publicly disclosed frontline attacks against the Houthis. Reports alluding to Pakistan's role were strongly refuted in Islamabad. The expectation of what the Mecca alliance was to be, an 'Islamic NATO'—like construct according to some opinions, was misrepresented to begin with. While the agreement's foundations can be found in the Pakistan–Saudi Strategic Mutual Defense Agreement signed in September 2025, the real nature of its future workings remains open for debate.

Rather than a NATO—like construct, the Mecca alliance can be seen as anchored not in a military but in an intelligence—led structure. Perhaps, more than NATO, it may end up resembling the Five Eyes alliance, a deeply ingrained intelligence consortium among Western countries, namely the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand. The alliance was founded between the US and the UK in 1946, following the end of World War II. It expanded to its current five members between 1948 and 1956.

The reason for the above hypothesis is not geopolitical, ideological, or even theological. It is technological. Wars of the past decade are fundamentally different from the ones being fought today. Since the 9/11 terror attacks against the US and the subsequent 'war on terror' era that reshaped the global security architecture, namely via the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the nature of how conflicts are fought has changed drastically. Today, we find ourselves in an era of 'half wars', where protracted military conflict prevails in the absence of political resolutions. This reality, one with grave consequences for the long—term health of the geopolitical order, can be witnessed in theatres ranging from Russia and Ukraine to now Iran and the extended Middle East. There are limited visible off—ramps, and the few that exist are stalled due to a lack of political will to compromise. This is also a reason why, till now, countries like Turkey have eluded to support based on 'deterrence' and 'defence' for Riyadh, and not offense.

Due to the above, intelligence, and tech—led intelligence, such as signals intelligence (SIGINT) and electronic intelligence (ELINT), terms made popular during the Cold War, have made a comeback. Information in 2026 is a very underrated tool. The Ukraine conflict serves as a quintessential modern lab for warfare today. In the conflict's infancy in 2022, Russia relied on older warfare tactics, including the use of infantry and tanks as frontline weapons. Ukraine, on the back foot but well funded through its Western support, was forced to improvise. It decided to work on modern tech, such as drones, to play a frontline role in prioritizing hybrid warfare tactics. Moscow was forced to play catch—up, inducting 'dumb drones' from Iran, such as the Shahed drones, and juicing them up with home—grown tech to take on Kyiv's notable battlefield gains.

Fast—forward a few years, and tech such as Starlink, owned by US billionaire Elon Musk, is also at the center of the feud, as it has played a central role in how Ukraine has developed and operated its reconnaissance, intelligence, and drone infrastructure. According to research released by the Center for Security Studies at ETH Zurich, Switzerland, more than 50,000 Starlink terminals were in use in Ukraine in 2025. In Iran as well, Starlink was a tool smuggled in to aid dissidents, especially within the system, to work against the regime. Iran has since labeled Starlink a 'tool of war' and installed heavy curbs on communication and internet access for its people.

For the Mecca Agreement, looking for joint military operations against the Houthis in the traditional sense, that of

joint air raids or collective offense by joining infantry together, may not be the correct assessment to pursue. In fact, institutional sharing of intelligence, SIGINT, ELINT, cybersecurity, and defence tech is a more likely operational design to prevail in the long run despite the demands coming from the current conflict. While technology is central, the old-school art of clandestine operations and capacity building using intelligence tools will also remain a more probable area of strong collaboration.

Traditional wars today are not only expensive but also seemingly unwinnable. From the US exiting Afghanistan in 2021 and paving the way for the Taliban's return, to Israel's 'seven-front' war in response to the 2023 terror attack by Hamas, none of the conflicts has been able to deliver an outright victory. This includes a now years-long confrontation between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis. Conflict management, rather than resolution (by way of an outright defeat of one side), may be the name of the proverbial strategic game in the time to come. And here, tech will play a deciding role tactically, while strategically, politics and diplomacy are yet to find their own path.

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