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The Saudi-Pakistan Pact is a Dodgy Insurance Policy

Context

- The signing of the **Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement (SMDA)** between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan in Riyadh on September 17, 2025, marks a significant development in the geopolitics of Southwest Asia.
- Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif, joined by Field Marshal Asim Munir, **symbolised not just bilateral cooperation but also an attempt to reshape regional security equations.**
- While the **pact may be hailed as a victory of future aspirations over past experience**, its sustainability and effectiveness remain deeply contested.
- To appreciate its import, **it is necessary to examine the history of Saudi-Pakistani defence ties, the current calculations of both parties**, and the wider consequences, particularly for India.

The Highs and Lows of Saudi-Pakistani Defence Cooperation

• Historical Context

- Defence collaboration between Riyadh and Islamabad has a long history, **dating back to 1951.**
- The period from **1979 to 1989 represented a golden decade**, when nearly 20,000 Pakistani troops were stationed in Saudi Arabia.
- Their **dual mandate was both symbolic and strategic**: to protect Islam's holiest shrines and act as a counterweight to threats from Iran and Yemen. Yet this arrangement revealed fault lines.
- **Saudi leaders often regarded Pakistani soldiers as mercenaries**, while Pakistani generals resented serving as subordinates in a foreign command.
- **The Saudis' insistence on excluding Shia soldiers from Pakistani contingents** aggravated tensions.
- These **divergences culminated in the withdrawal of Pakistani troops by 1990.**
- In subsequent crises, such as the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and the Yemeni civil war in 2015, Pakistan declined Saudi requests for direct involvement, restricting its role to defending the holy sites.

• America's Influence in SMDA Agreement

- American influence has **historically underpinned this bilateral relationship**, often shaping its trajectory from behind the scenes.

- **The recent chronology**, with high-level meetings in Riyadh, followed by Field Marshal Munir's unprecedented lunch with U.S. President Trump, **suggests Washington's continued role in orchestrating security alignments.**
- The **SMDA, therefore, cannot be viewed in isolation but as part of a triangular framework** involving Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and the United States.

The Present Calculations: Riyadh's Perspective

- For Saudi Arabia, the SMDA is both **a necessity and a compromise.**
- Its **demand for a U.S. defence pact, access to nuclear technology**, and advanced weapons has been stalled by regional upheavals, particularly after the 2023 Hamas attack on Israel and the Gaza war.
- In this context, **the SMDA emerged as a consolation prize**, giving Riyadh a partner it can rely on without upsetting its domestic religious establishment or exposing itself to Arab power struggles.

Factors Informing Riyadh's Calculus

- **Survival without foreign troops**
 - Since 1991, **the kingdom has weathered al-Qaeda terrorism**, two Gulf wars, and the Yemeni crisis without large-scale foreign forces on its soil.
 - Its recent \$100 billion purchase of advanced U.S. weapons further strengthens its capabilities.
- **Nuclear Considerations**
 - **Pakistan's nuclear status adds strategic weight** to the partnership, especially if Iran inches closer to acquiring similar capabilities.
 - However, **an overt nuclear transfer to Saudi Arabia remains improbable** due to Israeli red lines and international scrutiny.
- **Constraints of Pakistani alliances:**
 - **Pakistan's deep strategic partnership with China complicates Riyadh's ability** to cultivate unrestrained military camaraderie.

Islamabad's Perspective: Strategic Opportunism

- For Pakistan, the SMDA **is less about shared defence and more about strategic opportunism.**
- **Islamabad is unlikely to fight Riyadh's battles against Iran, Yemen, or Israel**, just as it knows Saudi Arabia would not risk entanglement in conflicts against India or Afghanistan. Instead, Pakistan seeks to:
- **Monetise Saudi insecurity** by extracting economic aid, oil concessions, and military hardware.
- **Leverage U.S. goodwill** through its role in the trilateral arrangement, hoping to reduce its disadvantage against India.
- **Enhance domestic prestige** for its military leadership through expanded training, equipment access, and geopolitical relevance.

- **Thus, the asymmetry in expectations is stark:** Riyadh desires strategic reassurance, while Islamabad seeks material and political gains.

Regional Implications: India's Position

- The **SMDA inevitably raises questions about its impact on India.**
- As the world's third-largest oil importer and a key Saudi partner, India occupies a unique position.
- It is **Saudi Arabia's second-largest trading partner**, with a diaspora highly valued for its professionalism and political neutrality.
- **Since 2014, New Delhi has cultivated strong ties with Riyadh**, ranging from defence cooperation to intelligence sharing.
- Notably, **Saudi officials have emphasised balancing relations with both Pakistan and India**, explicitly acknowledging India's nuclear status and strategic weight.
- **Riyadh reportedly kept New Delhi informed about the SMDA**, suggesting a desire to avoid alienating a vital partner.
- **For India, the agreement serves as a reminder to remain vigilant**, deepen engagement across the Arabian Sea, and strengthen its own strategic presence in West Asia.

Conclusion

- The Saudi-Pakistani Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement is **less a grand alliance than a calculated hedge.**
- **History cautions that defence ties between the two have been riddled with mistrust, asymmetry, and divergent threat perceptions.**
- In its current form, **the SMDA appears more symbolic than substantive**, offering Riyadh a layer of reassurance and Islamabad a channel for financial and strategic dividends.

The Saudi-Pakistan Pact is a Dodgy Insurance Policy FAQs

Q1. What is the Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement (SMDA)?

Ans. The SMDA is a defence pact signed between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan in September 2025 to enhance security cooperation and strategic alignment.

Q2. Why has Saudi-Pakistani defence cooperation historically faced challenges?

Ans. It has faced challenges because of mutual mistrust, differing threat perceptions, and disputes over issues such as the inclusion of Shia troops in Pakistani contingents.

Q3. What does Pakistan hope to gain from the SMDA?

Ans. Pakistan hopes to gain economic aid, oil supplies, military hardware, and greater strategic relevance by leveraging Saudi insecurity and U.S. involvement.

Q4. How has Saudi Arabia reassured India about the SMDA?

Ans. Saudi Arabia reassured India by stressing its intention to balance relations with both Pakistan and India, while acknowledging India's nuclear status and strategic importance.

Q5. Why is the SMDA considered more symbolic than substantive?

Ans. The SMDA is considered more symbolic because it provides reassurance and optics but is unlikely to lead to large-scale military deployments or deep strategic integration.

Source: [The Hindu](#)

A Climate-Health Vision with Lessons From India

Context:

- In July 2025, Brazil hosted the Global Conference on Climate and Health, with 90 nations drafting the **Belém Health Action Plan**, to be launched at COP30. The plan will set the global climate-health agenda.
- Notably, **India had no official representation**, a missed opportunity to showcase its developmental approach and position itself as a model for implementing the Belém Plan.
- This article highlights how India's welfare schemes provide valuable lessons for integrating climate and health goals, the challenges in intersectoral governance, and the urgent need for a coordinated, whole-of-society approach.

Lessons from India's Welfare Schemes for Climate-Health Action

- India's intersectoral welfare programmes show how policies not explicitly designed as climate measures can deliver significant **health and environmental co-benefits**.
- They highlight the power of integration, leadership, and community engagement for advancing climate-health goals.
- **Nutrition and Climate-Resilient Food Systems**
 - The PM POSHAN scheme, reaching 11 crore children in 11 lakh schools, links health, education, agriculture, and food procurement.
 - By promoting millets and traditional grains, it tackles malnutrition while strengthening climate-resilient food systems.
- **Sanitation, Livelihoods, and Clean Energy**
 - The Swachh Bharat Abhiyan improved sanitation, public health, and dignity while supporting sustainability.
 - MNREGA restored degraded ecosystems through rural works, and **PM Ujjwala Yojana (PMUY)** cut household air pollution and emissions by promoting clean cooking fuel.

Critical Insights for Climate-Health Integration

- **Political Leadership:** Direct Prime Ministerial backing, as in Swachh Bharat and PMUY, ensured inter-ministerial cooperation and wider public support. Framing climate change as a **health emergency** can mobilise similar momentum.
- **Community Engagement:** Programmes succeeded by invoking cultural symbols and grassroots participation, showing that climate action also needs **cultural anchoring** to societal values of health and prosperity.

- **Institutional Strengthening:** Building on existing frameworks — such as **ASHA workers, SHGs, municipal bodies, and panchayats** — enhances credibility and ensures sustained action at the community level.

Challenges in Implementing Intersectoral Climate-Health Policies

- While India's welfare programmes offer valuable lessons, their implementation highlights key **structural and institutional challenges** that must be addressed for effective climate-health governance.
- **Administrative and Structural Constraints**
 - Policies often struggle due to **siloed departmental responsibilities**.
 - For example, high LPG refill costs under **PMUY** persist as oil marketing interests overshadow beneficiary needs.
 - Social and cultural barriers also limit equitable access without sustained support mechanisms.

Three Pillars for Health-Anchored Climate Governance

- **Strategic Prioritisation:** Political leaders must frame climate action around **immediate health benefits** rather than distant risks, much like PMUY linked clean cooking to women's empowerment.
- **Procedural Integration:** **Health impact assessments** should become mandatory across climate-relevant sectors — energy, agriculture, transport, and urban planning — similar to environmental clearances.
- **Participatory Implementation:** Communities resonate more with **health gains** like cleaner air or safe water than with carbon metrics. Local health workers can be strong advocates by linking environmental changes to everyday health outcomes.

India's Path to Integrated Climate-Health Action

- India faces a crucial choice: continue tackling climate change and health issues separately with limited results, or adopt a **bold, intersectoral model** that treats them as interconnected challenges.
- By building on its welfare policy experience and engaging globally, India can pioneer a governance framework delivering **coordinated, transformative solutions**.
- The stakes are high, and the costs of inaction severe — only a whole-of-society approach can meet this moment.

Conclusion

- India must embrace an integrated climate-health model, leveraging welfare experiences, leadership, and community action.
- The costs of inaction are immense, while coordinated solutions offer transformative global impact.

A Climate-Health Vision with Lessons From India FAQs

Q1. What was the significance of the 2025 Global Conference on Climate and Health in Brazil?

Ans. The conference shaped the Belém Health Action Plan, set for launch at COP30, which will define the global agenda on climate-health integration.

Q2. How does the PM POSHAN scheme demonstrate climate-health integration?

Ans. It tackles malnutrition while promoting millets and traditional grains, linking health, education, agriculture, and food procurement, and fostering climate-resilient food systems.

Q3. What are the three pillars of health-anchored climate governance suggested for India?

Ans. They are strategic prioritisation of health framing, procedural integration through mandatory health impact assessments, and participatory implementation leveraging community health advocates.

Q4. What challenges hinder intersectoral climate-health policy in India?

Ans. Siloed departmental responsibilities, high LPG refill costs under PMUY, and cultural barriers limiting equitable access highlight structural and social challenges.

Q5. Why is political leadership crucial in India's climate-health approach?

Ans. Direct involvement, as seen in Swachh Bharat and PMUY, ensures inter-ministerial cooperation, public support, and frames climate change as an immediate health priority.

Source: TH

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