

How Is the Pakistani Army Engineering Its Country's Influence in the Region?



The Pakistani army has forcefully asserted its presence on the Middle Eastern scene in recent months, in a notable shift that has strengthened its standing as one of the most prominent actors in the equations of regional balance, after successfully expanding the scope of its military and political influence at a rapid pace.

The Pakistani military establishment is no longer content with its traditional role based on training and defense cooperation with allies a path it had followed since the state's founding in 1947. Instead, it has moved toward deeper and more consequential engagement in regional affairs, becoming a key player and a principal driver of Pakistani policy in the Middle East. In this context, Army Chief Field Marshal Asim Munir has emerged as one of the most visible figures on the regional and international stage, amid the growing political and diplomatic role of the military establishment.

Over the past few years in particular, the Pakistani army has shifted from being merely a military institution into an effective diplomatic instrument through which Islamabad seeks to bolster its political and regional presence, leveraging its military weight to offset the economic challenges and deepening internal

crises facing the country.

Expanded Presence in the Gulf

The Pakistani army has notably expanded the scope of its deployment and influence in the Middle East in recent years, but the most significant shift in its regional presence came on September 17, 2025, when Islamabad and Riyadh signed a agreement on joint strategic defense aimed at developing areas of defense cooperation between the two countries and strengthening mechanisms of joint deterrence in the face of threats and attacks.

In the first practical implementation of this agreement, Pakistan sent around 8,000 troops a few weeks ago, along with a squadron of fighter jets and an air defense system, to Saudi territory, in a move observers viewed as a pivotal shift in Pakistan's doctrine of military deployment beyond its borders and an indication of the rising regional role of the Pakistani military establishment.

Pakistan's military presence has not been limited to Saudi Arabia alone, but has extended to most Gulf states, albeit to varying degrees in terms of the nature of the missions and the level of engagement. In Qatar, Islamabad has strengthened its presence through training and military cooperation agreements, with the Pakistani army playing a role in supporting and developing the capabilities of the Qatari armed forces, in addition to contributing to the security of a number of major events, most notably.

In the UAE, Kuwait, and Bahrain, military and security institutions have relied to varying degrees on Pakistani expertise, whether in training and combat readiness or in building and developing air forces and security systems. Defense relations between these countries and Pakistan have also seen growing cooperation in joint military exercises, exchange of expertise, air defense, and military maintenance, in addition to the employment of large numbers of Pakistanis in private security sectors, defense companies, and military training programs in a number of Gulf states.

A Notable Presence in the Middle East

As part of a strategy of balanced deployment, Pakistan's military presence has not been confined to the Gulf states linked to Islamabad by a broad network of security and economic interests. It has also extended to a number of influential regional powers in the Middle East, in an effort to cement Pakistan's position as an influential player in regional security equations.

In Egypt, Islamabad has worked to strengthen its military ties with Cairo, although cooperation has remained largely confined to joint exercises, exchanges of visits by military leaders, and coordination of positions on a number of regional

and security issues. The same approach applies, to varying degrees, to its relationship with Jordan, and to a lesser extent with Iraq.

As for Turkey, the relationship is considered one of Pakistan's most important military partnerships outside the Gulf framework, with cooperation between the two countries taking on a multi-level strategic character that includes joint military production, special training, intelligence coordination, as well as growing cooperation in defense industries and military technology.

In Libya, Pakistan strengthened its defense presence by concluding one of the largest military deals in the post-war period, worth around \$4 billion. It included fighter jets, tanks, and military training aircraft, in addition to offshore oil drilling projects using Pakistani defense technologies and industries, in a step that reflected the widening tools of Pakistani influence and the overlap between military and economic dimensions in its regional moves.

The Army Draws Foreign Policy

Pakistan's military presence in the Middle East and North Africa is an extension of a historical legacy formed during the British colonial era in the Indian subcontinent, when the British Empire relied on the military establishment to manage its regional influence and build networks of control and security across a number of vital arenas.

In this context, large numbers of Pakistani soldiers within the ranks of the British Indian Army before Pakistan's independence—served in strategic cities and stations such as Jerusalem, Amman, Baghdad, Cairo, and Muscat. This later contributed to the formation of field experience and extended relationships for the Pakistani military establishment within the Middle Eastern sphere.

Building on this legacy, the military establishment in Pakistan has become the most influential actor in shaping Islamabad's foreign policy. It has effectively become the true center of decision-making, where strategic approaches are formulated and the state's regional and international orientations are determined, making the military dimension clearly present in most of Pakistan's external diplomatic moves.

Pakistan's military doctrine in the Middle East generally rests on a set of governing principles, foremost among them avoiding direct involvement in intra-regional conflicts and steering clear of sharp alignments between competing axes, while at the same time maintaining balanced relations with various regional parties.

Islamabad also employs its military cooperation and defense ties as a tool to maximize economic and strategic gains, in light of the ruling establishment's

awareness of the economic fragility the country suffers from. This explains the clear overlap between the military and economic dimensions in Pakistan's foreign policy toward the Middle East.

Diplomacy in Military Uniform

Pakistan has adopted a diplomatic approach with a distinctly military character, with the military establishment becoming the most visible and influential face of Islamabad's foreign moves in the recent period. Over the past months, Pakistan has witnessed intense diplomatic activity led by Army Chief Field Marshal Asim Munir through shuttle tours that included a number of regional capitals, during which he met leaders and heads of state such as those of Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt, and the UAE, in addition to meeting Libyan military commander Khalifa Haftar.

This activity reflected the Pakistani military establishment's transition from merely employing traditional defense capabilities to building a more advanced and effective military diplomacy, through which Islamabad has been able to expand its influence and presence across multiple geographies stretching from North Africa to the Gulf and reaching the vicinity of Iran. This has transformed the Pakistani army from a local military institution into one of the influential actors in the equations of regional stability amid a highly turbulent Middle Eastern environment.

One of the most prominent features of Pakistani military diplomacy is its ability to manage delicate balances and maintain channels of communication with contradictory parties without slipping into direct confrontations or sharp alignments, even if its external activity at certain stages appears closer to polarized positioning.

This is clearly evident in Libya, where Islamabad supported Haftar's forces through massive military deals without this leading to direct tension with Turkey despite Ankara's well-known position on the Libyan scene. The same approach was also evident in the Yemeni file, as Pakistan maintained an active diplomatic role without becoming embroiled in the polarization between Saudi Arabia and the UAE. It has also succeeded in achieving a degree of balance in its relations between Iran and the Gulf states in a way that preserves its interests with both sides and spares it from losing either.

In sum, Pakistan is acting with a high degree of political realism in deploying its capabilities and tools of influence, driven by its recognition of the difficulty of competing economically and politically with major regional powers. This has pushed it to rely on the arena in which it holds a clear advantage its military and nuclear capabilities. Through this approach, Islamabad has succeeded in turning

its military power into an effective tool of regional influence, using it to strengthen its political presence, expand its network of relations, and secure economic and strategic gains that extend beyond its geographic borders.

Yet this strategy, despite the presence and influence it has achieved, remains fraught with a high degree of risk, especially in a highly complex and rapidly shifting Middle Eastern environment, where any imbalance in the delicate policy of equilibrium pursued by Pakistan could drag it into regional conflicts and polarizations in which it has no direct interests, even as it may bear their political and security costs. Hence the most pressing question remains: Can Islamabad continue to maintain that delicate compass amid a region whose maps and alliances are changing at a rapid pace?

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