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Hedge, Not Alliance: Reading the Makkah Pact Through Saudi Eyes

 **THE HINDU**

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IR**GS2**

CURATED & WRITTEN BY

**Bharat Choudhary**

UPSC Educator & Content Creator

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INTERVIEW ANGLE

"A hedge and an alliance can look identical on the day they are signed. What specific evidence, short of an actual war, would let you tell the two apart before the Makkah pact is ever tested?"

✓ Every fact web-verified against primary sources

THE LIFT LINE

A pact modelled on a clause that has never once been invoked is not evidence of an alliance's strength. It is evidence of how badly its authors wanted the world to believe in one.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

Most Prelims-and-Mains coverage of the Makkah pact will stop at "Saudi Arabia, Turkiye and Pakistan sign NATO-style defence agreement." Ambassador Sachdev's op-ed gives you the analytical move that separates a strong IR answer from a descriptive one: **test whether a security arrangement is a hedge or an alliance by asking who trusts whom, not by reading its opening clause.** That same test applies to any coalition India will be asked to assess this year, from West Asian re-alignments to the Mecca pact's own precursor, the September 2025 Saudi-Pakistan [bilateral](#) pact.

GS Paper 2: India and its neighbourhood relations; bilateral, regional and global groupings and agreements involving India and/or affecting India's interests; effect of policies and politics of developed and developing countries on India's interests.

CONCEPT	MEANING	WHY IT IS TESTABLE
Strategic hedging	Building alternative security options without fully committing to a new bloc, in case a primary guarantor becomes unreliable	The editorial's central analytical claim about the MJDA
Collective defence clause	A treaty commitment that an attack on one signatory is treated as an attack on all	Borrowed language from NATO Article 5, never invoked by NATO in a first-attack sense until 2001
Post-American transition	The broader thesis that West Asian states are self-organising as confidence in assured US guarantees erodes	Recurr across multiple 2026 West Asia editorials, worth mastering once
Strait of Hormuz	The chokepoint through which a large share of global oil transits, bordered by Iran	Direct link to India's crude diversification imperative
I2U2 and IMEC	India-Israel-UAE-US grouping, and the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor	India's own multilateral anchors in the same region, relevant to the way-forward argument

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The Makkah Joint Defence Agreement (MJDA) was signed on **August 7, 2026**, by Saudi Crown Prince **Mohammed bin Salman**, Turkish President **Recep Tayyip Erdogan**, and Pakistani Prime Minister **Shehbaz Sharif**. It builds on a **bilateral Saudi-Pakistan Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement** signed in **September 2025**, widened a year later to include Turkiye.

SIGNATORY	PRINCIPAL ASSET BROUGHT TO THE PACT	PRINCIPAL
Pakistan	The Muslim world's only declared nuclear deterrent; decades of Gulf military training links	Fragile economy; dependent on Gulf capital
Saudi Arabia	Capital and oil leverage; regional diplomatic weight	Direct exposure to Iran and Houthi strikes; historical Ottoman-era grievance
Turkiye	NATO-scale conventional force; expanding drone-industrial base	Anxiety over Israeli assertiveness; NATO membership creates an unresolved overlap of commitments

The proximate cause is a documented sequence of episodes that eroded Saudi confidence in American security guarantees: the **2019 Houthi drone and missile strikes on Aramco facilities**, met with a muted US response; Saudi Arabia's own **March 2023 normalisation with Iran, brokered by China** rather than

Washington; and the strain Gulf states absorbed after the **United States and Israel's war on Iran, which began February 28, 2026.**

THE ANALYSIS

1. Ask what changed, not who signed. A rivalry does not dissolve because its causes vanished; the Ottoman-Saudi history, Erdogan's Islamist orientation, and the 2018 Khashoggi killing in Istanbul are all still live grievances. What changed is Saudi Arabia's confidence in its longstanding external guarantor. Reading the MJDA primarily as evidence of Muslim-world unity misses the actual driver.

2. The mistrust between signatories is the load-bearing fact. Erdogan's own neo-Ottoman ambition to lead Sunni Islam sits directly against Saudi Arabia's identity as Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques; a Turkiye that once backed Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood remains at odds with the Gulf monarchies' domestic hostility to political Islam; and earlier Pakistani troop deployments on Saudi soil have already produced friction over command and mission scope. An alliance built to project unity while its own members distrust each other's ambitions is, by definition, shallower than its text suggests.

3. Two of three signatories still need Iran. Both Turkiye and Pakistan share active borders with Iran and continue pursuing their own accommodation with Tehran, including Pakistan's ongoing free trade talks with Iran even after signing the MJDA. A pact whose implicit logic is anti-Iranian cannot go far operationally while two of its three members have independent reasons not to let it.

4. There is no operational skeleton behind the declaratory language. No integrated command, no standing multinational force, no permanent secretariat has been announced. Until any of these appear, or until an actual attack forces the collective-defence clause to be tested, the MJDA remains closer to a costly signal than to a functioning alliance.

5. What the counter-argument gets right. Even untested, a collective-defence clause changes an adversary's *calculus*, because deterrence partly works through ambiguity about whether Pakistan's nuclear status or Turkiye's drone capacity would actually be invoked. That is a real strategic effect, and it is why India should track the pact seriously even while declining to overreact to it.

DATA AND INSTITUTIONS VAULT

PRELIMS-GRADE FACTS:

Makkah Joint Defence Agreement: signed August 7, 2026, by Saudi Arabia, Turkiye and Pakistan; signatories Mohammed bin Salman, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Shehbaz Sharif

Precursor: bilateral Saudi-Pakistan Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement, September 2025

Jamal Khashoggi: Saudi journalist killed inside the Saudi consulate, Istanbul, 2018

Saudi-Iran normalisation: brokered by China, announced March 2023

US-Israel war on Iran: began February 28, 2026

Saudi Arabia is India's fifth-largest trading partner; bilateral trade of roughly US\$27.18 billion in FY26 (April to November 2025)

PM Modi's Jeddah visit, April 22, 2025, produced MoUs across energy, infrastructure, manufacturing and technology backed by a US\$100 billion investment commitment

India's US sanctions waiver for the Chabahar port project expired April 26, 2026, with no renewal, narrowing India's Iran-linked connectivity options via the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC)

India-anchored multilateral platforms relevant to West Asia: I2U2 (India-Israel-UAE-US) and the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC)

WATCH THE TRAP: DO NOT DESCRIBE THE MJDA AS LEGALLY EQUIVALENT TO NATO. IT BORROWS ARTICLE 5'S LANGUAGE, NOT NATO'S SEVEN DECADES OF INTEGRATED COMMAND, STANDING FORCES OR PERMANENT SECRETARIAT, AND NO SUCH STRUCTURES HAVE BEEN ANNOUNCED FOR THE MJDA.

THE DEBATE

Argument FOR treating the MJDA as a serious, durable alliance. A rivalry as old and bitter as the Ottoman-Saudi one does not get set aside for a symbolic gesture; the willingness of Riyadh and Ankara to formalise collective defence commitments, despite unresolved personal and ideological friction, signals how seriously both now weigh American unreliability, and an untested clause still imposes real deterrent costs on any adversary.

Argument AGAINST overreading a hedge as an alliance. No integrated command exists. Two of the three signatories continue active economic and border engagement with Iran, the pact's implicit target. Past Pakistani deployments on Saudi soil have already produced command friction, a precedent that argues for caution rather than confidence in how smoothly a real crisis would be managed.

Balanced verdict. Both readings hold simultaneously. The MJDA is a genuine signal of a structural shift, declining confidence in American guarantees across West Asia, and its practical depth remains unproven and constrained by real mistrust among its own signatories. The sound analytical position, and the one Ambassador Sachdev's piece models, is to track the pact's follow-through closely without treating its text as a finished alliance architecture.

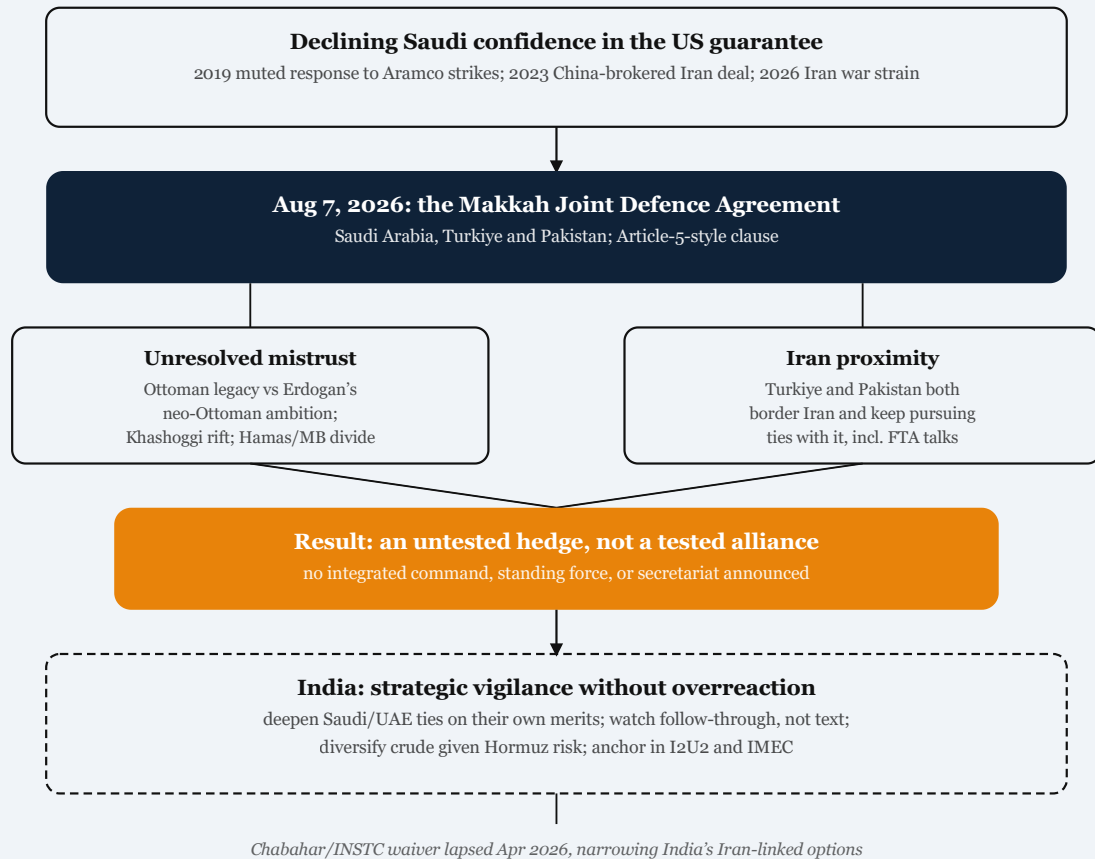
HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS

The transferable pattern: **when historic rivals sign a pact, ask what changed in their shared external environment before asking what changed between them.** Rivalries are rarely resolved through goodwill; they are set aside when a bigger shared problem, here, doubt about American security guarantees, makes cooperation temporarily more useful than continued competition. That does not make the underlying friction disappear, and it does not guarantee the new arrangement will hold once it is actually tested by a crisis.

Apply the same three-step test used for any new security grouping. *What is the stated trigger, and is it specific or vague?* Here it is specific: a documented erosion of confidence in one guarantor. *Do the signatories have unresolved friction that predates the pact?* Here, yes, and it is substantial. *Is there an operational skeleton, command structure, forces, secretariat, behind the declaratory text?* Here, not yet. A pact that scores hedge-like on this test deserves **vigilance**, not alarm, and India's Gulf and West Asia policy should be built on its own bilateral and multilateral relationships rather than on how any single trilateral arrangement eventually behaves.

DIAGRAM-IN-WORDS

Hedge, not alliance: reading the Makkah pact



The Makkah pact borrows NATO's collective-defence language but sits on top of real, unresolved mistrust among its three signatories and their shared need to manage relations with Iran; the sound Indian response tracks its operational follow-through rather than reacting to its declaratory text.

TAKEAWAY BOX

An alliance clause borrowed from NATO is not the same as NATO's seven decades of trust between its members. Read the borrowed language as a signal of anxiety, not as proof of unity.

Makkah Joint Defence Agreement (August 7, 2026, Saudi Arabia-Turkiye-Pakistan); precursor **Saudi-Pakistan Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement** (September 2025); **Jamal Khashoggi** killing (Istanbul, 2018); **China-brokered Saudi-Iran normalisation** (March 2023); **US-Israel war on Iran** (began February 28, 2026); Saudi Arabia is India's **fifth-largest trading partner** (~US\$27.18 billion, FY26 to November 2025); Modi's **Jeddah visit** (April 22, 2025, US\$100 billion in MoUs); **Chabahar** sanctions waiver lapsed **April 26, 2026**; **I2U2** and **IMEC** as India's own West Asia platforms.

is signing a collective-defence pact whose members privately distrust each other's ambitions good statecraft, a rational hedge against uncertainty, or a form of strategic theatre that risks over-committing states to obligations they may not honour when tested?

UPSC has repeatedly tested West Asia's shifting alliance patterns, India's neighbourhood-adjacent security environment, and India's energy-security dependence on the Gulf; this editorial supplies the specific analytical distinction, hedge versus alliance, and the concrete Indian policy response, vigilance without overreaction, that a strong answer on the Makkah pact needs.

"The Makkah Joint Defence Agreement is better explained by what its signatories no longer trust than by what they now share." Critically examine this statement and outline India's appropriate policy response.

Sources: *The Hindu, Al Jazeera, PIB, Ministry of External Affairs*

Source: Hedge, Not Alliance: Reading the Makkah Pact Through Saudi Eyes — Ujiyari.com | Free UPSC & State PCS Editorial Analysis

• KEY ARGUMENTS AT A GLANCE

Ambassador Mahesh Sachdev's reading is that the Makkah Joint Defence Agreement (MJDA), signed by Saudi Arabia, Turkiye and Pakistan on August 7, 2026, borrows NATO Article 5 language but is better understood as Saudi strategic hedging against a security guarantor it no longer trusts unconditionally, than as the birth of a durable Muslim NATO, because the internal mistrust among the three signatories and the geographic proximity of two of them to Iran will cap how far the pact can go operationally.



SUPPORTING

- The mistrust is structural, not incidental. Saudi Arabia's historical memory of Ottoman rule sits uneasily with President Erdogan's own neo-Ottoman ambitions to lead the Sunni Islamic world, a leadership claim that collides directly with Riyadh's self-identity as Custodian of Islam's Two Holiest Mosques, while Ankara's past backing for Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood remains at odds with the Gulf monarchies' hostility to political Islam, and the personal chill between Erdogan and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman since journalist Jamal Khashoggi's killing inside the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in 2018 has never fully thawed.
- Both Turkiye and Pakistan share active land borders with Iran and continue to pursue their own economic accommodation with Tehran even as they sign a pact whose logic is partly anti-Iranian; Pakistan has kept talks alive on a free trade agreement with Iran despite the MJDA, which means two of the three signatories have a direct incentive not to let the pact's language translate into confrontation with their shared neighbour.
- The MJDA has no NATO-style integrated command, standing multinational force or permanent secretariat, and past precedent within this very relationship, Pakistani troop deployments inside Saudi Arabia have previously produced command and mission disputes, counsels against reading the joint statement as an operational alliance rather than a signalling device.
- Saudi Arabia's own recent trajectory, absorbing the 2019 Houthi strikes on Aramco with a muted American response, normalising with Iran in 2023 through Chinese rather than American mediation, and enduring the regional fallout of the US-Israel war on Iran that began on February 28, 2026, is the direct cause of this pact, which makes it a response to a specific loss of confidence in one guarantor rather than evidence of a new ideological bloc.



COUNTER

Even a hedge, once formalised in treaty language invoking collective defence, changes the deterrence calculus for any actor weighing an attack on a signatory, because the uncertainty over whether Pakistan's nuclear status or Turkiye's drone-industrial capacity would be invoked is itself a cost imposed on a potential aggressor; dismissing the MJDA as mere signalling risks underestimating a structural shift already under way in West Asia's security architecture, where more states may follow Riyadh's logic regardless of how the alliance behaves the first time it is tested.

**WAY FORWARD**

India's appropriate posture is strategic vigilance without overreaction: deepen bilateral defence, energy and investment engagement with Saudi Arabia and the UAE on their own merits rather than through the lens of the MJDA; watch for concrete follow-through, joint military exercises, co-production agreements or basing arrangements, rather than reacting to declaratory text; accelerate crude-source diversification given the pact's own premise of Strait of Hormuz vulnerability; and continue to anchor India's West Asia policy in multilateral platforms it already leads or co-anchors, including I2U2 and the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), so that India's regional standing does not depend on how any one trilateral pact evolves.


MAINS ANSWER FRAMEWORK
QUESTION

The Makkah Joint Defence Agreement of August 2026 has been read both as a NATO-style collective defence pact and as an act of Saudi strategic hedging. Critically examine which characterisation better explains the agreement, and outline the elements of an appropriate Indian policy response. (250 words)

INTRODUCTION

On August 7, 2026, Saudi Arabia, Turkiye and Pakistan signed the Makkah Joint Defence Agreement (MJDA), a collective defence pact in which an armed attack on any one signatory is treated as an attack on all three, language that visibly echoes NATO's Article 5. Ambassador Mahesh Sachdev's analysis in The Hindu argues this is best read not as the formation of a durable alliance but as Saudi Arabia's strategic hedge against declining confidence in American security guarantees, a hedge whose depth is limited by real mistrust among the signatories themselves.

BODY

The case for reading the MJDA as hedging rather than alliance rests on three observations. First, the trigger is identifiable and specific to Washington's reliability: a muted American response to the 2019 Houthi strikes on Saudi Aramco facilities, Saudi Arabia's own 2023 rapprochement with Iran brokered by China rather than the United States, and the strain Gulf states absorbed after the United States and Israel went to war with Iran from February 28, 2026, together convinced Riyadh it could no longer treat American protection as automatic.

Second, the signatories carry genuine, unresolved friction: Saudi memory of Ottoman rule versus Erdogan's own neo-Ottoman ambitions for Sunni leadership, Ankara's past support for Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood against Gulf hostility to political Islam, the unhealed personal rift between Erdogan and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman since the 2018 Khashoggi killing in Istanbul, and past command disputes from earlier Pakistani troop deployments on Saudi soil. Third, both Turkiye and Pakistan retain active economic and border relationships with Iran, the pact's implicit adversary, with Pakistan continuing free trade talks with Tehran even after signing.

None of this means the MJDA is meaningless: an untested collective defence clause still raises the cost of calculation for any actor contemplating an attack on a signatory, and that deterrent effect is real even absent an integrated command structure. But the appropriate reading treats the pact as a symptom of a post-American transition in West Asia's security order, not as a finished, operational Muslim NATO.

CONCLUSION

For India, the sound policy response is strategic vigilance without overreaction. Saudi Arabia remains a partner whose interests in India are independent of this pact, so India should keep deepening that relationship on its own terms, track the MJDA's actual military follow-through rather than its text, diversify crude sources given the pact's own premise about Strait of Hormuz risk, and continue anchoring West Asia

policy in platforms like I2U2 and IMEC that do not depend on how this trilateral arrangement eventually behaves under pressure.

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Bharat Choudhary

UPSC Educator & Content Creator

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