

Erdoğan, Riyadh, Islamabad: The New World Order and the Game for the New Global South

In the multipolar world that is taking shape, power does not necessarily belong to those who choose a side, but may belong to those who manage to make themselves indispensable to multiple sides at the same time.



Abstract

The mutual defense agreement signed in Mecca on August 7, 2026, by Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan was quickly interpreted as the possible emergence of an “Islamic NATO.” An evocative term, but one that falls short of describing the nature and potential implications of this new security architecture.

This article offers a different interpretation: the pact could represent the first nucleus of a security network through which certain regional powers seek to increase their strategic autonomy while simultaneously maintaining relations with Washington, Beijing, and Moscow. Pakistan’s presence also extends the scope of the agreement well beyond the Middle East, introducing the rivalry with India and the relationship with China into the new configuration.

The central focus of the analysis, however, is Turkey. Ankara does not necessarily seem to be pursuing formal leadership of the Muslim world, but rather a position of mediation and indispensability among different strategic systems. The ability to simultaneously remain anchored to NATO, engage in dialogue with Russia and China, and build security relationships with Muslim powers could transform Turkey's geographical, military, industrial, and diplomatic position into a form of systemic power.

The Mecca Agreement should therefore be viewed not only as a deterrent but also as a potential network infrastructure within the emerging multipolar order and in the competition for influence within the Global South. The decisive question is not merely who will lead this network, but who will succeed in becoming the hub that the others cannot easily do without.

Methodological Note

The analysis deliberately distinguishes between documented facts, official statements, interpretations by the actors involved, and the author's prospective hypotheses. Where the text of the agreement or public statements do not allow for the determination of a strategic intent, conclusions are therefore formulated as scenarios or working hypotheses rather than as established facts. Particular caution is exercised in interpreting the agreement's religious dimension, its possible implications for India and Iran, and any prospects for expanding the network.

In the multipolar world that is taking shape, power does not necessarily belong to those who choose a side. It may belong—perhaps above all—to those who manage to become indispensable to multiple camps simultaneously. This, in my view, is the key through which the mutual defense agreement signed in Mecca on August 7, 2026, by Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan should be interpreted. Describing it as the birth of an “Islamic NATO” is certainly evocative, but it risks being not only reductive but also misleading. We have already discussed this on the *Nuovo Giornale Nazionale* in our previous article dated August 27, “The So-Called ‘Islamic NATO’ and Erdoğan's Game – The Struggle for Leadership in the Muslim World,” but the subsequent developments in this matter now make it necessary to go beyond that characterization.

The reference to Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty stems from the provision stating that an armed attack against one of the three countries will be considered an attack against all of them. The formal similarity is evident, but it should not be misleading.

As already mentioned and duly reiterated here—*repetita iuvant*—the agreement does not possess, at least at this stage, NATO's institutional structure, integrated command, operational experience, or level of integration. Furthermore, it is no coincidence that Ankara continues to present it as complementary to—and not an alternative to—the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, while Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan has spoken of a clause that is technically equivalent to Article 5. The project includes mechanisms for political-military coordination, joint exercises, cooperation in the land, naval, air, and cyber domains, as well as the joint development and production of weapons systems.

But precisely for this reason, the truly interesting question is not whether an “Islamic NATO” has emerged, but rather what sphere of influence is beginning to take shape through this agreement and, above all, who has an interest in occupying it.

The issue takes on even greater significance when we consider the transformation of the very categories we are accustomed to using to interpret power.

Old-style alliances like NATO are not necessarily “over,” but their ability to automatically translate military superiority into political control appears far more limited today than in the past. This is because—and I will never tire of repeating it—the end of the bipolar order, the transformation of the concept of a Great Power, the growing autonomy of regional actors, the evolution of warfare, and the centrality of economic, technological, informational, and cognitive dimensions have profoundly altered the relationship between material strength and political influence.

Western military superiority remains enormous, but it no longer automatically leads to control over events, and this is the fundamental difference that the U.S.-Iran standoff has demonstrated particularly clearly.

And in this sense, it is not necessary to argue that Tehran has “defeated NATO”—a conclusion that would be untenable—to acknowledge that Iran has shown how a regional power can use missile capabilities, asymmetric tools, networks of influence, strategic depth, and communication to transform a military confrontation into a much broader political and social competition: something that the events in Gaza have further highlighted, making us realize firsthand just how much strategic communication can affect the cohesion of Western societies, public opinion, and the decisions of European governments.

The power of the 21st century is therefore measured not only by the ability to destroy an adversary’s military apparatus, but also by the ability to influence its society, shape its perception of events, divide public opinion, and transform material superiority into a political outcome. And it is precisely this transformation that makes American dominance less a given.

And this is not because the United States has become irrelevant. On the contrary. Their continued status as the indispensable center of the system is precisely what allows regional powers to use their relationship with Washington as a lever for their own autonomy.

The problem for the United States is that a relationship of dependence can gradually become reciprocal. What for decades was a relationship in which Washington had enormous leverage can turn into one in which the allies themselves seek to raise the price of their cooperation. It is a dynamic that the West struggles to recognize, especially because the old system of alliances had accustomed its ruling classes to viewing their centrality as a structural, almost natural condition. But the world that is taking shape is different.

And this is precisely where Erdoğan's game begins.

Turkey is not leaving NATO. There is insufficient evidence to support such an interpretation, and, above all, this does not appear to be what Ankara intends to do. Erdoğan continues to view membership in the Alliance as one of the fundamental tools of Turkish power politics, and Ankara continues to engage with Washington even on extremely sensitive issues, such as the F-35 program.

The real strategy appears to be something else: ***using NATO membership without allowing it to define Turkey's entire international standing.*** Ankara wants to be simultaneously a NATO power, a dialogue partner with Russia, a partner of China, a regional power in the Islamic world, a player in Central Asia, a dialogue partner with Africa, and a key player in the Middle East.

That's a huge difference. Erdoğan doesn't seem to want to definitively choose a side. He seems to want to increase the strategic value of his choice precisely by avoiding making it.

This logic has been evident in numerous issues. Turkey has sought to draw closer to the BRICS without turning it into a break with the West. It has maintained relations with Moscow without becoming "Russian," with Beijing without becoming "Chinese," and with Washington without accepting automatic subordination. And the same ambivalence characterizes Saudi Arabia. In fact, it is no coincidence that Riyadh has, in recent years, used its relations with China, Russia, and the BRICS as tools for diversification without turning them into a definitive alternative to its relationship with Washington. And this means that the Turkish-Saudi convergence takes on a particular significance here and now precisely because it does not stem from choosing one camp over another.

We are not facing a Western bloc pitted against a Russian-Chinese bloc. We are facing the possibility that certain regional powers are attempting to build an intermediate space in which they can engage simultaneously with multiple centers of power without accepting permanent subordination to any one of them. And this is where the new Mecca agreement takes on a significance that goes far beyond the security of the three signatories.

To understand the bigger picture, however, we must ask why Pakistan is involved.

Pakistan: A Presence Worth Considering

If the pact were simply a response to the Iranian threat, Islamabad's involvement would require further explanation. Turkey and Saudi Arabia have direct interests in Middle Eastern stability and possess considerable military capabilities. Pakistan, on the other hand, introduces a completely different variable into the equation: India.

Islamabad brings to the triangle not only a massive military apparatus and the only nuclear deterrent belonging to a Muslim power. It brings with it a structural rivalry with New Delhi, Kashmir, extensive strategic experience, a privileged relationship with China, and a

geographic location that automatically extends the entire framework beyond the Middle East.

This does not mean that the pact was conceived “against India.” The text does not state this, and we do not have sufficient evidence to support such a conclusion. It does mean, however, that Pakistan’s inclusion necessarily has a strategic impact on India. Islamabad brings its own history, its own rivalries, its own relationship with Beijing, and its own nuclear deterrent into the agreement. All of these factors mean that the new structure linking Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey cannot be analyzed without taking New Delhi into account.

And this is where the issue takes on a new dimension. The Ankara-Riyadh-Islamabad triangle, in fact, connects Anatolia, the Gulf, the Middle East, and South Asia within a single strategic framework. It is no longer merely a Middle Eastern issue. If this network were to expand further, it could become one of the geopolitical infrastructures through which a significant portion of the Muslim world seeks to increase its autonomy and influence.

However, precisely for this reason, it would be a mistake to consider its religious dimension irrelevant. The fact that it does not constitute the operational foundation of the agreement does not mean, by any means, that it is politically irrelevant. On the contrary, their shared Islamic identity can represent a latent strategic resource, available to the governments involved as a tool for legitimization, mobilization, and, under certain circumstances, even for exerting pressure on their respective publics. The problem arises when such leverage is used to transform a geopolitical dispute into a conflict perceived as religious, in which the adversary is no longer simply another state with divergent interests, but is portrayed as an enemy of the faith, an apostate, or an infidel.

It is not certain that this will happen, nor is there sufficient evidence to suggest that it is currently the objective of the governments involved. But the possibility exists and should not be underestimated. Once a platform capable of connecting states characterized by a strong Muslim identity has been established, that same identity—which today can serve as a source of cohesion and legitimacy—could, in the event of a serious crisis, be used to mobilize the masses, harden negotiating positions, and make any compromise politically more difficult. The shift from realpolitik to sectarian mobilization would not necessarily require a formal transformation of the agreement: it might be sufficient to alter the narrative through which a conflict is presented to the respective societies.

This is precisely why the religious dimension must be viewed not as the explanation for the agreement, but as one of its possible strategic levers. The structure remains grounded in national interests, deterrence, security, and autonomy; however, beneath this structure lies a reservoir of identity that, if activated, is capable of producing much broader political effects. And it is precisely this possibility—not the agreement’s alleged confessional nature—that represents one of the most concrete risks of its potential evolution

After all, risk does not arise in a vacuum, and it would be naive to ignore that, over the past few decades, some of the countries now united under this agreement have—at different

times and in different ways—more or less surreptitiously fueled dynamics of jihadist radicalization, which were sometimes countered within their own borders and, at the same time, tolerated, supported, or indirectly fueled abroad when such actions appeared to serve the pursuit of contingent strategic interests.

This is only an apparent contradiction: radicalism can be viewed as a threat when it challenges the domestic order and, at the same time, as a potential asset when it is projected onto an external theater where its actions can yield political or strategic advantages.

Recent history offers more than one example that should prompt us to exercise caution in ruling out such a dynamic a priori.

One need only consider—to stick with the most recent events—the position taken by Ankara toward Hamas and the reception given to its representatives, or, looking further back, what happened in the Balkans, where the infiltration of networks, fighters, and funding linked to international jihadism helped create a situation whose geopolitical consequences may not yet have been fully assessed.

And it is precisely this memory that makes the risk—that tomorrow, a space for cooperation among Muslim powers might also turn into a potential proxy battleground, where religious identity, mass mobilization, and the strategic interests of states end up overlapping—anything but theoretical.

This does not mean to suggest that this has already happened, nor that this is the objective of the Mecca Agreement. It means recognizing that the availability of a powerful sectarian lever, combined with the prior experience of some of the actors involved in the direct or indirect use of non-state actors as instruments of foreign policy, constitutes a variable that no serious analysis of the new system can afford to ignore.

In this sense—though obviously not exclusively—the possibility that Bangladesh might be involved adds a further element of interest. Dhaka has expressed openness to the possibility of joining following a Saudi invitation, and such a development—precisely because of Bangladesh's position and its relationship with India—would have regional consequences that would go far beyond the formal significance of a new member. If other Muslim countries were to follow suit, the issue would definitively become one of building a network rather than simply a trilateral agreement.

It goes without saying that, at this stage, underestimating what has just been emphasized would be just as wrong and misplaced as interpreting this alliance and its possible expansion exclusively in religious terms: the objective data do not allow for such an interpretation, but at the same time they do not exempt us from the obligation to keep the situation under constant observation, since prevention, when necessary, is far better than cure.

The reason for this distinction lies in the fact that the language of Islamic solidarity is certainly present in the press release issued regarding the agreement and serves a strong political and identity-defining function. However, when the document shifts from political legitimization to the substance of the agreement, the vocabulary changes radically: shared strategic interests, cooperation in the defense sector, deterrence, political-military coordination, and the principle that an attack against one of the countries will be considered an attack against all are the dominant themes. There is no mention, at least in the text made public, of a general obligation of military solidarity toward other Muslim states simply because they are Muslim, nor of a strictly religious project based on the defense of the Ummah.

This is a fundamental distinction. Identity may provide the framework, but it is *realpolitik* that defines the mechanism.

The religious component therefore serves, on an official level, to lend political legitimacy to an agreement grounded in extremely concrete interests: security, deterrence, strategic autonomy, industrial cooperation, military technology, and reduced dependence on Western guarantees. This does not mean, however, that the religious element is irrelevant. Rather, it means that it can function as a powerful language of legitimization without necessarily being the organizing principle of the alliance. And it is precisely this seemingly ancillary nature that makes it potentially important: a resource for identity that does not formally bind states, but remains available to be politically mobilized should circumstances make it expedient.

After all, the history of the Islamic world demonstrates—to those who know it—that religious solidarity and geopolitical competition can easily coexist. Religion does not eliminate *realpolitik*. On the contrary, it can become one of the tools through which competition is mobilized, justified, and made politically sustainable. And when religious identity is superimposed on the perception of an external threat, the line between political mobilization and strictly religious mobilization can become far less clear-cut than the formally cautious language of an international agreement would suggest.

For this reason, it would be a mistake to speak of the emergence of a homogeneous Islamic bloc. It is far more plausible to envision a network of states that share strategic interests and that, when it suits them, may also use a common religious identity as a tool for legitimization, mobilization, and political pressure. But be careful: this interpretation concerns the presentation of the initiative and its possible use on the political and social levels, and by no means the existence of a documented obligation that imposes a specific course of action on the signatories of the agreement toward those who might be perceived as enemies.

And we must be even more rigorous on this point. At present, we do not in fact have the full text of the signed agreement, but only the official press release through which its essential principles and contents were made public. Any semantic or linguistic assessment must therefore be based on what has actually been disclosed and cannot be arbitrarily extended to clauses, protocols, or mechanisms that may be contained in documentation

not made public. ***But this methodological caution must not lead to an underestimation of the risk: the absence, in the public document, of an operational confessional constraint does not equate to the absence of the confessional dimension as a potential political lever.***

The Indian Issue

New Delhi is not simply an ally of the West. It is neither a Chinese, Russian, nor Islamic power. It is a power that is attempting to build its own strategic autonomy while simultaneously maintaining relations with Washington, Moscow, the Gulf, Africa, Central Asia, and the rest of the Global South. In this sense, India and Turkey share a fundamental commonality: both seek to increase their international influence not through exclusive membership in a single bloc, but through their ability to build and maintain relationships with multiple systems simultaneously.

And this is precisely why they could enter—though, in my view, they already are, even if India seems to have moved somewhat later—into a form of competition that need not necessarily take on a military character to produce significant geopolitical effects. It is a competition for the ability to bring countries together, build networks, become indispensable partners, and, above all, secure a central position within that fluid space we call the Global South.

Pakistan's presence inevitably complicates this dynamic, as it introduces India's main regional rival into the new architecture and brings with it a historical rivalry that cannot simply be separated from the rest of the framework. If Bangladesh were to be integrated tomorrow as well, the reach toward South Asia would become even more evident. A network connecting Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Bangladesh could no longer be easily described as an exclusively Middle Eastern structure, much less an exclusively defensive one: it would become a platform capable of spanning multiple regions of the Muslim world and projecting toward South Asia a capacity for relations, cooperation, and influence that New Delhi could no longer consider peripheral.

And here a point emerges that deserves particular attention. It would not be necessary for all the countries in the network to be formally or explicitly "anti-Indian" for India to perceive the new configuration as a strategic problem. It would suffice for the gradual convergence of their interests to produce a configuration in which Pakistan would be strengthened, Bangladesh would be more deeply integrated into a network alternative to the one traditionally gravitating toward New Delhi, and Turkey and Saudi Arabia would acquire a growing capacity for political and economic projection in South Asia.

In geopolitics, in fact, the issue is not only what an alliance declares it intends to do, but also what its very structure makes possible

Here emerges one of the most provocative—but also most interesting—hypotheses of the entire affair: the pact could have a containment effect on India even without having been explicitly designed to contain it.

The difference is substantial. If the pact were openly anti-Indian, Saudi Arabia and Turkey would pay a huge diplomatic price. By presenting it instead as a defensive agreement among Muslim powers, without formally identifying an enemy, the strategic strengthening of Pakistan can be portrayed as a natural consequence of cooperation rather than as a decision directly aimed against New Delhi.

It is a subtle distinction, but a very important one geopolitically, because it helps us understand how a stated defensive purpose can coexist with strategic consequences that go far beyond what is formally declared. And it is precisely this distinction that leads us to ask a further question: **Who might have an interest in not hindering this development?**

There is no single answer. China has a very close strategic relationship with Pakistan and would have no interest in seeing Islamabad marginalized. Russia has an interest in maintaining open relations with the Muslim world and in integrating itself into new regional architectures. The United States, for its part, might welcome greater responsibility-taking by regional powers and a consequent reduction in the need to act as the sole guarantor of Middle Eastern security.

This does not mean that Washington, Moscow, and Beijing are developing a common strategy against India. That would be an overreach. It implies something more subtle: the new configuration could produce outcomes that, for different reasons, are not necessarily incompatible with the interests of the three major power centers.

An India facing growing strategic pressure could, for example, be prompted to draw even closer to the United States. And this, of course, would not be incompatible with Washington's interests, as it has long regarded its relationship with New Delhi as a fundamental component of its Indo-Pacific strategy.

But beware: this is precisely where a miscalculation might lie.

Such a dynamic could, in fact, produce consequences in the medium to long term that are far more difficult to control than initially anticipated. Because a network built for essentially strategic reasons can gradually acquire its own political identity; and a political identity, when it finds fertile ground in collective perceptions, regional tensions, and the dynamics of mass mobilization, can end up taking on a sectarian dimension as well.

I am not claiming that this is the current intention of the agreement's signatories. We do not have sufficient evidence to assert this. I am emphasizing, however, that we cannot rule out the possibility that such a development might occur over the years should the network expand, consolidate, and transform from a simple instrument of military cooperation into a broader political platform.

History shows, after all, that religious identity can be used by states not only to define themselves but also to unite populations, legitimize conflicts, construct an image of the adversary, and transform contingent geopolitical interests into causes perceived as existential. This has occurred in very different historical contexts and periods and is not exclusive to any particular civilization or religion.

The history of European expansion and colonial ventures also offers, in this regard, examples in which religious motivations, political interests, economic ambitions, and power projects ultimately became intertwined. The spread of Christianity was, in many cases, intertwined with processes of conquest, political subjugation, and the transformation of local societies. It would, however, be simplistic to reduce the entire history of European expansion to evangelization alone, just as it would be equally simplistic to deny that religious language was sometimes used to legitimize and mobilize processes of expansion that responded not so much to—as to—political and economic interests.

It is precisely this historical ambivalence that should prompt us to exercise caution.

The problem, in fact, is not to determine today whether the new security system is destined to become a confessional bloc. We do not know. The problem is recognizing that, should the network expand to other Muslim countries, consolidate a common identity narrative, and subsequently find itself embroiled in a crisis perceived as a clash between communities, the religious dimension could become an extraordinary lever for mobilization.

And at that point, the situation would change radically.

One thing is a coalition of states that cooperate because they share security interests. It is quite another to have a network of states that begins to present itself—and, above all, to present itself to its own populations—as the political core of a religious community called upon to defend itself against an external adversary.

In the first case, we are still in the realm of *realpolitik*.

In the second, we enter much more dangerous territory, where the perception of a geopolitical threat can be transformed into a threat to faith, and where conflict can take on a mobilizing power that no diplomatic apparatus can easily control.

This is the risk we cannot afford to ignore. And this is not because it is already a reality; not because the Mecca Agreement contains a sectarian agenda, nor even because a unified Islamic bloc exists today, but because history teaches us that power structures rarely remain identical to the intentions with which they were built. A structure created to ensure deterrence can become a political platform; a political platform can develop an identity; and an identity, if properly mobilized, can transform into a force capable of transcending the very interests that originally gave rise to the structure.

And it is precisely for this reason that the new system deserves to be observed not only for what it is today, but also for what it might become tomorrow—because nothing entitles us to claim that the Mecca Agreement is the beginning of a new religious bloc, but, equally, nothing yet entitles us to rule out that it might constitute one of its first building blocks, starting with the fact that the real point of departure is not India. The real starting point is the Global South.

The Origins of the New Pact, the Power of the Indispensable Node, and the Global South



The term is used far too often as if it referred to a homogeneous political group. This is not the case. India and Pakistan are part of it, but they are rivals. Saudi Arabia and Iran are part of it, but they are strategic competitors. Turkey and the Arab countries share a religious majority, but not necessarily the same conception of political order. China and India both belong to the emerging world, but they are engaged in a growing strategic competition. Russia and many Muslim countries share energy and strategic interests, but they do not constitute an ideological bloc.

The Global South is therefore much less a unified entity than an arena in which a contest to build networks is being waged.

And here we return to the true insight behind Turkey's strategy: whoever builds the broadest network gains power; whoever becomes the hub through which relationships between different networks pass gains even more.

It is a form of power distinct from traditional leadership.

For this reason, it might be a mistake to interpret Erdoğan's policy exclusively as a quest for leadership of the Muslim world. Perhaps the Turkish leader has realized that it is not necessary to become the formal leader of that world. It might be enough to make Turkey the country without which no major Muslim security architecture can function fully.

Riyadh need not recognize Erdoğan as a leader if it needs Turkish technology, defense industry, and operational capabilities. Islamabad need not recognize Ankara as a political leader if it considers Turkey an indispensable industrial and strategic partner. Washington

need not accept an anti-American Turkey if it needs Ankara as a privileged interlocutor with a growing segment of the Muslim world. Beijing must not regard Turkey as an ally if it deems it necessary to maintain a sufficiently good relationship with Turkey to prevent Ankara from becoming an obstacle.

This is the power of the indispensable node.

And this is where the genesis of the Mecca agreement becomes decisive.

If we were to look only at the signing on August 7, 2026, we might think that Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan reacted to a contingent situation—especially the escalation with Iran—by deciding to quickly establish a joint defense mechanism. ***But the available chronology suggests something different.***

By September 2025, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan had already signed a strategic mutual defense agreement under which an attack against either country would be considered an attack against both. Riyadh and Islamabad had thus already established their own bilateral framework. And, according to statements by the Saudis themselves, that agreement was the result of discussions that had been ongoing for years.

The decisive turning point came later, when Ankara began seeking a place within that framework. In January 2026, it became publicly known that Turkey was attempting to join the Saudi-Pakistani alliance. Pakistan's Minister of Defense Production, Raza Hayat Harraj, confirmed that separate discussions were underway for a trilateral agreement and reported that a draft had already been submitted to the three governments. But above all, he stated that the trilateral project had been under discussion for about ten months. If we take this indication seriously, the negotiations would have begun to take shape as early as the spring of 2025—several months before the Saudi-Pakistani bilateral agreement and more than a year before the signing in Mecca.

However, it is Hakan Fidan who sets the clock back even further. The Turkish foreign minister explained that the process leading up to the agreement lasted about two years and eight months. Taking August 7, 2026, as a reference point, this brings us roughly to the end of 2023. Fidan also explained that the project gradually evolved from an idea to a concept and from a concept to an agreement, and that Erdoğan had repeatedly raised the issue in talks with regional leaders.

We cannot, therefore, claim—without stretching the available evidence—that Erdoğan personally “invented” the agreement in 2023 in exactly the form in which it was signed in 2026. That would be an excessive conclusion. We can, however, put forward a more cautious—and, for that very reason, more interesting—thesis: **Ankara appears to have worked for years to build a broader regional security architecture, within which the Riyadh-Islamabad axis ultimately found a natural place.**

The distinction is strategic. The initial formal core was Saudi-Pakistani; the broader vision of the platform, however, appears to have been strongly supported by Turkey.

If this interpretation is correct, August 7 would not mark the beginning of an alliance, but rather the provisional culmination of a much longer process. And, above all, Iran may not have been the cause of this architecture's emergence, but rather the event that allowed for its rapid acceleration and easier political justification.

At this point, it becomes inevitable to ask why Erdoğan specifically chose Pakistan.

If the goal had been solely to build a deterrent against Iran, the choice would not necessarily have been obvious. Turkey and Saudi Arabia already possess considerable military capabilities and are both integrated—albeit in very different ways—into the Western security network. Pakistan, on the other hand, brings something the other two lack: a significant nuclear deterrent, a large military force, a strategic position in South Asia, military experience, privileged relations with China, and a structural rivalry with India.

It is this complementarity that likely constitutes the true strength of the triangle.

Turkey contributes technology, a defense industry, operational capabilities, and a strategic geographic location. Saudi Arabia brings capital, energy, influence in the Arab world, and a religious legitimacy that none of the other three can match. Pakistan brings military strength, strategic experience, geographic depth, and nuclear deterrence, as well as a direct connection to South Asia and China.

It is not an alliance built on perfectly aligned interests. It is almost a functional division of strategic capabilities.

And it is precisely this functional division that explains why ideological differences can be temporarily set aside.

This brings us to Saudi Arabia and Turkey—that is, to the contradiction that likely constitutes the project's main internal vulnerability.

For years, Ankara and Riyadh have represented two competing models of the Sunni order. On one side: Erdoğan, the AKP, political Islam, the Muslim Brotherhood, and a vision in which Turkey could use its history, culture, and religious identity as tools for projection. On the other, the Saudi monarchy—custodian of the holy sites, a financial and energy power, and historically hostile to the Brotherhood and to the transformation of Islam into political mobilization.

During the Arab Spring, the rift became evident. Turkey supported forces aligned with political Islam and the government of Mohamed Morsi in Egypt, while Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates moved in the opposite direction. They were not simply two countries with differing interests. They were two powers embodying two competing conceptions of the Sunni order.

That contradiction has not disappeared.

It has been put on hold.

What's new in recent years is that Mohammed bin Salman seems to have decided that Saudi Arabia's strategic interests take precedence over old ideological divisions. Riyadh needs security, military technology, investment, deterrence capabilities, and diversification of its international relations. Ankara can offer a significant portion of all of this. Erdoğan, in turn, needs Saudi capital, Riyadh's political clout in the Arab world, and the opportunity to consolidate a strategic network capable of extending Turkey's influence far beyond the traditional boundaries of Ankara's foreign policy.

It is therefore entirely possible that two profoundly different powers might say: we don't agree on everything, but we need each other.

This is *realpolitik* in its simplest form.

But there is a fundamental difference between being partners and being subordinates. Mohammed bin Salman may accept Erdoğan as a partner; it is far from certain that he is willing to accept him as a leader. And this distinction could become decisive if the pact were to evolve from a military instrument into a political platform.

The issue of the Muslim Brotherhood remains, in fact, one of the deepest fault lines in the Sunni system. A high-profile Kurdish interlocutor with whom I had the opportunity to discuss the issue privately told me that he had personally met numerous Turks and Saudi Arabs characterized by a strong element of mutual prejudice, and he also relayed to me the assertion of an Arab interlocutor that only Arabs could be true Muslims, because Islam originated in Arabia, the Prophet spoke Arabic, and the Quran is written in Arabic.

This claim is theologically and historically untenable as a definition of Islamic identity, but it is politically interesting because it shows just how intertwined religious and ethnic identities can be. Islam originated in Arabia and the Quran is in Arabic, but Islam is not an ethnically Arab religion. Islamic history is inseparable from the contributions of Persians, Turks, Kurds, Berbers, Indians, Africans, and many other peoples.

And this is where the religious issue becomes a geopolitical one.

Who has the right to speak on behalf of the Muslim world?

Riyadh possesses a form of legitimacy that no other capital can replicate: Mecca and Medina, Arabia's historical role in the birth of Islam, and its religious, financial, and energy clout. Ankara possesses a completely different kind of legitimacy: military strength, the defense industry, technology, population, geographic location, the Ottoman legacy, and diplomatic prowess. Islamabad possesses yet another: population size, military apparatus, strategic experience, and nuclear deterrence.

These three countries do not represent the same thing. And that is precisely why their convergence is interesting.

The real competition, at least in its early stages, may therefore not be between the new triangle and the West, but—at least in the long run—within the triangle itself: and this is where Syria once again takes on particular importance.

For years, we have interpreted Syria primarily through the lens of the confrontation between Assad, Iran, Russia, Turkey, Israel, the United States, and jihadism. But Syria can also be viewed as one of the theaters in which the competition for the internal order of the Islamic world has played out. The story of Ahmed al-Sharaa, formerly Abu Mohammed al-Joulani, and the gradual shift in the West's attitude toward the new Syrian leadership demonstrate just how quickly the frameworks through which international actors interpret a counterpart can change.

We don't need to argue that Washington or Brussels "created" al-Sharaa to pose a more interesting question: **Why did the West choose to intervene in Syria's transformation precisely through a Sunni actor capable of altering the internal balance of power within the Islamic world?**

One possible answer is that, in a region where Tehran represented one of the main centers of Shi'ite power, the establishment of **a new Sunni center in Damascus could serve as a means of restoring the balance of power. But not necessarily only against Iran. Potentially also within the Sunni world itself.**

Syria may therefore have been—whether intentionally or not—one of the arenas in which various actors sought to influence the future shape of the Sunni world. But the subsequent Turkish-Saudi convergence introduces a new element. If Ankara and Riyadh manage to cooperate, it becomes much more difficult to exploit their divisions to exert influence from the outside.

The divisions do not disappear. They become manageable through a direct agreement among the main players.

This is the true paradox of the situation: **the very fragmentation of the Islamic world that for decades has allowed external powers to exert influence could become, through pragmatic convergence, the basis for a new form of autonomy.**

Not an ideological unity. Not a new, politically organized Ummah. Not an "Islamic NATO" in the classical sense of the term. Something much more fluid: a network of countries that do not necessarily share the same worldview, but share an interest in not depending exclusively on Washington, Moscow, or Beijing.

And it is precisely this flexibility that makes the project potentially effective.

Turkey can remain in NATO while simultaneously building its own Muslim security network. Saudi Arabia can remain a partner of the United States while simultaneously deepening its ties with China, Russia, and regional powers. Pakistan can maintain its relationship with Beijing, strengthen its ties with Riyadh, and deepen cooperation with Ankara.

Everyone can argue that the project is not directed against anyone.

Formally, that may be true.

Strategically, however, every new network shifts the balance of power.

This is the point that is often overlooked when geopolitics is interpreted solely through the lens of official statements. Strategic architectures produce consequences regardless of the stated intentions of their key players.

And this brings us back to the issue of Iran.

In 2023, when the idea of closer cooperation among the major Muslim powers began to take shape, Tehran had also been considered as part of regional diplomatic contacts and initiatives. Its potential involvement would have given the project a radically different character: not a possible Sunni axis centered on Ankara, Riyadh, and Islamabad, but a platform in which the leading Shia power could have coexisted with the major Sunni actors in the Middle East and Asia.

The fact that this path did not result in a structure that included Iran does not prove that its exclusion was planned from the outset. It does not justify retroactively interpreting every development of recent years as part of a single plan. But it raises a question that cannot be ignored: if the original goal was to build a platform capable of uniting or coordinating various Muslim powers, why did the project gradually take shape precisely along a structure in which Tehran remained on the outside and Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey became the three vertices?

Iran's absence is no mere detail. It alters the very nature of the balance that is taking shape and appears, at least at this stage, to be the result of a genuine self-exclusion on the part of the great Shiite nation, which has been unable to adapt its strategic posture to changing times.

And this brings us right back to the question regarding Erdoğan.

Because a Turkey capable of coordinating with Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, while simultaneously maintaining its membership in NATO, would gain enormous mediation capabilities. It would no longer be merely the country that controls the Straits. It would no longer be merely NATO's Muslim member. It could become one of the main intermediaries between the West and the Islamic world.

Washington would therefore have to contend with an autonomous regional power with access to the Muslim world that no other member of the Alliance possesses in the same way. But the same problem would apply to Beijing and Moscow. China and Russia, too, would have an interest in maintaining a sufficiently stable relationship with Ankara to prevent Turkey from becoming an obstacle to their regional interests.

This is the logic of permanent mediation.

And this is where the concept of leadership must be rethought.

Traditional leadership presupposes a hierarchy. Someone leads, and someone else follows. Indispensability works differently. It doesn't necessarily require others to recognize your superiority. It requires that they cannot do without you.

Erdoğan may not need Mohammed bin Salman to recognize him as the leader of the Muslim world. It is enough for him that Riyadh needs Turkish technology and industry. He doesn't need Islamabad to recognize Ankara as a political leader. It is enough that Pakistan considers Turkish cooperation strategically useful. He doesn't need Washington to view Turkey as an obedient ally. It is enough for him that the United States cannot afford to lose its access to the Muslim world. It doesn't need Beijing to view Ankara as an ally. It is enough that China has an interest in maintaining a relationship with Turkey that is good enough to prevent Ankara from becoming an obstacle.

This is a form of power far more sophisticated than traditional leadership.

It is the power of the node.

And this is precisely where the cognitive dimension of geopolitical competition also comes into play. In the new international system, competition is not limited to control over territories, resources, infrastructure, or military capabilities. Competition also centers on influencing the way societies and ruling classes perceive threats, interpret interests, evaluate alliances, and, more generally, construct their own perception of reality. This is the realm of **Cognitive Warfare**.

The ability to exploit the contradictions, vulnerabilities, and critical weaknesses of third countries can enable a state to gain not only diplomatic and economic advantages, but also political and perceptual ones—even in the absence of the material capacity to achieve decisive results in a confrontation conducted according to the paradigms of traditional kinetic warfare.

In fact, those who succeed in operating simultaneously on the military, economic, technological, diplomatic, informational, and cognitive fronts can acquire influence disproportionate to their material strength.

And it is from this perspective that Erdoğan seems to have understood the ongoing transformation very well.

His strategy, therefore, does not appear to be based on allegiance, but on the ability to transform every relationship into leverage against the others.

Ankara can tell Washington that Turkey is indispensable because no other NATO power has the same access to the Muslim world. It can tell Riyadh that its defense industry and military capabilities are indispensable. It can tell Islamabad that Turkish technological cooperation offers a gateway to the Middle East. It can engage with Beijing without becoming Chinese, with Moscow without becoming Russian, and with Europe without sacrificing its autonomy.

This is not a strategy of belonging.

It is a strategy of indispensability that Erdoğan has asserted across the board, using every aspect of Turkey's position as a bargaining chip: at times even in a rather undiplomatic manner, reminding Europe just how important Ankara is not only as NATO's eastern gateway but also as a bulwark through which to contain irregular migration flows headed toward the heart of Europe. A role that Turkey has skillfully played, in part through its ability to project influence in the Mediterranean and North Africa, leveraging the special relationship it has built with General Khalifa Haftar and, more broadly, its position vis-à-vis the actors who exercise control or influence over the Libyan areas most affected by migration routes heading toward the southern coasts of the European Union.

And that is precisely why Syria, Iran, and the Muslim Brotherhood become parts of a single equation.

While the West, during the Syrian transition, sought to insert itself into the internal dynamics of the Islamic world by using the new leadership in Damascus as a balancing force and, potentially, a source of division, the gradual convergence between Turkey and Saudi Arabia could make this strategy more difficult. Cooperation between Ankara and Riyadh does not eliminate the internal contradictions within the Sunni world, but it can reduce the likelihood that these contradictions will be easily exploited by external powers.

This does not mean that the competition is over. It means that it has entered a different phase.

And this is precisely where the project's potential limitation emerges.

As long as the agreement remains a tool for deterrence and military cooperation, the contradictions between Ankara and Riyadh can be managed. But if it were to become a broader political platform, the issue of the Muslim Brotherhood and leadership of the Sunni world would inevitably return to the forefront.

Riyadh has no interest in seeing Ankara transform military cooperation into a platform for political leadership of the Sunni world. Abu Dhabi, in all likelihood, would have even less interest in this. And this means that the real contest could unfold right within the new system, not necessarily against it.

The pragmatic Mohammed bin Salman may have an interest in strengthening Turkey without wanting to see it become dominant. Erdoğan may have an interest in strengthening Riyadh without wanting to accept Turkish subordination. Islamabad may benefit from both without wanting to become part of a political hierarchy. It is precisely this plurality of interests that makes the system both stable and unstable at the same time.

Stable because none of the key players has an interest in destroying it.

It is unstable because each could seek to use it to increase its own influence relative to the others.

And this is probably where we should look for the true significance of the Mecca Agreement.

It is not necessarily the birth of a new bloc, but rather the emergence of a new center of gravity. And this distinction is fundamental. A bloc needs borders, an identity, adversaries, and institutions. A center of gravity needs only to gradually draw relationships, interests, and dependencies toward itself.

If the Mecca mechanism were to work, other countries might be interested in joining it. Each new member would increase the platform's capacity to represent not only a part of the Muslim world but a growing portion of the Global South, and at that point the question would no longer be ***"Who will defend whom in the event of an attack?"*** but would become ***"Who will speak on behalf of this new geopolitical space?"***

And at that point, Erdoğan would necessarily have to meet with Mohammed bin Salman because, while Ankara may be the architect of the network, Riyadh possesses a form of legitimacy that no Turkish project can ignore. In fact, Mecca and Medina, along with the kingdom's financial clout, energy resources, and influence over the Arab world, grant Saudi Arabia an unrivaled position—even though Erdoğan possesses another form of power: the military, industry, technology, geographical location, diplomatic prowess, and an imperial history that Ankara continues to reinterpret in a contemporary light.

As is clearly evident, we are dealing with two distinct forms of legitimacy, which is why the real competition may, at some point, not be between the new triangle and the West, but within the triangle itself.

Given these premises, the question that naturally arises is, ***"Who will be the political center of this space?"***—or, more likely, ***"Will it be possible to build a system in which there is no single center, but rather several interdependent nodes?"*** If for no other reason than that this second possibility is precisely what could favor Erdoğan: if no one formally becomes the leader, but everyone needs the others, Turkey can occupy a central position without having to bear the political cost of declared leadership—a solution that is extraordinarily well-suited to a multipolar context.

The Importance of Asking the Right Questions

It seems that most interpretations of this agreement have been significantly influenced by the absence of the right questions—due to a whole series of cultural biases rooted in power dynamics that very few seem to have realized had reached their end with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent onset of globalization promoted by the leading Western nation—the United States of America—with the full, and ill-considered, unconditional support of the European Union. That same European Union, due to a whole series of structural flaws and constraints, failed to seize the opportunity to create at least something vaguely similar to what came into being on August 7, 2026, in Mecca.

The nature of the questions—and the implicit interpretations that followed—accompanying the commentary on the newly signed agreement between Ankara, Riyadh, and Islamabad amply reflects all of this: questions aimed at understanding whether the world witnessed the birth of an “Islamic NATO” on August 7, or whether we are in the presence of an alliance against Iran, against Israel, or against the United States.

Legitimate questions, to be sure, but among them, the most important one has not even been raised: “What new power architecture might emerge if some of the major Muslim powers decide to build their own security network without breaking ties with the West and without subordinating themselves to China and Russia?”

And immediately following that: “Who stands to be strengthened by this architecture, and who, on the other hand, risks being marginalized?”

These are key questions, yet they cannot be posed by those who have failed to grasp that, in reaching this point, Erdoğan, Mohammed bin Salman, Pakistan, Iran, India, China, Russia, the United States, and the new Syria have ceased to be protagonists in separate crises and have instead become nodes in a single transformation.

And in all likelihood, this is the real news, because it follows that **from now on no one will be justified in thinking of the Global South as a single bloc—according to the obsolete Eurocentric view that persists even in the most recent history, which has seen the return of imperial and imperialist logics such as those of Washington and Moscow, with the sole partial exception of Beijing, which also persists in pursuing its own attempt to join the ranks of that global leadership that once belonged to the U.S. and Russia, but which, at this very moment, is moving wearily and inexorably down that path of decline that Trump, Putin, and even Xi Jinping stubbornly refuse to see for what it is—caught as they are in the logic of profit, capital gains, and control over markets and their resources, which they view in the Global South merely as areas to be divided up and colonized anew, rather than as the place where a fierce competition to build networks has long since begun.**

A competition in which power does not necessarily belong to the richest, most populous, or best-armed state, but may, in fact, belong to the state that occupies the most strategic position in the network—a network in which Turkey holds an extraordinary advantage.

And in fact, geographically, Ankara has become—without almost anyone noticing—the true bridge between Europe and the Middle East, between the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, between NATO and the Muslim world, as it can engage with Washington, Moscow, Beijing, Riyadh, Islamabad, and numerous regional actors thanks to its undeniable and growing industrial capacity in the defense sector, its complex and extensive diplomatic network spanning the Middle East, Central Asia, and Africa, as well as its cultural ability to speak to different worlds simultaneously.

This motivates us to view the Mecca project not as an endpoint, but rather as yet another tool through which to transform Turkey’s geographical and political position into systemic

power—thanks to a strategy that, if successful, would ensure that Erdoğan would not need to become the leader of the Muslim world, as it would suffice for him to make Turkey the country without which no major configuration of the Muslim world could function fully. And this is a form of power that is much more difficult to counter because, as has already been pointed out elsewhere:

- it does not require loyalty, but mutual dependence;
- it does not require subordination, but rather interdependence;
- it does not require others to recognize Turkey as superior, but simply that everyone has something to lose should Ankara definitively side with the other side

because this is the true logic behind that indispensability, which, moreover, allows all participants in the agreement in question to keep multiple channels open simultaneously, taking advantage of an ambiguity that makes the project potentially effective.

This is because, under this arrangement, Turkey can remain in NATO while simultaneously building a Muslim security network. Saudi Arabia can continue to be a strategic partner of the United States while deepening its ties with China, Russia, and regional powers. Pakistan can consolidate its relationship with Beijing, strengthen its ties with Riyadh, and deepen cooperation with Ankara, so that, formally, no one has to declare that they have chosen a new side.

Strategically, everyone is helping to reshape the structure of the system.

And that is the most important point.

The true significance of the Mecca agreement may not lie in the clause stating that an attack against one will be considered an attack against all, but in what that clause makes possible: a network—one that is, moreover, potentially expandable.

A network in which Pakistan brings India along; Turkey brings NATO along; Saudi Arabia brings the Arab world, energy, and the holy sites along; Syria brings the competition for the new Sunni order along; Iran represents what this architecture leaves out; China and Russia represent two major external centers with which the network will necessarily have to interact; the United States represents the old, indispensable guarantor that might gradually discover it is no longer the only possible guarantor.

And the Global South brings with it the biggest question of all: who will be able to represent it without formally being its master?

Perhaps, then, the ultimate question is not who will defend whom.

It is who will manage to become indispensable to the others.

And this is precisely where Erdoğan's game becomes truly interesting.

Because if his strategy succeeds, Turkey would not need to definitively choose which side to take, as it could become the country that everyone else needs on their side.

A country that Washington cannot afford to lose, that Riyadh has an interest in keeping close, that Islamabad considers strategically useful, that Moscow must reckon with, and that Beijing cannot ignore.

A country that doesn't belong entirely to anyone, precisely because it can be useful to everyone.

This would not be a strategy of allegiance, but one of permanent mediation.

And in a world where the old blocs are becoming increasingly difficult to define, it could be one of the most effective forms of power in the 21st century.

The real issue at stake in Mecca, then, may not be the emergence of an "Islamic NATO."

It could be the beginning of the creation of a new center of gravity.

And the decisive question would no longer be who will lead the Muslim world.

It would be much simpler—and much more difficult:

who will succeed in ensuring that others cannot afford to do without him?

If this is indeed Erdoğan's logic, then August 7, 2026, might be remembered not as the day a new military alliance was born, but as one of the moments when a different conception of power began to take shape: not the power to command others, but the power to become indispensable to everyone else.

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