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# **TURKEY'S STRATEGIC PIVOT TO PAKISTAN: IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA**

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### **Turkey's Strategic Pivot to Pakistan: Implications for India**



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#### **Abstract**

This study examines the growing influence of Turkey's defence industry and its deepening ties with Pakistan, and how this evolving alliance is reshaping security dynamics in South Asia. Previously reliant on Western arms, Turkey has rapidly emerged as a major defence exporter, extending its strategic reach into new regions, including the Indian subcontinent. The strengthening of military ties between Turkey and Pakistan, marked by joint defence projects and arms transfers, presents new challenges for India, especially amid ongoing tensions with Pakistan. A recent example of this shift was the May 2025 drone attacks on Indian positions using Turkish-made equipment, which highlighted Turkey's direct involvement in the region's security affairs. The study analyses how India is responding to this changing landscape through diplomacy, military preparedness, and by forging new international partnerships. It argues that to maintain balance and stability, India must pursue a careful and strategic approach to address the implications of the Turkey-Pakistan alliance.

## **Introduction**

The 21<sup>st</sup> Century is witnessing the global defence landscape being shaped by shifting alliances, indigenous technology development, and the emergence of new players in the arms trade, among other factors. Turkey's defence industry stands out, owing to its rapid defence modernisation and assertive export strategy. From a nation once heavily dependent on Western arms supplies, Turkey today has evolved into a significant arms producer and exporter, thereby expanding its geopolitical influence. Turkey's influence has also extended to South Asia, where the tensions between India and Pakistan largely determine regional security.

The expanding relations between Turkey and Pakistan have added new dimensions to the already tense India-Pakistan relationship. Turkey and Pakistan have long-standing ties that go beyond politics. As Turkey strengthens its military and diplomatic ties with Pakistan, India faces new strategic challenges, necessitating a recalibration of its defence and diplomatic strategies. Under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's leadership, Turkey has cultivated deep strategic ties with Pakistan while simultaneously complicating its relationship with India. The recent incident on May 7-8, 2025, where Pakistani forces deployed Turkish-made Songar drones against 36 Indian locations, demonstrates how Turkey's expanding defence footprint directly impacts the volatile India-Pakistan security dynamic. This paper analyses Turkey's defence sector development, its deepening relationship with Pakistan, the implications for India, and strategic recommendations. Based on recent events and policy shifts, it tries to understand the impact on regional security.

## **Turkey's Defence Industry**

Turkey's journey to building its defence industry was driven by necessity and strategic urgency. For years, Turkey relied heavily on Western allies, especially the US and NATO, for its military gear. But a pivotal moment arrived in 1974 when a US arms embargo, triggered by Turkey's actions in Cyprus, served as a stark wake-up call, highlighting the dangers of such dependence. This embargo exposed Turkey's vulnerability due to its reliance on foreign military supplies.<sup>1</sup> This experience spurred a national resolve to become self-sufficient. Turkey initiated efforts to develop indigenous defence capabilities, leading to the establishment of key defence

enterprises such as Turkish Aerospace Industries (TAI) and Aselsan. The 1980s and 90s saw the birth of foundational state-owned companies like ASELSAN for electronics, TAI for aerospace, and Roketsan for rocketry.<sup>2</sup> While they initially leaned on foreign expertise, these entities laid the groundwork. The real acceleration came in the 2000s, as successive governments poured resources into modernisation, fostering research and development, and encouraging collaborations between public and private sectors. This foundational shift aimed to reduce external dependencies and enhance national security.<sup>3</sup>

Fast forward to today, and Turkey's defence sector is a sophisticated, integrated powerhouse. They've proudly developed indigenous platforms like the Altay tank, the widely recognised Anka and Bayraktar drones, and the MilliGemi national ship project (MILGEM) warships. Private firms like Baykar have even become global players. By the late 2010s, Turkey wasn't just building for itself; it was aggressively exporting drones and armoured vehicles. According to recent data, Turkey's defence exports reached a record \$7.1 billion in 2024, with its defence industry exporting to 180 countries as of that year.<sup>4</sup>

Turkey's commitment to indigenous research and development over the past two decades has yielded significant advancements:

- **Bayraktar TB2 UAVs:** These drones have demonstrated effectiveness in various conflict zones, including Syria and Libya, Nagorno-Karabakh, Ukraine conflict etc and have been exported to multiple countries.<sup>5</sup>
- **Altay Main Battle Tank:** A domestically designed and produced tank, reflecting Turkey's ambition to field a modern, independent armoured corps.<sup>6</sup>
- **TAI TF Kaan (National Combat Aircraft Project):** Turkey's initiative to develop a fifth-generation fighter jet, which is set for deployment by 2030, positioning the country among a select group capable of producing advanced combat aircraft.<sup>7</sup>
- **MILGEM (National Ship Project):** Development of indigenous warships, including corvettes and frigates, enhancing Turkey's naval capabilities and export potential.<sup>8</sup>

- **Advanced Tactical Attack and Reconnaissance (ATAK) Helicopters and Milli Piyade Tüfeği (MPT) Rifles:** Homegrown rotary-wing and small arms platforms that have garnered international interest.<sup>9</sup>

These advancements are the result of deliberate policy shifts favouring domestic production, fostering public-private partnerships, and state-led innovation since 2004. But this assertive growth hasn't been without challenges. Sanctions, particularly from the US over the S-400 missile purchase, have created hurdles, limiting access to certain technologies.<sup>10</sup> Yet, Turkey has responded by doubling down on its R&D and seeking out new partners beyond its traditional circles. Despite these challenges, the industry's drive for self-reliance and global reach continues to push forward.

Turkey's defence exports have experienced significant growth, positioning the country among the world's top arms exporters.<sup>11</sup> Key markets include Pakistan, a major recipient of Turkish naval, aerial, and land systems, Qatar, Ukraine, and various African nations, beneficiaries of Turkish UAVs, armoured vehicles, and naval assets and Europe and Central Asia who has a growing interest in Turkish defence technology, particularly drones and electronic warfare systems.<sup>12</sup> Turkey has become a sought-after supplier for countries looking for alternatives to Russian or Western arms, largely because it offers cost-effective, combat-proven systems.<sup>13</sup>

### **Turkey-Pakistan Defence Relations**

The close relationship between Turkey and Pakistan is built on longstanding cultural ties, common beliefs and shared interests.<sup>14</sup> Their partnership began back during the Cold War and has grown much stronger since Recep Tayyip Erdogan came to power in 2003. Under Erdogan's leadership, Turkey has consistently supported Pakistan on key global issues, especially related to Kashmir. The two countries have often presented a united front in international forums, backing each other and reinforcing their political bond through regular high-level meetings and visits.<sup>15</sup> Pakistan is a central part of Turkey's regional diplomacy. Erdogan has visited Pakistan more than ten times, most recently in February 2025, when he co-chaired the 7th High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council meeting.<sup>16</sup>



This close relationship can also be viewed as a part of Turkey's broad strategy: Turkey is working to position itself as a balance to the influence of Saudi Arabia and the UAE in the Muslim world. To do that, it's building stronger connections with countries outside the Gulf, like Pakistan and Malaysia.<sup>17</sup> For both countries, this growing partnership brings mutual benefits. Pakistan secures a reliable ally in West Asia, while Turkey expands its presence in South Asia, strengthening its influence in a region that plays a key role in shaping global politics. The 'close friendship' and 'brotherhood' between Turkey and Pakistan dates back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Still, the formal military cooperation was shaped by their shared membership in Western military alliances like the CENTO.<sup>18</sup>

Defence cooperation is one of the significant components of Turkey's relations with Pakistan. This relation, rooted in historical ties and shared strategic interests, has grown rapidly through defence procurement, technology transfer, joint exercises, etc. Turkey is now the third-largest (3.8%) supplier to Pakistan after China (81%) and the Netherlands (5.5%).<sup>19</sup> Around 10% of Turkey's total arms exports between 2020 and 2024 went to Pakistan.<sup>20</sup> The cooperation includes joint arms production, technology sharing, hardware exchanges, etc. Some of the major defence deals between the countries include Pakistan's acquisition of 4 MILGEM class corvettes from Turkey, Bayraktar TB2 and Akinci drones, Kemankes cruise missiles, Songar armed drones, etc<sup>21</sup>. The two nations also engage in tech transfer and co-production projects like the MILGEM Corvette deal, with technology transfer, enabling local construction at the Karachi Shipyard.<sup>22</sup>

The defence partnership between Turkey and Pakistan has intensified, encompassing various collaborative efforts:

- **Naval Cooperation:** In 2018, Pakistan signed a \$1.5 billion deal with Turkish state-owned ASFAT for four MILGEM-class stealth corvettes, including technology transfer and local assembly at Karachi Shipyard.<sup>23</sup>
- **Aerial Platforms:** Turkish Aerospace Industries has upgraded Pakistan's F-16 fleet and explored further collaboration on attack helicopters and UAVs. While the T129 ATAK helicopter deal faced delays due to U.S. export restrictions, both nations are seeking alternatives.<sup>24</sup>

- **Drones and Missiles:** Pakistan has acquired Bayraktar TB2 armed drones and Kemankes cruise missiles from Turkey. In 2022, three TB2 drones were delivered, and joint ventures are underway to co-develop UAVs.<sup>25</sup>
- **Submarine Upgrades:** STM Defence Technologies has modernised Pakistan's Agosta 90B submarines, enhancing their operational capabilities.<sup>26</sup>
- The Pakistan Aeronautical Complex has exported **MFI-17 Super Mushshak training aircraft** to the Turkish Air Force (TurAF), marking a turning point in Pakistan-Turkey relations.<sup>27</sup>
- Turkey and Pakistan are set to operate a joint factory for the production of Turkey's fifth-generation Kaan fighter jet, which would enable Turkey to produce low-cost fighter jet and Pakistan to boost its air defence capabilities.<sup>28</sup>
- **Joint Exercises:** Regular military drills, such as the Ataturk-Jinnah, were conducted as a joint exercise at the Special Operations School in Cherat, Pakistan, involving special services personnel from both countries.<sup>29</sup>

This multifaceted cooperation allows Pakistan to diversify its defence procurement and reduce reliance on traditional suppliers.

Turkey's defence support has significantly contributed to Pakistan's military modernisation:

- **Naval Power:** The induction of MILGEM-class corvettes and submarine upgrades has enhanced Pakistan's maritime capabilities in the Indian Ocean.
- **Aerial Capabilities:** Acquisition of advanced drones and ongoing collaboration on UAV development have bolstered Pakistan's air power and surveillance reach.
- **Land Systems:** Turkish technology has aided in modernising Pakistan's armoured and artillery units, though to a lesser extent compared to naval and aerial domains.

## Turkey-India Relations

While Turkey and India have maintained diplomatic relations since 1948, recent years have seen strains, primarily due to Turkey's assertive support for Pakistan on issues

like Kashmir. Turkey's critical statements at international platforms regarding India's domestic policies have elicited strong responses from India.

Economic engagement between the two countries remains limited, and defence cooperation is minimal. As of the data for April-February 2024-25, India's exports to Turkey are at \$5.2 billion, compared to \$6.65 billion in 2023-24. The imports from Turkey to India stand at \$2.84 billion compared to \$3.78 billion in 2023-24.<sup>30</sup> India perceives Turkey's growing military relationship with Pakistan as a direct challenge to its security interests, complicating prospects for bilateral engagement.

### **Role in India-Pakistan Conflict**

During Operation Sindoor, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan reached out to Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif to express his support amid rising tensions. Pakistan and Turkey share a longstanding and close relationship, and, notably, Sharif was actually in Turkey when the Pahalgam terror attack occurred on April 22. As Prime Minister Narendra Modi landed in Jeddah to boost India's relationship with Saudi Arabia, Pakistan's Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif was arriving in Turkey to strengthen ties with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. It was a telling moment- India and Pakistan, long-time rivals in South Asia, were being hosted at the same time by two powerful countries in West Asia. Saudi Arabia and Turkey themselves have had a complicated relationship, often shaped by competition and different worldviews.<sup>31</sup>

After India carried out retaliatory strikes in response to the terror attack, Turkey strongly criticised India's actions and called for both nations to show restraint. Their foreign ministry warned that India's strikes increased the risk of a wider war and called for restraint on both sides.<sup>32</sup> When Pakistan launched a significant drone attack on 36 locations along India's western border, tensions increased even more. Both military and civilian targets were attacked. Many of the 300 drones that Pakistan has launched, according to Indian sources, are Turkish in origin.<sup>33</sup> They have presented the research that the drone debris indicated that the drones used were the Turkish-made Asis guard Songar models.<sup>34</sup> Turkey's actions became more visible amid these tensions. A Turkish C-13 transport plane landed in Karachi on April 27, 2025. After a few days, on May 2, a Turkish Ada-class warship arrived in Karachi port.<sup>35</sup> Turkey denied that they were carrying weapons and asserted that these were normal visits.<sup>36</sup>



## **Responses from India**

India did not remain a passive observer while Turkey increased its influence in the area and strengthened its relations with Pakistan. India has reoriented its foreign policy in recognition of the changing regional dynamics. India has been forging close ties with nations that oppose Turkey's expanding power as part of this approach. The Eastern Mediterranean is home to some of the best examples of this. Greece and Cyprus, two countries that have long-standing problems with Turkey, have both seen growing connections with India.<sup>37</sup> Recent examples of this growing relationship include the joint naval exercise between the Greek Navy's HS Hydra and the Indian Navy's INS Taraksh.<sup>38</sup> India has taken a strong stance in offering its support to the Republic of Cyprus in its disputes with Turkey over Northern Cyprus, and Greece has supported India in the Kashmir issue, demonstrating a shared sense of diplomatic support.<sup>39</sup>

In the South Caucasus, India has increased its involvement with Armenia. In 2024, India became Armenia's largest arms supplier. Due to concerns from Turkey's close ally, Azerbaijan, Armenia has looked to India for its essential military supplies.<sup>40</sup> Unsurprisingly, this has drawn criticism from Turkey, which is instead promoting its rival plan: the 'Iraq Development Road'.<sup>41</sup> At the same time, India's close partnerships with the UAE, Israel, and France help balance Turkey's moves, especially when it comes to defence and maritime interests.<sup>42</sup> Together, these steps show that India is actively working to counter Turkish influence on multiple fronts.

## **'Boycott Turkey' and the Way Ahead**

A rising wave of posts on Indian social media is calling on people to 'Boycott Turkey'. The campaign is picking up steam, with users asking others to stop buying Turkish goods, using Turkish services, or travelling there for holidays. This push is starting to have a clear impact, especially on the economic front.<sup>43</sup> Travel from India to Turkey has seen a sharp decline in recent weeks. According to travel industry sources, bookings by Indian tourists have dropped by about 60%, while cancellations have shot up by more than 250%. Just last year, around 274,000 Indians visited Turkey, but that trend has now reversed.<sup>44</sup>

Leading travel companies like EaseMyTrip, MakeMyTrip, and Ixigo have halted taking bookings to Turkey. They've also stopped advertising trips there and are advising travellers to avoid going unless it is necessary.<sup>45</sup> Adding to the backlash, the civil aviation ministry cancelled the security clearance of Celebi, a Turkish company that handles airport services at several major airports in India. The decision, effective immediately, was made on grounds of national security.<sup>46</sup>

India has blocked the X (formerly Twitter) account of Turkish state broadcaster TRT for a short period, accusing it of spreading misleading content and pushing a pro-Pakistan line, particularly on Kashmir. Authorities say the channel has repeatedly shared biased reports and misrepresented facts, which they view as part of a larger attempt to influence public opinion. Indian cyber teams have flagged TRT as playing a role in promoting Turkey's foreign policy agenda under President Erdoğan. They also suspect that TRT is working alongside Pakistan's military media unit, ISPR, to spread coordinated narratives that target India.<sup>47</sup>

Several major Indian universities have either ended or paused their academic partnerships with institutions in Turkey. IIT Bombay and IIT Roorkee are among those that have suspended their ties. Lovely Professional University, Jawaharlal Nehru University, and Jamia Millia Islamia, Kanpur University, Chandigarh University, Maulana Azad National Urdu University in Hyderabad, University of Delhi have also stepped back from collaborations.<sup>48</sup>

## **Implications and Recommendations for India**

The Turkey-Pakistan defence nexus has a number of strategic implications for India.

- **Military and Technology Edge for Pakistan:** The transfer of Turkish arms and technology like drones, naval platforms, etc, to Pakistan can boost Pakistan's tactical capabilities.
- **Diplomatic Fallout:** Turkey's vocal support for Pakistan during crises, such as after India's Operation Sindoor strikes in 2025, has added complexity to regional diplomacy.<sup>49</sup> Turkey's interventions extend beyond statements,

utilising state-backed media and international platforms to internationalise issues like Kashmir, thereby challenging India's diplomatic narratives.

- **Direct Confrontation vs. Strategic Patience:** Confronting Turkey directly could further strain bilateral ties and push Turkey closer to Islamabad. Conversely, inaction might embolden both countries, undermining India's security interests.
- **Narrative and Influence Campaign:** Disinformation and skewed narratives shaped by Turkey and Pakistan may hurt India's image globally.
- **Complicating Regional Power Balance:** As a new strategic actor, Turkey's increasing influence in the region complicates the regional power balance.

## Recommendations

- **Expand Strategic Alliances:** Deepening strategic partnerships with Turkey's rivals to counterweigh Turkey's influence.
  - **Strengthening Ties with Israel and France:** Both nations, having complex relations with Turkey, are key suppliers of advanced defence technology to India. Enhanced collaboration can serve as a counterbalance.
  - **Outreach to GCC and Central Asian States:** Building stronger ties with influential Muslim-majority countries can dilute Turkey's influence and garner broader support for India's positions.
  - **Multilateral Diplomacy:** Actively participating in global forums to highlight the destabilising impact of the Turkey-Pakistan axis and garner support for India's positions.
- **Narrative Management:**
  - **Proactive Media Engagement:** Utilising international and regional media to project India's perspectives.
  - **Digital Diplomacy:** Engaging diaspora communities and think tanks to counter misinformation and shape global perceptions.
- **Defence Indigenisation:** Accelerating 'Make in India' to balance any technological edge Pakistan may obtain from its collaboration with Turkey.

## **Conclusion**

Turkey's ascent as a defence industry powerhouse and its deepening partnership with Pakistan have introduced new complexities into South Asia's security landscape. While Turkey's support has enhanced Pakistan's military capabilities, it has also compelled India to reassess its strategic priorities and partnerships. Navigating this evolving trilateral dynamic requires India to adopt a multifaceted approach, combining military preparedness, diplomatic engagement, and strategic alliances to safeguard its interests and maintain regional stability. India must carefully balance its responses, leveraging partnerships, narrative diplomacy, and military capabilities to counter the emerging alliance.

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