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By Syed Ismail and Zhoushi Bai

SYNOPSIS

Saudi Arabia's recent defence pact with Pakistan signalled the Gulf states' pivot from a US-led security order to a multipolar arms market, as Washington's use of political strings erodes trust. Chinese arms, proven in the May 2025 India-Pakistan air battle, now compete head-on with those of the US.

COMMENTARY

Saudi Arabia's relationship with the United States [has long been premised](#) on its access to advanced US weaponry and intelligence, and in the US being a credible partner. That premise no longer holds as the trust on which it rested was eroded by the announcement of the Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement signed between Saudi Arabia and nuclear-armed Pakistan on September 17, 2025.

This pact was built on a [deep defence relationship](#) between the two Muslim countries. It spanned over 50 years and culminated in the deployment, under the defence pact, of about 25,000 Pakistani troops to Saudi Arabia for security, joint operations and training. Saudi purchases of Chinese-made military hardware further strengthened this defence relationship.

The Saudis' sudden pivot to a non-Western security guarantor was not based on impulse, but the outcome of long-simmering frustrations with the US security bargain. The Israeli strike on Doha, the capital of Qatar, on September 9, was the last straw. That attack exposed a flaw in the relationship between the US and the Gulf states: Washington's policy of ensuring Israel's qualitative military edge.

For decades, the Gulf states paid handsomely for US military hardware, tacitly accepting that their acquisitions lagged a generation behind Israel's in quality. The failure of Qatar's US-supplied air defence system to detect the Israeli attack confirmed their fear: The systems meant to protect them were intended to be ineffective against Israeli air attacks.

The aftermath was also alarming. Not only was Israel not censured; it soon became clear that President Donald Trump and his senior officials were kept in the dark, learning of the attack only as it happened. For the Gulf states, this was unacceptable. America was not only not defending them but was also unaware and unable to influence its ally's plans and actions.

This vulnerability was compounded by a second, equally corrosive issue: the political strings attached to US arms sales. In 2021, the Biden administration temporarily [froze munitions sales](#) to Saudi Arabia and the UAE over the Yemen war, making it clear that access to American weapons depended on alignment with American policy goals.

For thirty years, this flawed bargain was tolerable to the Gulf states in the shadow of Saddam Hussein and revolutionary Iran. But when the Doha strike came, not from a common enemy, but from a US ally, the American security umbrella began to look less like a shield than a gilded cage.

China's Strategic Opportunity

With the signing of the mutual defence pact between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, a clear opening has emerged for China to supply arms to Saudi Arabia and to establish a strategic foothold in the region. As Riyadh reassesses the US bargain, China emerges as the most viable alternative supplier of arms, offering sales, training, and co-production.

For many years, two major obstacles prevented Beijing from becoming a premier arms supplier to the Gulf, keeping its Middle East and North Africa market share to a [meagre 1.2 per cent](#) between 2020 and 2024. First, its technology, while affordable, was unproven in high-stakes combat. Second, potential buyers feared the possibility of punitive US sanctions.

The India-Pakistan conflict of May 2025 eliminated the first obstacle. When Pakistan's Chinese-built ecosystem of jet fighters, missiles, and air defences brought down several of India's much-vaunted European and Russian-built fighters, it was a stunning demonstration of China's military technology. The Pakistan Air Force (PAF), a key component of the mutual defence pact, has pivoted from American F-16s to China's advanced J-10C fighters.

During the conflict, the PAF's J-10Cs, using PL-15 long-range missiles, are believed to have downed several Indian jets, variously described as including French Rafales and Mirages, and Russia's premier combat aircraft. However, that air battle success was merely the prelude to the pact's most dangerous new dimension. In a striking announcement, Khawaja Asif, Pakistan's Defence Minister and senior figure in the

ruling party, confirmed that the agreement extended to Pakistan's "strategic assets", explicitly placing Saudi Arabia under Islamabad's nuclear umbrella.

The air battle success was a triumph for Pakistan and a brilliant showcase for Chinese military technology. Among Gulf leaders, the second obstacle – the perceived risk of US retaliation for switching to Chinese arms – has not disappeared, but it appears less constraining. Several Gulf capitals now seem willing to test limited purchases or co-production with China, so long as they avoid jeopardising priority US programmes.

The Outcome for China-Pakistan-Gulf Cooperation

The Saudi-Pakistan Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement has also enabled China to gain access to other Gulf states. For sure, Beijing won't just be selling hardware; it will be embedding an entire military ecosystem. The stationing of Pakistani troops and air force squadrons in Saudi Arabia will create a permanent, live-fire showcase for Chinese technology in the heart of the world's most lucrative arms market. The model of strategic co-production is now being offered to Riyadh. It marks the dawn of a new security architecture in the Middle East, one brokered by Islamabad, but built and armed by Beijing, and bankrolled by Riyadh. An era of transactional, multipolar security is replacing the era of American monopoly.

Instead of relying on air-show marketing, Gulf decision makers can now receive briefings from Pakistani personnel working with Saudi units under the mutual defence pact. These personnel, fellow Muslims with mutual strategic concerns, can share their after-action assessments of Chinese systems based on operational experience against Western and Russian aircraft. This creates an unprecedented sales channel, not just for Beijing but also for Pakistan's own military-industrial complex, which co-produces much of the hardware.

This new dynamic arrives as Gulf states are in the midst of a massive, multi-billion-dollar military modernisation cycle. But this time, they are not just buying weapons; they are buying industries. A core tenet of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 is the building of a domestic defence sector through technology transfer and local manufacturing; a level of industrial partnership the US has always been reluctant to share fully. China, in contrast, has built a new model with Pakistan. The visit of Pakistan's President Asif Ali Zardari to the aircraft complex of the Aviation Industry Corporation of China (AVIC) in Chengdu on September 14, becoming the first foreign head of state to do so, signalled just how deep this industrial co-dependency runs.

Conclusion

Beyond the Middle East, this new development could potentially persuade "fence-sitters" currently in a military upgrade cycle who have realised that the United States is no longer as willing, as it was during the Cold War, to supply its latest military equipment. This is especially so for countries that have already been eyeing some of China's military equipment, even if only as a hedge. Indonesia, for example, is [considering the J-10 alongside](#) the US' F-15EX and existing Rafale orders from France on the grounds of cost.

Over time, cooperation is likely to deepen beyond straightforward procurement to include technology transfer, co-production, and broader capacity-building. As evidenced by Thailand's acceptance of China's CHD620 engine, the programme was extended to include [maintenance and personnel training, technology transfer, and simulator support](#), showing cooperation moving beyond platform purchase toward a structured, long-term relationship with Chinese contractors.

The true significance of this new development cannot be measured in terms of the billions of dollars spent on arms deals; Pakistani squadrons flying Chinese-made jets over the Arabian Desert is a declaration that the region's security architecture is now multipolar. For China, this is a soft power victory that money cannot buy, demonstrating its dependability as a security partner.

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