

PAKISTAN'S TURKEY RELATIONS AND MENA BALANCING ACTS AFTER IMRAN KHAN'S OUSTER

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Abstract: Pakistan is feeling the aftereffects of populist PM Imran Khan's ouster. With rupee in freefall, dwindling foreign exchange reserves, and Imran Khan in opposition firing salvoes, the new interim government has turned to foreign relations to seek political and economic support from all corners. History shows that the effect of such domestic changes, regardless of how revolutionary they may be, have little negative effect on Turkey-Pakistan relations. Close military partnership and good political and social relations between the two countries are expected to continue while economic relations will remain modest. Whether the new era of Turkey-Pakistan relations will translate into coordination on Afghanistan remains to be seen, because Afghanistan belongs exclusively Pakistan army's purview and the two countries have rarely seen eye-to-eye on Afghanistan. In view of Turkey's new diplomatic shift to normalize relations with its Mediterranean neighbors and Gulf countries, Pakistan can pursue a policy of balance more easily between Turkey, Iran, and the Gulf in the near future.

Introduction

Turkey-Pakistan relations are marked by continuity more than anything else. What started as a modest friendship in the early 1950s evolved very fast into a tight political and military partnership. Bilateral relations have proven durable against domestic turmoil in both countries, leadership changes, and transformations in regional and international system. Can Imran Khan's ouster prove otherwise? How are relations going to evolve under the new interim PM Shehbaz Sharif? How will Pakistan navigate the corridor between Iran, Turkey, and the Gulf states?

This brief argues that Sharifs' return to power will influence Turkey-Pakistan relations more in style than substance. Pragmatic politicians in political power well acquainted with each other and sharing similar way of doing politics will add renewed vigor to bilateral relations. If the interim Pakistan government survives the recent economic onslaught, a possible realignment in foreign policy between the government and army in Pakistan at a time of both broader regional de-escalation moves in the MENA region and Turkey's new diplomatic shift may help bilateral relations as well. Yet, the prime institutional pillar of durable Turkey-Pakistan relations—the Pakistan army—will also draw the limits of bilateral cooperation by its control of most critical foreign policy dossiers such as Afghanistan. Bilateral cooperation that has been missing on such issues as Afghanistan may not therefore be forthcoming. This brief also notes that, in view of the multiple bitter pills the new government will have to swallow to address the current economic crisis, the specter of Imran Khan hovering over Pakistani politics, and the toughest spot the army finds itself in for the first time, a realignment between the new government and army will remain a fragile one.

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A Special Relationship

Neither the partition of India nor the perceived Soviet threat caused Turkey to become pro-Pakistan immediately after end of the World War II. If anything, Turkey in this period refused to participate in the ‘Pan-Islamic Confederacy’ proposed by Zafrulla Khan, Pakistan’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, during his 1952 tour of Turkey, Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon. Turkey turned down this proposal because it believed that ‘Islam, as a cultural link, could not be substituted for the political association Turkey needed in view of its long frontier with the Soviet Union. Also, Turkey was satisfied with the NATO and its military guarantees.’¹

However, the more Turkey tilted toward the West and participated in anti-communist global (NATO, 1952) and regional (MEDO-Middle East Defence Organization, 1953) security organizations, the more it inched closer to Pakistan. Embryonic Turkey and Pakistan partnership grew fast, expanded to Iraq and Iran, and transformed into the Baghdad Pact in 1955. While military and political relations improved at a great pace, cultural and economic relations always lagged even after the establishment of the Regional Cooperation for Development (RCD) in 1964.

Unless Turkey or Pakistan truly changed axis during the Cold War, internal turmoil in either did not affect bilateral relations. For instance, the 1958 coup led by General Ayub Khan in Pakistan caused some concern in Turkey because it came very soon after Abdul Karim Qassim’s coup in Iraq. The DP government worried if this meant further weakening of the Baghdad Pact, while the Turkish opposition criticized the coup for its anti-democratic nature. Turkish officials, however, eschewed any criticism against the coup, and relations continued uninterrupted.² Pakistan treated coups in Turkey in 1960, 1971, and 1980 as if nothing happened. Admittedly, the 1977 coup against PM Bhutto in Pakistan upset PM Demirel, who asked Bhutto to be sent on exile to Turkey. Yet, pragmatism eventually prevailed over Demirel as Turkey preferred order and stability in Pakistan over anarchy.³

Only once in the history of Turkey-Pakistan relations, the Turkish government was openly against coups/military regimes in Pakistan. PM Bülent Ecevit, a social democrat with a warm spot for India, gave the 1999 coup led by General Musharraf in Pakistan an unexpected cold shoulder even though Musharraf was perceived as very close to Turkey. Not only did Ecevit not invite General Musharraf after the coup despite Musharraf’s desire and published no

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statement on what had transpired, but he also refused to stop in Pakistan as a show of gesture during his later visit to India. In sharp (and interesting) contrast, the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs showed 'understanding' in its first official reaction to the coup.⁴ Similarly, then Turkish Ambassador to Islamabad had to convince President Ahmet Necdet Sezer (2000-2007) to do damage control in the face of Ecevit's reaction. Even then, for the first time ever, Pakistan reportedly had the new Turkish ambassador to Islamabad unusually wait for fifty-four days before he could present his credentials to Pakistan's president.⁵ In brief, the impact of domestic changes on Pakistan-Turkey relations have historically been kept at a minimum.

From a Rough Start to Normalcy

Starting in the 2000s, the Justice and Development Party (JDP) and Pakistan Muslim League-N (PML-N) ran on a conservative democratic platform. JDP and PML-N emerged respectively in Turkey and Pakistan as business-friendly, pragmatic political parties open to building broader coalitions to stay in power⁶ and developed an affinity to work together. Turkish companies started to invest in Punjab especially during Sharif's second government term, when Punjab was led by his brother, Shehbaz Sharif.⁷ Turkey-Pakistan relations experienced a brief shock in 2017, when corruption allegations forced PM Nawaz Sharif to resign. In the middle of the political crisis in Pakistan, when PM Sharif was blamed for corruption, President Erdogan visited Islamabad and addressed the Federal Parliament, which the PTI boycotted.⁸ When Nawaz Sharif was forced to eventually resign in 2017, Turkish government circles immediately characterized the corruption case against PM Shariff as a 'judicial coup'. Turkey's pro-government media and think tanks chose to read what happened through the lenses of corruption allegations raised against the JDP in Turkey in December 2013 as well as the 2016 coup attempt.⁹

When Imran Khan was elected in the general elections in 2018 and replaced PM Sharif, there was an initial coldness towards him. Imran Khan was not a figure Turkish officials had an easy time talking to throughout the 2000s either. When Turkish officials visited Pakistan and addressed all political parties/leaders to convince them to reconcile and not boycott the 2008 elections, they had a hard time convincing Imran Khan.¹⁰ When the same Imran Khan became the PM, it took some time for the AKP government to accept him. When the issue of Turkey's desire for the closure of schools controlled by the Gulen movement came up during President Erdogan's visit to Pakistan in November 2016, Imran Khan, then in opposition,

reportedly objected to the move.¹¹ These schools were eventually shut down by the Pakistan Supreme Court in 2019, possibly after an encouragement by the Pakistan army, after Imran Khan's ascent to power.

However, governmental relations rebounded as PM Imran Khan modeled his 'New Pakistan' [*Naya Pakistan*] program partly on the Turkish model. His housing project for the low-income groups and health reform project was inspired by Turkish projects in these fields under the JDP governments.¹² Erdogan and Imran Khan shared a similar political discourse as well. Both had openly spoken against Islamophobia, Western materialism, the IMF, western equation of Islam and terrorism, the unjust global order, and the Kashmir and Palestine causes. Imran Khan also advocated a Sufi understanding of Islam in Pakistan and promoted even closer cultural relations by importing more Turkish TV series to Pakistan.¹³

Turkey's Response to Imran's Ouster

While JDP government-affiliated media groups, some members of the parliament, and social media trolls immediately condemned the 'no-confidence vote' led ironically by Shehbaz Sharif and his political allies as a coup supported by the West, the JDP government kept patently silent.¹⁴ It was interesting, however, that Imran Khan's ouster revealed cracks in preferences within government-affiliated media as well. *Yeni Şafak*, owned by Albayrak business group, which had thrived in Punjab when Shehbaz Sharif was Chief Minister there, ran a headline against Imran Khan, blaming him for leading Pakistan to chaos.¹⁵ Once the 'no-confidence vote' passed and the PTI government collapsed, President Erdoğan was very quick to congratulate Shehbaz Sharif and praised 'the commitment to democracy and the rule of law the people of Pakistan demonstrated once again despite all the hardships and obstacles they had faced.'¹⁶

Given the rifts between Imran Khan and the army and the latter's unhappiness with the PM's erratic policies and populist rhetoric, we can initially expect a more aligned political (civilian and military) leadership in Pakistan. In desperate search for financial aid in the face of an escalating economic crisis at home as well as pressure by Imran Khan's presence in the opposition, the new political leadership will strengthen its coordination with the army and 'run with the hare and hunt with the hounds' when it comes to maneuvering relations with China, Russia, the US, and MENA politics. The new government immediately dropped the fiery rhetoric against the US to secure further IMF funds, take advantage of normalized inter-Gulf relations to ensure steady supplies

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of natural gas from Qatar and financial support by Saudi Arabia, and accelerate the pace of CPEC projects.¹⁷ It was no surprise therefore that Pakistan's new Finance Minister visited Washington immediately after his appointment and is seeking more IMF funds from the \$6bn bailout package agreed in 2019.¹⁸ PM Shehbaz Sharif visited Saudi Arabia for primarily the same reason as well. Saudi Arabia affirmed in a joint statement made after PM Sharif's visit that it will continue to support Pakistan financially by augmenting its \$3bn deposit with the Central Bank of Pakistan.¹⁹ In terms of immediate financial needs of Pakistan, Turkey's own economic turmoil will hamper its ability to gain any exclusive leverage.

Turkey-Pakistan military to military relationship has been a steady pillar of bilateral relations. Areas of bilateral military cooperation will be bracketed from other issues and should be expected to continue.²⁰ Economic relations however have remained weak from the day relations were established. Trade volume between both countries has been stuck at a mere one billion USD for years, despite constant push by officials from both sides. The problem is more structural, not intentional. Both economies produce similar goods, primarily textile, so there is little complementarity. Pakistan has been eager to sign a free trade agreement with Turkey since 2015, but to no avail.²¹ No new government will be able to increase the trade volume soon.

Turkey's desired influence in Afghanistan will remain as the thorniest issue between the two countries. Different visions over Afghanistan between Turkey and Pakistan in the 1990s put a real stress on relations. During Taliban's rise to power in 1996 and 1997, Turkey was trying to make sure that Afghan armed groups were unified against the Taliban. Former Turkish Ambassador details in his memoirs the extent to which Turkish activity in Afghanistan disturbed Pakistan.²² Fast forwarding this to 2021, it seems Turkey received little assistance from Pakistan to move the Afghan peace talks to Turkey. Turkey was also disappointed to not receive sufficient support from Pakistan in its bid to resume the operation of Kabul airport.²³ Can the new interim government now help Turkey undertake the security and operation of Kabul airport? Given Pakistan military's tight control of foreign affairs and the Afghanistan dossier, a change in government may not automatically bring a change in Turkey-Pakistan cooperation in Afghanistan.

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Balancing Acts in a new Season

Regional polarization with the Arab Spring had put an immense strain on governments in Pakistan in finding balanced relations in the region. Pakistan has historically had to walk a tightrope between Saudi Arabia, a source of financial aid, and Iran, an indispensable geopolitical neighbor.²⁴ Pakistan had to fine tune its policy between Qatar, a recipient of Pakistani migrants and critical supplier of gas used for Pakistan's energy needs, and other Gulf nations. The siege of Qatar after the summer of 2017 left Pakistan between rock and a hard place. Pakistan was also torn about whether to support the Saudi coalition in its air operations in the Yemeni civil war.

Imran Khan's government deeply felt some of these dead-ends too. Imran Khan first seemed to side with Malaysia, Iran, Qatar, and Turkey as a new center of gravity in the Muslim world in 2019, yet pulled out from an 'Islamic Summit' meeting in Malaysia.²⁵ This resulted from its economic dependency on Saudi Arabia and put pressure on its ties with Turkey.²⁶ OIC's silence on Kashmir, after India revoked Kashmir's special status in the Indian constitution to incorporate it into the Union territory in 2019, caused a big downturn in Pakistan-Saudi Arabia relations.²⁷ In the process of signing of the Abraham Accords process, Pakistan claimed that it was being pressured by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to recognize Israel as well.²⁸

The season of regional de-escalation in the MENA region provides an opportune moment for Pakistan to manage regional relations better. Multiple and parallel de-escalation moves in the region between Saudi Arabia and Iran; Turkey and Israel, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the UAE; the earlier restoration of relations between Qatar and the remaining GCC nations, as well as negotiations for the renewal of the nuclear deal (JCPOA) between the west and Iran will relieve a big burden on Pakistan's MENA policy. The fact that President Erdogan and PM Shehbaz Sharif both arrived in Saudi Arabia for official visits on April 28th is indicative of the winds of change. While both countries entertained ideas for a new center of gravity in the Islamic world a few years earlier, the lack of resources and economic crises in both countries led them back to Saudi Arabia.

One potential area of further cooperation between Pakistan and Turkey could be in China-Pakistan Economic Corridor projects. China and Pakistan had agreed in 2018 to open

CPEC to investment of friendly third countries.²⁹ Turkey, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates alongside a few other countries have been interested in investing and working on CPEC projects.³⁰ PM Shehbaz Sharif recently proposed to attach Turkey more to CPEC, proposing to transform it into a trilateral arrangement between Turkey, Pakistan, and China.³¹ The normalization of Turkey's relations with Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates may remove any hurdles before Pakistan's attempts to entice investment from its West Asian partners into CPEC.

The renewed ties between Turkey and Saudi Arabia may facilitate more OIC focus on Afghanistan. In 2009, one of the ways the Obama Administration thought Turkey could help Afghanistan was by leveraging its position in the OIC and strengthening ties with the Arab world to secure more financial support from the OIC for Afghanistan and Pakistan.³² The OIC Council of Foreign Ministers convened in Islamabad and pledged to establish a humanitarian trust fund for Afghanistan in December 2021.³³ This is coming into fruition under the name of the Afghanistan Humanitarian Trust Fund (AHTF).³⁴ Turkey supported this pledge in December and may now use its rapprochement with Saudi Arabia to push for more assistance to Pakistan and Afghanistan.

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