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# Pak-Turk Naval Partnership in Western Indian Ocean

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## Key Points:

- Cooperation between naval special operations forces is a key feature of Pak-Turk naval relations.
- Pakistan continues to view its domestic and surrounding interests from a land-centric lens at the long-term cost of sea blindness and eventual domination by a hegemonic Indian Navy patronised by the US and Japan.
- India's diplomatic understandings with Indian Ocean countries including Arab Gulf countries are shifting the balance of power to Washington and New Delhi's favour, impacting not only security dynamics but overall commercial shipping.
- Turkey's naval partnership with Pakistan in the Western Indian Ocean will complement its strategic engagement in East Africa while ensuring freedom of navigation and uninterrupted commercial maritime traffic to and from the Mediterranean.

After Pakistan's independence in 1947, Turkey was among the first countries that reached out to establish full-fledged diplomatic relations. In December 1947, Jinnah despatched his trusted aide Sir Malik Feroz Khan Noon to Turkey with the message that both nations would, in the 'near future,' establish close cultural, commercial and political relations.<sup>1</sup> This was Sir Noon's second major foreign outreach after he was asked to forge relations with Arab Gulf countries two months prior.

Both countries support each other's core national security interests. For example, Pakistan has been supportive of Turkey's policies in Northern Cyprus

and Syria, whereas, Turkey has consistently supported Pakistan's narrative on Indian-Occupied Jammu & Kashmir and Afghanistan. Thus, beyond cultural and economic relations, both Pakistan and Turkey appear to have shared security interests in the larger backdrop of great-power rivalry ongoing since the end of the world wars.

## Military Relations

The Pak-Turk Military Consultative Group (MCG) was established in 1988 to strengthen bilateral defence and military relations. The forum evolved into a High Level Military Dialogue Group (HLMDG). The 14th Pakistan-Turkey HLMDG was held in Pakistan in April 2019 to deliberate upon bilateral security, counter-terrorism and emerging regional issues with particular reference

<sup>1</sup> "Turkey-Pakistan friendship: From past to present," *Daily Sabah*, last modified February 13, 2020, <https://www.dailysabah.com/op-ed/2020/02/13/turkey-pakistan-friendship-from-past-to-present>.

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to Afghanistan and the Middle East.<sup>2</sup> The 15th round of this dialogue will be held in Turkey on a mutually-agreed date.

## Maritime Defence Relations

Pak-Turk maritime defence relations go back long before the MCG was established. After the 1965 Pak-India war, sanctions were imposed on Pakistan thus making it difficult to maintain naval assets. Pakistan Navy's submarine PNS Ghazi, originally a US-manufactured Tench-class submarine, was faced with a shortage of spare parts. Faced with a dilemma, officials at the Pakistan Navy Dockyard decided to refit and upgrade the Ghazi's military computers at Gölcük Naval Shipyard sometime in 1967 after tacit approval of the US government.<sup>3</sup>

In 2016, STM Defence Technologies Engineering and Trade Inc of Turkey secured the bid against DCNS Shipyard of France to modernise the Agosta 90B-class submarines for the Pakistan Navy.<sup>4</sup> The process involved a complete replacement of the old French systems by Turkish military software developed by HAVELSAN. In addition, the submarines were fitted with KAŞİF, Geographic Information System (GIS) software for navigation and guidance and the Sonar Integrated Submarine Command Control System (SEDA). Pakistan Navy is the first international customer to benefit from these technologies developed by HAVELSAN. Moreover, these revamped Agosta 90B submarines have also been fitted with ASELSAN's Zargana Torpedo Countermeasures System. In the same year, STM also offered its monohull FAC-55 fast-attack craft to Pakistan Navy, which is part of the Turkish Naval Forces Fast Attack Craft Project.<sup>5</sup>

After the signing of another agreement with STM in May 2017, Turkey is spearheading the production of four Jinnah-class corvettes for the Pakistan Navy under 'MILGEM,' the country's national warship programme.<sup>6</sup> Two of these will be built in Istanbul and the remaining two in Karachi. In this context, a transfer-of-technology

agreement between STM of Turkey and state-owned military factory and shipyard management corporation (ASFAT) of Pakistan was reached. These corvettes will enable reconnaissance, surveillance, early-warning, anti-submarine warfare and amphibious operations capabilities. Reportedly, the Pakistan Navy will possess all four corvettes by 2024.

Acquisition of these corvettes will prove a game-changer for Pakistan Navy. They will most likely be inducted in the Task Force-88 (TF-88) that was specifically raised to protect against seaborne threats to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC).<sup>7</sup>

## Bilateral Naval Relations

The Turkish Navy has been a regular participant in Pakistan Navy's AMAN (peace) exercises since 2007, having sent Naval Special Operations Forces (2007, 2009, 2011, 2013, and 2015 editions) and eventually sending aircraft (2017 and 2019 editions). Pakistan Navy has been a regular participant in the bi-annual exercise 'Mavi Balina' (Blue Whale) since 2012 for ASW drills in the Eastern Mediterranean.<sup>8</sup> It is probably the only regional maritime exercise in which Pakistan Navy sends its maritime patrol aircraft.

Cooperation between naval special operations forces is a key feature of Pak-Turk naval relations. The 12th edition of Pak-Turk exercise AYYILDIZ-2019 between Pakistan Navy's 'Special Service Group Navy' (SSG-N) and Turkish Navy's special operations forces 'Su Altı Taarruz (SAT)' included drills in anti-terrorism operations, rescue and hostage operations and intelligence-based operations.<sup>9</sup>

Pakistan Navy's frigate PNS Alamgir along with maritime patrol aircraft and naval special operations forces was a prominent participant in Turkish Naval Forces Command's exercise Eastern Mediterranean-2019.<sup>10</sup>

In addition to bilateral exchanges, representatives of both Pakistani and Turkish navies have assumed rotational command of the Bahrain-based Combined Task Force 151 (CTF-151) on more than five occasions, separately, lending them significant exposure to working in a multi-

<sup>2</sup> Aamir Latif, "Pakistan, Turkey agree to enhance defense cooperation," *Anadolu Agency*, last modified April 14, 2019, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/pakistan-turkey-agree-to-enhance-defense-cooperation/1457796>.

<sup>3</sup> "Remembering Our Warriors - Vice Admiral Tasneem," *Defence Journal*, accessed June 26, 2020, <http://www.defencejournal.com/2001/may/tasneem.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> "Pakistan to launch Agosta 90B soon," *The Nation*, last modified December 15, 2019, <https://nation.com.pk/15-Dec-2019/pakistan-to-launch-agosta-90b-soon>.

<sup>5</sup> "Turkey Offers Fast Attack Missile Boat FAC-55 to Pakistan," *Defense World*, last modified November 28, 2016, [https://www.defenseworld.net/news/17787/Turkey\\_Offers\\_Fast\\_Attack\\_Missile\\_Boat\\_FAC\\_55\\_To\\_Pakistan#.XvHjicBsbIU](https://www.defenseworld.net/news/17787/Turkey_Offers_Fast_Attack_Missile_Boat_FAC_55_To_Pakistan#.XvHjicBsbIU).

<sup>6</sup> "Local cooperation set for Turkish-built Pakistan Navy corvettes," *Daily Sabah*, last modified June 22, 2020, <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/defense/local-cooperation-set-for-turkish-built-pakistan-navy-corvettes>.

<sup>7</sup> Bilal Khan, "Pakistan Establishes Naval Task Force to Guard Gwadar and Its Sea-Lanes," *Quwa*, last modified December 12, 2020, <https://quwa.org/2016/12/12/pakistan-establishes-naval-task-force-to-guard-gwadar-and-its-sea-lanes/>.

<sup>8</sup> "Pakistan Navy Ship to Participate in Naval Exercise in Turkey," *Embassy of Pakistan - Ankara, Turkey*, last modified 2012, [http://www.pakembassyankara.com/pakistan-navy-ship-to-participate-in-naval-exercise-in-turkey\\_4-171](http://www.pakembassyankara.com/pakistan-navy-ship-to-participate-in-naval-exercise-in-turkey_4-171).

<sup>9</sup> "Pak-Turkish joint naval exercise concludes," *The Nation*, last modified July 29, 2019, <https://nation.com.pk/29-Jul-2019/pak-turkish-joint-naval-exercise-concludes>.

<sup>10</sup> Mustafa Kirikçioğlu, "Turkish navy, allies conclude Eastern Mediterranean drill," *Daily Sabah*, last modified November 19, 2019, <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/2019/11/19/pakistani-navy-takes-part-in-naval-drill-hosted-by-turkey-in-mediterranean>.

national counter-piracy alliance around the Gulf of Aden and East Africa.

## Indian Ocean in Turkish Naval Strategy

The Turkish Maritime Task Group (TMTG), initiated in 2010, was an attempt to chart waters around Turkey's southern periphery and project Turkish foreign policy interests in the region.<sup>11</sup> From May to August 2011, TMTG visited eight countries in the Red Sea, Gulf of Aden, Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean to engage in counter-piracy operations. During a visit to Pakistan as part of its journey, Turkish naval forces conducted a joint ASW exercise off the Karachi port.<sup>12</sup>

The TMTG was renamed to Barbaros TMTG (TMTG-14) and activated between March and June 2014 for maritime force projection. It was the second instance in which Turkish Navy independently executed counter-piracy operations in the Indian Ocean.

The 2015 Turkish Naval Forces Strategy mentions in detail the vitality of the Eastern Mediterranean to Turkey's long-term national security and energy interests. It also acknowledges that the Indian Ocean's chokepoints linking Eurasia (Red Sea, Bab el-Mandeb Strait, Strait of Hormuz and Strait of Malacca) have increased its 'strategic importance.' Moreover, Turkish Navy leadership outlined their intent to closely monitor developments in the Indian Ocean, Africa, Persian Gulf and the Asia Pacific region; "presence and show of flag will be ensured, interoperability will be improved by acquiring logistic bases and local port facilities," the Strategy notes.

Maritime force dynamics in the Mediterranean witnessed an abrupt change in the status quo in February 2019 when the Turkish Naval Forces Command held its most comprehensive exercise 'Mavi Vatan' (Blue Homeland).<sup>13</sup> More than 102 warships, warplanes and army units were deployed in the Black Sea, Aegean Sea and Mediterranean Sea including Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs). The massive exercise aimed to test the synchronicity of air, land and naval forces. The show-of-force was meant to signal neighbouring countries (particularly Greece, Israel, Cyprus, Egypt and Arab Gulf countries) that Turkey was fully capable of setting up a naval-led shield to protect its energy interests in the

<sup>11</sup> "About BARBAROS Turkish Maritime Task Group," *Turkish Maritime Task Group*, accessed June 26, 2020, [https://www.dzkk.tsk.tr/icerik.php?icerik\\_id=225&dil=0&tdgg=1](https://www.dzkk.tsk.tr/icerik.php?icerik_id=225&dil=0&tdgg=1).

<sup>12</sup> "Turkish ships conclude exercises," *Dawn*, last modified July 2, 2011, <https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:ohExdeRxmI4J:https://www.dawn.com/2011/07/03/turkish-ships-conclude-exercises.html+&cd=4&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=pk&client=firefox-b-d>.

<sup>13</sup> Muhittin Ataman, "Turkey emerges as a real naval power," *SETA*, last modified December 12, 2019, <https://www.setav.org/en/turkey-emerges-as-a-real-naval-power/>.

region.

The Mavi Vatan exercise validated the doctrine of the same name that was drafted in 2006 by Turkish Navy Admiral (Retired) Cem Gürdeniz. At a conference on maritime geopolitics, Admiral Gürdeniz mentioned the need to factor stability of the Indian Ocean in Turkey's overall maritime threat calculus.<sup>14</sup> He cited the country's extraordinary dependence on maritime transportation for foreign trade (almost 90%) and urged focus on the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea as a 'periphery' of concern. Moreover, he indicated that Turkey's maritime interests are linked to Africa, Arab Gulf states and particularly China through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), essentially the Western Indian Ocean.<sup>15</sup>

## Pakistan's Maritime Threat Paradigm

The 2018 Maritime Doctrine of Pakistan 'Preserving Freedom of Seas' promulgated by Pakistan Navy makes it clear that the North Arabian Sea remains Pakistan's primary area of concern. There is no indication that this geographically-limited scope of thinking is going to change till the foreseeable future.

Failure to look beyond this zone can justifiably be attributed in large part to the strategic myopia of successive governments in Islamabad, even military dictatorships. Unfortunately, Pakistan continues to view its domestic and surrounding interests from a land-centric lens at the long-term cost of sea blindness and eventual domination by a hegemonic Indian Navy patronised by the US and Japan.<sup>16</sup>

Despite 2020 being declared the 'Year of the Blue Economy,' the state machinery including national military leadership remains visibly non-committal about promoting maritime awareness.<sup>17</sup> The proposed national defence budget for FY2020-21 worth Rs1.29 trillion saw a decline in the share for the Pakistan Navy and Pakistan Air Force, whereas, the Pakistan Army's budget was increased.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Amiral Cem Gürdeniz, "2023 yılında Türkiye'nin deniz jeopolitik vizyonu ne olmalıdır?," accessed June 26, 2020, <https://add.org.tr/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/CEM-G%C3%9CRDEN%C4%B0Z-ADD-2023-Sempozyumu-Nisan-2018.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup> "Blue Homeland 'shows Turkey has become a maritime power'," *Hurriyet Daily News*, last modified March 4, 2019, <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/blue-homeland-shows-turkey-has-become-a-maritime-power-141624>.

<sup>16</sup> Zaki Khalid, "Pakistan's Land-Centric Defence Calculus Needs Overhauling," *Centre for Strategic and Contemporary Research*, last modified November 13, 2019, <https://cscr.pk/explore/themes/defense-security/pakistans-land-centric-defence-calculus-needs-overhauling/>.

<sup>17</sup> "Pakistan gears up to promote blue economy for national development," *Xinhuanet*, last modified February 29, 2020, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-02/29/c\\_138828497.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-02/29/c_138828497.htm).

<sup>18</sup> Baqir Sajjad Syed, "Govt proposes Rs1.29tr for defence spending," *Dawn*, last modified June 13, 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1563187/govt-proposes-rs129tr-for-defence-spending>.

In the foreseeable future, Indo-US militarisation of the Western Indian Ocean will pose the greatest challenge to Pakistan's economic and security interests (including CPEC), paving the way for protracted conflict and even the risk of nuclear war in the high seas.<sup>19</sup> The Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) is a robust forum to keep prospects of Sino-US great power competition at bay in the Eastern Indian Ocean and Western Pacific, but on the Western Indian Ocean, the Indian Navy with the support of US and Japanese patronage intends to maintain exclusive control of regional waters.

India's diplomatic understandings with Indian Ocean countries including Arab Gulf countries are shifting the balance of power to Washington and New Delhi's favour, impacting not only security dynamics but overall commercial shipping. The foundation of Indo-US strategic cooperation in the Asia Pacific and Indian Ocean region was laid out in 2015 for shared partnership from Africa to East Asia followed by a mutually-productive and comprehensive 2+2 Ministerial in 2019.<sup>20</sup> As mentioned earlier, India's maritime hegemony in the Western Indian Ocean will remain unchallenged unless there is an effort by a coalition of like-minded regional countries to ensure that the strategic equilibrium is maintained.

Enhanced Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) and activation of maritime surveillance stations across Indian Ocean littorals (including Oman) notwithstanding, India is aiming for the deputation of Naval Liaison Officers in Madagascar (Regional Maritime Information Fusion Centre) and UAE (European Maritime Awareness Strait of Hormuz) that would ultimately be linked to India's own Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR).<sup>21</sup>

In the midst of these developments, Pakistan's sole reliance on China as a regional maritime partner is an affirmation of its strategic myopia. In the emerging geostrategic environment, Pakistan needs an additional reliable maritime partner which could help maintain the balance of power in the region and ensure freedom of navigation across the Indian Ocean.

## Avenues for Pak-Turk Naval Partnership

Turkey, like China, has its energy interests linked to freedom of navigation in the Western Indian Ocean overlooking the Arab Gulf countries and East Africa. It needs credible partners with whom it can sustain long-term strategic partnerships. Turkey already maintains a base in Qatar but the tiny emirate neither has a potent navy nor the international experience to deal with the full spectrum of threat from the seas.

On the other hand, Pakistan, with its robust maritime force structure and training experiences with Turkey, the US and China (to name a few), offers the right blend of a maritime security partner. Both Turkish and Pakistani navies have interoperability amongst themselves. The upgrades to Pakistan's surface and submarine fleets by Turkish defence technologies further boost this capability. If projections are to be believed, the Turkish Navy will experience an overall decline in guided-missile ships until 2030.<sup>22</sup> Coupled with continued engagements with Greek, Israeli and (expected) Egyptian naval resistance in the Mediterranean, Turkey would find it difficult to maintain a credible force in the Indian Ocean. For the next decade, therefore, Pakistan could be Turkey's best bet.

The bedrock of this naval partnership can be built upon shared energy interests as the primary driving force. In December 2019, the Government of Pakistan decided to auction 35 offshore sites for hydrocarbon exploration after failure by Italian and American firms to retrieve anything resourceful.<sup>23</sup> The offshore Indus Basin holds potential for hydrocarbon reserves that has never been adequately explored.<sup>24</sup> This dilemma was also acknowledged in the 2018 Maritime Doctrine of Pakistan.

The 2020 Turkish Annual Presidential Plan encourages drilling at five offshore sites including those in the waters along Northern Cyprus.<sup>25</sup> More recently, the agreement with Libya on maritime delimitation paves the way for Turkish drilling in its Exclusive Economic

<sup>19</sup> Zaki Khalid, "Indo-US Militarisation of Western Indian Ocean – Implications for Pakistan," *Centre for Strategic and Contemporary Research*, last modified December 31, 2019, <https://cscr.pk/explore/themes/defense-security/indo-us-militarisation-of-western-indian-ocean-implications-for-pakistan/>.

<sup>20</sup> Dinakar Peri, "India looks to deploy naval liaisons at Madagascar, Abu Dhabi for information exchange," *The Hindu*, last modified June 14, 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-looks-to-deploy-naval-liaisons-at-madagascar-abu-dhabi-for-information-exchange/article31828272.ece>.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Turgut Kaymal, "Turkish Navy's Guided Missile Ships with Projections to 2030," *Bahriye Enstitüsü*, accessed June 26, 2020, [https://bahriyeenstitusu.org/2018/08/31/turkish-navys-guided-missile-ships-with-projections-to-2030/#\\_ftn21](https://bahriyeenstitusu.org/2018/08/31/turkish-navys-guided-missile-ships-with-projections-to-2030/#_ftn21).

<sup>23</sup> "Govt to offer 35 offshore sites for oil, gas exploration," *The Express Tribune*, last modified November 30, 2019, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2109113/2-govt-offer-35-offshore-sites-oil-gas-exploration/>.

<sup>24</sup> "The Geological Society," accessed June 26, 2020, <http://mr.crossref.org/iPage?doi=10.1144%2F1354-079309-826>.

<sup>25</sup> "5 Turkish offshore drilling rounds to explore for oil, gas scheduled for 2020," *Daily Sabah*, last modified November 4, 2019, <https://www.dailysabah.com/energy/2019/11/04/5-turkish-offshore-drilling-rounds-to-explore-for-oil-gas-scheduled-for-2020>.

Zone (EEZ).<sup>26</sup> By and large, Turkish energy stakes in the Eastern Mediterranean will continue to rise. In the near future, there are high chances of a confrontation initiated by Mediterranean countries against Turkey's growing footprint. Egypt recently indicated that it may consider deploying boots on the ground in Libya.<sup>27</sup> Such a proposition would risk jeopardising the prospects of any Turkish energy exploration efforts.

The Government of Pakistan can incentivise Turkish energy giants to explore potential reserves in its EEZ as well as the extended continental shelf, opening up unprecedented avenues for Turkey to fulfill its energy requirements from the Indian Ocean while increasing the cost of war for hostile maritime forces in the region. Such economic efforts could involve land reclamation and the construction of artificial islands in Pakistan's extended continental shelf thereby giving Turkish Navy an additional offshore replenishment facility alongside Qatar.<sup>28</sup>

Pakistan can use its influence to promote greater Turkish cooperation with China for the pursuit of shared regional interests under the BRI. The China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in its 2019 report declared Turkey as a 'priority country' for the project in lieu of its pipeline projects.<sup>29</sup> In this context, a framework to ensure freedom of navigation operations in the Western Indian Ocean particularly chokepoints in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, Gulf of Aden, Strait of Hormuz and the Red Sea can be instituted that would initially involve Pakistan, Turkey and China and could be expanded to include Qatar and a few East African nations. This framework will need to derive its rationale from the common shared goal of protecting the 'Maritime Silk Route,' a term that finds resonance in Turkish naval circles.

## Conclusion

Turkey's naval partnership with Pakistan in the Western Indian Ocean will complement its strategic engagement in East Africa while ensuring freedom of navigation and uninterrupted commercial maritime traffic to and from

the Mediterranean.<sup>30</sup> It will also give breathing space for the PLA Navy to focus more on immediate threats in the Eastern Indian Ocean/ Western Pacific.

To realise this cooperative partnership framework, Pakistan's national security leaders will need to think outside the box.

<sup>26</sup> "Turkey 'to explore hydrocarbon resources in EEZ over Libya deal'," *Hurriyet Daily News*, last modified June 03 2020, <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-to-explore-hydrocarbon-resources-in-eez-over-libya-deal-155287>.

<sup>27</sup> Borzou Daragahi, "'A declaration of war': Egypt's threat to enter Libya conflict risks regional clash with Turkey," *Independent*, last modified June 22, 2020, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/egypt-libya-conflict-border-latest-news-turkey-gaddafi-a9579556.html>.

<sup>28</sup> Zaki Khalid, "Extending Pakistan's Maritime Presence through Artificial Islands," *Centre for Strategic and Contemporary Research*, last modified January 23, 2020, <https://cscr.pk/explore/themes/defense-security/extending-pakistans-maritime-presence-through-artificial-islands/>.

<sup>29</sup> "Spotlight: Turkey, China show desire to expand cooperation under BRI," *Xinhuanet*, last modified August 10, 2019, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-08/10/c\\_138297128.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-08/10/c_138297128.htm).

<sup>30</sup> "East Africa: Turkey Sets Its Sights on the Horn of Africa," *All Africa*, last modified January 22, 2020, <https://allafrica.com/stories/202001230002.html>.