Saudi-Pakistan Defence Pact

Mains: *GS II – Agreements involving India and/or affecting India's interests*

Why in News?

Recently, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan have signed a significant mutual defence pact.

What are the terms of the agreement?

- **Collective defence** – The official text released in Riyadh and Islamabad declares that "any aggression against either country shall be considered an aggression against both."
- This principle of collective defence effectively commits each side to respond to threats to the other.
- **Permanent mechanisms** – The two countries will establish permanent coordination mechanisms, including a joint military committee, intelligence-sharing arrangements, and expanded training programmes.
- Pakistan has stationed military personnel in Saudi Arabia for decades.
- **Informal to formal** – The mutual defence agreement takes the partnership into a formal treaty framework from decades of informal military cooperation.
- **Stance on nuclear programme** – Saudi Arabia had reportedly provided generous financial assistance to Pakistan's nuclear programme.
- The agreement does not spell out whether Pakistan's nuclear capabilities extend to Saudi defence.
- **Clear symbolism** – Saudi Arabia is no longer satisfied with existing security ties and is letting Pakistan play a larger role in the Persian Gulf.

Why was the agreement signed now?

- **Inaction from US** – Qatar was a heavily defended ally of US and it came under Israeli attack without consequence.

  Qatar *is home to the Al-Udeid airbase, the largest U.S. military base in West Asia.*

- In 2019, when Iran's allies attacked Saudi oil installations, the U.S. looked away.
- Riyadh seems to have concluded that it cannot rely solely on U.S. security guarantees.
- Shifting focus of US – The U.S. doesn't want to get entangled in West Asia's conflicts any more as its strategic focus is shifting to East Asia.

- **The Gaza war** – The October 7, 2023 Hamas attack in Israel, and Israel's devastating response in Gaza, derailed Saudi Arabia's plans to normalise ties with Israel under the U.S.-brokered Abraham Accords.
- Since then, Israel's war in Gaza has spilled over into the region, deepening the insecurity of Gulf kingdoms.
- **Threat from Houthi rebels** – The Houthis in Yemen have also steadily expanded their military capabilities.
- Their missile and drone strikes had disrupted Saudi oil facilities and shipping in the Red Sea.
- While there is a tenuous ceasefire between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis now, the Saudis continue to look at the Houthis as a challenge.
- The Saudis, the U.S. and Israel have repeatedly bombed Houthis, but they still remain a force in Yemen, controlling almost half of the country, including its capital Sanaa.

***The Houthis**, officially known as Ansar Allah (Partisans of God), are an Iranian-backed Shiite Muslim military and political movement in Yemen.*

- **Significance of Saudi** – It is a Muslim-majority country, and has long experience in providing security services to the kingdom.
- **Pakistan's need** – In return, Pakistan needs Saudi financial support to stabilise its battered economy.

What about West Asia's security landscape?

- **The plan of US** – The U.S.'s pre-October 7 plan was to bring Israel and the Gulf kingdoms closer.
- But Israel's attacks in Gaza, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Iran and Qatar have alarmed Arab states.
- **Demand of Saudi Arabia** – Post-October 7, Riyadh has said it would normalise ties with Israel only if Tel Aviv commits itself to the creation of a Palestinian state based on the 1967 border.
- **Israel's position** – Israel, on the other hand, says there won't be a Palestinian state.
- This means that the further expansion of the Abraham Accords is in doubt.
- By turning to Pakistan, Saudi Arabia is signalling to both Washington and Tel Aviv that it is diversifying its security alliances.
- **Potential risks** – Pakistan could be dragged into Saudi Arabia's regional rivalries with Iran or into the conflict in Yemen.
- For Saudi Arabia, the deal could entangle it in South Asian instability, particularly if tensions between India and Pakistan flare up again.
- The pact does not resolve Riyadh's core vulnerabilities, such as Iranian missile strikes or Houthi drones.
- It provides a hedge at a time when America's reliability is under doubt and Israel's behaviour is destabilising the region.

How does India view the pact?

- **Various complications** – the Saudi-Pakistan defence pact introduces complications on multiple fronts.
- **Strategic ties** – Over the past decade, New Delhi has invested heavily in its relations with Riyadh, deepening energy ties, expanding trade, and securing cooperation on counter-terrorism.
- Roughly 2.6 million Indian expatriates work in the kingdom.
- **Balancing the ties** – India has also sought to balance these ties with its growing strategic partnership with Israel.
- But Indian policy in West Asia clearly has a pro-Israeli tilt.
- **Israel's threat** – Now that Israeli-Saudi normalisation is not happening and Israel's unchecked militarism poses security threats to Gulf kingdoms, Saudi Arabia seems to have overlooked India's concerns by formalising the defence pact with Pakistan.
- **Saudi's hidden message** - If India can have a pro-Israel tilt, Riyadh can have a pro-Pakistan tilt is what the Saudis seem to be conveying.
- **Less attention for India** – As Arab monarchies diversify their alliances, they may be less sensitive to India's concerns.
- **Could reduce India's dominance** – If Pakistan successfully positions itself as a credible security provider to the Gulf, India's influence in the region could come under question.

What lies ahead?

- New Delhi must reckon with the broader structural shift that U.S. dominance in West Asia is no longer assured.
- Regional powers are recalibrating, and security arrangements once taken for granted are being reconfigured.
- India's interests ensuring energy security, protecting its diaspora, and preventing extremist spillovers are best served by stability and balance in the Gulf.
- New Delhi's best course lies in maintaining balance deepening economic and political ties with Riyadh, while continuing to engage with other Gulf states, Iran, and beyond

Reference

The Hindu| Saudi – Pakistan Military Pact

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