



Decoding the Turkey-Pakistan Alliance

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Decoding the Turkey-Pakistan Alliance

Abstract

Over the years, Turkey-Pakistan relations have stood the precarious nature of international relations as well as the turbulence of their domestic politics. Historically, Turkey has supported Pakistan on Kashmir issue to the extent of providing material support in various wars vis-à-vis India. Therefore, the diplomatic support provided by Ankara to Islamabad at various international fora after India's decision to revoke the special status of Jammu and Kashmir in August 2019 is not exceptional. Nevertheless, the recently repeated escalations of the Kashmir issue in the United Nations by President Erdogan indicates a stronger motive behind Ankara's geostrategic calculations. The article argues that Turkey views Sunni-Muslim nation Pakistan, historically known to be economically dependent on Saudi Arabia and other gulf countries, as a staging area in the ongoing competition for primacy within the Muslim world. For Pakistan, identifying itself closer to Ottoman Turkish Islamic heritage serves two purposes: first, it strengthens the already established bond between Ankara and Islamabad at a time when the Gulf States are tilting towards India due to its economic potential. Secondly, it allows Pakistan to relinquish the common heritage of Indian civilization by distorting history and reinforcing Islamic values by glorifying Ottoman Turkish culture.

Introduction

Over the years, Turkey-Pakistan relations have stood the precarious nature of global politics as well as the turbulence of their domestic politics. Since its creation in 1947, Pakistan has received uncritical support of Turkey irrespective of who is dominating in Ankara- the Kemalist secular military elites or the current Islamist government. Often dubbed as “brother

countries”, the affinity between these two nations stems from their common religious background and similar world-views. Since coming to power in 2001, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government in Turkey has put special emphasis on nurturing ties with Islamabad. In recent years, Turkey’s backing to Pakistan in Financial Action Task Force (FATF) and Kashmir issue has proved critical to Islamabad at the global platform. Historically, Turkey has supported Pakistan on Kashmir issue to the extent of providing material support in various wars vis-à-vis India. Therefore, the diplomatic support provided by Ankara to Islamabad at various international fora after India’s decision to revoke the special status of Jammu and Kashmir in August 2019 is not exceptional. Nevertheless, the recently repeated escalation of the Kashmir issue in the United Nations by President Erdogan indicates a stronger motive behind Ankara’s geostrategic calculations.

The article argues that Turkey views Sunni-Muslim nation Pakistan, historically known to be economically dependent on Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries, as a staging area in the ongoing competition for primacy within the Muslim world. To achieve success in this endeavour, Turkey has adopted various techniques such as extending diplomatic support to Pakistan on critical issues at international fora, strengthening economic and trade relations, undertaking mediation effort between Pakistan and Afghanistan, and enhancing the cultural and educational ties between the two countries. In a bid to challenge Saudi Arabia’s predominance and secure its position as the leader of the Islamic world, Turkey is assertively defining various non-religious issues such as Kashmir and support to Pakistan in FATF in religious terms. Also, Pakistan is a key market for Turkey’s defence exports- a strategic and economic priority for AKP government that aims to expand its defence industrial base by boosting arms sales to USD 25 billion by 2023.

In February 2020, during a visit to Pakistan, President Erdogan stated:

“We will continue to stand by Pakistan in the future, as we did in the past.”

In this context, I would like to emphasize that we will support Pakistan that may face political pressure at the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) meetings which is a current issue. The brotherhood law in Islam requires sharing agitations and being involved in them besides supporting the fellow believers. Short-term interests, daily reckonings cannot hinder our everlasting and eternal brotherhood.”¹

He also emphasized that Turkey “endeavours to eliminate the differences between the Ummah, to find a solution to the disputes and to claim our righteous causes, especially Palestine, Cyprus and Kashmir.”² Apart from political and diplomatic support, the growing appeal of Turkish cultural products such as TV shows has boosted Turkey’s popularity in Pakistan. Prime Minister Imran Khan requested the Pakistan Television (PTV) to broadcast popular Turkish drama series ‘Ertugrul’, dubbed in Urdu and gifted by Turkish Radio and Television Corporation (TRT) to Pakistan free of licensing cost, during *Ramzan* in 2020. As an analyst observes, “Pakistan makes up 25 percent of Ertugrul’s global audience on YouTube, and in the last week of May 2020, TRT Ertugrul by PTV was YouTube’s 33rdmost-watched channel in the world.”³

For Pakistan, identifying itself closer to Ottoman Turkish Islamic heritage serves two purposes: first, it strengthens the already established bond between Ankara and Islamabad at a time when the Gulf States are tilting towards India due to its economic potential. Secondly, it allows Pakistan to relinquish the common heritage of Indian civilization by distorting history and reinforcing Islamic values by glorifying Ottoman Turkish culture. Previously, during Zia ul- Haq’s era in the 1980s, Pakistan promoted Islamic values, Arab rulers, and Holy war to fill its identity

1 After Erdogan Supports Pakistan on Kashmir, India Asks Turkey Not to Interfere, The Wire, 15 February 2020, <https://thewire.in/diplomacy/erdogan-pakistan-kashmir-india>

2 After Erdogan Supports Pakistan on Kashmir, India Asks Turkey Not to Interfere, The Wire, 15 February 2020, <https://thewire.in/diplomacy/erdogan-pakistan-kashmir-india>

3 Fatima Bhutto, How Turkey’s Soft Power Conquered Pakistan, Foreign Policy, 5 September 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/09/05/ertugrul-turkey-dizi-soft-power-pakistan/>

vacuum.⁴ Such mutually reinforcing geostrategic calculation forms the core of Turkey-Pakistan relations in recent times.

The Schism within the Islamic *Ummah*

The “Arab Spring” in early 2011 challenged and in some cases toppled the long-standing authoritarian regimes in West Asia. The issues that sparked the protests in 2011 across West Asia persist. Nevertheless, the political uncertainty and civil war in the region has become rampant as the stability provided by former authoritarian regimes eroded. The political vacuum and turmoil that followed the “Arab Spring” not only sharpened the previously existed schisms such as Saudi-Iran or Sunni-Shia rivalry but also gave rise to new divisions. One such historical rivalry that is renewed in the new geopolitical landscape of West Asia is the competition for Islamic leadership between Turks and Arabs. Under President Erdogan, Turkey is aiming to revive its historical glory when for over 400 years, the Ottoman Empire was the sole custodian of the Holy Mosques, and thereby, the undisputed leader of the Islamic *Ummah*. However, such an ambitious goal would mean displacing Saudi Arabia, a country that has established itself as the modern-day leader of the Muslim world.

At present, the open antagonism and power struggle between Turkey and Saudi Arabia are reshaping the geostrategic setting and ties that these two nations share with the countries within and outside the region. Both the countries have adopted hard as well as soft power techniques to establish their supremacy in the Islamic world. This, in turn, has complicated the already volatile milieu of the West Asian region. The fallout between Turkey and Saudi Arabia became openly hostile in 2018 after the death of Saudi Arabian dissident Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi Arabian Consulate General in Istanbul. Since then, the rivalry has been exacerbated which divided the Islamic world into two mutually hostile Sunni blocs in the region. These two antagonistic blocs consisted of Turkey and Qatar on the

4 Frud Bezhani and Daud Khattak, Pakistan Turns To Turkish TV Drama To Fill Identity ‘Vacuum’, Radio Free Europe, 17 June 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/pakistan-turns-to-turkish-tv-drama-to-fill-identity-vacuum-/30676048.html>

one hand, and Saudi Arabia, UAE and Egypt on the other are fighting with each other for influence among other states within and outside the region. The third pole in the Islamic world, i.e. Shiite Persian Iran, has been tilted towards Turkey and Qatar's camp.

Since the Arab uprisings in 2011, Saudi-aligned allies such as UAE have expended billions of petrodollars on strengthening its influence across the Islamic world through economic, humanitarian, cultural, and military investment in these countries. It has spent at least USD 87.6 billion in foreign investment and bilateral aid since 2011 to eight countries, including Egypt, Pakistan, and Ethiopia.⁵ On the other hand, Turkey, under the AKP government, has expanded its diplomatic outreach not only in West Asia but in Africa as well. The regional powers in West Asia, such as Saudi Arabia and Iran, have traditionally used religion as an instrument of foreign policy. Over the years, by funding mosques and madrassas, Saudi Arabia and Iran have disseminated their version of Islam across the globe. In its bid for regional hegemony, Turkey is promoting its brand of *Hanafi* Islam as more fit for regional leadership because of its liberal and tolerant characteristics as compared to the Saudi *Wahhabism* which belongs to *Hanbali* school of Islam. As an analyst observes, “fusing Sunni Islam with Turkish nationalism, the state institutions and civil society organizations behind the country’s religious outreach promote Turkish language and culture alongside religious curricula.”⁶

Further, Turkey has also relied on its ties with the Muslim Brotherhood to enhance its soft power in the region. In this endeavour, Turkey also got the support of Qatari-backed Al Jazeera, the largest news network in the Middle East, which helped in creating Turkey’s image as a model Muslim country. Nevertheless, Turkey’s strong ties with Muslim Brotherhood tagged as a terrorist organisation in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and UAE, and

5 UAE vs Turkey: the regional rivalries pitting MBZ against Erdogan , Financial Times, 25 October 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/990f13cf-613f-48a5-ac02-c8c73741a786>

6 Gonul Tul, Turkey’s Bid for Religious Leadership, Foreign Affairs, 10 January 2019, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/turkey/2019-01-10/turkeys-bid-religious-leadership>

its aggressive nationalist rhetoric and frequent references to Ottoman past have rattled regimes across the West Asian region.

In the last 15 years, the number of Turkish embassies in Africa has risen from 12 to 42 as Ankara and Abu Dhabi are vying for influence in the African continent. In 2017, Turkey opened its largest overseas military base in Mogadishu. Again, in 2017, Ankara deployed troops to a Qatari base to display its muscular might and solidarity towards Doha after Saudi Arabia and UAE isolated their Gulf neighbour by putting a regional embargo against it. In 2018, while Riyadh was dealing with one of its worst diplomatic crisis in the aftermath of Jamal Khashoggi's murder, Turkey signed a defence cooperation agreement with Kuwait, thus extending its reach close to Saudi Arabia's backyard.⁷ The two rival Sunni blocs are supporting opposing sides and proxy actors in Libya and Syria, which has led to the protraction and escalation of these conflicts. In the case of Egypt as well, Saudi-aligned Arab state, the UAE, bolstered the Egyptian media outlets unfriendly to the Muslim Brotherhood, while Ankara backed Mohammed Morsi with political and financial support.

In 2019, the schism within the Islamic world became more visible with the inauguration of 'Kuala Lumpur Summit' in Malaysia. It was initially envisaged as a "Muslim five summit" by former Malaysian President Mahathir Mohammad to bring together Indonesia, Malaysia, Qatar, Pakistan, and Turkey.⁸ The initiative was viewed as an attempt to challenge the Saudi-led Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC). However, Pakistan, after being initially enthusiastic about the Summit declined to participate due to pressure from Saudi Arabia.⁹ Indonesia also opted out of the Summit because of fear of displeasing the Gulf Kingdom. The Kuala

7 UAE vs Turkey: the regional rivalries pitting MBZ against Erdogan , Financial Times, 25 October 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/990f13cf-613f-48a5-ac02-c8c73741a786>

8 Talmiz Ahmad, Diplomatic challenges from the Muslim world, Livemint, 25 March 2020, <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/diplomatic-challenges-from-the-muslim-world-11585154238694.html>

9 Qureshi asks OIC to stop dragging feet on Kashmir meeting, Dawn, 6 August 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1572857/qureshi-asks-oic-to-stop-dragging-feet-on-kashmir-meeting>

Lumpur Summit indicated a clear chasm within the Muslim world where Iran, Turkey, Qatar, and Malaysia are openly challenging the Saudi-led Islamic order that has been determining the affairs of the Muslim world over the last several decades. What binds these nations together against the Saudi-led Islamic order is their association with Islamism and its most prominent organization—the Muslim Brotherhood.

Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi intensified the churning within the Muslim world when he told Saudi Arabia, the current Chair of OIC, in August 2020 that Pakistan expects OIC to summon a meeting of the Council of Foreign Ministers on Kashmir issue. He further warned the Gulf Kingdom, "If you cannot convene it, then I'll be compelled to ask Prime Minister Imran Khan to call a meeting of the Islamic countries that are ready to stand with us on the issue of Kashmir and support the oppressed Kashmiris."¹⁰ The warning was not well received in Saudi Arabia which retaliated by asking Pakistan to repay a USD 1 billion debt disbursed to Islamabad in November 2018, four months ahead of its repayment period. Riyadh also refused to move ahead on Pakistan's request to extend the deferred oil facility worth USD 3.2 billion. To repair the damaged ties, in August 2020, Pakistan had sent Army Chief General Javed Qamar Bajwa to Riyadh. However, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's refusal to meet General Bajwa reveals that the estrangement in ties between the two countries will be slow to overcome. As Saudi Arabia is moving towards diversifying its oil-based economy, it views the growing Indian market as a critical contributor to the Gulf Kingdom's growth and development. Bilateral trade between India and Saudi Arabia is USD 27 billion annually, whereas Pakistan-Saudi trade is just USD 3.6 billion.¹¹ Probably, that is why Riyadh has chosen to play down the Kashmir issue in the OIC. In this background, Turkey's uncritical support to Pakistan on Kashmir issue has come as a

10 Ibid

11 Madiha Afzal, The Pakistan-Saudi Arabia relationship hits a bump in the road, Brookings, 24 August 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/08/24/the-pakistan-saudi-arabia-relationship-hits-a-bump-in-the-road/>

respite for Islamabad and has strengthened the historically stronger ties between the two nations.

Turkey-Pakistan: a ‘special relationship’?

The shifting geostrategic alliances at the international level and the ongoing schism within the Islamic world have brought Turkey and Pakistan closer than ever before. Historically as well, the two countries have shared a cordial relation due to their shared religious background that Pakistan has exploited, after the partition of India in 1947, by presenting itself as the sole inheritor of the Muslims and their affairs in the Indian subcontinent. In a skewed and distorted representation of history, Turkey has always perceived that at the end of World War I during the Turkish War of Liberation, only Indian Muslims supported the cause of *Khilafat*. The support extended by the nationalist forces in India under Congress and Mahatma Gandhi has been overlooked and underplayed.¹² The leaders in Pakistan never fail to refer to the *Khilafat* Movement as an indication of strong historical and brotherly ties between Turkey and Pakistan. In 2020, Prime Minister Imran Khan stated: “the relations of the people who live in the lands we call Pakistan with Turkey dates back to the 1920s when there was a *Khilafat* movement.”¹³

Pakistani leaders have also often expressed their admiration for Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the Father of Turks. For instance, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, founder of Pakistan, was a huge admirer of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. He had even expressed his desire to build Pakistan on the Turkish model of modernism and secularism. In a gesture to display mutual affinity towards one another, Turkey and Pakistan have named major roads, such as ‘Cinnah Caddesi’ in Ankara after Mohammad Ali Jinnah, and roads in Islamabad,

12 Aswini Mohapatra (2008), *Bridge to Anatolia: An overview of Indo-Turkish Relations*, *The Turkish Yearbook*, Vol. XXXIX, pp. 166-167

13 Pakistani PM: Ties with Turkey get stronger in every area, *Daily Sabah*, 2 February 2020, <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/2020/02/02/pakistani-pm-ties-with-turkey-get-stronger-in-every-area>

Karachi, and Lahore after Atatürk.¹⁴ After its creation in 1947, Pakistan's founder Mohammed Ali Jinnah told the first Turkish ambassador, Yahya Kemal, to Islamabad:

“It gives me great pleasure to welcome you as the first Turkish Ambassador to Pakistan. But my pleasure is enhanced as there is a unique significance about today’s ceremony to the people of Pakistan, for historical reasons. Your Excellency has yourself observed that many spiritual and sentimental ties, born and grown in the course of a long history bind the people of Turkey to the people of Pakistan. Not only this but by a turn of the world situation during the past 50 years or more, Turkey has been in our thoughts constantly and has drawn our admiration for the valour of your people and the way in which your statesmen and leaders have struggled and fought almost single-handed in the midst of Europe for your freedom and sovereignty which have been happily maintained.”¹⁵

Similarly, General Pervez Musharraf, a former Pakistani Army Chief and President, who spent part of his childhood in Turkey, had expressed his admiration for Kemal Atatürk for creating a strong secular state. Like Jinnah, General Musharraf, also hoped that Pakistan would follow a Turkish path to modernity. Unlike his predecessors, Pakistan's current Prime Minister, Imran Khan considers Turkish President Erdogan as one of his “political heroes”.¹⁶ Apart from the common religious heritage and the deep admiration for Turkish leaders in Pakistan, the ties between Ankara and Islamabad were sealed during the Cold War years when both the countries moved closer to the United States through various military pacts and economic linkages.¹⁷ As members of the Central Treaty Organization

14 Syed Ali Nawaz Gilani, Turkey-Pakistan friendship: From past to present, Daily Sabah, 13 February 2020, <https://www.dailysabah.com/op-ed/2020/02/13/turkey-pakistan-friendship-from-past-to-present>

15 Waasti, S. T. (2011). Eight months in the life of Yahya Kemal. Middle Eastern Studies. 47(1), p. 138.

16 Philip Kowalski, Turkish-Pakistani relations: A burgeoning alliance? , Middle East Institute, 22 May 2019, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/turkish-pakistani-relations-burgeoning-alliance>

17 Aswini Mohapatra (2008), Bridge to Anatolia: An overview of Indo-Turkish Relations, The Turkish Yearbook, Vol. XXXIX, pp. 166-167

(CENTO) in 1955, and the Regional Development Corporation (RCD) in 1964, Pakistan and Turkey further strengthened their relations. Pakistan, Turkey and Iran formed the RCD to build economic prosperity, improve cultural relations, and technical cooperation.¹⁸ Over the years, Pakistan and Turkey have also provided mutual support to each other on disputes such as Kashmir and Cyprus issue. Turkey and Pakistan are also part of D-8 Organization for Economic Cooperation, formed in 1997 in Istanbul, along with Bangladesh, Nigeria, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, and Malaysia. During its 23rd anniversary in 2020 Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan felicitated the member states for making “significant contribution in promoting solidarity, and strengthening cooperation among the brotherly countries since its inception.”¹⁹

Under the AKP government, Pakistan has assumed critical significance in Turkey’s geostrategic ambitions. Traditionally, despite sharing cordial relations with Turkey, Pakistan has always been more dependent on Saudi Arabia and UAE for political and economic support. Throughout its history, Islamabad has asked Riyadh for bailout multiple times due to its dwindling economy. Saudi Arabia has also used its petrodollars to enhance its influence in Pakistan by funding *madrassahs* and exporting *Wahhabi* Islam into the country. Therefore, given the ongoing competition between Saudi Arabia and Turkey for the leadership of the Islamic world, Pakistan has naturally become a critical Sunni Muslim country to influence by Ankara.

In 2016, the failed military coup in Turkey brought a turning point in Pakistan-Turkey relations. After the alleged coup on 15 July 2016 the then Prime Minister, Nawaz Sharif, quickly reached out to President Erdogan to extend his solidarity with the AKP government. Islamabad’s uncritical

18 Rahat Shah & Wang Li (2020). Rationales behind Pakistan-Turkey relations since September 11, *The Round Table: The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs*, 109 (5), p. 562

19 Islamuddin Sajid, Pakistan felicitates D-8 states on 23rd anniversary, Anadolu Agency, 16 June 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/pakistan-felicitates-d-8-states-on-23rd-anniversary/1878667>

support to President Erdogan has enhanced Pakistan's importance as a like-minded Muslim country for Turkish President. Since then, the bilateral visits between the two countries have seen an upward trend. Moreover, in the aftermath of the coup attempt, Pakistan has handled the Turkish concerns about the Pak-Turk Schools funded by Fethullah Gulen led Pak-Turk International Cag Education Foundation (PTICEF), with utmost urgency. As part of his *Hizmet* Movement, Fethullah Gulen, an influential cleric and former ally of President Erdogan, had opened a network of schools across the world to promote Turkish culture and educate young children about Gulen's religious and political ideas. President Erdogan has blamed Fethullah Gulen for instigating the failed coup attempt in 2016 against his government. Since then, Turkey has been demanding that other countries should shut down the Gulen schools and declare Fethullah Gulen and his organization as terrorists.²⁰

Pakistan complied with Turkey's requests by denying the Turkish staff of Pak-Turk schools renewed work and residence visas. In 2019, the Supreme Court of Pakistan declared the Fetullah Gulen led PTICEF to be a terrorist organization. The court also ordered the *Maarif* Foundation, an organization established by the Turkish government, to take over the Pak-Turk schools. As part of the Turkish government's strategy to enhance its soft power abroad, Maarif Foundation is actively promoting Turkish-style religious education through offering scholarships, building schools, dormitories, and training teachers.²¹ In 2019, during his visit to Pakistan, President Erdogan acknowledged Islamabad's efforts to identify PTICEF as a terrorist organization. Since then, Turkey's unflinching support to Pakistan in FATF and Kashmir issue is also a reciprocal gesture from Turkish President for Islamabad's efforts in designating the Gulen Movement as a terrorist organization.

20 Amberin Zaman, Turkey's tilt toward Pakistan provokes India's ire, *Al Monitor*, 27 August 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/08/turkey-tilt-pakistan-india-erdogan-saudi-uae-greece.html#ixzz6fAubC69X>

21 Gonul Tul, Turkey's Bid for Religious Leadership, *Foreign Affairs*, 10 January 2019, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/turkey/2019-01-10/turkeys-bid-religious-leadership>

Turkey has also tried to gain inroads in Pakistan by offering its good offices to mediate between Islamabad and Kabul on various bilateral issues. In 2007, Ankara initiated hosting Pakistan-Afghanistan-Turkey Trilateral Summit (PATTS) to improve Pakistan-Afghanistan relations. After the second summit in 2008 the three countries decided on “joint military drills, police cooperation, training and intelligence sharing” to enhance security cooperation.²² Islamabad has shown interest in conducting these trilateral summits regularly as it gives a robust platform to mend ties with Afghanistan. During the eight PATTS meeting in 2014, Ankara emphasized maintaining people-to-people contacts and socio-economic projects between Afghanistan and Pakistan. At the same time, it assured unconditional support to both the nations and stressed the need to make peace and reconciliation process successful.²³ The trilateral summits have provided an opportunity for Afghanistan and Pakistan to discuss various thorny issues in the relationship. However, it has not reduced the trust deficit between the two countries as the leaders in Kabul blame Pakistan for supporting the Taliban. Despite the ongoing peace process, the Taliban’s unwillingness to accept a ceasefire and reduce violence has frustrated Kabul.

Moreover, Afghanistan also presents a challenge for Pakistan-Turkey relations as both countries have historically supported opposite sides during the Afghan civil war in the 1990s. With the rise of the Taliban in the 1990s, the interests of Turkey and Pakistan started clashing as Ankara rallied behind the Northern Alliance, primarily composed of ethnic Tajiks and Uzbeks. Turkey still maintains close relations with the Uzbek community in Afghanistan due to their shared Turkish heritage.

22 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Turkey, Joint Statement Adopted At The Conclusion Of The Second Trilateral Summit Held In Istanbul Among The Presidents Of The Islamic Republic Of Afghanistan, The Islamic Republic Of Pakistan And The Republic Of Turkey, Istanbul, 5 December 2008, http://www.mfa.gov.tr/joint--statement-adopted-at-the-conclusion-of-the-second-trilateral-summit-held-in-istanbul-among-the-presidents-of-the-islamic-republic-of-afghanistan_-the-islamic-republic-of-pakistan-and-the-republic-of-turkey_-istanbul_-5-december-2008_.en.mfa

23 Rahat Shah & Wang Li (2020). Rationales behind Pakistan-Turkey relations since September 11, *The Round Table: The Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs*, 109 (5), P. 566

One of the most notable ethnic Uzbek, Abdul Rashid Dostum has received continuous Turkish patronage over the years. In 2015, as one of the Vice President under the Ashraf Ghani government, Dostum adopted a harsh anti-Pakistan stance when declared, “If Pakistan is playing with us for many years, we must also cut our diplomatic relations with them.”²⁴ Turkey’s close ties with Pakistan has enhanced Ankara’s role in playing an active role in the Afghan conflict. However, if the peace process falters in Afghanistan, Turkey and Pakistan’s interests will once again diverge as Ankara will rally behind the Uzbek community and Dostum.

Perhaps, nothing more can substantiate the deep ties between Turkey and Pakistan better than the current popularity of Turkish drama series in the country. In the mediascape of the West Asian region, Turkey has gained an edge in promoting its cultural values and influencing Arab audiences and the Muslim world through the export of its soap operas and TV series. In 2020, Prime Minister Imran Khan personally asked the national TV broadcaster to air the famous Urdu dubbed Turkish series ‘Ertugrul’ that depicts the prehistory of Ottoman Empire. According to reports, “133 million people watched the show in the first 20 days. A dedicated YouTube channel, TRT Ertugrul by PTV, had amassed four million subscribers and 344 million views as of 25 May”²⁵.

Given the schism in the Islamic world, unsurprisingly, the show is banned in Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Egypt. In February 2020, the highest Fatwa Council of Egypt, *Dar Al-Iftaa*, accused Turkey of carving an area of influence in the region through its soft power. It claimed that “aims to revive the Ottoman Empire in the Middle East and regain sovereignty over Arab countries which were previously under Ottoman rule, and

24 First Vice President Seeks to Cut Ties with Pakistan, Tolo News, 21 August 2015, <https://tolonews.com/afghanistan/first-vice-president-seeks-cut-ties-pakistan>

25 Uday Bhatia, How ‘Ertugrul’ hit a sweet spot in Pakistan, Livemint, 27 May 2020, <https://www.livemint.com/mint-lounge/features/how-ertugrul-hit-a-sweet-spot-in-pakistan-11590458224858.html>

therefore, should not be watched.”²⁶ Nevertheless, Prime Minister Imran Khan’s lauding of the show indicates a wider project of promoting the Islamic values and glorifying Turkish Ottoman history by the Pakistani state. Pakistan has always struggled to forge its identity distinct from the common cultural heritage of Indian civilization. Instead of investing in its cultural heritage, the Pakistani state is consciously trying to create a narrative of Pakistan as a “manifestation of Islamic expansionism.”²⁷

Previously as well, in order to relinquish its Indian connection, Pakistan has promoted its Islamic identity and exported national heroes, such as former Afghan Kings, Persian emperors, and Arab rulers from another part of the world. As a window to Ottoman history, pan-Islamic values, and Muslim political and civilizational revivalism, Ertugrul perfectly fits into the narrative of the Pakistani state. After coming to power in 2018, Prime Minister Imran Khan has emphasized the need “to create a Pakistan which is in line with the first Muslim society created by the Prophet Mohammad.”²⁸ In President Erdogan, Khan has found a perfect ally who is slowly seeping Islamic values in a historically and constitutionally secular country. Both the leaders in association with the former Prime Minister of Malaysia, Mahathir Mohamad, also planned to create an English-language TV channel to fight rising “Islamophobia” at the international level.²⁹

Trade and Military dimension

Since last few years, Turkey and Pakistan are working towards bringing their trade and economic relations at par with their political ties. In the last

26 Egypt fatwa bans Ertugrul, Turkish soaps, Middle East Monitor, 12 February 2020, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200212-egypt-fatwa-bans-ertugrul-turkish-soaps/>

27 Uday Bhatia, How ‘Ertugrul’ hit a sweet spot in Pakistan, Livemint, 27 May 2020, <https://www.livemint.com/mint-lounge/features/how-ertugrul-hit-a-sweet-spot-in-pakistan-11590458224858.html>

28 Shayista Farooqi, Ertugrul: The Turkish TV drama enthralling Pakistan, BBC, 15 June 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-53024479>

29 Frud Bezhan and Daud Khattak, Pakistan Turns To Turkish TV Drama To Fill Identity ‘Vacuum’, Radio Free Europe, 17 June 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/pakistan-turns-to-turkish-tv-drama-to-fill-identity-vacuum-/30676048.html>

five years, the trade volume between the two countries has increased from USD 600 million to USD 800 million. Interestingly, India and Turkey have higher trade volume than Ankara and Islamabad. In 2018, Turkey's exports to India totaled at USD 1.2 billion, while its import from India valued at USD 7.5 billion.³⁰ Nevertheless, to fully realize the economic potential of their relations, Turkey and Pakistan are engaged in various initiatives such as Strategic Economic Framework (SEF), which aims to boost the bilateral trade volume between the two countries. In 2019, to boost business and tourism between the two countries, Pakistan added Turkey to its visa-free travel list.

In February 2020, Erdoğan and Khan co-chaired the sixth meeting of the Turkey-Pakistan High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council, where the two countries signed a series of memorandums of understanding (MoUs) aimed at boosting the existing bilateral trade, economic engagement, and cultural and communication ties. The MoUs included “cooperation between two countries’ state-run broadcasters – TRT and PTV – education and overseas diaspora, culture and tourism development and facilitation, halal accreditation and conformity assessment and trade facilitation. They also intend to cooperate in areas like customs, postal services, railway and military training and e-commerce.”³¹ Also, both the countries also proposed to enhance “cooperation in the area of hydrocarbons, joint ventures in exploration and production, and sharing of best practices in natural gas distribution, transmission and wholesale markets in the liquefied petroleum gas market”.³² A proposed free trade agreement (FTA) between the Ankara and Islamabad that aims to enhance the bilateral trade from USD 800 million to USD 10 billion by 2022 is still pending.

30 Aysu Bicer, Turkey, India target \$10B trade volume by 2020, Anadolu Agency, 15 January 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/world/turkey-india-target-10b-trade-volume-by-2020/1703290>

31 Strong will to take Turkish-Pakistani trade, economic ties to new heights, Daily Sabah, 14 February 2020, <https://www.dailysabah.com/economy/2020/02/14/strong-will-to-take-turkish-pakistani-trade-economic-ties-to-new-heights>

32 Ibid

Pakistan has also assumed a critical position as a defence export market for Ankara. President Erdogan has aimed to expand Turkey's defence sales to USD 25 billion by 2023. At present, Turkey is the second-biggest supplier of arms to Pakistan after China. Turkey has been upgrading Pakistan's F-16 jets as well as its submarines. In 2018, the Pakistani navy commissioned a fleet tanker in Karachi that was built in collaboration with the STM, Turkey's leading arms manufacturer. Further, in July 2018, Turkey bagged a USD 1.5 billion deal to sell Pakistan 30 T129 helicopters and to supply four corvettes to the Pakistan navy.³³ However, the delivery of T129 helicopters is delayed due to US sanctions imposed on Turkey. In order to dissuade Turkey from operationalizing the S-400 Russian missiles, the US congress is blocking the export licenses for the American-made engines used in the T129 helicopters.

The Turkish firms that are licensed to produce the T129 and its engine domestically collaborate with Agusta Westland, an Italian-British aerospace company to manufacture the helicopters. However, the engines used in these helicopters, the CT800, are originally produced by the Light Helicopter Turbine Engine Company, a joint venture between U.S.-based Honeywell and U.K.-based Rolls Royce. In Turkey, Tusas Engine Industries is licensed to produce these engines. Since the engines are originally produced in the US, Turkey requires an export license authorized by the US government to sell T129 or any weapon system containing these engines. At present, Tusas Engine Industries (TEI) is working on developing a replacement for the CT800 engine used in the T129 helicopters. In a goodwill gesture, Pakistan has extended the deadline for its supply as Turkey has not been able to secure American export licenses for the export deal with Pakistan.³⁴

33 Pakistan & Turkey : Brothers in Arms, Pakistan Politico, 10 September 2018, <http://pakistanpolitico.com/pakistan-turkey-brothers-in-arms/>

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

Threatening the T129 sale to Pakistan hurts Turkey more than just financially. For one, if successfully implemented, the deal cements a relationship between Turkey and a fellow Islamic nation, signalling Ankara's pivot from the West. Increasing annual defence exports is also a key priority for Erdogan, who vowed in 2015 to boost arms sales to USD 25 billion by 2023 and to rid the Turkish defence industrial base of its reliance on foreign suppliers. The military-to-military relationship between both the countries is exemplified by the armed forces training exchange programme, which was inaugurated in 2000. Since the programme began, approximately 1,500 Pakistani military officers have been trained in Turkey.³⁵

Conclusion

Turkey's engagement with Pakistan has involved a combination of economic cooperation, military supplies, soft power projection, conflict resolution diplomacy, and Islamic solidarity politics. The deep historical and religious bonds between Turkey and Pakistan find its echo among the conservative masses in both countries. In the last few years, Turkey has enhanced its cultural appeal in Pakistan through TV shows such as *Ertugrul*. The support of the Pakistani state has further ensured the rising admiration for Ottoman history and culture in the country. As the last Muslim Kingdom and Caliphate, Turkey wants to tap into the emotive appeal of the Ottoman Empire that brings back the memory of grandeur of Muslim civilization. Turkey can create such appeal in Pakistan more easily than Arab countries. The 'Khilafat movement' was indicative of the emotional bond that Muslims of the subcontinent had with the Ottoman Empire as it reflected their unhappiness about the caliphate's end. Moreover, Pakistan's identity crisis and its tilt towards pan-Islamist sentiment play well with Erdogan's neo-Ottomanism. With the Arab world, Turkey's relations have always been coloured by mutual distrust and conflicting memories of the last years of the Ottoman Empire.

35 Ibid

Despite such strong emotional and symbolic appeal of Turkey in Pakistan, the relations between the two countries cannot be a source of real economic, diplomatic and strategic strength. For one, with its dwindling economy, Turkey could never support Pakistan economically like the Gulf countries. Despite the ongoing rift between Islamabad and Riyadh, the presence of Pakistani diaspora in the Gulf countries and Islamabad's strong economic and military linkages with Saudi Arabia and UAE are difficult to untangle. Moreover, the vast network of the charitable organizations that the Gulf Arab states use to enhance their influence could not be matched by Turkey and its state institutions. Secondly, historically, the real source and strength of the Turkish model have been its anchoring to western values and democracy. By asserting its Islamic and Ottoman identity, Ankara has rattled every country in the region. A country that itself is isolated could do little to validate the concerns and anxieties of Islamabad at the international level. Therefore, it could not replace Saudi Arabia and UAE in the strategic calculus of Pakistan. When the chips are down, Pakistan's 'brotherly relations' with Turkey could only give Islamabad symbolic and emotive strength and nothing more.

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