

Allies in Arms and Diplomacy: The Rise of the Turkey-Pakistan Axis and What it Means for India

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Abstract: Amidst heightened Indo-Pak tensions after Pahalgam terrorist attack on April 22, NATO-member Turkey has emerged as Islamabad's staunchest supporter. On May 7, when Indian Armed forces launched Op. Sindoor to destroy terrorist infrastructure inside POK and Pakistan via precision strikes, Turkey was the [first](#) country to express solidarity with Islamabad while describing India's retaliatory action as an "[unprovoked](#) violation of Pakistan's sovereignty". On April 29, a high-level delegation led by Turkey's [Intelligence Chief](#) Lt Gen Yasar Kadioglu visited Pakistan's Air force Headquarters in Islamabad, one day after Ankara (allegedly) supplied military equipment and weapons to Pakistan via [C-130E](#) aircraft. As per [MEA](#) briefing on May 9, Turkish Asisguard SONGAR drones were used by Pakistan military to target Indian territory during the recent conflict. These developments must be understood within the broader context of Turkey-Pakistan relations, and how this nexus poses a threat to Indian interests in South Asian subcontinent.

Rooted in historical religious solidarity and reinforced by contemporary geopolitical alignment, Turkey and Pakistan have forged a multifaceted alliance encompassing defense cooperation, intelligence sharing, trade expansion, and diplomatic support on key international issues—most notably Kashmir. The partnership has been institutionalised through mechanisms such as the High-Level Military Dialogue and Preferential Trade Agreements, while Ankara's defense exports and intelligence collaboration with Pakistan further deepen the axis. Turkey's unwavering support for Pakistan at global forums, including its opposition to India's position on Jammu and Kashmir issue, and resistance to Pakistan's blacklisting at FATF, highlights a rigid anti-India stance.

In light of Turkey's growing alignment with Pakistan during peace as well as war, there is a need for a recalibrated and assertive policy shift policy to restore strategic balance and safeguard national interests in an increasingly polarised regional landscape.

From Brotherhood to Strategic Depth - The Evolution of Turkey-Pakistan Relations

Over the years, Turkey and Pakistan's ties have traversed into an all-weather friendship and a strong strategic partnership, rooted in a deep religious and cultural bond and a calculated convergence of interests. However, the relationship between the two countries precedes the establishment of the new Islamic republic of Pakistan in 1947. During the Khilafat Movement of the early twentieth century, Muslims across the Indian subcontinent came together to support the Ottoman Caliphate. When the Ottoman Empire was deposed in [1924](#), Gen. Mustafa Kamal Atatürk was able to build the modern state of Turkey, which shared close ties with the Muslim communities of British origin, including Pakistan's future founding fathers (Demiriz, 2023). The ideological support continued, and after partition of British India in 1947, Turkey and Pakistan formally established diplomatic ties.

In response to the first Turkish Ambassador to Pakistan's speech on [4 March 1948](#), Mohammad Ali [Jinnah](#) had stated: "The people of Pakistan are well aware of the achievements of your leaders in several historic fields of combat and the advancement of your revolution. Pakistani Muslims harbour feelings of love and respect for your nation, and since both Turkey and Pakistan are now free, independent, and sovereign nations, they can deepen their relationship for the benefit of both" (Jinnah, 1948; Ahmad, 2001). Jinnah set the tone for bilateral ties with his speech. In September [1953](#), Gen. Ayub Khan visited Turkey for the first time as Army Chief to meet with the Turkish Defense Minister (US Department of State, 1953). Impressed by Turkey's military architecture and facilities, they advocate for increased defense cooperation between the two countries.

Over the years, both the nations managed to sustain ties traversing cold war politics. In 1990s, several high-level discussions from both the countries met to revive and reinvigorate bilateral relations. In [1992](#), during his state visit Turkish PM Süleyman Demirel emphasised the need to enhance bilateral economic cooperation, while reiterating Ankara's complete support on Kashmir issue. He also inaugurated the (partial) construction of the Indus Highway undertaken (165 kms of Peshawar-Islamabad motorway) by Turkish company STFA (Shakoor & Ahmad, 1993). [Tensions](#) surfaced between Turkish PM Tansu Ciller and Pakistan PM Benazir Bhutto, during latter's [1993](#)

trip to Turkey (Khan, 2020; MFA, 2022). As a result, some ongoing projects including the Motorway project were cancelled. However, relations improved significantly when Gen [Pervez Musharraf](#) took over as President in October 1999 following a military coup (Prusher, 2002). Musharraf's deep affection for Mustafa Kemal Atatürk provided him with a personal motivation to invest in Pakistan's relationship with Turkey. In 2002, President Tayyip Erdoğan was elected as Prime Minister, signalling a significant shift. Erdogan paid his first state visit to Pakistan in [2003](#), leading a team of 110 businessmen (Al Jazeera, 2003).

Significant aid packages and strategic frameworks for collaboration were part of his government's dealings with Pakistan. In [2009](#), a High Level Cooperation Council (HLSCC) was set up to guide high-level political interactions between the two countries (Express Tribune, 2017). In 2014, when Erdoğan took over as country's first directly elected president, bilateral relations bolstered further. By 2017, over [50](#) Agreements/MoUs had been concluded between the two sides in various fields such as military cooperation, energy, trade, urban development, health, culture etc (PID, 2017).

Trade ties: Trade relations between Turkey and Pakistan have witnessed significant growth. From US\$ [599.7](#) million in 2015, total bilateral trade between the two countries has doubled and increased to US\$ [1.4 billion](#) in 2024 (Khan, 2016; AA, 2025). The bilateral trade has been skewed heavily in favour of [Ankara](#), with Turkish exports to Pakistan surpassing imports from Pakistan (Salman & Ali, 2023). In [2022](#), Ankara and Islamabad signed a Preferential Trade Agreement (PTA) with the goal of increasing bilateral trade to US\$ 5 billion (Dawn, 2022). The PTA, which went into effect on May 1, 2023, marked a significant turning point in Pakistan-Turkey economic relations. Under the agreement, duties were lowered mutually and both sides were given greater access to partner country's domestic market. Pakistan was given preferential access under 261 tariff lines in traditional as well as non-traditional sectors. This included leather, rice, dates, mangoes, cutlery, sports goods, seafood, processed agricultural products, rubber tubes and tyres, plastics, and engineering goods. On the other hand, Turkey was granted concessions on [130 tariff lines](#), in goods like black tea, processed foods, industrial raw materials, and components for electronic and machinery equipment etc (Khan, 2023).

Defense Cooperation and Intelligence Sharing: Turkey has been instrumental in modernising Pakistan’s defense capabilities. [Collaborations](#) include the supply of MILGEM-class corvettes and T129 ATAK helicopters, reflecting a deepening defense-industrial partnership (Abdullah, n.d.). Ankara is known to have helped Islamabad in upgrading its [F-16](#) fighter jets, and has also been a notable partner in bolstering Pakistan’s [drone](#) capability, especially with supply of Bayraktar Akinci drones in [2023](#)¹ (Tiwari, 2023; EurAsian Times, 2023; Chakraborty, 2025). Pakistan is an important client for Turkey’s defence sector. Such initiatives not only strengthen military ties but also shape the regional security architecture. Both countries have established deep military ties, marked by defense-related trade and joint training exercises focusing on counter-terrorism and urban warfare. The most notable joint training exercise includes the “[Ataturk](#)” series which started in 1998 as a joint bilateral exercise held alternatively in Pakistan and Turkey (TurDef, 2023). These drills have enhanced [interoperability](#) and strategic coordination between the armed forces of both the countries (Ansar, 2021).

In [February 2024](#), Pakistan and Turkey concluded their High-Level Military Dialogue Group’s 18th meeting (Radio Pakistan, 2024). The forum was founded in [2003](#) during Erdogan’s first state visit to Pakistan to formalise defense cooperation between the two countries (Özdemir, 2024). The 18th round, held in Rawalpindi, centred on defense and security cooperation, including discussions regarding current regional security issues.

Intelligence cooperation between Turkey’s National Intelligence Organisation (MIT) and Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) has also been a critical part of their bilateral relationship. In 2021, the ISI requested MIT’s aid in tracking down and apprehending Ehsanullah Ehsan, a former Taliban commander who had escaped from a Pakistani Army-run safe house. Over the course of 18 months, MIT detained three people for allegedly assisting Ehsan’s escape and

¹ It is important to highlight that as a policy; Turkey had made it clear that these drones would not be sold to India. See [Tavsa](#) (2022) and [Dangwal](#) (2022)

subsequent actions in Turkey. Combined [ISI-MIT teams](#) interrogated these people, demonstrating the extent of their intelligence cooperation (Mishra, 2021). As per American Enterprise Institute's report, MIT has also been supplying arms to terror groups in [Pakistan](#) (Rubin, 2025). Both sides are also allegedly running a joint propaganda network to promote a pro-Erdogan narrative in South Asian subcontinent, by [hiring](#) "Pakistani and Indian Kashmiri journalists in large numbers" to work for channels such as TRT World and Anadolu Agency (MIJ, 2021).

Support on International Platforms: The most important aspect of Turkey's support for Pakistan has been on Kashmir issue. Turkey has consistently supported Pakistan's stance on Jammu and Kashmir on international forums, especially within the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). The pro-Pakistan position was prominently reflected during Turkey's tenure as chair of the OIC Summit from 2016-2019. During the [13th OIC Summit](#) held in Istanbul in 2016, Turkey endorsed the group's reaffirmation of support for the Kashmiri people's right to self-determination, a move that drew objections from India, which labelled the references as "factually incorrect and misleading" (Express News, 2016).

Prior to his state visit to India in [2017](#), Erdogan proposed a "multilateral dialogue" to resolve the Kashmir issue, contradicting India's long-held position that the Kashmir issue is a bilateral one with Pakistan and does not require international mediation (Kaura, 2020). [Turkey](#) was one of the first countries to condemn Delhi's decision to revoke Article 370 in early August 2019, which removed the state of Jammu and Kashmir's special provisions (Mohan, 2020). While addressing the Pakistani parliament in [February 2020](#), he extended Turkey's support "against the oppression... The troubles our Kashmiri brothers have suffered for decades have been exacerbated by the latest unilateral steps" ([PTI](#), 2020; [Daily Sabah](#), 2020; [TRT World](#), 2020). His words that "the issue of Kashmir is as close to us as it is to you" are a testimony to Turkey's strong support to Pakistan on the issue.

Thereafter, as Riyadh took over OIC chairmanship in 2019, Ankara continued to play a leading role in the OIC's Contact Group on Jammu and Kashmir, often issuing statements critical of India's policies in the region. For instance, in [2020](#), the Contact Group, with Turkey's active participation,

reaffirmed its support for the Kashmiri people's right to self-determination and condemned India's actions in the region (OIC, 2020). Turkey has also opposed [blacklisting](#) Pakistan at international forums, including the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) (Reuters, 2020). President Erdoğan has stated that Turkey will assist Pakistan in staying off a terrorism financing blacklist, despite political pressure from the West.

Erdogan's support for Pakistan is not only out of any cultural affinity or moral obligation towards Kashmir, but as a strategic move to counter [Saudi Arabia's](#) Wahhabi influence in the region (Kowalski, 2019). India's close cooperation and relationship with Riyadh has become a major source of friction in Delhi-Ankara relations, enabling Islamabad to take advantage of the rift.

Meanwhile, Islamabad has always reciprocated the favour by supporting Turkey's position on both the [Kurdish issue](#) and the [Armenian genocide](#)² (New Indian Express, 2019; MEM, 2021). Thus, Turkey has emerged as one of Pakistan's most powerful allies, driven by a Quid Pro Quo arrangement.

Cultural and Humanitarian Bonds: Cultural diplomacy and people-to-people connections have been an essential soft-power component of Pak-turkey ties. Ankara has been financing organisations to promote [Turkish language](#) and culture, like the Yunus Emre Institute in Pakistan (Latif, 2019). Similarly, Pakistan has permitted the establishment of Turkish educational institutes, so encouraging mutual understanding. Furthermore, cooperation in the media and entertainment industries has reinforced cultural relations and Islamic identity, as seen by the popularity of Turkish television series in Pakistan such as [Diriliş: Ertuğrul](#) in Pakistan (Subramanian, 2020). These interactions have created a strong sense of common identity and fraternal affinity among the people of both countries. Humanitarian assistance has also played an important role in the Pakistan-Turkey partnership. Following the [2005](#) Kashmir earthquake (MFA, 2008), Turkey provided major

² While [India](#) has sided closely with Armenia and become its biggest defense supplier, [Turkey](#) has been a strong ally of Azerbaijan and has increased its military training activity and arms sales to Baku especially since Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in [2020](#). See Yalçinkaya (2021), Shahbazov (2023) and Fazl-e-Haider (2024).

aid, including a US\$ 150 million relief package. In the same spirit, following the severe earthquake in Turkey in [February 2023](#), Pakistan sent 100 tons of emergency supplies and constructed an air bridge to provide continuous support (Hafeez, 2023). Additionally, Turkish NGOs like the Turkish Red Crescent have maintained an active presence in Pakistan, contributing to health, education, and disaster relief efforts. These sustained gestures of solidarity have deeply reinforced bilateral goodwill between the two nations.

Implications for India

India–Turkey relations have experienced noticeable turbulence over the past decade, shaped by regional alignments, ideological divergences, and internal political recalibrations in Ankara. The most significant fault lines arise from Turkey’s vocal support of Pakistan, especially on the Kashmir issue, and its consistent positioning against India in multilateral forums such as OIC. These moves have been perceived in New Delhi as antagonistic and have stalled the constructive bilateral engagement.

The Erdogan administration’s close ties with Islamabad, ranging from defense cooperation to mutual diplomatic support on contentious issues like Kashmir and FATF proceedings, have contributed to an overall negative narrative of Turkey in Indian strategic circles. Turkey’s alignment with Pakistan on Kashmir, including repeated statements critical of India’s constitutional measures such as abrogation of Article 370 and internal security decisions, continues to sour relations.

Another source of friction is the divergence in regional partnerships. India’s deepening ties with Armenia, Greece, and Cyprus — all of whom share complex relations with Ankara — stand in contrast with Turkey’s strategic alignment with Pakistan and Azerbaijan. Similarly, India’s close relationships with Israel and Iran — countries with which Turkey has had fluctuating relations — add to the list of differences between the two states.

Furthermore, Turkey’s internal political trajectory under President Erdogan has amplified its religious and ideological rhetoric, often projecting a pan-Islamist worldview. This has implications

for India, a pluralistic and secular democracy, which sees such overtures as infringing upon its internal matters. The reported use of Turkish platforms such as TRT World and Anadolu Agency to promote narratives sympathetic to Pakistan — including through recruitment of journalists from Pakistan and Kashmir — has further deepened distrust.

Despite these challenges, it would be shortsighted to view India–Turkey relations solely through the lens of current disagreements. There remains a broad canvas of opportunities for constructive engagement if both nations choose to recalibrate their strategic outlooks. India and Turkey are both rising regional powers with global aspirations. Their growing economies, demographic dynamism, and historical legacies position them to play influential roles in shaping 21st-century geopolitics. The scope for convergence is considerable:

- **Economic Synergies:** Bilateral trade between India and Turkey has steadily grown, though there remains untapped potential in areas such as pharmaceuticals, information technology, renewable energy, agriculture, and textiles. Turkish infrastructure companies have expressed interest in India’s Smart Cities Mission and transport projects. Enhanced economic engagement can create powerful constituencies in both countries that advocate for stability in political ties.
- **Tourism and Cultural Diplomacy:** Despite diplomatic tensions, people-to-people engagement has remained resilient. Over 350,000 Indians visited Turkey in 2024, making India one of Turkey’s fastest-growing inbound tourism markets. Indian travellers are drawn to Turkey’s rich historical sites, cuisine, and hospitality. This cultural bridge offers space for soft diplomacy, encouraging greater cultural understanding and reducing misinformation-fuelled animosity.
- **Multilateral Collaboration:** India and Turkey share platforms such as the G20, where they can align on developmental priorities like climate action, global health, and reform of multilateral institutions. Such cooperation can lay the groundwork for depoliticizing bilateral issues and focusing on shared global responsibilities.

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