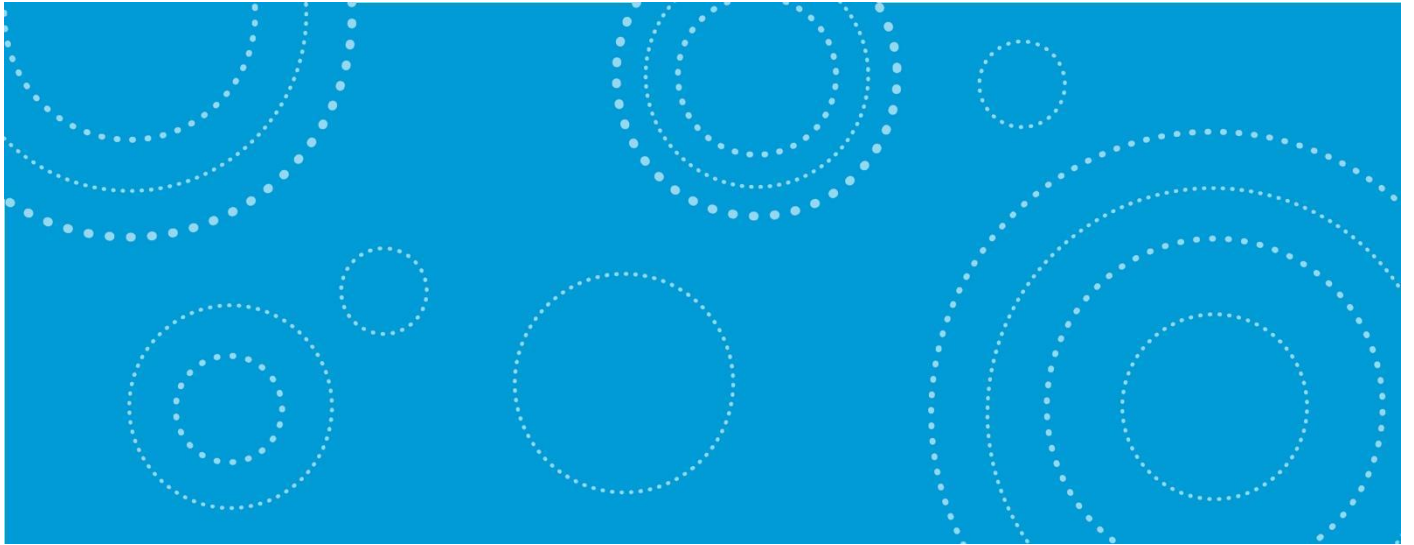




India and the World

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The Middle East's emerging multipolarity draws in South Asia

As global power becomes more distributed, and unipolarity gives way to multipolarity, established security partnerships are being recalibrated, while new ones are emerging. This development is reflected in the evolving configuration of defence ties, which is reshaping security cooperation in South Asia and the Middle East.

On the one hand, the Mecca Joint Defence Agreement (MJDA), was signed by Saudi Arabia, Türkiye and Pakistan on 7 August 2026. On the other hand, there has been a gradual deepening of security and defence cooperation between India, Israel and the United Arab Emirates.

The Mecca Pact marks a potentially important shift in the security architecture of India's western neighbourhood. Although the agreement does not target India and its practical scope remains unclear, its significance lies in bringing together three strategically influential states under a collective-defence framework. For New Delhi, the key concern is therefore not so much the prospect of Saudi or Turkish forces fighting alongside Pakistan, but the possibility that the pact strengthens Pakistan's strategic resilience, and that it signals a broader reconfiguration of Gulf security.

India's official response has been cautious, with the Ministry of External Affairs stating that it is examining the agreement's implications for national security and regional peace and stability. By all accounts, officials in New Delhi were not taken by surprise, and it is likely that they were taken into confidence by Riyadh in advance.

Indian public debate has been less restrained, with some analysts viewing the pact as a significant diplomatic gain for Pakistan, while others question its military substance. Both assessments capture part of the picture. The agreement may not have any immediate operational significance. Indeed, it may primarily be an act of political signalling. But that in itself should not be underestimated. It indicates one unexpected – at least in New Delhi – consequence of our current moment, when regional actors are increasingly seeking greater strategic autonomy and hedging against uncertainty over established security arrangements in general, and US reliability in particular. And that is that Pakistan's attractiveness as a possible partner – including to such aspiring regional powers as Saudi Arabia and Türkiye – has been enhanced.

For India, the most concerning consequence would be a potentially more capable Pakistan. Saudi backing could increase Islamabad's financial and diplomatic resilience during a future crisis, while defence cooperation with Türkiye could expand Pakistan's access to drones, precision weapons, maintenance and defence-industrial capabilities. It seems clear, on the other hand, that the collective-defence clause in the Mecca Agreement may have limited relevance in a renewed India–Pakistan military confrontation – unless Riyadh or Ankara are willing to assume significant risks on Pakistan's behalf. This remains unlikely. Nevertheless, the prospect of external political, economic or military support could affect India's calculations about escalation and the sustainability of a prolonged confrontation.

The larger challenge, however, concerns India's position in the Gulf, and the Middle East in general. New Delhi has built an extensive network of economic and strategic relationships across the region while deliberately avoiding alignment with competing blocs. This approach has generated considerable benefits: the Gulf Cooperation Council accounts for around 15 percent of India's total trade, millions of Indian citizens live in the region, and the Gulf is central to India's energy security and infrastructural connectivity ambitions.

But the MJDA could if, anything, accelerate India's reassessment of its security role in the Gulf at a time when cooperation with Israel and the UAE, while not formalised into a pact, has been deepening significantly. Defence cooperation between India and the UAE is coordinated through the Joint Defence Co-operation Committee and regular military dialogues. The 2026 Strategic Defence Partnership Framework signed in May 2026 expanded collaboration in counterterrorism, defence industries, cybersecurity, advanced technologies, maritime security, and special operations.

Israel has become one of India's most important defence partners, supplying advanced capabilities such as drones, radar systems, air-defence technologies, precision-guided munitions, and Spike anti-tank missiles. Cooperation also includes intelligence sharing, counterterrorism coordination, joint research and development, cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, and defence-industrial collaboration through joint ventures and co-production arrangements. However, red flags have been raised since India's reliance on Israeli systems may create dependencies in critical sectors.

For a New Delhi that has largely welcomed, and believes it thrives in, a more multipolar order, the Mecca Agreement can be viewed two ways – either as an unwelcome reminder that its ambition to isolate Pakistan might have worked in a unipolar world but is complicated in a multipolar one; or that such attempts at hedging are expected, and should only be concerning when they rise to the level of genuine, reliable alliances. It would be unlikely, given India's strong view that multi-alignment should not force countries into choosing blocs, that such agreements would in and of themselves cause India to form closer protective ties with other regional powers. The most likely outcome would be for New Delhi to recalibrate what it expects out of its West Asian policy, and to seek to shape the region more actively rather than merely reacting to it.

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