

Building Turkish-Indian Cooperation Amidst a World in Turmoil*

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Unlike Winston Churchill's faulty predictions India has grown into a robust nation since Independence amassing significant power and influence. Amongst its long list of achievements India's democratic institutions and secularism hold particular place. Turks and Indians living in secular states with democratic institutions may not realise the role of the institutions when peacefully fulfilling their daily chores. For those who have yet to come under the protection of democratic and secular institutions the challenges are of different nature. The fact of the matter is that within any State citizens are ultimately in the same boat. The good governance in any State is a common concern to all its citizens, as we see in West Asia, to the entire region and beyond. Robust military capability may provide the ultimate assurance against external threats. However, democratic and secular institutions, incorporating accountability, the rule of law, separation of "religion and state", individual human rights, economic freedoms and protection of free enterprise enable good governance and thus ensure peace and prosperity at home. One may even argue that, since the external environment and the internal peace and prosperity are related, a good foreign and security policy is the one that also promotes good governance in its neighbourhood. Turkey's grand strategy is constructed upon the premise that international legitimacy, economic interdependence, respect for human rights, pursuing a sustainable environmental policy and harmony among people belonging to different religious and ethnic origins stand as the most important tools in building lasting peace, stability and prosperity.

Turkey is spending time, resources and energy to contribute towards, not only benefit from, a positive evolution of the regional and global order. In the words of Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu:

"Rejecting a reactionary foreign policy approach, Turkey develops its positions on regional and international issues with careful consideration of its own conditions. More than anything else, Turkey's stance reflects its historical depth, geographical positioning and rich legacy in international affairs. We believe that those who fail to understand the flow of history and do not position themselves in the world accordingly will be overtaken by the rapid pace of events and will end up paying a heavy price for it. Therefore, we formulate our policies through a solid and rational judgment of the long-term historical trends and an understanding of where we are situated in the greater trajectory of world history."

Turkey's active engagement with the world at large has already transformed the one and only pluralistic democracy in the Muslim World into a rising donor country and an active player in a multiplicity of regions and global matters including in economic and humanitarian issues. As Turkey takes on the Chairmanship of the G-20 in 2015 she will strive to bridge the gap between the wealthy and not so wealthy nations cohabiting egregiously in a globalised world. Having hosted the Least Developed Countries forum in 2011, Turkey will next host the first ever World Humanitarian Summit in 2016. Being on the right side of history motivates Turkey and compels her to take principled stances and pursue proactive policies. The challenge to implement principled stances and proactive and active policies is nowhere greater than in West Asia or the Middle East.

The Middle East and North Africa have entered a new era of transformation which is based on the legitimate aspirations of the people to enjoy democracy, human rights and better living standards. The same has raised rightful expectations regarding the future of the region. The "Arab Spring" essentially entails the establishment of political systems which respect the will of the people. Since the revolution in Tunisia, Turkey's value-based approach and emphasis on democracy and popular legitimacy have underpinned her policy toward the uprisings in the Middle East.

First and foremost, Turkey decided to support the people who rise to demand such basic rights as freedom of expression and other political freedoms. Turkey's chief concern was to sustain the deep and dear friendship we established with the people and to not trade these ties for temporary balance of power calculations. Secondly, Ankara emphasised that the transition towards stable and legitimate democratic political structures can only be achieved via a balance between security and freedom. Thirdly, Turkey believed that there is no contradiction between our emphasis on democratic demands, which in some cases required us to confront repressive regimes. Fourthly, Turkey expressed her opposition to foreign intervention because this region's future has to be decided by its people. Last but not the least, Turks proclaimed that they considered all peoples of the region as their eternal brothers irrespective of their background and saw it as their duty to dampen sectarian tensions provoked by some irresponsible actors.

Recent political developments and the rising security threats have led many observers around the world to question the future of the "Arab Spring". The emergence of political systems based on the free will of people involves challenges and comprehensive and far reaching transformations which require long term efforts. There is a very strong possibility that in the long run democratic turn may well be irreversible despite short term ups and downs. It is most certainly needed and desirable.

The current situation in Syria and Iraq demands particular focus. The growing extremism in Syria and Iraq constitutes a serious threat to the security and stability in the region and beyond. While confronting risks and threats presented by the extremist groups, it is important not to lose the focus on the root cause of this problem.

The Syrian regime bears the sole responsibility for the current chaos, instability and devastation in Syria. Taking advantage of the inaction of the international community and in fact with the active support of a limited set of some of its actors, Syria continues to oppress the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people with its increasing violence, including heavy bombardments, indiscriminate killings and even use of chemical weapons. It is the only regime that has fired no less than four hundred ballistic missiles against the cities and people it purports to represent and govern. Its policies based on sectarianism and ethnic divisions trigger further instabilities and threats in the wider region. It is because of such policies that al-Dawlah al-Islamiyah fil Iraq wa ash-Sham (DAESH) [which also called itself ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) or IS (Islamic State)] and other extremist groups have gained ground in Syria and Iraq.

The developments in Iraq underline the need to develop a more comprehensive strategy in confronting the deteriorating situation in Syria. Recently, this issue has been on the agenda as a result of DAESH's siege of Kobani. DAESH has become an imminent and clear danger threatening our borders. This has turned into a national security issue for Turkey. Turkey has mobilised its resources to address the humanitarian situation arising from the above.

The fight in Kobani carries the risk of deflecting the attention from the real problem which is the overall situation in Syria, created and sustained by the policies of Damascus. The determined support by a couple of international actors to the regime hampers the prospect for the peaceful resolution of the conflict. Airstrikes against DAESH would not be sufficient by themselves and instead need to be construed as a component of a comprehensive and integrated strategy. To start with, without No Fly Zones/Safe Areas, it will not be possible to prevent large scale refugee movements. The central point of a comprehensive and integrated strategy in Syria should be the implementation of zones that are protected from the regime's tyranny. The solutions to the humanitarian crisis must be found within the borders of Syria and strict implementation of the UNSC Resolutions 2139 and 2165 must be observed.

Ultimately, the future constitutional structure of the new Syria can only be decided by a parliament created by free and fair elections. Thus, a genuine political transformation on the basis of the Geneva Communiqué and the legitimate expectations of Syrian people continues to be our main objective. Therefore, Turkey has supported the calls for the formation of a transitional government with full executive powers. Naturally, the opposition to the regime is needed for genuine political resolution. The Coalition has successfully transformed itself into a credible alternative to the Assad regime but needs strong support. We should bolster and intensify our support to the Coalition.

While dealing with ISIL and extremism, there is also the other side of the spectrum. Hezbollah and other foreign militia from various countries fighting on the side of the regime against the people commit the same crimes. These groups do not belong to Syria and must withdraw from Syria immediately.

Turkey increasingly feels the strain of the current state of chaos and instability at her doorstep. Turkish citizens living along the border are being constantly terrorised by the ongoing clashes in northern Syria. So far we have lost 82 lives, many in terrorist attacks traced to Damascus. Turkey's commitment to humanitarian aid is clearly demonstrated by facts: Turkey is host to more than 1,600,000 Syrians, and has spent over US \$4 billion to meet their humanitarian needs. Most recently, more than 160,000 Syrians fleeing DAESH have sought refuge in Turkey over a single week. To put it into perspective, this number is close to the number of Syrians that all of Europe has taken in during the last three and a half years of the conflict in Syria. Turkey has put in significant resources to accommodate this new and massive influx by building additional shelters and providing humanitarian assistance.

Preventing the illegal transportation of logistics and manpower across Turkish-Syrian border is a key priority. Turkey is taking necessary measures against the activities of the extremist groups to defend her territory and citizens. However, transnational threats require efficient international cooperation which is currently rather weak. This is what makes the above threats ultimately resilient and stand as the hallmark of the many challenges confronting not only the Middle East but also various other hotspots around the world.

Times change and regions once known for intractable disputes may become centrepieces of peace and prosperity. A century ago Turkish nation was attacked by European imperial armies. The Çanakkale (Gallipoli) Peninsula, which saw one of the bloodiest battles that changed the course of the first global war and the path of history 99 years ago, has today become the scene of friendship in which the people who lost their forefathers in these battles gather to send out the most powerful message of peace to the world.

It must be our common aspiration that the constructive understanding displayed by the fighting parties with messages of peace and friendship despite war conditions in the Çanakkale land battles, which are described as the last gentlemen's battle by many historians, be adopted today around the world. The annual Commemoration Ceremonies take place with an unflinching emotional intensity every year in this historical land where tens of thousands of fallen soldiers from various parts of the world were buried next to each other. We are hoping that a top level delegation from India would take part in the centennial commemoration events in Turkey.

Many Indian soldiers died needlessly in this imperial war either on Imperial British or the Turkish side and are buried in Turkey. The Indian soldiers were only there because the British Empire entered the war against the Ottomans. Many of the Indian soldiers did not even know they were fighting against the Turks until it was too late and many deserted to Turkish ranks once they found out. The war had no public support at home. Masses in India were rallying in support of the Turkish forces, collecting funds and sending them to Turkey. The Ottoman forces included Indian volunteers who bravely fought to resist an imperial invasion. When India remembers rightly its fallen sons it should give equal homage and respect to those who died as part of the Ottoman Army. This was not India's war by any stretch of imagination. It was one which in fact the Indian people were against. The Government of India in 1914 was the Imperial government and matters of high politics such as diplomacy or national defence were outright beyond the Indian reach except as soldiers following orders. Jawaharlal Nehru was to famously criticise, in turn, the Indian Civil Service of the times 'as neither Indian, nor civil, nor a service'. We have been taking and we will always take very good care of the Indian soldiers buried in Turkey whether as part of British Imperial or Turkish forces. In 1934, the founder of the modern Turkish Republic and the hero of Gallipoli, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk wrote a tribute to those killed at Gallipoli:

"Those heroes that shed their blood and lost their lives... You are now lying in the soil of a friendly country. Therefore rest in peace. There is no difference between the Johnnies and the Mehmets to us where they lie side by side now here in this country of ours... you, the mothers, who sent their sons from faraway countries wipe away your tears; your sons are now lying in our bosom and are in peace. After having lost their lives on this land they have become our sons as well."

This is the spirit with which we remember and take care of the fallen soldiers. There are also thousands of Turkish soldiers who were brought to prisoner camps in India and died there in captivity. We have been building

cemeteries for them. One in Sumerpur in Rajasthan needs urgent attention and is awaiting permission from India. The Turkish government has also asked for permission to erect a memorial in Delhi that would symbolise eternal peace between Turkey and India.

Turkey is aware and pleased that her friend India is taking firm steps forward to be a global power with its growing economy, huge market, military power, outstanding knowledge in space technology and informatics, rich human resources and deep-rooted historical and cultural heritage. It is of course customary to argue that there is further potential in bilateral relations but in the case of the Turkish-Indian relationship the statement is unquestionably accurate.

The founding document of our relationship is the 1951 Treaty of Friendship which stipulates that there shall be perpetual peace and friendship between the two countries. It must be a telling fact that independent India's first cultural cooperation agreement was also concluded with Turkey. The leaders of the independence movement, including but not limited to Gandhiji and Nehru, were ardent supporters of a strong relationship with Turkey. It is time that the two countries come up with a restatement of their joint will to build on the 1951 Treaty of Friendship and quickly develop a more robust and intensive relationship than ever before.

Turkey and India need a new statement that would acknowledge similar visions, values and ideals, namely; promotion of peace, stability, prosperity based on democratic values and commitment to rule of law, human rights, pluralism, open society and sustainable development; remember with heartfelt gratitude the assistance peoples of the two countries extended to each other in their most difficult times; welcome the increase in people to people contacts and business sector cooperation while looking forward to further developing their economic relations; commit to further develop their friendly relations on their own merits; acknowledge that today's complex challenges require a more structured, comprehensive and intensified practice of consultation and cooperation; aim at enhancing practical cooperation between the two countries on issues of common interest.

The two friendly countries must decide on a number of actionable items in the immediate future, including particularly mutually intensifying visits of Heads of State and Government, Ministers of Foreign Affairs, as well as other Ministers including those in charge of Commerce, Culture, Tourism, Energy, Internal Affairs, Transport and Communications, Agriculture, Health, Education, Science and Technology; promoting contacts between the two Parliaments; broadening the consultations between the Ministries to include global and regional issues of mutual interest, including but not limited to Central Asia, West Asia, Middle East, Asia-Pacific, Africa, fight against organised crime and terrorism as well as arms control.

Turkey and India need to consult frequently and cooperate in the areas of food security, connectivity, transport, logistics and communications, information technology, sustainable development and environment. The Istanbul Process on Afghanistan already provides an important platform for regional cooperation, including between Turkey and India, and that needs to be jointly emphasised and promoted.

However, the most pressing need is in increasing the air connectivity between the two countries in order to facilitate tourism, business and economic as well as cultural interaction and cooperation. Concluding a new trade agreement would also be necessary in order to develop commercial ties. Although bilateral relations are below their full potential, the fact is that a leap forward is achievable and would require only a minor push. In this context, it is imperative that the communication and interaction between the political leaderships in both countries be intensified.

In the last eleven years no Indian Prime Minister has visited Turkey. I am hoping that the Honourable Prime Minister of India would visit Turkey next year not only on the occasion of the G-20 Summit that Turkey would host towards the end of 2015 but also earlier on a bilateral occasion. In turn, I also hope that the Turkish side, upon India's invitation of course, would take the initiative to break the unnecessary cycle of 15 years for a visit at the Presidential level.

The fact of the matter is that the Turkish-Indian relationship holds strategic value that is yet to be fully explored, identified and tapped. That is the very task that awaits those of us who have assumed responsibilities in political, bureaucratic and intellectual domains. I may be the 20th Ambassador of the Republic of Turkey in India, but our diplomatic relations were established as early as the 16th Century AD. Turkish-Indian cultural and historic ties are deeply entrenched and the potential of our cooperation is immense. Building a robust Turkey-India friendship is one responsibility that we should not forfeit. It is one response we can give to the enduring challenges of our day and age in a world where history far from being finished has instead come to a precipice.

*Text of the talk delivered by **HE Dr Burak Akçapar** at USI on 27 Oct 2014 with Shri Sanjay Singh, IFS (Retd) in Chair.

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