



Can the Rise of ‘New’ Turkey Lead to a ‘New’ Era in India-Turkey Relations?

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Summary

Turkey and India have undergone an immense social, political and economic transformation since the end of the Cold War. This has also been the case when it comes to their foreign policies. However, Turkey’s truly multidimensional foreign policy came into existence in 2002. Since then Turkey has been actively re-defining its foreign policy preferences in Africa, the Middle East and Asia. Turkey’s Asia policy is no longer based on Pakistan as it was a decade ago. ‘New’ Turkey is deeply interested in developing stronger relations with China, India and other rising Asian powers as part of the diversification of its economy and foreign policy. Turkey-India relations have a huge potential to develop and benefit both sides in coming years as relations at social, political and economic levels are already flourishing. The biggest challenges are, however, to overcome the lack of knowledge about each side and the lack of global dynamics in Turkey-India relations. Both Turkey and India are rising powers but they still cooperate at the global level in a very limited way.

Turkey is one of the few most discussed but little understood country in the world. Religion, culture, fast-track modernization, conservative domestic political culture and western-oriented foreign policy outlook have always been the sources of confusion in the west and the east alike. Nevertheless, only recently has the world shown a greater interest in Turkey. Turkey, too, has been only able to develop a clear terminology to explain the new situation both in its domestic and foreign policy fronts. In other words, 'new' Turkey articulated itself to the world with a new sense of rhetoric.

What makes Turkey unique is not its geography, religion, modernity or secularism singly, but the interesting mixture of all. Turkey is at the crossroads of Asia, Europe, Africa and the Middle East at the same time. It is because of this character that some historians have even suggested calling Turkey a continent by itself.

A true understanding of Turkey may shed light on several issues: the transformation of political Islam, the role of military in politics in non-western societies, the rise of the influence of middle-sized states in political and discursive arena in global politics. Each of these issues requires in-depth analysis, which is beyond the scope of this brief, though a general outline of the major tenets of the 'new' Turkey would help readers grasp the essence of the changing face of Turkey in the 21st century.

Changing Socio-Political Dynamics

Understanding social dynamics and following the changes closely is the best way not only in contextualizing the current developments but also predicting the future. Turkey is a country that has based its existence on the remnant of the Ottoman State. Since its establishment in 1923, modern Turkey followed a strictly western line both in domestic and global politics. Top-down modernization and the creation of a 'firm' identity based on Turkishness were the main characteristics especially until early 1950s. Turkey became a multiparty democracy in the late 1940s, but the real challenge and effort to establish a new Turkey based on identity dates only to the late 1970s. Islamist political parties, headed by Necmettin Erbakan, brought the major challenge and became the only viable alternative to the existing system at the ideational level. However, the influence of such a change on social dynamics indeed started with the efforts of Turgut Ozal as both prime minister and president in the 1980s. After the 1983 election when Ozal became prime minister, he furthered the project of economic liberalization and opening to the world. This new trend in Turkish economy and liberalization process has changed the dynamics of society by contributing to a redefinition of social dynamics and foreign policy.¹

In almost every non-western society, there exists an alienated and excluded periphery

¹ See Muhittin Ataman, "Leadership Change: Özal Leadership and Restructuring in Turkish Foreign Policy," *Alternatives: Turkish Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 1, No. 1, Spring 2002, pp. 120-153.

that has almost no voice or influence in the decision making process, along with an elite controlling everything and named the Centre. Turkey is no exception. After the 1980s, Turkey's acceptance of neo-liberal and free-market economic policies has actually helped it to go beyond the classical dichotomy of centre-periphery; these policies accelerated the periphery's integration while paving the way for the widening of political and economic freedoms. This took place on several fronts. The historically disadvantaged and excluded periphery gradually gained economic independence from the state through trade/business, and with the creative 'individualistic' successes of Anatolian Tigers, as it is called, the periphery also gained political power.²

If Turkey has grown in the last seven years at approximately 7 per cent each year, this is partly the result of this newly emerging Anatolian creative and independent thinking business culture. Their import-export contribution to the Turkish economy and their production has been indispensable. This is a direct result of changing social dynamics. The current ruling Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi - AKP) should be seen as the political reverberation of this change in the form of the emergence of a new elite/middle class from the periphery.

Since November 2002, the AKP has been in power with an absolute majority. It has also been the only party that increased its votes in successive elections in the last 40 years of Turkish history (from 34 per cent in 2002 to 47 per cent in 2007). When the AKP came to power, Turkey was trying to revive its economy after the biggest economic crisis in the republican era in 2000-2001. Turkey during the AKP period developed a strategy of export-oriented economic development and sought to develop political relations with all the neglected areas. For example, it opened up to Africa, Far East Asia, the Middle East and Latin America at the political and economic levels. There were also frequent high level visits to these areas along with the opening of new embassies. That helped Turkey's economy and foreign policy grow together and become more internationalized. Turkey has also used soft-power elements in its approaches to issues, such as civil society involvement. Perhaps what makes the AKP unique in Turkish history is that it has contributed to the changing social dynamics in a sophisticated way by pushing democratization through the process of European Union integration. It has also changed the discourse on long-standing foreign policy issues like Cyprus which even clashed with some traditional domestic constituencies. Thus, Turkey took the initiative to solve the Cyprus issue and accepted the Annan Plan for reunification of the island in 2004. However, in a referendum held in the island, Greek Cypriots rejected the UN reunification plan while Turkish Cypriots said yes with 65 per cent majority. Turkey has also developed relations with Greece and has signed a protocol with Armenia in order to normalize

² See, among others, Hasan Kosebalaban, "The Rise of Anatolian Cities and the Failure of the Modernization Paradigm," *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 3, 2007, pp.229-240.

relations thus clearly exhibiting a nuanced soft power approach to foreign and security policy.³

A 'New' Turkey in Global Politics

Turkey's foreign policy since the end of the Cold War has been marked by a significant reorientation from a long entrenched passive and isolationist stance to one of active engagement particularly in the affairs of the Middle East. This dramatic change in foreign policy outlook has become more pronounced since the AKP came to power in 2002.

AKP foreign policy-makers have envisioned Turkey as holding multiple roles in world politics, though these were previously thought of as incompatible. In conformity with these multiple identities, Turkey's foreign policy interests have been extended to a much larger realm, escaping the constraints of a single focus. Turkey's continuing commitments to involvement with the West, while deepening connections with the Middle East, Latin America, Asia and Africa constitute the hallmarks of the new foreign policy vision.⁴

Students of Turkish foreign policy since 2002 point to one key person as the brain behind the foreign policy of successive AKP governments: Ahmet Davutoglu. He was the chief foreign policy advisor (2003-2009) to Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan until his appointment as foreign minister in May 2009. It is imperative to understand the *Strategic Depth* of Davutoglu, a concept named after his book with the same title published in 2001, as it has become the guide for the new Turkish foreign policy.⁵ He has exerted a huge influence on foreign policy-making both at the theoretical and practical levels; thus he is considered to be the main architect of Turkey's new foreign policy orientation. Perhaps an indication of this can be seen in an analysis in the *Economist* of November 2007 (long before his appointment as foreign minister), which argued that 'dealing with Turkish foreign policy means dealing with Mr *Davutoglu*'.

According to Davutoglu,⁶ Turkish foreign policy now has a visionary approach, not a

³ For a good summary see Ahmet Sozen, "A Paradigm Shift in Turkish Foreign Policy: Transition and Challenges," *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 1, 2010, pp.103-123.

⁴ See Bulent Aras and Aylin Gorener, "National role conceptions and foreign policy orientation: the ideational bases of the Justice and Development Party's foreign policy activism in the Middle East," *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 1, 2010.

⁵ Ahmet Davutoglu, *Stratejik Derinlik: Turkiyenin Uluslararası Konumu (Strategic Depth: Turkey's International Position)*, Istanbul: Kure, 2001; for a review in English see Joshua W. Walker, "A Turkish Concept of Strategic Depth," *Pragati: The Indian National Interest Review*, July 2010, <http://pragati.nationalinterest.in/wp-content/uploads/2010/07/2010-07-communityed.pdf> (accessed on 15 August 2010).

⁶ See Ahmet Davutoglu, "Turkey's Zero-Problems Foreign Policy," *Foreign Policy*, 20 May 2010, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/05/20/turkeys_zero_problems_foreign_policy?page=full (accessed on 10 August 2010).

crisis oriented approach and follows a vision-oriented foreign policy, which has “a consistent, systematic framework that guides Turkey in foreign affairs.” This means that Turkey’s involvement in or relations with one area should not be seen in opposition to others. Therefore, Turkey’s endeavour to develop political and economic relations with the Middle East, Asia and Africa is not an alternative to its European vocation and its strong intention to become a member of the EU. Davutoglu believes that there should be one holistic approach behind the new foreign policy of Turkey and the various elements should complement and support each other. Turkey also has a new style, in the sense of political rhetoric, tools and instrument in foreign relations, which – as referred above – is called ‘soft power’.

‘The balance between security and freedom’ and ‘zero problems with neighbours’ is frequently cited as the operational principles of the new Turkish foreign policy.⁷ As part of this, Turkey has developed economic and political relations with all neighbouring countries and signed high level consultation agreements with Syria and Iraq. Turkey signed a protocol with Armenia and now has far better relations with Greece, Russia and Georgia. In regional affairs, Turkey has usually employed ‘proactive peace diplomacy’. Turkish involvement in the Iraqi-Syrian dispute in 2010, facilitation of Syria-Israel peace efforts before the Israeli offence in Gaza in 2009, and following an active diplomacy to prevent a war between Georgia and Russia in 2008 are some examples of this approach. Similarly, Turkish efforts for Sunni-Shiite reconciliation in Iraq since 2005, domestic reconciliation in Lebanon in 2008 and reconciliation negotiations between Serbia and Bosnia since 2009 can be seen as examples of pragmatic soft power policy in Turkey’s immediate neighbourhood, though recent official requests for Turkish mediation from different parts of the world like Somalia and Philippines indicate the possible future involvement of Turkey in other regions too. Turkey’s efforts to find a diplomatic solution to the Iranian nuclear issue along with Brazil resulted in the joint declaration of 17 May 2010. This declaration is the only signed agreement by Iran so far to find a solution to the nuclear crisis.⁸

Turkey therefore sees its relations with different parts of the world as compatible global relations. As the international system is no longer bi-polar, Ankara considers good relations with each region as distinct as is the case with respect to its approach towards the EU. This is where Turkey’s interest to develop strong relations with rising powers like India finds its place in the new foreign policy formulation. From this perspective, Turkey sees its relations with India, China and other rising powers not as a temporary venture; but

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ See Mehmet Ozkan, “Significance of Turkey-Brazil Nuclear Deal with Iran,” 20 August 2010, Institute of Foreign Policy Studies, University of Calcutta, India, <http://www.caluniv.ac.in/ifps/Article1/ozkan%20web%20article.pdf> (23 August 2010).

rather as a part of its re-orientation in the changing global political economy. Ankara also pursues an active involvement in all global and international issues and in all international organizations. In 2009 Turkey was elected as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council and also as a member of the G-20. Turkey holds observer status both in the African Union and the Arab League, and wants to be a part of the Pacific Forum as well.

With increasing democratization, prosperity and the decreasing role of the military in politics, Turks are becoming more and more self-confident in regional and global politics. This is the biggest change which helps to understand Turkey's new-found international and regional activism in solving problems and bringing a new order.

Turkey and India: Looking Beyond Cyprus and Pakistan?

History is the mirror of the future. A strong historical connection between India and Turkey exists dating back to the medieval era and fostered with the late 19th and 20th century interaction between the two. The help of Indians in the Independence War of Turkey in the 1920s is still one of the most recalled one in Turkish memory. Indeed, the original finance for the biggest bank of Turkey, *Turkiye Is Bankasi*, came from India. However, Turkey and India had different preferences during the Cold War, one sided with the West and the other led the non-alignment movement. Since the establishment of diplomatic relations between India and Turkey in 1948, political and bilateral relations have been usually characterized by warmth and cordiality.⁹ However, now with the leverage of Cold War gone, a new definition of bilateral and global political cooperation is needed both at regional and international levels between Turkey and India.

A general picture indicates that Turkey has looked at India through the prism of Pakistan, and India has done so through Cyprus and strong Turkey-Pakistan relations. At a minimum, such conceptions are now outdated to examine the new existing developments between the two, because political, economic and societal relations have undergone a deep transformation.

At the political level, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's visit in November 2008 and the February 2010 visit of President of the Republic of Turkey, Abdullah Gul to India with a huge delegation have emphasised Turkey's interest in India. The Indian response has been mild so far mostly due to Turkey's approach to Pakistan. It is clear that the new Turkey is no longer interested in formulating its Asian policy based on Pakistan as it was a decade ago, therefore "the Pakistan factor today does not exist as an over-

⁹ For a general overview of Turkey-India relations during the Cold War, see Aswini K. Mohapatra, "Bridge to Anatolia: An Overview of Indo-Turkish Relations," *The Turkish Yearbook of International Relations*, No. 39, 2008, pp.164-167.

riding determinant in Turkey's South Asian policies."¹⁰ Turkish officials are worried about the future of Pakistan as a possible failed state as much as India does. Turkey has softened its pro-Pakistani approach on the Kashmir issue realizing that it is important to build up a coherent and comprehensive relationship with India and develop a holistic Asian policy. The fact is that New Delhi and Ankara have drawn closer even as Turkey's traditionally good ties with Pakistan have unravelled following the latter's support to the Taliban and its indulgence of Islamist radicals who destabilize Central Asia. Turkey has since reversed its support to Pakistan's position on Kashmir, moving from a call for a plebiscite under UN supervision to stressing the importance of India-Pakistan bilateral talks to resolve the issue, which is by and large closer to India's position.¹¹ On terrorism and security issues, the post-9/11 era marked the beginning of a changing security environment for Turkey and India. They have begun to move closer on these issues and started to cooperate and take various steps towards a more substantive partnership.¹² Today, the Turkish understanding is closer to the Indian approach in opposing all kinds of terrorism without any reference to 'root cause'.

Despite these positive developments at the political level, there have also been some tensions. For example, after the trilateral meeting of Turkey, Afghanistan and Pakistan in Istanbul in January 2010, India has lodged a protest with Turkey at not being invited to a conference of Afghanistan's immediate neighbours. It was clear that Turkey did not invite India because of objection from Pakistan. Although this was a little incident in damaging Turkey-India relations, it also showed that Turkey should go and see beyond Pakistan in its South Asian policy. Pakistan as the closest ally of Turkey in the region may bring advantages but may also jeopardize its newly emerging relations with countries in Asia like India.¹³ Toward that direction, Turkey has indeed expressed its regret at not inviting India for the conference on Afghanistan in Istanbul, but added that New Delhi's relations with Islamabad should not come in the way of the expanding bilateral relations between the two countries in the near future.¹⁴

¹⁰ Subhash Kapila, "Turkey-India Strategic Partnership: The Indian Imperatives," *South Asia Analysis Group*, Paper no. 2788, 29 July 2008, <http://www.southasiaanalysis.org/%5Cpapers28%5Cpaper2788.html> (accessed on 10 August 2010).

¹¹ For example see Ishtiaq Ahmad, "Turkey and Pakistan: Bridging the Growing Divergence," *Perceptions: Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 5, No. 3, September-November 2000.

¹² See Sarah Akram, "Turkey-India Relations Redefined," *Reflections*, No. 4, 2010, http://www.issi.org.pk/photos/TURKEY_INDIA_RELATIONS_REDEFINED.pdf (accessed 10 August 2010).

¹³ See "India protests to Turkey for not getting Istanbul meet invite," 29 January 2010, <http://www.zeenews.com/news600090.html> (accessed on 15 August 2010).

¹⁴ See Shubhajit Roy, 'Turkey regrets not inviting India for Afghan meet', *Indian Express*, 10 February 2010, <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/turkey-regrets-not-inviting-india-for-afghan-meet/577935/1> (accessed on 15 August 2010)

On the societal level, Turkey is becoming a major tourist destination for Indians. In 2009, 50,000 Indians visited Turkey and since July 2010 Turkey has adopted a new visa policy towards Indian citizens aimed at reaching the target of 1 million tourists from India. Now those who have valid USA or Schengen visa can get Turkish visa at the port of entry. Interaction between the writers of both countries is also becoming more frequent and it may open more channels to develop social relations. Recently Turkey's Nobel laureate Orhan Pamuk has shown an interest in India mostly through his girlfriend – the famous Indian author and Booker Prize winner Kiran Desai – and visited India twice in 2009. There is an expectation that Pamuk will write his next book in Goa and include some elements about India into his book.¹⁵

Economic relations show signs of change much more than other fields as seen in Table 1. Since the early 2000s Turkey-India relations have improved tremendously though they are still to reach their full potential. Bilateral trade increased from USD 429 million in 2001 to USD 3001 million in 2008. Though the global economic crisis has affected this trend by bringing bilateral trade down to USD 2314 million in 2009, Turkey and India show signs of improving their economic ties including through a possible Free Trade Agreement (FTA) in the near future.

Table 1: Turkey-India Import & Export Statistics 2000-2009

| Million USD | 2000 | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 |
|---------------|------|------|------|------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| <i>Import</i> | 449 | 355 | 564 | 723 | 1,046 | 1,280 | 1,579 | 2,300 | 2,458 | 1,903 |
| <i>Export</i> | 56 | 74 | 73 | 71 | 136 | 220 | 222 | 348 | 543 | 411 |
| <i>Total</i> | 505 | 429 | 637 | 794 | 1182 | 1500 | 1801 | 2648 | 3001 | 2314 |

Source: Undersecretary of Foreign Trade, the Prime Ministry of Turkey, www.dtm.gov.tr (15 August 2010)

Earlier during the last visit of the Turkish Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, to India in November 2008, the Turkish side insisted on starting negotiations on an FTA. The Turkish side became interested in signing a FTA with India soon after India and the European Union began discussions for a FTA. This was conveyed to India during the visit of the then Turkish Minister of State, Kursad Tuzmen, in March 2008. During the visit of Erdogan a joint study group was set up to study the feasibility of an FTA. This

¹⁵ See 'India-Turkey: Time to translate commonalities into closer bilateral ties', Interview with Indian Ambassador to Turkey, Mr. Raminder Singh Jassal, *Today's Zaman*, 9 February 2010, <http://www.todayzaman.com/tz-web/news-201022-india-turkey-time-to-translate-commonalities-into-closer-bilateral-ties.html> (accessed on 19 August 2010)

group met on 6-7 January 2010 for the first time and examined the possibility of a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA). The JSG is slated to submit its report by the end of 2010. During the visit of Turkish president to India in February 2010, at delegation level talks in the presence of the Turkish President Abdullah Gul and the Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in Delhi, it was decided to set up a joint technical committee to further the prospects of the proposed FTA.

The major items of India's exports to Turkey include cotton yarn, synthetic yarn, organic dyes, organic chemicals, denim, steel (bars and rods), granite, antibiotics, carpets, unwrought zinc, sesame seed, TV CRTs, mobile handsets, clothing and apparel. Turkey's exports to India include poppy seed, auto components, marble, textile machinery, denim, carpets, cumin seeds, minerals (vermiculite, perlite and chlorites) and fittings and steel products. Moreover, various Turkish and Indian companies, mostly ranging from construction to energy, have undertaken major projects in both countries alone or in cooperation with a host country company. The Indian Railway Construction Company, TATA Motors and Indian Oil Cooperation are some of the companies in this regard.¹⁶

During the visit of President Gul to India in February 2010, two joint declarations were also issued: the Joint Declaration on Scientific and Technological Cooperation and Joint Declaration on Terrorism. It has been agreed to study the possibilities of working together in mutually identified projects in areas such as telecommunications, computerization, information technology, space research, bio-technology and environmental technology and convene a joint workshop in 2010. New Delhi considers the joint declaration on terrorism a breakthrough because in it Ankara has agreed to "recognise the need" for the conclusion of the India-initiated Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism (CCIT).¹⁷

According to the Investment Support and Promotion Agency of Turkey, three direct investment agreements were also signed by Turkish and Indian entrepreneurs during Turkish President Abdullah Gul's formal visit to India. Officials say that these agreements would bring Turkey direct investments of nearly 150 million USD, providing employment opportunities for 200 people. They also added that Indian companies dealing in ship construction and renewable energy had expressed interest to invest in Turkey.¹⁸

¹⁶ For example, see Aswini K. Mohapatra, "Bridge to Anatolia: An Overview of Indo-Turkish Relations," *The Turkish Yearbook of International Relations*, No. 39, 2008, pp.178-180.

¹⁷ See Sandeep Dikshit, "Turkey agrees to work closely with India on global terrorism," *The Hindu*, 10 February 2010, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/international/article103944.ece> (accessed on 18 August 2010).

¹⁸ See "Turkey hopes India deals to attract \$150 mln-direct investments," *World Bulletin*, 15 February 2010, http://www.worldbulletin.net/news_detail.php?id=54136 (accessed on 18 August 2010).

What Future for India-Turkey Relations?

In global politics, quantitative indicators do not always tell the whole story. They only capture a static picture of a moment in time, rather than catching fast moving developments. In total, there are only 250 Turks living in India, which does not even require Turkey to open an embassy if seen from a quantitative perspective. However, Turkey and India has much more in common, discovered and undiscovered, to share and to work on at the international and regional levels. Time has come for Turkey and India to discover each other and understand their changing and unchanging elements.

Just to give one example, Turkey and India are located in very different environments but their approach to the role of religion in domestic politics is one alternative to the 'totalitarian' French-way of secularism. Turkey and India tend to separate state, religion and politics from each other to articulate a new secularism. In traditional practice, state and politics are seen as almost complimentary and thus forced to disconnect religion and politics from each other. Both the experiences of Turkey and India now indicate that state and religion can be separated indicating state neutrality in religious affairs, but it is impossible to separate religion from politics. What we see today in Turkey and India is a deep struggle to articulate such a new approach of secularism, learnt by hard experience.¹⁹

However, there are two major obstacles in taking Turkish-Indian relations forward. The most persistent issue is the lack of information about each other. The problem is deep-seated and requires time for an efficacious resolution. However, three strategies could be implemented: (a) students' exchange programme would bridge the societal and informational gap; (b) more frequent exchange of academics and researchers between universities and interaction; (c) ensuring cooperation between Indian and Turkish think-thanks and organizing joint conferences and publications on Turkish and Indian socio-political issues would create awareness on both sides.

Second, is the lack of global dynamics in Turkey-India relations. Both Turkey and India are rising powers but they only cooperate at the global level in a limited way such as in the G-20. A Turkish interest to develop close relations, and if possible participating in inter-continental groupings like the India-Brazil-South Africa Dialogue Forum may be the best way to link Turkey-India relations at the global level. This linkage could expand the horizon between Turkey and India by adding an international dimension. Considering the Turkey-Brazil nuclear deal with Iran in May 2010, similar co-operation between Turkey and India should not be seen outside of reach.

¹⁹ This can be drawn from the writings of Rajeev Bhargava, Director of Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, New Delhi, for example see, among others, his *The Promise of India's Secular Democracy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010; however, the more articulate comparison between Turkey and India may be found in Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, *Islam and the Secular State: Negotiating the Future of Shari'a*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008.

In short, what will define the future of Turkey-India relations is not Cyprus or Pakistan, but rather the stress on mutual strengthening of their economies and providing an environment for greater understanding of each other. Establishing a norm of soft power potentialities and creating stable bilateral political interaction along with recognizing mutual threats and opportunities may also accelerate this process.