



Modi-Erdogan Meeting: Convergence between India and Turkey

*Dr Omair Anas**

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan visited India on 1 May 2017, his second visit to India after his first visit in 2008. In his earlier interactions with Indian leaders, Recep Tayyip Erdogan had met with Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee when Prime Minister Vajpayee had visited Turkey in 2003 and Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh in 2008 when Recep Tayyip Erdogan paid his first visit to India as Prime Minister. Erdogan had received a call of solidarity and support from Prime Minister Modi on 16 July 2016 when Turkey had faced its fearsome failed coup attempt.

Both leaders understand that their two countries have so far not reached the potential of bilateral trade and political relations. On 1 May 2017, they agreed to increase their trade to 10 billion US dollars by 2020¹, a lower target though compared to 15 billion dollars set by the previous governments. Turkey has been actively looking to bridge the trade deficit with India and to see Free Trade Agreement, now as part of Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement go through as soon as possible. President Erdogan had focused on trade relations in his speech at Turkey-India Business Forum.

The "India-Turkey Joint Statement" issued by the Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India on first May 2017 titled "India-Turkey- a Stable & Friendly Partnership" demonstrates both sides' pragmatism and willingness to resist all odds in their relationship.

India and Turkey appreciate that their economies are strong enough to create more convergence rather than divergence. They realize that economic strength is an opportunity to redefine their mutual interests and contribute to finding a new economic order. A large business delegation of 160 members accompanying President Erdogan to attend the Turkey-India Business Forum symbolises the keenness of Turkey's business community in India's large and promising market.² The delegation comprised of Turkey's top business groups and their CEOs such as Dogus Construction Co., Limak Holding, Koc Holding, Beta Gida, Ege Ihracatçılar Birliği, Demir İnşaat, Turkish Emlak Konut, and all major business associations such as MUSIAD, TIM, TOBB, and DIEK attended the business forum. Prime Minister Modi's remarks were extremely generous

when he announced “from the Indian side, I welcome you with open arms. I can say with confidence that India was never a more promising destination than it is today. To make it even better, I assure you of my personal care and co-operation.”³

Prime Minister Modi made an offer to the Turkish companies to invest in India’s housing and railways, as India is planning to build 50 million houses by 2022 and start metro rail projects in 50 cities and high-speed trains. Hydrocarbon, solar and wind energy sectors were also identified as common areas where India and Turkey can cooperate. Turkish media reports suggest that several Turkish companies are now in process of exploring investment opportunities in India particularly in construction and automobile sectors, according to a Turkish newspaper Daily Sabah. Voltas Limited, a Tata Enterprise, and Turkish company Ardutch BV, a subsidiary of Arcelik AS have announced to establish a joint venture company (JVC) in India with an equity capital of \$100 million.⁴ According to Yenisafak newspaper, Turkey’s Tourist Hotel and Tourism Management Association (DOKTOB) and Muğla Chamber of Commerce and Industry (MUTSO) are in talks with their Indian partners to enhancing cooperation in tourism sector.⁵

The joint statement shows that the two sides had extensive discussions on a wide range of issues covering trade, cultural cooperation, counter-terrorism, and United Nations reforms. Both leaders signed five bilateral agreements and memorandum of understanding was signed during the visit:

- Cultural Exchange Program for 2017-2020
- MoU for Cooperation between Foreign Service Institute of India and Diplomacy Academy of Turkey
- Agreement between the Government of The Republic of Turkey and the Government of The Republic of India on Gainful Occupation for Family Members of the Members of Diplomatic Mission or Consular Post
- MoU between Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI), India and Information and Communication Technologies Authority (ICTA), Turkey
- Cooperation Agreement between Press Trust of India (PTI) and Anadolu Agency (AA) of Turkey

The issue of India’s membership of Nuclear Supplier Group was also discussed on which Prime Minister Modi thanked President Erdogan for Turkey’s support for India’s membership of the MTCR and applications to join the Nuclear Suppliers Group and Wassenaar Arrangement, according to the joint statement.⁶ Turkey says that it is ready to join the consensus [on India’s NSG membership] if it is reached.⁷ In 2008 joint press conference with Prime Minister Erdogan, Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh had appreciated Turkey’s position on India’s membership application at NSG.⁸

Media Reactions

As Turkey is an important player in today's West Asian regional politics where India is advancing a careful balancing act, the visit received a huge interest from both Turkish and Indian media.

Indian Ambassador in Ankara Rahul Kulshreshtra wrote in a Turkish newspaper *Daily Sabah* highlighting the importance of the visit and opportunities India and Turkey have at their hands to advance their relations.⁹ Several Turkish analysts including President's advisor İlnur Çevik wrote his article in *Daily Sabah* titled "Turkey and India set to rediscover a lost friendship" in which referred historical linkages between the two countries. His statements at an event organized by *Daily Sabah* in New Delhi, however, drew more diplomatic and media attention when he told media persons that India and Turkey are ready to advance defence relations and that Turkey can offer India armed unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs).¹⁰ *Daily Sabah*, for example, noted down the suggestion made by President Erdogan to alleviate currency pressure by conducting export and imports in local currency.¹¹ The paper focused on Erdogan's admiration of India making progress in high technology, computer software and space exploration under the leadership of Indian Prime Minister Modi. President Erdogan expressed his desire to develop cooperation with India in these areas. Another commentator in the *Hurriyet Daily News* on 1 May said, "it clearly appears that while improving relations [with India], Turkey is showing the utmost attention to avoid causing resentment with Pakistan, India's archenemy. "We are friends and we will remain friends with Pakistan," a Turkish official told his Indian counterparts. The relations will not overshadow relations with India, the official added, giving India's relations with Palestine and Israel as an example.¹²

As the President Erdogan's interview to an Indian TV channel was being broadcast on the eve of his arrival, his controversial comments on Jammu and Kashmir and India-Pakistan relations drew huge media attention. Strategic Affairs commentator Dr. C Raja Mohan wrote in the *Indian Express* "In any list of India's more difficult bilateral relationships — other than those with Pakistan and China — Turkey will figure prominently. If turning Turkey around has long been a major diplomatic challenge for India, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been eager to address it. The Turkish establishment's uncritical embrace of Pakistan has been unchanging, irrespective of who dominated Ankara — the secular army or the current Islamist leadership."¹³ *The Indian Express* in its editorial on 2 May recommended the government of India "to remind its guest that no outside help is needed to resolve the Kashmir issue".¹⁴ Another leading newspaper *The Hindu* wrote in its editorial on 2 May stating "Mr. Erdogan's comments on supporting India's bid for the UN Security Council membership came with the rider on other countries being included, and for the Nuclear Suppliers Group with the caveat of support for Pakistan. But it is certainly a start that could lead to deeper engagement on the two issues."¹⁵ Former Ambassador Rakesh Sood expressed a mixed feeling about the outcomes of the visit as he wrote

"Both sides sought to emphasise the potential for greater economic cooperation. However, there are clear limits here, imposed by existing agreements. Half of Turkey's \$350 billion foreign trade is with Europe. Our bilateral trade which stands at \$6 billion, and is expected to grow to \$10 billion by 2020, can hardly become a major driver. Opening a new page in India-Turkey relations clearly, needs to wait for better times."¹⁶

On the other hand, former Ambassadors MK Bhadrakumar and Mani Shankar Aiyar were critical of the timing of the visit of Cypriot President to India on 26-29 April and the visit of Vice President Hamid Ansari to Armenia on 30 April. However, the Turkish side, as the article of President Erdogan's advisor Ilnur Çevik wrote:

“Turkey's relations with India should be taken independently from its ties with long-time friend Pakistan. India has good ties with Armenia and the Greek Cypriots but that is also no obstacle for us to forge close ties with New Delhi.”¹⁷

As the strategic community on both sides has evaluated India-Turkey relations, both sides have maintained a degree of pragmatism without getting involved in over-expectation. For Turkey, India remains an important market; an emerging power in the fields of science and technology, IT and medicine, Turkey finds it necessary to engage. However on strategic cooperation, security and defence, the two sides are aware of their limits. For example, progress on defence cooperation, again mentioned by President Pranab Mukherjee during his visit to Turkey in 2013, has not seen much progress. The bilateral Defence Cooperation Agreement, under consideration since then, has not yet been signed.

Differences, but not Divergence

India and Turkey belong to different political and security contexts which require both countries to define their bilateral relations with pragmatic limitations. Turkey's position on Kashmir and Pakistan is what makes India and Turkey hesitant to think about enhancing their partnership to the strategic levels. On Kashmir for example, India had been conveying its position to the Turkish side and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. Previously, Turkey has restricted its position to suggest both India and Pakistan solve the issue bilaterally. Days before his visit to India, an Indian TV channel WION asked Erdogan, “Where do you stand on the issue of Jammu and Kashmir? Why does Turkey continue to support Pakistan?”¹⁸ His response was beyond Turkey's traditional lines by proposing rather, multilateral efforts to be taken to resolve the issue, including his own country's mediation. Though not very actively, this is the line that Turkey is following for last few years. Indian government came out with a statement which clearly but politely rejected Turkey's offer for a multilateral mechanism. Moreover, Turkey's relations with Pakistan have progressed more to security and defence cooperation than evolving a rationally diverse relationship. Turkey has also joined the Chinese Belt Road Initiative project that Turkey believes will make it a real bridge between European and Asian markets, connecting it with multiple trade highways and trains and maritime points. India has clearly conveyed its reservations to the concerned countries that its China-Pakistan Economic Corridor violates India's territorial sovereignty in the Pakistan occupied Kashmir.

Turkey's position on India's NSG bid is struggling to balance between its trade interests with India and China and security interests with Pakistan. Turkey's success in de-hyphenating the India-Pakistan relations will depend on its ability to secure more common interests between the two countries. The two countries have made limited progress in diversifying and expand their relations beyond trade. Had Turkey been in good relations with its Western allies, Turkey would have found a bigger common ground with India including the NSG membership issue. Turkey and Russia have just finalized the "technical issues" of Russian S-400 missile system deal and Turkey joined China's OBOR, Turkey's decisions are more outside of Western security architecture.

India's membership of United Nations Security Council is also an issue which divides India and Turkey. As Turkey in principle agrees with UN reforms but it has joined the so-called Coffee Club which opposes the increase of permanent seats; instead, it proposed, to elect non-permanent members from different regions rotationally. In his speech at Jamia Millia Islamia, the Turkish President flagged one billion Muslims' aspirations for a permanent seat at the world's most powerful body. While he asked India's support for this aspiration, he offered support to India's candidacy, perhaps in exchange of India's support to a Muslim candidate at the UNSC.

These differences notwithstanding, in recent years Turkey's relationship template with the West and Europe is changing and mistrust overshadows their security cooperation. Turkey is actively involved with Russia, China and Pakistan to find a new security template. As part of G20 and SCO, both sides have more opportunities to find convergence in their interests. Turkey is a dialogue partner at SCO and discussions on Turkey's full membership at SCO is getting seriously frequent. Ilnur Cevik, advisor to the Turkish president, in an interview in New Delhi said

"Turkey's relations with India should be taken independently from its ties with long-time friend Pakistan. India has good ties with Armenia and the Greek Cypriots but that is also no obstacle for us to forge close ties with New Delhi."¹⁹

What is not sufficiently being recognized is that India-Turkey relations have already progressed in recognition of these limitations. Many other Arab and Muslim countries, Saudi Arabia, Iran and the United Arab Emirates, for example, have developed good relations with India. It is safe to say that Turkey is currently in a transition phase where it is looking for strong allies and trading partners to reduce its dependency on its Western allies. But it does not necessarily mean that Turkey will completely disengage with its allies. Its aspirations for European Union membership will keep defining its European policy to enhance Turkey's trade, security and strategic profile.

Despite the fact that Turkey has much better trade relations with Iran via open borders, the historical sectarian rivalry still continues to dominate each other's popular imagination. No state in Moghul India had ever officially accepted the Ottoman Caliphate and most of them rather remained close to Safavid-Shia Iran. Pakistan's significance for Turkey is also because of their common roots in Sunni-Hanafi-Sufi Islam.

The secular Turkey, however, had sought a constructive approach by evolving Regional Cooperation for Development (RCD) followed by the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) in 1979 creating a cooperation model between Turkey, Pakistan, and Iran. The ECO train project was then extended to India, Myanmar, and Bangladesh to create a long geographical connectivity linking the vast human populations. Of late, India has been able to redefine its relationship with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, earlier considered to be close Pakistani allies. This became possible by expanding bilateral relations beyond trade and increasing dialogues on cooperation on regional security, counter-terrorism, political and cultural interactions. India and Turkey are yet to expand and diversify their relations to this level; they have maintained useful trade relations, though.

Conclusion

Turkey remains one influential country in the West Asian region where several conflicts have deeply complicated the security and strategic calculations of major stakeholders. Its European geography gives Turkey an edge to connect both Asian and European markets. European markets are the important attraction for Indian companies and Turkey remains an important junction to connect with European, Central Asian, Caucasus, and the Middle Eastern markets.

This visit, regardless of its limited political outcomes, the leaders of the two countries can be seen advancing a pragmatic agenda. Turkish experts, who accompanied President Erdogan on his India visit, have expressed optimism after they observed that the visit had covered each and every point they wanted to talk about their bilateral relations and have conveyed each other's sensitivities. This visit has indeed built confidence for future cooperation. A pragmatic engagement between India and Turkey will continue regardless of how and when the two countries find great convergence in long run. As the joint statement refers, the visit has underscored an "increasing convergence of positions which could contribute to addressing international issues of mutual interest such as new economic order, stability, and security of the respective regions."²⁰

** Dr Omair Anas, Research Fellow, Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi.*

Disclaimer: The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.

Endnotes

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