

## Turkey's India Outreach: Possibilities and Challenges

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**ABSTRACT** Emerging developments in Turkey–India relations suggest that New Delhi is gaining more relevance in Turkey's Asia policy than before. This brief argues that Turkey's interest in shaping a new approach to India is a function of Ankara's evolving foreign policy under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's AKP (the Justice and Development Party), which has sought to expand the country's relations with emerging powers. While the scope of Turkey–India relations was earlier limited due to Ankara's longstanding association with Pakistan, India's growing economic and political profile has motivated Turkey to review its relations with New Delhi.

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## INTRODUCTION

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's 2017 visit to India<sup>1</sup> underlined the growing significance of New Delhi for Turkish policymakers. Indeed, recent scholarship on the subject suggests that Turkey's interest in expanding cooperation with India heralds a new era in their bilateral relations.<sup>2</sup> For a long time, the political differences between India and Turkey over issues such as Ankara's cooperation with Pakistan and its stance on the Kashmir conflict, limited the prospects of cooperation from India's perspective. However, Ankara is now interested in pursuing strong economic relations with India,<sup>3</sup> as well as cooperation in sectors such as space, science and technology, where India has made significant leaps in the past few decades.

This brief argues that Ankara's interest in rethinking its relations with India is an outcome of the ideological transformation in Turkish foreign policy, guided by the leadership of Erdoğan's AKP (or Justice and Development Party). Turkey seeks to adapt to the emerging structural realities by exploring the potential of cooperation with "emerging powers,"<sup>4</sup> which are vying for greater influence in the international order and are being recognised for their economic growth. The brief first underlines the lack of ideological and strategic convergence between Turkey and India during the Cold War due to Ankara's proximity with Pakistan, a country with which India has long had an adversarial relationship. It then argues how the transformation in Turkish foreign policy governs Ankara's growing outreach towards India. Finally, the brief outlines the differences between Turkey

and India on various issues, which limit the potential of their cooperation.

## TURKEY'S COLD WAR OBSESSION WITH PAKISTAN

United in their struggle against colonial powers—notably the British—Turkey and India have historically been on friendly terms. During World War I, proponents of the Indian national movement provided medical and financial assistance to the distressed Turks.<sup>5</sup> However, this mutual goodwill did not translate into benevolent and friendly relations between the two countries after India's independence.

Following the 1947 Partition, Turkey's engagement in South Asia became Pakistan-centric. Overcoming the geographical divide, ideological traction—owing to their shared Islamic heritage—helped in the growth of Turkey–Pakistan relations. Although the founder of the modern Turkish republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, had envisioned a limited role of religion in public life, Islam emerged instrumental in achieving consensus among Turkey's diverse ethnic groups such as the Kurds, the Albanians and the Arabs. Despite Kemal's efforts, "Muslimness" remained a core element of the modern Turkish nation.<sup>6</sup> The rise of Islamist parties under the leadership of Necmettin Erbakan in the 1970s further reinforced the role of Islam in Turkish politics. Such political experiences also influenced Turkish foreign policy and explains the country's proximity to Pakistan. Ultimately, emerging security challenges in its neighbourhood motivated Ankara to seek a viable partnership with Pakistan.<sup>7</sup> Imperatives

of national survival, on the other hand, led Pakistan to also seek support from Muslim countries, including Turkey.<sup>8</sup> The two sides subsequently signed a Treaty of Eternal Friendship in 1954.

Structural variables further facilitated the growth of comprehensive security relations between Turkey and Pakistan, with implications for Turkey–India bilateral relations. Both Turkey and Pakistan became members of the Baghdad Pact, also known as the Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO), in 1955. Turkey was CENTO's lynchpin in the Mediterranean region against Soviet influence, while Pakistan sought assistance from the organisation in its rivalry with India.<sup>9</sup> However, the West's reluctance to extend support to Turkey in its dispute with Cyprus, and Pakistan's dissatisfaction with the CENTO over its lack of support on the Kashmir conflict, incentivised both sides to seek alternative means of cooperation. In 1958, Pakistan discussed the possibilities of setting up a confederation with Turkey and Afghanistan.<sup>10</sup> During the 1962 Sino-Indian conflict, following Pakistan's protest, Turkey refused to send mountain howitzers to India. Subsequently, Turkey and Pakistan initiated the Regional Cooperation for Development (RCD) in 1964.<sup>11</sup>

Turkey also cooperated with Pakistan in the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC, formerly the Organisation of Islamic Conference) and, as its member, was critical of India's approach towards the Kashmir issue. During the 20<sup>th</sup> OIC Foreign Ministers Meet in August 1991, Ankara condemned India's use of force in Kashmir. Ankara was also part of the meeting of the OIC bureau in 1993 (Dakar,

Senegal) where, on Pakistan's request, the issue of the Babri mosque demolition was raised. Turkey and Pakistan later became members of the OIC contact group on Kashmir, formed in 1994.<sup>12</sup>

In 1998, Turkey expressed concerns about India's nuclear tests conducted that year. As the chair of the UN conference on disarmament, Turkey opposed the nuclear testing and stated that Pakistan's nuclear test was a reaction to India's. It even advocated for Pakistan's membership in the Nuclear Supplier Group (NSG).<sup>13</sup>

Considering these factors, India was not a priority in Turkey's foreign policy. On the other hand, Islam provided an ideological framework for cooperation between Turkey and Pakistan. Turkey's alignment with the West under the NATO—followed by its cooperation with Pakistan under the CENTO and, later, the RCD—made it challenging for it to pursue relations with India, a founding member of the Non-Aligned Movement. Moreover, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru was critical of smaller countries, such as Turkey, joining the NATO.<sup>14</sup>

The opening up of the Turkish economy under the leadership of former Prime Minister Turgut Özal provided impetus for Turkey to improve bilateral relations with India. Özal visited India in 1986, and then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi reciprocated his visit in 1988.<sup>15</sup> Özal was accompanied by a business delegation, indicating Turkey's interest in strengthening economic relations with India. Turkey's India outreach was in line with Özal's interest in expanding the realm of Turkey's foreign policy, which was then primarily

focused on relations with the West. Under Özal, Turkish foreign policy moved to intensify the country's engagement in the global economy. This phase also saw an expansion of its relations with new regions in Asia and Africa that were less relevant before.<sup>16</sup> Following this phase, successive electoral victories have allowed the AKP to gain substantial influence on Turkish foreign-policy decisions. The AKP gives due importance to emerging economies such as India and China—considered new centres of growth—and are reviewing their participation in the international system.<sup>17</sup> AKP is charting out a way to diversify the country's western-centric foreign policy, incentivising Ankara to review its relations with India.

### **TURKEY'S AKP-LED INDIA POLICY**

Since assuming power in 2002, the AKP has provided a new perspective to Turkish foreign policy. While some are of the view that the AKP-era foreign policy is shaped by the party's linkages to Islam and that the AKP leadership intends to revive Turkey's regional supremacy as in the Ottoman era,<sup>18</sup> the party's foreign policy is driven primarily by its desire to see Turkey play a greater role in the emerging international order. Turkey has shown interest in institutions such as the BRICS (the association of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, which some view as offering alternatives to the Western-led institutions.<sup>19</sup>

The AKP-era foreign-policy activism is partly characterised by the growing divergence between Turkey and its traditional partners, such as the US, on issues of international importance. For instance, as a non-permanent

UN Security Council member, in 2010, Turkey (along with Brazil) voted against the US-sponsored resolution on Iran's nuclear programme.<sup>20</sup> Under the AKP, there has been a growing strategic component in Turkey's foreign policy, alongside the soft-power element that is also gaining salience. The Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency has increased its Official Developmental Assistance in Africa, which reached US\$395.77 million in 2015. Turkey established its largest overseas military base in Somalia, which could have strategic implications in the Indian Ocean Region.<sup>21</sup>

Turkish foreign policy activism is largely attributed to former Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu and President Erdoğan. Davutoglu's "strategic depth"<sup>22</sup> doctrine aims to expand Turkey's agency by exploiting its historical and cultural ties with multiple regions, including Asia and Africa. Turkish foreign policy under the AKP also seeks to adapt to the emerging structural realities, e.g. the economic rise of BRICS countries in the international order. Davutoglu's doctrine focuses on counterbalancing Turkey's ties with the West by exploring the potential of cooperation with China and India, now amongst the world's largest economies—and which possess the capacity to have some influence on the global order. Additionally, Turkish foreign policy is shifting its focus towards pursuing greater economic relations, which motivates Turkey's outreach towards India. Former Turkish President Abdullah Gul seconded this when he said in an interview that Turkey was "now a big economic power that had embraced democracy, human rights, and free markets."<sup>23</sup> In line with this apparent ideological transformation in Turkish foreign

policy, the relevance of issues such as the Kashmir conflict is gradually declining in “Turkey’s pivot to Asia.”<sup>24</sup> Economic ties have taken precedence instead and are gaining prominence in the bilateral equation.

President Erdoğan met with Prime Minister Narendra Modi on the margins of the G-20 summit in Antalya in 2015, which was followed by another meeting at the G-20 summit in Hangzhou, China in 2016. These meetings, according to India’s ambassador to Turkey, led to the charting of a roadmap between the two countries, towards strengthening their economic, political and cultural cooperation.<sup>25</sup>

In his 2008 visit to India, Erdoğan endorsed the Turkey–India Free Trade Agreement (FTA). Former President Abdullah Gul, in his visit to India in 2010, spoke about cooperating with New Delhi in space research, biotechnology, information technology and computerisation. He further suggested creating a joint technical committee to study the prospects of the India–Turkey FTA.<sup>26</sup> In 2017, Erdoğan’s senior adviser, İlnur Çevik, spoke about India’s growing relevance in Turkey’s foreign policy: “Pakistan is a very good friend of Turkey but that does not mean India cannot be a close friend of Turkey. We want India to be a partner of Turkey in defence, in nuclear issues ... in Africa—in all areas—we want India to be our partner.”<sup>27</sup>

The focus of Erdoğan’s 2017 visit was largely economic. A business delegation of over 100 representatives accompanied him. Ankara has also shown interest in India’s ‘smart cities’ initiative, given the expertise of Turkish firms in construction and in the infrastructure

sector.<sup>28</sup> The prioritisation of economic interests in Turkish foreign policy is due to Turkey’s apparent economic rise under the AKP government, which has pursued economic liberalisation with some success.<sup>29</sup> Turkey now seeks to tap the potential of economic cooperation with growing economies such as India to maintain its export-oriented growth rate. Since 2003, Turkey–India bilateral trade has been on an upward trajectory. In the financial year 2017–18, bilateral trade between the two countries amounted to US\$7,222.9 million.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, FDI inflow from Turkey in 2016–17 was greater than those from some other countries in the region, including Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Jordan, Egypt and Israel.<sup>31</sup> Recent bilateral agreements between Turkey and India reflect the interest of both countries in expanding the economic relations. In 2015, the Confederation of Indian Industries signed a memorandum of understanding with the Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchange of Turkey to promote bilateral trade and investments. There now exists an India–Turkey Joint Committee on Economic and Technical cooperation.<sup>32</sup> There is also a growing interest amongst Asian investors—including those from India—to tap into the Turkish market, moved by Turkey’s proximity to expansive markets, including Europe.<sup>33</sup>

These developments suggest that there is mutual interest in deepening the economic relations. Although India was sceptical of Turkey’s interest in mediating differences between India and Pakistan on the Kashmir issue, such a dynamic could be based on Turkey’s larger foreign-policy objectives. Guided by Davutoğlu’s ‘strategic depth’

doctrine, Turkish leaders are keen on acting as mediators and facilitators to find solutions to longstanding issues. The party leadership has conceived Ankara's role as that of a 'global sub-system collaborator' in the international system.<sup>34</sup>

The inclination to pursue the role of an international mediator is aligned with the AKP's interest in expanding Turkey's agency in the international order and overcoming the obstacles in strengthening Ankara's trade and economic relations. In its neighbourhood, Turkey reached out to various constituencies in the run up to the 2005 general elections in Iraq, helping them achieve political consensus. In 2008, Turkey made attempts to facilitate peace between Syria and Israel, and in 2010, Turkey—alongside Finland—launched the 'Mediation for Peace' initiative.<sup>35</sup>

India's economic rise and its potential for future development motivates Turkey to diversify the agenda of its bilateral relations with India. While Turkey continues to attach importance to its relations with Pakistan, it is no longer central to its India policy. From India's perspective, Turkey's expanding agency in its neighbourhood and in other regions in Africa is lucrative. More importantly, Turkey's evolving opinion on political questions under the AKP leadership captures India's interest. Erdoğan was supportive of India's participation in the NSG, even as Turkey stands by Pakistan's claim to the NSG membership. Turkey advocates for a mechanism which would allow for Non-Proliferation Treaty non-signatories to become NSG members.<sup>36</sup>

In 2018, much to India's satisfaction, Turkey supported Bangladesh's demand for a

reform of the OIC and its expansion to countries such as India, which hosts a large Muslim population.<sup>37</sup> This development underlines the softening of Turkey's position on India's involvement in the OIC. Counterterrorism is another emerging area of cooperation between the two countries. Under the Joint Declaration on Terrorism, issued during former Turkish President Abdullah Gül's visit, Turkey recognised the need to support the India-initiated Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism. Against the background of the failed July 2016 coup attempt, Turkey had asked the Indian authorities to clamp down on the institutions associated with the Gulen movement. New Delhi has asked for substantial evidence that will hold in the court of law.<sup>38</sup>

Despite the recent improvements, major challenges continue to bedevil India–Turkey bilateral relations. The AKP's political preferences are problematic from India's point of view. Known for his personal relations with former Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, Erdoğan said, while commenting on the Kashmir issue, "My dear friend, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif of Pakistan is an individual with whom I have been discussing these issues at length and I know that he is a man of good intention. So, if we keep the dialogue channels open, we can settle this question once and for all ... We should not allow more casualties to occur and by strengthening multilateral dialogue, we can be involved, and through multilateral dialogue, I think we have to seek out ways to settle this question once and for all, which will benefit both countries."<sup>39</sup> Turkey's ambassador to India later clarified that President Erdoğan was misquoted and that Turkey would only

offer a mediatory role if “asked.”<sup>40</sup> However, the Hurriyat conference—a conglomeration of different political fronts that advocate the cause of Kashmiri separatism—described Turkey as an important Islamic country and insisted that its leader should make efforts to end the political uncertainty prevailing in the region. Erdoğan also remains popular among a section of Muslim clerics in India, who see him as a strong Muslim leader capable of defending Turkey’s sovereignty against the West and its policies.<sup>41</sup>

In 2018, the Turkish foreign minister reiterated that Ankara is committed to supporting Pakistan on the Kashmir issue. India has countered this political cooperation between Turkey and Pakistan by strengthening its ties with Cyprus and Armenia, neighbouring countries with whom Turkey shares fractious relations.<sup>42</sup> The focus of Turkey’s pivot to Asia seems to be China. Despite political differences, e.g. China’s treatment of Turkic Uyghur people in the volatile Xinjiang province, Sino-Turkish relations have progressed considerably. In 2010, despite Turkey’s association with the NATO, the two sides undertook joint aerial military exercise. For India, too, Turkey might not be a priority in the evolving West Asia policy, where it seeks to deepen economic and security cooperation with multiple Gulf Cooperation Council member states, including UAE and Saudi Arabia which are contesting for regional influence with Ankara.

In South Asia, Turkey’s growing role in Afghanistan could be of concern to India. While India wants a stable centre of power in Kabul and avoids political association with any particular ethnic group, Turkey has

declared support for the Uzbek leader and Afghanistan’s former Vice President Abdul Rashid Dostum against President Ashraf Ghani.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, Turkey believes that the Taliban should be part of the Afghan political mainstream.

## CONCLUSION

Despite sharing a history of diplomatic relations with India, Turkey for the longest time did not give due importance to these ties. During the Cold War period, Turkey saw its relations with India through the prism of Pakistan. Turkey and Pakistan first cooperated under the CENTO and later initiated the RCD. Moved by Islamic sentiments and geopolitical imperatives, Turkey sided with Pakistan on the Kashmir dispute, much to India’s dismay. This brief underlines the various structural and ideological factors that limited the scope of Turkey–India relations.

However, the opening up of the Turkish economy under Özal administration, provided an opportunity for the strengthening of Turkey–India relations, as the former intended to benefit from India’s economic potential. This dynamic has been expedited by the AKP, which seeks cooperation with India in various sectors, including defence, space, science and technology. Ankara’s interest in seeking greater cooperation with India is an outcome of the apparent transformation in the Turkish foreign policy under the AKP. Structural changes such as India’s economic growth and a perceptible decline in Turkey’s relations with the West further motivates Turkey’s pursuit of improved relations with India. There have been a growing number of high-level bilateral visits between the two countries. Turkey has

also been considering cooperating with India on issues such as counterterrorism.

Despite the recent progress in India–Turkey relations, however, there is still a lack of strategic convergence between the two countries on multiple issues, e.g. Ankara's

stance on the Kashmir issue, which is still pro-Pakistan; its conflicting role in Afghanistan; and lastly, Turkey's prioritisation of its relations with China over India. These factors currently complicate the equation between Turkey and India and must be addressed for their bilateral relations to improve. [ORF](#)

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