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Turkey's Adventurism against India: Perceived Threats and Challenges



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Introduction

The deep historical, civilisational and cultural connect between India and Turkey dates back to the relations that existed between pre-independence India and the Ottoman Empire. Diplomatic relations between the two countries were established in 1948, based on several common principles like democracy and secularism. The economic engagement between the countries has been quiet strong and in 2018 the bilateral trade grew by 22 per cent and crossed \$8.6 billion.¹ However, on certain geopolitical issues, Turkey views its bilateral relations with India from the 'prism of its relations' with Pakistan. This further became evident after the constitutional and administrative developments in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) on 5 August 2019.

Turkey has been avidly supporting Pakistan's stance on abrogation of Article 370, so much so that, it has attempted to internationalise the Kashmir issue on various occasions. It has a growing ambition of projecting itself as the 'leader' of the world's Muslim population. In

Key Points

- The historical bilateral relation between India and Turkey is witnessing a period of tension due to Turkey's constant support to Pakistan's stance on the abrogation of Article 370 by India.
- With an aim to influence the global Muslim community and challenge the custodianship of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Turkey has been using its 'soft power' in Europe, Africa and South Asia.
- In India, the intelligence and security agencies have flagged the growing outreach of the Turkish media, religious and educational institutions, and non-governmental organisations.
- India must take cognisance of Turkey's lucrative scholarships and exchange programmes targeting Indian youth belonging to the Muslim community, events on anti-India themes in Turkish universities, biased coverage and fake propaganda by the state-led media platforms and multiple fabricated statements by the Turkish leadership during international engagements.
- Turkey's adventurism against India must be countered through India's foreign policy objectives and security apparatus. Also, both countries must ensure that this does not become a serious impediment to the civilisational ties between the two countries.

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December 2020, *Pentapostagma* (a Greek newspaper) in a report titled “Erdogan sends mercenaries to Kashmir” mentioned in detail about Turkey’s ‘alleged preparations’ to send its mercenaries from East Syria to Kashmir.² Even though such reports seem dubious but they can not be completely ignored considering the growing influence of Turkey’s ‘soft power’ in Europe, Africa and South Asia through its media, educational and religious institutions and NGOs. It is part of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s efforts to “revivify Islamist Turkey”³ and his vision of ‘Neo-Ottomanism’ for the world in which Turkey would be an economic and cultural powerhouse and at the same time would replace Saudi Arabia as the authentic custodian of global Islam. This paper aims to highlight the security implication of Turkish activities against India and suggests recommendations to tackle these threats and challenges.

Official Discourse of the Turkish Leadership

A change in the official discourse of Turkey towards India is evidently visible since 5 August 2019. Numerous statements have been given through official channels targeting India in general and Kashmir in particular— thus interfering in the internal matters of India.

Most notable comments were on Turkey’s reaction to the abrogation and support to Pakistan. For instance, on 24 September 2019, in his address to the 74th session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), the Turkish President said that “despite the resolutions adopted, Kashmir is still besieged, and eight million people are stuck in Kashmir”.⁴ At another event on ‘Combating Hate Speech’ the President again attacked India by saying, “in India, how will we defend Muslim youth who are being whipped, beaten by machetes and even sentenced to death just for eating beef”.⁵ Commenting on Kashmir, he said, “it has turned into an open air prison and its residents have become prisoners; Turkey is resolved to defend the rights of Muslims living in J&K and make their entry and exit free”.⁶ What is all the more surprising is that his popularity on social media increased manifold after such statements with hash tag #OurVoiceErdogan trending and praising his advocacy for the welfare of Muslims all around the world—from Palestine to Kashmir.⁷ In February 2020, during a state visit to Pakistan, the Turkish President, in his speech at the Pakistan National Assembly, compared the “struggle of Kashmiris” with the Ottoman Empire’s fight during World War I. He went on to assert that Kashmir is as important to Turkey as it is to Pakistan. He said, “Kashmir is and will be the same for us. It was Çanakkale⁸ yesterday and it is Kashmir today”.⁹



Repeatedly, Turkey has raised the issue of Kashmir at the UNGA and President Erdogan has even accused India of being a country where “massacres of Muslims” are widespread and perpetrated by the Hindus. Even though since 1947, Turkey has had a stronger bilateral relation with Pakistan in comparison to India but certainly its support to Pakistan on Kashmir has found greater prominence in the Turkish foreign policy since the ascendance of Recep Tayyip Erdogan as the President of the country in 2014. To accomplish his global ambitions to influence the Muslim community, the Turkish leader, through his statements, is targeting India which has the third largest Muslim population of the world. According to a Turkish columnist, Abdullah Bozkurt, Erdogan has directed all his diplomats to approach prominent clerics, businessmen and politicians, and pointed out towards radical preacher Sheikh Salman al-Husseini al-Nadwi as the main conduit for establishing an ‘Erdogan support base’ among the Indian Muslims.¹⁰

Religious Outreach

Diyanet or the Directorate of Religious Affairs is Turkey’s official institution mandated to regulate the religious arena both domestically and internationally. The institution was founded in 1924 to manage the prayer houses and deal with the belief and practices of Islam which falls outside the regulations legislated and executed by the Grand National Assembly of Turkey. Since 1970s, it has been given the duty to also provide religious services to the Turkish diaspora. Hence, the activities of the Diyanet have expanded to Europe, Balkan peninsula, Asia and Africa. The ruling Justice and Development Party or the Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP) has further intensified the ‘transnationalisation’ of the Diyanet. In 2018, it was operating in 36 countries with 61 branches.¹¹ The institution functions with significant financial resources and is completely supported by the Turkish Government. On the pretext of reaching its citizens abroad, Turkey has been appointing religious attachés from the Diyanet to the Turkish embassies and consulates as religious diplomats across various countries. It has in fact started to function as a parallel diplomatic machine of the Turkish state.¹² While presence of such religious attachés as part of the Turkish diplomatic mission in India is unknown but they do have a wide presence in several European countries wherein they could try getting in touch with the Indian diaspora. This requires attention of India’s diplomatic missions and the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA).

The reports of India’s Intelligence agencies, in July 2020, have raised concerns over Turkey’s role in funding religious seminars, supporting fundamentalists and introducing young Indians visiting Turkey to extremist thoughts and literature.¹³ According to such



reports, Turkey has been funding some Kerala based Islamist fundamentalist organisations and paying around Rs 40 lakh to religious teachers preaching extremist thoughts and also the Diyanet has been distributing copies of the Quran— translated in the Malayalam language— to the Muslims of Kerala under an initiative called “Quran, My Gift”.¹⁴ Thus, the Diyanet has become very influential under the current Turkish government and allegedly acts as its propagandist abroad.

According to the Nordic Research Monitoring Network, members of the Popular Front of India (PFI) were hosted in Turkey in 2018 by the Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief (İnsan Hak ve Hürriyetleri ve İnsani Yardım Vakfı, or IHH).¹⁵ IHH is considered to be an organisation working closely with the AKP and the Turkish intelligence agency. It has also been accused of aiding and abetting terror in different countries and has been banned by Israel, Germany and the Netherlands. Interestingly, PFI has been accused of radicalising the Muslim youth of India and has been involved in various violent clashes and political murders. The Enforcement Directorate (ED) of India has even accused PFI of complicity in funding violent protests in some parts of the country in December 2019.

There exist close links between controversial Turkish and Indian clerics who have a role in propagating extremist thoughts. Jagdish N. Singh in his article “Erdoğan’s Dangerous Ambitions Threaten India and Beyond” mentioned about a Pakistan educated Turkish cleric— Serdar Demirel— who had participated in a protest march in 2016 against the Government of India’s proposal to implement a Uniform Civil Code across the country.¹⁶ Also, controversial Indian clerics like Zakir Naik and Sheikh Salman al-Husseini al-Nadwi, accused of terror-related activities and inciting extremism through hate speeches, also have a close nexus with Turkey and frequently visit the country. For instance, Zakir Naik in several of his speeches has showcased his support for President Erdogan and has even projected him as the supreme leader of the Muslim community.¹⁷ Also, it has been found that Zakir Naik has close ties with IHH. Some people still follow these ‘radical’ clerics and regularly watch their hate speeches and sermons that are easily available on the internet— such networking is part of Turkish government’s outreach programme towards the Muslim community.

Educational Opportunities

Turkey has been providing lucrative educational scholarships and organising exchange programmes through various state sponsored NGOs. They mainly target the Muslim



students in India especially the Kashmiri students. Some of the sponsors of these scholarships include the Turkey Youth Foundation (TUGVA), Presidency of Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB), the Turkish Airlines, Yunnus Emre Institute (YEI), Turkey's Diyanet Foundation (TDF) and Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA).¹⁸ Amongst these, allegedly TUGVA has developed strong networks within India especially with extremist outfits like PFI and the Social Democratic Party of India (SDPI).¹⁹ The government funded 'Turkiye Scholarships' is the international scholarship program allowing foreign individuals to study at Turkish universities at the undergraduate, postgraduate and PhD levels and offers them allowances, accommodation, tuition fees, health expenses and Turkish language instruction. Such an extensive program is becoming increasingly popular amongst the students of the Indian subcontinent. All scholarship students are provided with one year free of charge Turkish language course and are acquainted with the Turkish culture by ways of trips and programmes. Ruwa Shah, granddaughter of Kashmir's infamous separatist leader Syed Ali Shah Geelani is also a recipient of such scholarships and currently disseminates propaganda against India from there.²⁰

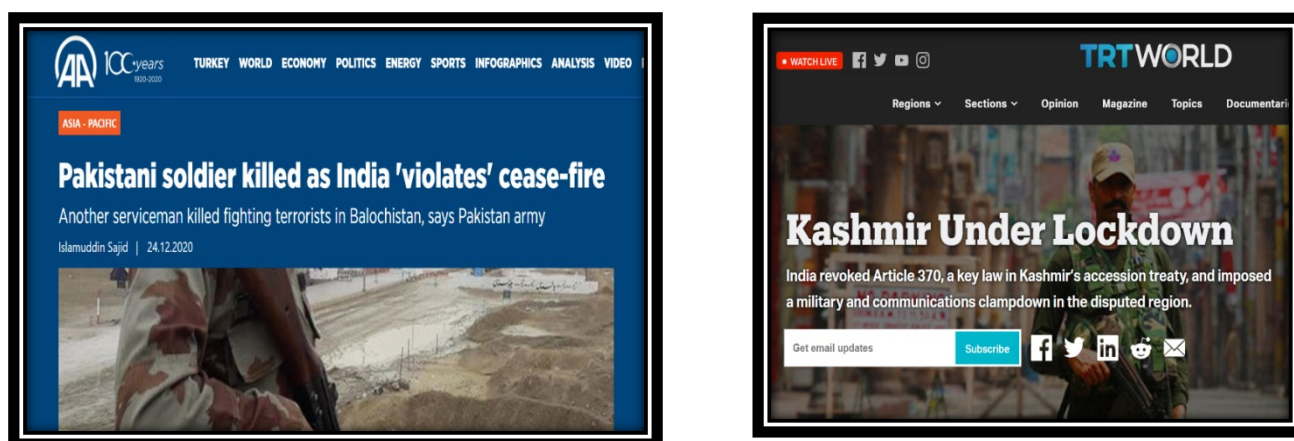
Another way used by Turkey to spread propaganda against India is by the South Asian Centre for Strategic Studies (GASAM), a think tank located in Istanbul and established in 2004 founded by Ali Sahin, a Turk who studied in Pakistan and has inimical views on India. This think tank has many anti-India publications. These publications consist of several false accusations and criticisms against India. Also, Turkish universities have been organising multiple events on themes such as 'Jammu and Kashmir under the pressure of far-right nationalism' in Istanbul's Aydin University or 'The Question of Kashmir' and 'From 05 August 2019, till today: endless martial law' in the Istanbul University.²¹

Media Platforms

Freedom of press in Turkey has been limited since the coup attempt in 2016. The content disseminated within the country and abroad has largely aimed to create a perception in favour of the current government's domestic and foreign policy. Some prominent instances of the role of Turkish media in building narrative includes the Syrian conflict, Arab Spring and the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict. Similarly, it has been creating a narrative against India through its 'biased coverage' of the India-Pakistan relations and the issue of Kashmir. Many Kashmiri separatists and Pakistani journalists have found space in the mainstream print and broadcast media of Turkey wherein they work towards their agenda of criticising and maligning India internationally. *Anadolu Agency* and *Turkish Radio and Television*

Corporation (TRT) are two of Turkey's most popular media platforms with wide viewership and audience—nationally and internationally. These are state-run news agency and national public broadcaster respectively. Both of these have been publishing and broadcasting with huge amount of bias against India. For instance, *Anadolu Agency* reported that the problem between India and Pakistan over J&K is equivalent to the Artsakh problem, i.e. the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Currently, out of 11 copy editors in *Anadolu Agency*, five posts have been occupied by Pakistani nationals.²² Clearly, the positioning of Pakistani journalists in Turkish media outlets is a part of Pakistan's psychological warfare and influence operations against India.

Figure 1: Biased Coverage on India by Turkish Media



Source: Anadolu Agency and TRT World

Similarly *TRT World* on its official YouTube channel has been broadcasting propaganda videos like “Decoded: India’s Annexation of Kashmir”, “India’s Settler Colonialism in Kashmir”, “Is India using Hindu pilgrimages to tighten its grip around Kashmir?”, “Is Kashmir becoming Palestine?”, etc. *TRT Urdu* has also come up with several propaganda materials for India. They are actively using WhatsApp groups and trying to create a new Islamic identity in India.²³ However, not even once, have these media outlets criticised Pakistan for sponsoring terrorist organisations in Kashmir. As part of its anti-India propaganda, Turkey has also released songs on J&K such as “*My Name is Kashmi*”, “*Kashmir March*” and “*We Will Never Betray*”. These songs have accused India of ‘massacre’, ‘torture’ and other alleged brutalities in J&K and are filled with morphed images depicting the same. According to the Indian security forces, there is a growing popularity of a Turkish television series ‘*Diriliş: Ertuğrul*’ or ‘*Resurrection: Ertugrul*’ amongst the youth of India.²⁴ Even though the series is based on the prehistoric times of the Ottoman Empire, however, it is being used by



Pakistan and Turkey as propaganda. According to the *Anadolu agency*, the series provides a “voice of hope to the oppressed residents of Kashmir”.²⁵

India's Response to the Turkish Influence

The aggressive diplomatic stance displayed by the Turkish leadership at international platforms has not gone unnoticed by India. The MEA has proactively responded to any references made to India's internal affairs by Turkey. The Indian Prime Minister also cancelled his scheduled state visit to Turkey planned in the last months of 2019 as a response to President Erdogan's remarks on India's internal affairs at the UNGA.²⁶ Responding to the growing defence ties between Turkey and Pakistan, India has restricted the exports of military equipment and dual-use items like explosives and detonators to Turkey and has even criticised Turkish military offensive in north-eastern Syria in October 2019.²⁷ However, awareness regarding Turkish activities against India, using its ‘soft power’, remains limited. Today, such Turkish actions do not seem to be a major threat to India's national security but it certainly has the potential to harm the social fabric and the law and order situation of the country, if not tackled with in a timely manner.

Way Ahead for India

The following options could be explored in order to control Turkey's “new found role” in India:

- **Closer Diplomatic Relations with others.** Turkey shares fractious bilateral relations with some countries including Cyprus, Armenia, Greece, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, France, etc. Diplomatic tensions keep escalating between Turkey and these countries. To counter Turkey's adventurism, India must take note of such fractious bilateral relations and enhance its diplomatic relations with those countries. Possible cooperation in the fields of defence, politics, economics, consular and cultural relations must be explored.
- **Travel Advisory.** Many Indians have been travelling to Turkey for tourism, educational and religious purposes. Travel advisory for Turkey issued by India in October 2019 states that “travellers must exercise utmost caution”.²⁸ Such advisories must be continued. An intelligence report in August 2020 claimed that once the students land in Turkey, they are approached and lured by Pakistani proxies operating there.²⁹ Hence, Indian diplomatic missions in Turkey must be careful about the safety of its citizens and caution them from getting possibly engaged in anti-India activities. Also, they must be consistently in communication with the Indian diaspora in Turkey, especially the student



community. The security agencies must look closely at how extremist literature from abroad gets circulated in India and have proper mechanisms in place to ensure that people do not illicitly carry extremist literature in electronic and removable devices while travelling to India.

- ***Taking Strong Stance against Terrorism.*** Some news reports have suggested that Turkey covertly supports terrorist organisations like ISIS and Al- Qaeda. Many have alleged that Turkey (family members of President Erdogan) has involvement in the illegal trade in oil by ISIS. According to Lt. Col. (res.) Dr. Mordechai Kedar, “ISIS transported oil from occupied oil fields of Iraq and Syria to Turkey in tankers, whereupon Turkey sold the oil to other countries as if it were from Iraq and Syria and shared some of the proceeds with ISIS.”³⁰ Almost all the terrorists who travelled from different parts of the world to Iraq and Syria to join the cadre of ISIS went from the Turkish borders. India must look into the authenticity of such claims and must call out Turkey’s support for banned terrorist organisations at international engagements especially considering India’s resolve to take a strong stand against terrorism during its tenure as a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) as well as the chair of the Counterterrorism Committee in 2022.
- ***Strict Media Control.*** Media platforms of Turkey that have been at the forefront of spreading propaganda against India must be dealt with strictly. There is grave misrepresentation of Indian map and facts in their reports. TRT’s unbiased coverage on Kashmir is highlighted on their website under a separate topic “Kashmir Under Lockdown”. Action must be taken by the Indian authorities against such media outlets because such propaganda is further circulated to brainwash the youth of the country. To counter this, the Indian Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) must showcase its objection to the representatives of the social media platforms being used by Turkey for anti-India propaganda like YouTube. In December 2020, Turkish media reported that the Turkish Telecommunications Authority has blocked an Indian website on the pretext that it spreads anti-Pakistan propaganda.³¹ India must also take similar steps towards Turkish websites that spread anti-India propaganda especially *Anadolu Agency* and *TRT*. Also, in 2016, reportedly India’s public broadcaster *Prasar Bharati* and Turkey’s state broadcaster *TRT* were set to sign a memorandum of understanding (MoU) for content collaboration.³² The status of the same is unknown in the public domain however, any further action to this end must take into consideration the incessant propaganda by TRT against India.

Figure 2: Misrepresentation of the Map of India by TRT World



Source: TRT World, 'India-China Tensions', YouTube, 13 September 2017, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4JmT2HilTDo&feature=emb_logo&ab_channel=TheNewsmakers (Annotated by author)

- **Strict Digital Content Control.** Over the past few years, Turkish television drama have gained immense popularity worldwide, including India. The security forces in India have raised concerns regarding the possibility of series like “Diriliş: Ertuğrul” or “Resurrection: Ertugrul” being used as a tool of propaganda to instigate violence. India’s Ministry of Information and Broadcasting must take note of such apprehensions and ensure that the content of Turkish drama complies to the Indian broadcasting standards and does not harm the security of the country.
- **Encourage Research.** Government of India must encourage research on Turkey’s growing influence in different parts of the world using organisations like Diyanet and IHH. The widespread influence of Diyanet in European counties needs detailed examination. Even though the Turkish influence in India today is limited but research on its activities in other countries will enable India to counter any future threats and challenges from Turkey.



Conclusion

Turkey's close bilateral relations with Pakistan have never majorly impacted India-Turkey bilateral relations and frequent exchange of visits by the leaders continued till 2017 alongside strong economic engagements. However, Turkey's growing support to Pakistan's stance on Kashmir and repeatedly discussing India's internal affairs at international platforms will certainly act as an impediment in the bilateral relations. India must take into consideration the perceived threats and challenges emanating from Turkey to the country's national security and counter these through concerted efforts of India's foreign policy and security apparatus. At the same time it is essential that both the countries value the strong historical ties and engage diplomatically to resolve such issues, hence avoiding them from becoming factors of stunting the India-Turkey bilateral relations.

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