

The Erdogan Effect: Turkey's Relations with Pakistan and India

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Summary

Ever since the Islamist-conservative Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in 2002, Turkey's engagement with South Asia has involved a combination of economic cooperation, soft-power projection, conflict resolution diplomacy, Muslim solidarity politics and defence supplies. The flurry of Turkish activism gives rise to many questions. What drives Turkey's interest in India and Pakistan? Will Ankara establish itself as a power-broker for years to come? How much bandwagoning or counterbalancing among local actors has been generated by Turkey's rising presence in the region? Most of these questions have no simple answers. While ties with Pakistan appear important to Turkey, through its uncritical support to Islamabad's stance on the Kashmir issue, Ankara has lost ground in India, especially since Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have deepened ties with India. Turkey is likely to remain vulnerable to South Asia's enduring rivalries and geopolitical faultlines, such as the Kashmir issue, the endgame in Afghanistan, problems of Uyghur Muslims, and now the increasing strategic competition between India and China.

Background

Ankara's special bond with Islamabad goes back to the Cold War era, when both were American allies in an apparent bid to contain the Soviet expansionism. As rightly argued by C Raja Mohan, "the Turkish establishment's uncritical embrace of Pakistan has been unchanging, irrespective of who dominated Ankara — the secular army or the current Islamist leadership."¹ Turkey established diplomatic ties with India in 1948. However, two factors – Turkey's pro-Pakistan stance on the Kashmir issue and its membership of the Western military alliances – seriously hindered Indo-Turkish ties during the Cold War period. To put it more bluntly, India, largely viewed through the prism of Pakistan, was never a priority in Turkey's foreign policy during the Cold War.

The only Turkish Prime Minister who was sensitive to India's stand towards Pakistan was Bülent Ecevit, who not only disapproved General Pervez Musharraf's usurpation of power in Pakistan, but also revised Ankara's traditional stance on Kashmir by calling for a bilateral settlement of the dispute. During his landmark India visit in April 2000, Ecevit charmed his hosts when he remarked that "the deep secular and democratic traditions in India, along with its rich ethnic, religious and linguistic mix, are an example for other countries in Asia."²

¹ C Raja Mohan, 'Warming up cold Turkey', *Indian Express*, 2 May 2017. <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/raja-mandala-warming-up-cold-turkey-erdogan-narendra-modi-india-foreign-policy-4636114/>.

² Satish Jacob, 'India charmed by Turkey PM', *BBC*, 2 April 2000. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/698980.stm; Pranay Sharma, 'Turkey Warms to Delhi, Leaves Pak in Cold', *The Telegraph*, April 2000. <https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/turkey-warms-to-delhi-leaves-pak-in-cold/cid/899641>.

In an attempt to de-hyphenate India and Pakistan from Turkey's foreign policy, he further said, "We don't believe we have to undertake a journey to Pakistan every time we come to India. We needed to give our bilateral relations with India a new impetus and we did not want to confuse the issue."³

This positive momentum was carried forward by the Justice and Development Party (AKP), when it was hesitant in liquidating the secular heritage of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in Turkey. High-profile bilateral visits – Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's visit to Turkey in September 2003, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's visit to India in 2008 and President Abdullah Gül's visit to India in 2010 – went a long way in further strengthening the ties in areas of trade, commerce and technology.⁴ For instance, Turkey's trade with India in 2019 was US\$7.7 billion (S\$10.45 billion), whereas its trade with Pakistan stood at around \$800 million (S\$1.09 billion).⁵ Notwithstanding upward direction in commercial ties, Turkey's relations with India continue to be marred by critical political issues. In other words, the 'Pakistan factor' has prevented India from developing strong and sustainable ties with Turkey.

Turkey's historically good relations with Pakistan have strengthened under Erdogan. Besides China, Turkey remains one of Pakistan's most dependable allies, supporting it on the Kashmir issue at all international forums. Recently, Pakistan also avoided being placed on the International Monetary Fund's Financial Action Task Force blacklist largely because of the uncritical support it received from both Turkey and China.⁶ The former has even advocated for the latter's membership in the Nuclear Supplier Group.⁷

Erdogan has visited Pakistan four times in official capacities, whereas Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan has visited Turkey once. The year 2016 was particularly crucial, a turning point in some sense, in Pakistan-Turkey ties. Then Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif called Erdogan in the midst of the alleged coup on 15 July 2016. The following month, Pakistani Punjab's then chief minister and the Prime Minister's younger brother, Shahbaz Sharif, visited Ankara to congratulate Erdogan on thwarting the coup attempt, further declaring that the enemy of Turkey was the enemy of Pakistan.⁸ Within months, Sharif hosted Turkey's new Islamic strongman in Islamabad. And in February 2017, Sharif led a high-powered delegation to Turkey to hold talks on many bilateral and regional issues.⁹ Since then, Erdogan has increased his efforts to establish closer ties with Pakistan.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Selçuk Colakoğlu, 'Turkey and India: "Natural Allies"?', Middle East Institute, 11 August 2020. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/turkey-and-india-natural-allies>.

⁵ Ibid; and 'Pakistan-Turkey trade drops due to protective duties,' *The Express Tribune*, 13 July 2019.

⁶ Reuters, 'Turkey to oppose Pakistan blacklisting at FATF meet', *Hindustan Times*, 14 February 2020. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/turkey-to-14-feb-oppose-pakistan-blacklisting-pulwama-at-fatf-meet-valentine/story-QbIGs1qZIS4ElnjWyO3RDN.html>.

⁷ 'NSG membership: Turkey's support for Pakistan bid appreciated', *The Express Tribune*, 24 January 2019. <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1895940/nsg-membership-turkeys-support-pakistan-bid-appreciated>.

⁸ 'Shahbaz invites Turkish PM to visit Pakistan', *The Express Tribune*, 28 August 2016. <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1171226/official-visit-shahbaz-invites-turkish-pm-visit-pakistan>.

⁹ IANS, 'Turkish President Erdogan hosts family dinner for Pak PM Sharif', *Hindustan Times*, 23 February 2017. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/turkish-president-erdogan-hosts-family-dinner-for-pak-pm-sharif-media-reports/story-VSD7TRjhzdznxL8er3HJ6O.html>.

Symbolising Pakistan's importance in Turkey's evolving strategic orientation, Islamabad is seriously pursuing a dual citizenship agreement that would allow Pakistani citizens to acquire Turkish nationality and vice versa. This would open immense opportunities for Pakistanis in terms of access to quality healthcare, education and business in Turkey.¹⁰ With the construction of the Turkish consulate in Karachi, Pakistan will have the largest Turkish consulate anywhere in the world.¹¹ Quite early, in the COVID-19 pandemic, Turkey was one of the first countries to deliver medical supplies to Pakistan.¹²

Turkey's Defence Ties with Pakistan

Defence ties between Pakistan and Turkey have expanded considerably in recent years. A few years ago, Pakistan awarded the Agosta 90B Submarine Modernization Project to STM, one of Turkey's leading arms manufacturers. Worth US\$350 million (S\$475.2 million), the submarine project is set to strengthen military ties between the two countries. In 2018, Pakistan Navy commissioned a fleet tanker, which was built in collaboration with the STM in Karachi. Attending the commissioning ceremony, Pakistani President Arif Alvi stated, "Pakistan and Turkey have always stood alongside each other during testing times... Pakistan always feels proud of its friendship with Turkey."¹³ In an interview last year, the general manager of STM had underlined the "excellent relations" between the two countries, further stating that "we are currently discussing new projects, including serious and dedicated works for midget submarines... [O]ur relations are constantly moving forward to a much higher level. There is also significant cooperation between the Pakistan Navy and the Turkish Naval Forces, which also affects us positively."¹⁴

Turkey awarded a contract of 52 Super Mushshak trainers to Pakistan Aeronautical Complex in 2017.¹⁵ The memorandum of understanding for the sale of these aircrafts to Turkey was signed in 2016. The Super Mushshak is an upgraded variant of the Saab MFI-17 Supporter. In 2018 itself, Turkish Aerospace Industries (TAI) signed a US\$1.5 billion (S\$2.04 billion) agreement to sell 30 T129 helicopter gunships to Pakistan. However, Pakistan has extended the deadline for its supply as the TAI has not been able to secure American export licenses for export deal with Pakistan. The Turkish government has now tasked Tusas Engine Industries, TAI's sister concern, with developing an indigenous engine for the T129.¹⁶

¹⁰ 'Turkey and Pakistan Will Enable Dual Nationality for Their Respective Citizens', 14 February 2020. <https://www.astons.com/news/turkey-and-pakistan-will-enable-dual-nationality-for-their-respective-citizens/>.

¹¹ Marisa R Lino, 'Turkey and Pakistan: a special relationship?', *IJSS*, 17 April 2020. <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/analysis/2020/04/dmap-turkey-and-pakistan-a-special-relationship>.

¹² Aamir Latif, 'Turkey delivers more medical aid to virus-hit Pakistan', 28 April 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkey/turkey-delivers-more-medical-aid-to-virus-hit-pakistan/1821154>.

¹³ Aamir Latif, 'Pakistan Navy commissions warship built with Turkey', 16 October 2018. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/pakistan-navy-commissions-warship-built-with-turkey/1283542>.

¹⁴ 'Interview: Murat İkinci, General Manager of STM', 13 September 2019. <http://www.savunmahaber.com/en/interview-murat-ikinci-general-manager-of-stm-3/>.

¹⁵ 'Turkey To Buy 52 Pakistani Super Mushshak Trainers', 11 May 2017. https://www.defenseworld.net/news/19266/Turkey_To_Buy_52_Pakistani_Super_Mushshak_Trainers#.X4P5d9AzbIU.

¹⁶ Burak Ege Bekdil, 'Pakistan extends Turkey's deadline to deliver T129 helos', 14 January 2020. <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2020/01/14/pakistan-extends-turkeys-deadline-to-deliver-t129-helos/>.

Pakistan is also lobbying with the Donald Trump administration to support the deal with Turkey.

Kashmir and Other Territorial Disputes

As highlighted earlier, Turkey shares an uneasy relationship with India ever since the latter became independent. Successive governments in Ankara have supported Pakistan on the issue of Kashmir. Despite the best of efforts to overcome their differences with a spirit of mutual give and take, the Indo-Turkish bilateral ties seem to have fractured under Erdogan's leadership. Just before his arrival in India for a two-day state visit in 2017, Erdogan had made irritating remarks in which he suggested a "multilateral dialogue" to resolve the Kashmir dispute.¹⁷ Erdogan made these remarks with the complete awareness that they were contrary to India's long-standing position that the Kashmir issue is a bilateral matter with Pakistan. Not surprisingly, an editorial in Pakistan's leading newspaper, *The Dawn*, termed this suggestion as "a sensible idea".¹⁸

Previous Indian governments did not care much about Turkey's traditional rhetoric on the Kashmir issue but the Narendra Modi government has been quite unforgiving in this respect, particularly after it returned to power in 2019. However, even in 2017, New Delhi was keen to convey how it could also be rather disrespectful of Turkish preferences in other ways. Just days before Erdogan's visit, Cyprus' President Nicos Anastasiades toured India, where he asked for India's help in Cyprus' quest for reunification.¹⁹ And if this was not sufficient, India's then Vice-President Hamid Ansari made a simultaneous visit to Armenia, marking the 25th anniversary of bilateral ties.²⁰ While in India, Erdogan reaffirmed Turkey's solidarity with India against all forms of terrorism, specifically condemning the latest Naxalite attack on the Central Reserve Police Force personnel at Sukma,²¹ but his silence on cross-border terror attacks from Pakistan did not go unnoticed.²² Strengthening economic ties was his primary agenda as the Turkish president emphasised the need to increase bilateral trade to at least US\$10 billion (\$13.6 billion).

Erdogan has since been openly cosying up with Pakistan. After India abrogated Article 370 of Indian Constitution in early August 2019, scrapping the special provisions for the state of Jammu and Kashmir, Turkey was one of the few countries critical of the move. During their telephonic discussion, Erdogan was reported to have promised Khan Turkey's "steadfast

¹⁷ Rituparna Chatterjee, 'Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan Suggests Multilateral Dialogue On Kashmir', *Huffington Post*, 1 May 2017. https://www.huffingtonpost.in/2017/04/30/turkish-president-recep-tayyip-erdogan-suggests-multilateral-dia_a_22062957/.

¹⁸ Editorial, 'Erdogan's Kashmir approach', *Dawn*, 3 May 2017. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1330706>.

¹⁹ Nisha Sharma, 'India Can Help in Cyprus Reunification, Says Cypriot President', *The Wire*, 24 April 2017. <https://thewire.in/external-affairs/india-cyprus-reunification-president-nicos-anastasiades>.

²⁰ Press Trust of India, 'Vice President Hamid Ansari arrives in Armenia', *Business Standard*, 24 April 2017. https://www.business-standard.com/article/pti-stories/vice-president-hamid-ansari-arrives-in-armenia-117042401359_1.html.

²¹ Press Trust of India, 'Erdogan, Modi sign 3 pacts, condemn terrorism', *Telangana Today*, 1 May 2017. <https://telanganatoday.com/52414-2>.

²² Talmiz Ahmad, 'Erdogan's Delhi Visit Reaffirms His Status in a World of Authoritarian Leaders', *The Wire*, 3 May 2017. <https://thewire.in/diplomacy/erdogan-india-kashmir-modi-authoritarian>.

support” on the matter.²³ But Erdogan was careful not to condemn of India. In September 2019, Erdogan told the United Nations (UN) General Assembly (UNGA) that the international community has not paid “enough attention” to the Kashmir conflict, further arguing that “despite the resolutions adopted by the UN Security Council, Kashmir is still besieged and eight million people are stuck in Kashmir.”²⁴ His statements did not go down well with New Delhi. Relations nosedived to such an extent that Modi decided to cancel his two-day state visit to Ankara which was scheduled in October 2019. Going a step further, India condemned Turkey’s military operation in northern Syria.

While addressing a joint session of the Pakistani parliament during his February 2020 visit to Pakistan, Erdogan again pledged to continue his support for Islamabad’s stance on Kashmir. He even compared it to Turkey’s own 1915 Gallipoli campaign.²⁵ Responding strongly, India argued that such “remarks reflect neither an understanding of history nor of the conduct of diplomacy. They distort events of the past to advance a narrow-minded view of the present.”²⁶ On 22 September, 2020, New Delhi criticised Erdogan for his caustic remarks on Kashmir during the UNGA session, saying it is an interference in India’s internal affairs and thereby “completely unacceptable.” Part of Erdogan’s increasingly vocal support for Pakistan’s position on Kashmir is because of his effort to style himself as the defender of Muslims worldwide. Against the backdrop of Erdogan’s pitch to challenge Saudi Arabia’s dominance and attain Muslim leadership status, Ankara has been reaching out to Indian Muslims as well. Kashmir’s many separatist leaders have developed special liking for Erdogan, which is not unusual.²⁷ And recently, India’s intelligence community is reported to have unearthed some activities of Turkey-linked non-government organisations in Kashmir, whose aim is to radicalise Indian Muslims in Kashmir.²⁸

Pakistan’s solidarity with Turkey has been strong for decades, as reflected in its support on issues which are sensitive for Ankara. Pakistan’s relationship with Turkey is closely linked with Azerbaijan, which is a mutual ally. The axis of Pakistan-Turkey-Azerbaijan comes at the expense of Armenia; Pakistan is the only country that has not recognised Armenia. In other words, Pakistan’s warm ties with Azerbaijan and Turkey have clearly played a role in its

²³ Naveed Siddiqui, ‘Pakistan says it will exercise all possible options to counter ‘illegal steps’ taken by India in IoK’, *Dawn*, 5 August 2019. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1498236>.

²⁴ Shubhajit Roy, ‘Resolve Kashmir issue through dialogue: Tayyip Erdogan’, *Indian Express*, 26 September 2019. <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/resolve-kashmir-issue-through-dialogue-tayyip-erdogan-6029414/>.

²⁵ ‘Erdogan’s unequivocal stance on Kashmir rattles India’, *The Express Tribune*, 15 February 2020. <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2157523/erdogans-unequivocal-stance-kashmir-rattles-india>.

²⁶ Express News Service, ‘India serves strong demarche to Turkey over Erdogan’s Kashmir comments’, *New Indian Express*, 17 February 2020. <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2020/feb/17/india-serves-strong-demarche-to-turkey-over-erdogans-kashmir-comments-2104632.html>.

²⁷ ‘Turkey’s Erdogan Is Latest Favourite Of Kashmiri Separatists’, *Outlook*, 25 June 2018. <https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/why-turkeys-erdogan-is-latest-favourite-of-kashmiri-separatists/312824>.

²⁸ Shishir Gupta, ‘Intel agencies to probe new Turkish NGO outreach in Kashmir: Official’, *Hindustan Times*, 18 September 2020. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/intel-agencies-to-probe-new-turkish-ngo-outreach-in-kashmir-official/story-fXlcpCylVz9jF6bqB7GrO.html>.

decision not to recognise Armenia.²⁹ However, Islamabad recognises Azerbaijan's claims over Nagorno-Karabakh. If Armenia has extended its uncritical support to New Delhi on the Kashmir issue, Azerbaijan's support for Pakistan's narrative on the issue is not surprising. In the recent flare up, India did not want Turkey's involvement beyond the moral support to Azerbaijan.³⁰

Gülen Network

After alleged coup attempt in Turkey in 2016, which was blamed on a leading Turkish intellectual, Fethullah Gülen, and his Hizmet movement, one of the immediate problems faced by Pakistan was about the educational institutions linked to Gülen, friend-turned-foe of Erdogan. Pakistan responded first by refusing to renew the visas of the Turkish staff of the Pak-Turk International Cag Education Foundation (PTICEF), and eventually Pakistan's Supreme Court proscribed the PTICEF in late 2018.³¹ Interestingly, the issue was mentioned by Erdogan during Khan's visit to Turkey in January 2019, when the former expressed his gratitude over Pakistan's decision to tag PTICEF as a terrorist outfit. Following a joint press conference in Ankara, both the leaders "underlined their abiding commitment to fight the menace of terrorism in all its forms and manifestations" and reiterated their resolve to "fight against the Fethullah Gülen Terrorist Organisation."³²

Ankara's iciness may also be dictated by New Delhi's independent stance on the Gülen network in India. After the coup, the Turkish leader began to demand that other countries should also brand Gülen's followers as terrorists and shut down their institutions. These educational institutions, being run under the banner of Indialogue Foundation, have their activities in many Indian cities.³³

Middle Eastern Geopolitics

Saudi Arabia's relations with Turkey and Pakistan are a key determinant in influencing Ankara's growing tilt towards Islamabad. For many countries in Asia, Turkey is seen neither a Middle Eastern state nor a natural leader of the Muslim world in the same way as Saudi Arabia and Iran have projected themselves. Still, Turkey's growing presence in the Middle East, in particular following the Syrian civil war, seems to have created a *fait accompli* in which Pakistan must also not only balance between Tehran and Riyadh but also Turkey and Saudi Arabia. The impunity with which Turkey and Iran are intervening in the internal politics of many Arab countries has led to seismic realignment in Middle Eastern geopolitics, in particular the rush to normalise diplomatic ties with Israel.

²⁹ Andrew Korybko, 'Why is Pakistan the only country that does not recognise Armenia?', *The Express Tribune*, 21 July 2020. <https://tribune.com.pk/article/97102/why-is-pakistan-the-only-country-that-does-not-recognise-armenia>.

³⁰ Achal Malhotra, 'Nagorno-Karabakh and India', *Indian Express*, 12 October 2020. <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/armenia-azerbaijan-conflict-india-6722267/>.

³¹ Haseeb Bhatti, 'SC directs interior ministry to declare Pak-Turk education foundation a terror outfit', *Dawn*, 28 December 2018. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1454112>.

³² M M Alam, 'Pak PM meets Turkish President in Ankara', 4 January 2019. <https://newspakistan.tv/pak-pm-meets-turkish-president-in-ankara/>.

³³ <http://indialogue.in/>.

Turkey's support to the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt (which antagonised the leadership of the United Arab Emirates [UAE], Saudi Arabia and Bahrain) as well as its differences with the Saudis over policies in Libya and Qatar has certainly led to a striking deterioration in Ankara-Riyadh ties. Since Pakistan has enjoyed warm relationship with Saudi Arabia, Riyadh's growing rift with Ankara has begun to impact Pakistan's strategic orientation. Pakistan has historically been very friendly with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, due to many factors, including the presence of around four million of its expatriates in the two countries. Pakistan's ties with the Saudis have also been adversely affected by Riyadh's softening attitude towards India's policies in Kashmir.

Pakistan's security establishment is upset with India's growing engagement with the Arab world, which seems to have blunted traditional Arab support for Islamabad on the Kashmir issue. Pakistan was against granting India the observer status in the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC); Islamabad felt slighted when India's foreign minister was invited against its wishes to attend an OIC meet in March 2019.³⁴ India was previously invited to attend the OIC meet way back in 1969 but then Pakistan had succeeded in getting the invite withdrawn. Pakistan, Turkey and Malaysia are the main non-Arab Sunni majority countries which have joined hands with Shiite Iran to counter the so-called Quartet of Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain and Egypt and its influence in the OIC. This non-Arab alliance is also backed by Russia and China. Moscow's commercial and security interests in the Gulf region have grown significantly in recent years, despite Western sanctions on Russian entities and individuals.³⁵ Since Russia cannot compete with the United States either economically or politically, it exploits the multiple weaknesses of Western policies in the Middle East.³⁶ Therefore, this emerging alliance-like partnership would unquestionably align with Russia's evident aim of weakening Western partnerships in the Middle East. On the other hand, Beijing has highlighted Turkey, Iran and Pakistan as the central corridor joining the new land and sea routes that are crucial to realise China's ambitions.

However, what is more important for India is that New Delhi's policies in Kashmir are being challenged by countries which are part of this emerging alliance – Turkey, Malaysia and China. One of the reasons why Pakistan wants to be involved in a geopolitical grouping whose driving force are Turkey and Iran is to emerge as a bridge between China and the Middle East, besides using it as a convenient tool to pressurise Saudi Arabia to support its Kashmir policies.³⁷ The Kuala Lumpur summit in December 2019 stemmed from this very logic. Erdogan and then Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad were the leading

³⁴ Geeta Mohan, 'Sushma Swaraj addresses Islamic meet in UAE, corners sulking Pakistan on terror', *India Today*, 1 March 2019. <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/sushma-swaraj-islamic-meet-oic-uae-sulking-pakistan-terror-1467956-2019-03-01>.

³⁵ Eugene Rumer, 'Russia in the Middle East: Jack of All Trades, Master of None', Carnegie Endowment, 31 October 2019. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/10/31/russia-in-middle-east-jack-of-all-trades-master-of-none-pub-80233>;

³⁶ Nicu Popescu and Stanislav Secieru (Eds.), 'Russia's return to the Middle East Building sandcastles?', Chaillot Paper No. 146 (Paris: European Union Institute for Security Studies), July 2018; Nikolay Kozhanov, 'Russian Policy Across the Middle East Motivations and Methods', Chatham House, February 2018. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2018-02-21-russian-policy-middle-east-kozhanov.pdf>.

³⁷ C Raja Mohan, "India's geopolitical interests are in close alignment with moderate Arab centre," *Indian Express*, August 18, 2020, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/narendra-modi-arab-gulf-countries-middle-east-relations-c-raja-mohan-6558876/>.

lights of this summit which was seen as a counter to the OIC.³⁸ Pakistan was forced to opt out of the summit at the last moment due to pressure from Saudi Arabia. Erdogan was reported to be sympathetic to Pakistan's economic compulsions to comply with the Saudi wishes.³⁹ In August 2020, Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi criticised Riyadh when he called upon the Saudis to "show leadership" on the Kashmir issue. As the Saudi Kingdom showed its displeasure, Pakistan's military establishment swung into action, with General Qamar Javed Bajwa making an unscheduled visit to Saudi Arabia in order to repair ties with Riyadh.⁴⁰

Since Erdogan has been more than willing to oblige Khan in raising the Kashmir issue at the UNGA and other forums, the latter has also gone out of his way to bring Pakistan closer to Turkey at the expense of Saudi Arabia. Pakistan's neglect of Saudi Arabia, which from a geo-strategic perspective is a more logical ally than Turkey, only shows the salience of the Kashmir issue for Pakistan's military establishment. Islamabad's alienation with Saudi Arabia is likely to deepen further as the latter gravitates toward India both economically and strategically.

Erdogan seems to have sensed Pakistan's growing disillusionment with the Arab world and sees it as an opportunity to cultivate close relations and also to export its model of political Islam in Pakistan. But despite bombastic rhetoric on the alleged atrocities on Kashmiri Muslims, Erdogan has become more silent on China's treatment of its Uighur Muslim minority, reflecting an inconsistent but a realist compromise.⁴¹ Since many Western countries are increasingly viewing India as the only emerging power with the potential to challenge China's economic and military rise, Turkey's deepening engagement with China could also easily become another source of mistrust between Ankara and New Delhi as well as between the Western democracies and Turkey in the Indo-Pacific region.

Since Pakistan is seen as enjoying enormous leverage over the Afghan-Taliban settlement, Erdogan has also supported Pakistan's bid to play a larger role in Afghanistan once the American troops leave. Turkey has hosted a series of Afghanistan-related regional conferences, besides asking Islamabad and Kabul to resolve their differences peacefully.⁴² But Turkey's long association with Afghanistan's Uzbek leaders, particularly Marshal Abdul Rashid Dostum, is likely to be an important factor influencing Ankara's future stance towards Islamabad. Known for his strong anti-Pakistan views, Dostum recently asserted that the Afghan territory was not confined by the controversial Durand Line, but rightfully must

³⁸ Reuters, 'Malaysia, Turkey defend Muslim summit slammed by OIC', *Dawn*, 19 December 2019. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1523174>.

³⁹ 'Saudi pressured Pakistan to withdraw from Malaysia summit: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan', *Wion*, 21 December 2019. <https://www.wionews.com/south-asia/saudi-pressured-pakistan-to-withdraw-from-malaysia-summit-recep-tayyip-erdogan-269463>.

⁴⁰ Vinay Kaura, 'Looking to repair ties, Pakistan's Gen. Bajwa heads to Saudi Arabia', Middle East Institute, 14 August 2020. <https://www.mei.edu/blog/looking-repair-ties-pakistans-gen-bajwa-heads-saudi-arabia>.

⁴¹ Nick Cohen, 'Why do Muslim states stay silent over China's abuse of the Uighurs?', *The Guardian*, 4 July 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jul/04/why-do-muslim-states-stay-silent-over-chinas-uighur-brutality>; Sarah Leduc, 'Muslim countries' silence on China's repression of Uighurs', *France 24*, 27 November 2019. <https://www.france24.com/en/20191127-china-communist-uighurs-xinjiang-muslim-silence-camps-repression>.

⁴² Vinay Kaura, 'Turkey Sees Expanding Role in Afghanistan', Middle East Institute, 26 September 2017. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/turkey-sees-expanding-role-afghanistan>.

extend all the way up to Islamabad.⁴³ A few days after the Afghan Taliban and the Kabul government began direct talks in Qatar, Dostum was in New Delhi to hold discussions with the Indian leadership.⁴⁴ Since Turkey has given no hints of abandoning Dostum, it is quite possible that New Delhi's outreach to a non-Pashtun Afghan heavyweight is partly aimed at blunting Turkey's leverage with Uzbek strongman.

The Islamic Factor

During the last two decades, Islam has emerged as a very important element in Turkish political system. Turkey's experiments with an Islam-based polity have only multiplied under Erdogan's watch. Improving strategic and military ties with Pakistan are seen as helping Erdogan achieve his grandiose foreign policy ambitions in the Middle East and in many Muslim countries. During a ceremony to mark the centenary of the death of Ottoman Sultan Abdulhamid II in Istanbul, Erdogan said that "The Republic of Turkey... is also a continuation of the Ottomans... Of course, the borders have changed. Forms of government have changed... But the essence is the same, soul is the same, even many institutions are the same."⁴⁵ Erdogan is keen that Turkey should channelise its imperial history and culture in order to assert its status as a regional power as well as the ideological leader of the Muslim world.

While Turkey is one of the most advanced Muslim countries, yet the democratic institutions are facing serious challenge from the Erdogan regime which has begun to impose arbitrary restrictions on freedom of individuals and the media. Paradoxically, if a socially and culturally conservative Saudi Arabia is moving in the direction of gender equality, Turkey is experiencing the opposite by abandoning the Kemalist character of the state.

At a time when authoritarian rulers and radical Islam defined politics in the Muslim world, Erdogan was projecting himself as a "moderate" Muslim leader. However, he is now reinventing himself as the new champion of Islamism. Although the pace of Turkey's slide toward Islamism may not seem frightening at the moment, Erdogan's determination to realise the Ottoman glory is certainly a cause for concern for India which has a large Muslim population.

Since most of the Turkish people believe in the Hanifi School, this reinforces Khan's attempts to promote the Turkish culture in Pakistan. One of the most popular television shows in Pakistan today is *Ertugrul*, a Turkish production that portrays the founding of the Ottoman Empire and promotes traditional Islamic values.⁴⁶ Khan's aggressive promotion of

⁴³ 'Dostum claims possession on half of Pakistan territory', *South Asia Monitor*, 11 August 2020. <https://southasiamonitor.org/diplomacydisputes/dostum-claims-possession-half-pakistan-territory>.

⁴⁴ Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, 'India opens a communication channel with key non-Pashtun leader of Afghanistan', *The Economic Times*, 26 September 2020. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/india-opens-a-communication-channel-with-key-non-pashtun-leader-of-afghanistan/articleshow/78334190.cms>.

⁴⁵ Diyar Guldogan, 'Turkish Republic continuation of Ottoman Empire', 10 February 2018. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/todays-headlines/turkish-republic-continuation-of-ottoman-empire/1059924>.

⁴⁶ Manimugdha S Sharma, 'Turkish historical TV drama sets new battleground for Indians, Pakistanis', *The Times of India*, 5 June 2020. http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/76222307.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst.

the Turkish television dramas in Pakistan is a clear manifestation of Turkey's growing soft power appeal.

Conclusion

The growing proximity between Pakistan and Turkey, coinciding with New Delhi's skepticism toward Ankara, is going to have unmistakable geopolitical ramifications in South Asia. Under Erdogan's leadership, Turkey has given special focus on cultivating closer ties with Pakistan. With growing personal chemistry between their top leaders, Pakistan and Turkey seem to be well placed to build closer ties in all spheres. But by voicing Khan's rhetoric on Kashmir, Erdogan has unnecessarily soured his country's ties with India. The Turkish support for Pakistan's narrative on the Kashmir issue can be attributed to Ankara's aim to counter Saudi Arabian influence in the region.

Turkey, in association with Iran and Pakistan, is keen to exploit the rise of China and the reassertion of Russian ambitions, combined with America's shrinking global role. However, blinded by unrealisable geopolitical ambitions, Turkey mistakenly views China more as a potential facilitator than as a modern coloniser. Moreover, given the complexity of regional geopolitics and India's growing regional profile, a sense of resurgent Turkish influence seems a geopolitical illusion. How Turkey evaluates the feedback it receives from its actions vis-à-vis India will have important consequences for Erdogan's future policy choices. If Turkey continues to show the least inclination in neutralising the 'Pakistan factor' in its ties with India, policymakers in New Delhi will need to respond to a combination of intrinsically linked geopolitical, military and economic challenges emanating from an Islamist political agenda.

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