

MBZ In Delhi, Turks At Our Gates

India's security challenge will get a lot tougher if Türkiye joins the Saudi-Pakistan mutual defence pact. The threat from this would-be Islamic Nato needs to enter mainstream consciousness in New Delhi. And friends such as UAE become crucial

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Reflecting the current flux in world politics, India and UAE concluded a 'Letter of Intent for a bilateral Strategic Defence Partnership'. This happened during the three-hour visit by UAE's President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan to New Delhi on Monday.

It's evident from the phrasing of the partnership as a 'letter of intent' that it's not the outcome of a long process of negotiations. Nonetheless, the development is significant when seen in the light of another dynamic that will unfold in the coming years and adversely affect India. Türkiye is reportedly seeking to accede to the Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement (SMDA) that Saudi Arabia and Pakistan concluded in Sept 2025. This means India and Türkiye would effectively share a common border. Note too that UAE and Saudi Arabia presently are going through a rough patch, particularly over developments in Yemen. UAE is also a member of the I2U2 grouping with India, Israel and US, and has normalised its relations with Tel Aviv under the Abraham Accords.

So, the timing of the India-UAE letter of intent may not be a coincidence. For now, one must take note of six aspects of SMDA.

- The entity that will operationalise SMDA will be the Islamic Nato as the whole concept is "based on the bonds of brotherhood and Islamic solidarity".

- The entity's area of operations will be as large as that of Nato's, if not larger. Nato's conception of the North Atlantic is expansive and includes all of Europe, North America and even northern Africa (Algeria under the French). But an Islamic Nato will have no such geographic constraints. Let's also consider a near certainty of its expansion as any (Sunni) Muslim country is eligible to become a member.

- This development is no knee-jerk reaction to a few recent events like the war in Gaza or Israel's attack on Qatar or the global turmoil unleashed by the Trump administration. Even though Türkiye is seeking to join a bilateral arrangement between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, its President Erdogan is a staunch advocate of a pan-Islamic community which neatly

fits into his dream of creating a modern version of the Ottoman Empire.

- It's a collective security arrangement in that an attack on one is treated as an attack on all members. This is similar to Article 5 in the North Atlantic Treaty. Implications are obvious: Türkiye criticised India in the wake of Operation Sindoora and Saudi Arabia chose to remain neutral. But now onwards both are treaty-bound to side with Pakistan.

- The insistence on "joint deterrence against any aggression" makes Pakistan's nuclear weapons the



Islamic Bomb, formally and finally.

- Islamic Nato will formally bury Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) that has been dying in bits and pieces for decades. Because, by its logic of collective security with joint deterrence, Islamic Nato will enable its non-nuclear member states to enjoy nuclear deterrence of Pakistan which, by the way, is a non-nuclear state under NPT!

A fun fact: The three estates of Erdogan's dream Islamic realm are already in place. Its Lords Spiritual is Saudi Arabia with the two holy mosques; its Lords Temporal is Türkiye, which has not only ruled vast swaths of West Asia, North Africa and Europe but emerged today as a powerhouse of defence R&D;

and its Commons comprise Pakistan and all other future alliance members.

However, the new alliance is also likely to be plagued by cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversity in the Islamic world. For, what unites Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Türkiye is their common faith and nothing else.

However, two factors give us hope. One, Islam, like other great religions, is not monolithic. People who were under the Ottoman rule don't have fond memories of life then. Türkiye's extra-territorial ambitions, though clothed as its zeal to protect Muslims, are akin to a former colonial power wanting to enter its former colonies to help people there.

Plus, the Saudi-Türkiye competition for leadership of the Sunni world will not be the glue to bind the grouping. The icing on the cake will be Pakistan's India obsession. Therefore, the new grouping will be a house divided.

Two, a diverse group of many Muslim countries is more likely to be accommodative, rules-based and less intolerant towards non-Muslims than any of its members.

Case in point is the Ottoman Empire itself. Though it was a brutal regime, it was rules-based and minorities, who were second-class citizens, found it bearable enough to live under it. That's why millions of Christians lived under what was known as *Pax Ottomana*. It's only after the collapse of the empire at the end of World War I that intense persecution was unleashed on minorities.

In the context of India's national security, the matter ought to be less academic and more existential. Of course, India today is not what it was in the centuries past. But then, can any Indian ignore the fact that the three most powerful Muslim countries in the world are joining hands under a collective security framework whose designated adversaries are likely to include India?

Is it a political contingency requiring headline management? Or, is it an emerging national security threat that demands a concerted strategy and action by our national security apparatus? How does civil society, including the academia, media and think tanks, deliberate on the development? Isn't it, above all, a threat commensurate to our capabilities and stature as a great power?

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