

INDIA-PAKISTAN CRISIS AND PAKISTAN'S STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS

SHALINI CHAWLA

The Pahalgam terror attack on April 22, 2025, led to a four-day India-Pakistan conflict after India launched Operation Sindoor on May 7 and destroyed nine terror camps located in Pakistan and Pakistan-occupied Jammu and Kashmir areas.¹ The conflict demonstrated the effectiveness of India's offensive and defensive capabilities. India's tactical capabilities were effective in striking the key terrorists' sites and military infrastructure in Pakistan. India's air defence systems (indigenous and Russian) were successful in intercepting and neutralising Pakistan's missile and drone strikes in various regions of India's western border.

In the aftermath of Operation Sindoor, Pakistan has been aggressively driving the narrative of victory. Within Pakistan, the media reports, official statements and military briefings have carried the narrative of Pakistan's conventional capability, which

Dr **Shalini Chawla** is a Distinguished Fellow at the Centre for Air Power Studies, New Delhi.

1. Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, Media Centre, Transcript of Special Briefing on OPERATION SINDOOR, May 7, 2025, <https://www.mea.gov.in/media-briefings.htm?dtl/39474/Transcript+of+Special+Briefing+on+OPERATION+SINDOOR+May+07+2025>. Accessed on May 10, 2025.

deterred India and compelled it to de-escalate. Pakistan issued a dossier praising the victory of Operation Bunyan-un-Marsoos, the name given to the operation by Pakistan.² Pakistan Army Chief, General Asim Munir, has been promoted to the rank of field marshal. Even though Pakistan is hailing its victory primarily based on the “managed” perception of loss of Indian jets on May 7, the fact remains that the Chinese air defence system with Pakistan failed to intercept and counter India’s precision strikes.

During Operation Sindoor and the evolving dynamics of the India-Pakistan crisis, support from China and Türkiye has been crucial for Pakistan. Azerbaijan’s posture has been supportive of Pakistan, and some interesting dynamics are evolving. The paper aims to analyse Pakistan’s strategic partnership with China and Türkiye, as well as the evolving trends in this direction.

PAKISTAN AND CHINA: ETERNAL BROTHERHOOD

China’s support to Pakistan in the crisis was not unexpected given the strong alliance between the two nations. Following the Pahalgam attack, China’s Foreign Minister Wang Yi said, “As an ironclad friend and an all-weather strategic cooperative partner, China fully understands Pakistan’s legitimate security concerns and supports Pakistan in safeguarding its sovereignty and security interests”. He advocated “for a swift and fair investigation” and said that Beijing “believes that conflict does not serve the fundamental interests of either India or Pakistan, nor does it benefit regional peace and stability.”³ Commenting on the Indian strikes on May 7, Lin Jian, China’s Foreign Ministry spokesperson, termed the Indian strikes as “regrettable”.⁴

2. “Operation Bunyan-un-Marsoos: Pakistan Issues Dossier Exposing Indian Aggression”, *Dunya News*, May 18, 2025, <https://dunyanews.tv/en/Pakistan/884733-operation-bunyanunmarsoos-pakistan-issues-dossier-exposing-indian-a>. Accessed on May 8, 2025.

3. “Rimjhim Singh, “China Backs Pakistan, Calls for ‘Swift, Fair’ Probe into Pahalgam Attack”, *Business Standard*, April 28, 2025, https://www.business-standard.com/external-affairs-defence-security/news/china-pakistan-security-pahalgam-terror-attack-swift-fair-probe-india-125042800234_1.html. Accessed on May 20, 2025.

4. Rishika Singh, “From US to China, How Global Media Covered India’s Operation Sindoor Against Pakistan”, *The Indian Express*, May 7, 2025, <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/us-china-media-reaction-op-sindoor-pakistan-9988919/>. Accessed on May 10, 2025.

China extended its support to Pakistan, while maintaining a neutral position, urging both sides to de-escalate. It is speculated that China could have extended technical support to Pakistan during the crisis.⁵ China's posture during the crisis can be seen as a cautious balance where it was trying to manage its eternal brotherhood with Islamabad, significant investment and stakes within Pakistan [China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)], while at the same time judiciously expressing concerns about terrorism and maintaining a neutral stance which favoured stability.

Pakistan relies heavily on China for its weapon modernisation, and approximately 80 per cent of Pakistan's equipment is imported from China. Beijing's strategic interests allowed a robust export of defence equipment to Pakistan starting in the mid-1960s. For Pakistan, Chinese weapons are cheaper than Western equipment and credit from China is available on easy repayment terms. The supply of Chinese conventional weapons started in the 1960s and 1970s with F-7s and Mig-19 fighters from China. In the 1980s, the Pakistan Army inventory included significant Chinese equipment, including the T-59 Main Battle Tanks (MBTs), T-60 and T-63 light tanks, and Type 531 Armoured Personnel Carriers (APCs).⁶ By the early 1980s, China had provided Pakistan with approximately 65 per cent of its aircraft and 75 per cent of its tanks.⁷ Pakistan's military build-up has continued primarily through Chinese defence imports and US military assistance, despite phases of economic crisis in Pakistan. Over the last two and a half decades, the focus of Pakistan's arms procurement has been modernisation of the Pakistan Air Force (PAF) and build-up of the maritime and strike capabilities of the navy. In this regard, the technology transfer from China has been a key feature.

The Aircraft Manufacturing Factory (AMF), under the Pakistan Aeronautical Complex (PAC) at Kamra, started production of the

-
5. "Operation Sindoor: China Gave Pakistan Air Defence, Satellite Support, Report Says," *The Times of India*, May 19, 2025, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/operation-sindoor-china-gave-pakistan-air-defence-satellite-support-report-says/articleshow/121263123.cms>. Accessed on May 21, 2025.
 6. See, Shalini Chawla, *Pakistan's Military and Its Strategy* (New Delhi: Knowledge World, 2009)
 7. Pervez Iqbal Cheema, *The Armed Forces of Pakistan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 164.

Karakoram-8 jet trainer in collaboration with the China National Aero-Technology Import and Export Corporation (CATIC). Pakistan has been very proud of the Chinese fourth-generation fighter aircraft JF-17s (earlier called the FC-1). The JF-17 is co-developed by Pakistan and China and is being built by China's Chengdu Aircraft Industry Corporation (CAC) and the Pakistan Aeronautical Complex (PAC). Reports suggest the PAC has been producing 58 per cent of the JF-17s airframe, and China's CAC 42 percent of it. Pakistan has purchased the J-10 C, a multirole combat aircraft, from China and received the first batch of the aircraft in early 2022. The JF-17 Block III and J-10s are equipped with the Chinese PL-15 long-range air-to-air missiles. Reportedly, Pakistan has plans to acquire up to 40 units of the Chinese fifth-generation stealth fighter, the J-35A. The J-35A, developed by Shenyang Aircraft Corporation, is the second fifth-generation stealth fighter, followed by the J-20.⁸

Pakistan acquired and inducted multiple units of the HQ-9P into the army from China in 2021. The air defence system offers long-range surface-to-air capabilities with a base range of 130 km. Pakistan acquired the HQ-9B for the PAF, which has a range of 250-300 km. The Chinese LY-80, the export variant of the HQ-16, entered Pakistani service in 2017. It is considered as a cornerstone of Pakistan's layered air defence strategy and is effective against slower targets, and has a range of 40-70 km.

Robust nuclear assistance from China is one of the most critical dimensions of the China-Pakistan alliance. China has adopted an extremely supportive posture in the development of Pakistan's nuclear weapons and supplied it with a variety of nuclear products and services, ranging from uranium to enrichment technology, to research and power reactors.⁹ China's continued missile assistance to Pakistan has been the most significant factor in Pakistan's missile build-up. In 1991, China transferred the M-11 missiles and M-9 Short-Range Ballistic Missiles (SRBMs) to Pakistan. The flow of missile technology has been consistent and Pakistan's missile programme has

-
8. "Fifth-Gen Game Changer: China Accelerates J-35A Transfer to Pakistan in Dramatic Shift to Regional Power Balance", *Defence Security Asia*, May 15, 2025, <https://defencesecurityasia.com/en/fifth-gen-game-changer-china-accelerates-j-35a-transfer-to-pakistan-in-dramatic-shift-to-regional-power-balance/>. Accessed on May 20, 2025.
 9. See, Dr Shalini Chawla, *Nuclear Pakistan* (New Delhi: Knowledge World, 2012), p. 81.

come a long way. Chinese missile assistance to Pakistan ranges from providing equipment and training to transferring complete missiles. The technology of the M-11 was used by Pakistan to develop future missiles, the Hatf-3 and Hatf-4. Although the Hatf-5 is commonly known as a North Korean missile, reports suggest that China was under sanctions and was unable to export missiles to Pakistan, and North Korea became a transferring agent for the Hatf-5, which is also known as the Ghauri. The Hatf-6 is believed to be based upon the earlier Chinese two-stage solid propellant missile M-18, which was demonstrated in 1988.¹⁰ In early March 2015, Pakistan test-launched a surface-to-surface ballistic missile, the Shaheen-III. Reports suggest that the missile is capable of carrying a nuclear or conventional warhead to a range of 2,750 km.¹¹ The Shaheen III uses the Chinese 16 wheel Transporter Erector Launcher (TEL). Reportedly, Pakistan started negotiations with the China Precision Machinery Import-Export Corporation (CPMIEC) and exported “two 16x16 WS-21200s for use as TELs for the Shaheen-III missiles”.¹²

Pakistan’s indigenous defence production has expanded significantly in the last four decades. The small arms and light weapons industry has been developed significantly, fulfilling the requirements of not only Pakistan’s military but also of more than 30 nations, which are presently importing weapons from Pakistan. It is interesting to note that the majority of the defence production units were established to cater to servicing Chinese equipment and to assemble, co-manufacture, and produce Chinese equipment under technology transfer agreements. For example, the co-production of the JF-17 aircraft and the production of the F-22 frigates for the navy. In 2006, the Pakistan Navy ordered four F-22P-type frigates from China. It was agreed that the fourth F-22P would be manufactured in Pakistan at a Karachi shipyard to fulfil a pledge to transfer Chinese shipbuilding technology, which was part of the April 2005 agreement to build the frigates. In order to undertake the construction of the F-22,

10. James C O’Hollaoran, *HIS Jane’s Weapons Strategic*, 2016-2017, p. 77.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 79.

12. “Pakistan’s New Shaheen-III MRBM Uses Chinese Transporter, says Source”, <http://www.janes.com/article/61862/...iii-mrbm-uses-chinese-transporter-says-source>, cited in Pakistan Defence, <https://defence.pk/pdf/threads/pakistans-new-shaheen-iii-mrbm-useschinese-transporter-says-source.437117/>. Accessed on March 10, 2025.

the Karachi Shipyard and Engineering Works (KSEW) underwent massive upgradation in 2008-09.¹³

Pakistan remains heavily reliant on Beijing for its defence modernisation. The momentum of the defence cooperation between the two iron brothers is likely to continue. However, the question remains whether Pakistan will draw lessons from Operation Sindoor and explore options for its defence requirements, specifically the air defence systems. The performance of the Chinese air defence systems, HQ-9 and HQ-16, was indeed a setback to Pakistan during the crisis, and reports suggest that Pakistan is aiming to acquire an air defence system from Türkiye.¹⁴

China's position on Kashmir has remained, by and large, in favour of Pakistan. However, Beijing's overt position on Kashmir has witnessed some deviations in the intensity of support it has extended to Pakistan. After the revocation of Article 370 by India in August 2019, China has expressed its frustration, anger, and support for Pakistan's position on Kashmir. China raised the issue of Kashmir in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and has repeatedly tried to call meetings of the UNSC to discuss the issue. There are dual standards in Beijing's position, where, on one side, it talks about Kashmir being a bilateral issue, and, on the other, its efforts have been to internationalise Kashmir and discuss it in multilateral fora.

PAKISTAN AND TÜRKIYE: GROWING STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP AND BROTHERHOOD IN MAKING

During Operation Sindoor, not only did Pakistan extensively rely on the Turkish drones (Songar armed drone systems, manufactured by Turkish defence firm Asisguard) but also enjoyed diplomatic backing from Türkiye's leadership. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, stood in strong support of Pakistan during and after Operation

13. Karachi Shipyard and Engineering Works Limited (KSEW), *Globalsecurity*, <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/pakistan/ksew.htm>. Accessed on August 10, 2024.

14. "Pakistan Turns to Turkish SEPER Air Defense Systems after Chinese HQ-16 and HQ-9 Failures", Indian Defence Research Wing, May 24, 2025 <https://idrw.org/pakistan-turns-to-turkish-seper-air-defense-systems-after-chinese-hq-16-and-hq-9-failures/>. Accessed on May 28, 2025.

Sindoor. He termed the relationship between Türkiye and Pakistan as “one of the finest examples of true friendship”.¹⁵ Türkiye faced a strong reaction in India for its support for Pakistan during the crisis, leading to cancellations by a large number of Indian tourists visiting Türkiye and also cancellation of the contracts for Turkish companies in India.

Pakistan’s relations with Türkiye have evolved over time, given the mutual strategic interests and ideological empathy the two countries share. Türkiye and Pakistan have shared stable economic and defence ties and have collaborated on defence technology and joint ventures. Pakistan is the second largest recipient of Turkish arms exports (2020-24).¹⁶ There has been a steady development in the cooperation areas, and it would be useful to mention some of the critical developments. Türkiye has been active in upgrading the F-16s for Pakistan and has supplied Pakistan with advanced drones, including the Bayraktar, TB2 and Akinci. In 2016, a deal was reportedly signed for the mid-life upgrade of the Agosta 90-B submarines of the Pakistan Navy by the Turkish firm STM.¹⁷ In 2018, the Pakistan Ministry of Defence Production and Türkiye’s main Contractor Military Factory and Shipyard Management Inc., ASFAT, signed a deal (effective from March 11, 2019), on the Pakistan Navy MILGEM Corvette Project (MILGEM-J Pakistan Naval Forces named JINNAH class) which covers the construction of four corvettes based on the design of the ADA class corvette.¹⁸

The Pakistan Air Force chose the Turkish-made Aselpod for the JF-17s and ordered the Aselpod from the Turkish firm ASELSAN

15. “Will Continue to Support Pakistan in Good Times and Bad says Turkish President Erdogan Amid Boycott Calls in India,” *The Economic Times*, May 15, 2025 <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/new-updates/will-continue-to-support-pakistan-in-good-times-and-bad-says-turkish-president-erdogan-amid-boycott-calls-in-india/articleshow/121177482.cms?from=mdr>. Accessed on May 20, 2025.

16. Mathew George, Katarina Djokic, Zain Hussain, Pieter D. Wezeman, and Siemon T. Wezeman, “Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2024,” *SIPRI Fact Sheet March 2025*, p. 2, 2025, https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2025-03/fs_2503_at_2024_0.pdf. Accessed on March 20, 2025.

17. Mateem Haider, “Turley to Buy Super Mushshak Trainers from Pakistan,” *Dawn*, July 15, 2016, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1271025>. Accessed on March 3, 2024.

18. “A Look At PN MILGEM/JINNAH Program’, *Defence Turkey*, Issue 103, January 2021, <https://www.defenceturkey.com/en/content/a-look-at-pn-milgem-jinnah-program-4338>. Accessed on May 1, 2025.

in 2016.¹⁹ The Turkish technology company, HAVELSAN, has also delivered a full-spectrum electronic warfare training range to Pakistan.

In 2022, Türkiye received the delivery of the first three 52 MF1-17 Super Mushshak trainer aircraft which were ordered in 2017.²⁰ Pakistan has been aspiring for the fifth generation aircraft and has been in discussion with Türkiye for the possible export of the Turkish KAAN; manufactured by Turkish Aerospace Industries (TUSAŞ).²¹ There are reports that the two nations will be setting up a joint factory to produce the Turkish KAAN.²² In this respect, an emerging triangle of defence cooperation among Türkiye, Azerbaijan and Pakistan adds an interesting dimension. Türkiye and Azerbaijan signed an agreement in 2023 to advance the development of the KAAN. Azerbaijan is offering financial assistance to the KAAN, and Pakistan has provided hundreds of officials and engineers for the project.²³

The visit of Turkish President Erdogan in February 2025 to Pakistan marked the seventh round of the Pakistan-Turkey High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council. 24 documents and several Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) between the two countries were signed, highlighting collaboration across various sectors, including defence, intelligence, trade, tourism, and science and

19. "Pakistan Air Force JF-17 Thunder Aselpod, *International Defence Analysis*, April 28, 2024, <https://internationaldefenceanalysis.com/pakistan-airforce-jf17-thunder-aselpod/>. Accessed on April 20, 2025.

20. Tayfun Özberk, "Deliveries of Super Mushshak Trainer Aircraft to Turkish Air Force Commence," *SHEPARD*, November 11, 2022, <https://www.shephardmedia.com/news/training-simulation/deliveries-of-super-mushshak-trainer-aircraft-to-turkish-air-force-commence/>. Accessed on March 3, 2024.

21. Sakshi Tiwari, "After 'Stealth' J-35A From China, Pakistan Discusses Acquiring 5th-Gen KAAN Fighters From Turkey: Reports," *The Eurasian Times*, January 9, 2025, <https://www.eurasiantimes.com/after-stealth-j-35a-from-china-pakistan/>. Accessed on March 2, 2025.

22. "Türkiye, Pakistan to Establish Joint Factory for Production of KAAN Fighter Jet", *MEMO Middle East Monitor*, January 22, 2025, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20250122-turkiye-pakistan-to-establish-joint-factory-for-production-of-kaan-fighter-jet/>. Accessed on March 10, 2025.

23. "Türkiye-Pakistan-Azerbaijan Trilateral Defence Cooperation", *aze.media*, May 24, 2025, <https://aze.media/turkiye-pakistan-azerbaijan-trilateral-defence-cooperation/>. Accessed on May 29, 2025.

technology. Erdogan announced that the target is to expand the trade volume between the two countries to US\$ 5 billion.²⁴

Türkiye's diplomatic and strategic choices are shaped by the complexities of the geopolitical developments, its involvement in Syria, tensions with Russia and Iran and also its eagerness to be close to the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). Ankara's economic interest in Pakistan cannot be ignored, and it potentially sees Pakistan as a connector to Asia to expand its exports. Türkiye has maintained a consistent strategic and economic partnership with Pakistan and the relationship is likely to grow in the coming years.

Pakistan is trying to expand its alliances, create new relationships and nurture existing ties. Its growing relationship with Türkiye will contribute towards its defence modernisation and strategic positioning. Although Pakistan is a recipient of a consistent supply of Chinese defence equipment, it looks like the Pakistan military has been keen to expand channels of defence imports.

The evolving bilateral relations will contribute not only towards shaping Pakistan's military modernisation but will also support Pakistan's diplomatic posture. This is particularly important given Erdogan's efforts to position himself as the leader of the Islamic world. Erdogan's recent comments on Kashmir have been provocative for India. In February 2025, the Turkish president, during his visit to Pakistan, said, "The Kashmir issue should be addressed according to the UN Resolution through dialogue and keeping in mind the aspirations of the people of Kashmir."²⁵ The Turkish leader has once again raked up the Kashmir issue after the recent India-Pakistan conflict and expressed his interest in playing the role of a mediator between India and Pakistan, while also involving international bodies. He said, "As Turkey, we hope for a resolution that respects human rights and involves constructive engagement

24. Arshad Mahmood, "Pakistan and Turkey Forge Stronger Ties With 24 Agreements", *themedialine*, February 25, 2025, <https://themedialine.org/by-region/pakistan-and-turkey-forge-stronger-ties-with-24-agreements/>. Accessed on March 12, 2025.

25. PTI, "Türkiye's Edrogan Urges India, Pakistan to Resolve Kashmir Through Dialogue", *The Hindu*, February 13, 2025, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/turkiyes-erdogan-urges-india-pakistan-to-resolve-kashmir-issue-through-dialogue/article69215124.ece>. Accessed on March 1, 2025.

from international bodies.... If requested, Turkey is ready to play its part. We want peace."²⁶

It remains to be seen how far Türkiye can go in terms of alienating New Delhi, given its keenness to join the multilateral fora, including BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa).

Pakistan has a well-established alliance with China, and the emerging dynamics of its relationship with Türkiye suggest a strong partnership based on catering to mutual strategic interests and defence requirements. The emerging dynamics among China, Türkiye, Azerbaijan, and Pakistan indicate a tightening of a regional nexus in the region. India has well balanced its security situation and strategic interests so far, but the developments are crucial and need careful consideration in India's security policies and diplomatic positioning. The following trends can be predicted:

- Pakistan will continue to thrive on the narrative of military victory vis-à-vis India and claim to have revived the regional strategic balance in favour of Pakistan. The narrative of victory helps Pakistan internally to escalate its defence spending and continue military modernisation, even amid economic challenges.
- The strategic alliance with China remains inviolable, and China's support for Pakistan's military modernisation is likely to intensify.
- Pakistan will continue the momentum of building up its nuclear arsenal. It will continue the expansion and modernisation of the arsenal. The nuclear rhetoric might recede for some time, but Pakistan's reliance on nuclear weapons for its strategy vis-à-vis India is unlikely to change.
- Pakistan will aggressively aim to modernise its defence equipment, focussing on building the PAF and diversifying channels of acquisition. Pakistan-Türkiye defence collaboration is likely to flourish.

26. Ashesh Mallick, "Turkey's Erdogan Rakes Up Kashmir Issue After Talks With Pakistan PM, Offers Assistance", *News18*, May 17, 2025, <https://www.news18.com/world/turkey-ready-to-play-its-part-erdogan-calls-for-resolution-on-kashmir-after-talks-with-shehbaz-9341618.html>. Accessed on May 26, 2025.