

## Turkey-India relations redefined

*Sarah Akram* \*

India and Turkey, regional powers in their own respective geopolitical areas, have embarked upon a new chapter in their bilateral relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Although Ankara and New Delhi have a long history of friendly contacts, the present relationship is the outcome of increasing commonalities and convergence of interests. Ankara and New Delhi do not share borders, and are in different geographical locations, but despite the distance, there seems to be a growing need felt by both to cooperate on a wide range of issues.

Both the countries have expanding economies, growing industrial infrastructures and the attention of global powers trying to make important investments in their potential. Previously, the Cold War strategic calculus kept both the countries at a significant distance, along with the Pakistan factor, as Pakistan and Turkey have enjoyed strong ties and Turkey's historic support of Pakistan in its stance on the Kashmir issue has also been an irritant in Indo-Turkish cooperation. Similarly, Turkey's military ties with Pakistan have also been a stumbling block and prevented the two countries from coming closer to each other in the past.

However, the post-9/11 era marked the beginning of a changing security environment in which India and Turkey began to move closer, thus cooperating and taking various steps towards a more substantive partnership.

Since the inception of the building up of this partnership between Turkey and India, senior diplomats and government officials have exchanged high-level visits, widening the scope of growing cooperation between New Delhi and Ankara. Bilateral trade between the two countries has grown considerably in the last few years, making both countries major trading partners of each other. The recent years show a marked effort by both sides to cement stronger ties and move forward in areas of mutual interest.

In February, 2008, Turkey's foreign minister paid an official visit to India, becoming the first Turkish foreign minister to visit the country in three decades. This trip by the foreign minister was followed by the trip by Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan in November 2008. Besides these high

---

\* *The writer is Research Fellow at the Institute of Strategic Studies, Islamabad.*

level visits, parliamentary and ministerial delegations from India have also visited Turkey during the past few years.

In February 2010, Turkish President Abdullah Gul made a landmark visit to India, making it the first by a Turkish head of State in the last 15 years. The visit was aimed at forging stronger economic and military ties between the two countries and was made in the backdrop of increasing frequency of exchanges between the two countries.

In 2008, India and Turkey neared the 3 billion dollar mark in their trade volume, which was twice as much as compared to previous years. Both countries have vowed to increase the trade volume to the 6 billion dollar mark. India's interest in developing its infrastructure fast and Turkish companies' willingness to invest in Indian ventures is one of the most important aspects of the commercial and economic dimension of this relationship. Moreover, efforts towards a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) are also underway.

More than 60 Indian companies have registered businesses in Turkey in the form of joint ventures, trade and other commercial ventures. The major items of India's exports to Turkey include cotton yarn, synthetic yarn, organic dyes, organic chemicals, denim, steel, granite, antibiotics, carpets, unwrought zinc, sesame seed, mobile handsets, clothing and apparel. Turkey's export to India includes poppy seed, auto components, marble, textile machinery and, among others, steel products and minerals.

During Turkish President Abdullah Gul's February 2010 visit to India, the two countries signed joint declarations on scientific and technological cooperation and also a joint declaration on terrorism. Ankara and New Delhi decided to develop and expand cooperation in science and technology by launching the advanced science and technology dialogue and also offered to work together in mutually identified projects in areas such as telecommunications, computerization, space research, and biotechnology and environment technology; and also to convene a joint workshop.

The advanced science and technology dialogue will encourage cooperation through exchange of ideas, information, skills and technologies; exchange of scientists and technical experts and other such forms of cooperation.

During President Gul's meeting with the Indian leadership, the joint declaration on terrorism was also an important step in cooperation between the two countries. Both the countries declared their recognition

that terrorism poses a grave threat to global peace and security and agreed to work together with other States for the finalization of the Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism.

Civil nuclear cooperation is also an area that can become a potential factor in cooperation between Turkey and India, as Turkey is very keen to develop atomic energy for generating electricity and India is willing to cooperate and help Turkey construct civilian reactors.

Turkey has a very strong and robust relationship with India's arch rival Pakistan, and responding to skepticism in this regard, Turkish President Abdullah Gul underlined that the special relationship between Turkey and Pakistan did not in any way create obstructions for Turkey-India relations which Ankara intends to carry forward.

President Gul has also recognized India's contribution to Afghanistan as very important and expressed the desire to work together with India in bringing stability to that country. However, it may be noted that Pakistan views Indian involvement in Afghanistan very critically and India raised objections when New Delhi was left out of a peace summit on Afghanistan, hosted by Istanbul, prior to the London Conference on Afghanistan in February, 2010. India expressed its displeasure over being left out and accused Turkey of leaving it out at Pakistan's behest. This particular incident shows that Pakistan's close relations with Turkey could at some point become a hurdle in Turkish-Indian ties.

However, besides the Pakistan factor, which may come in the way of Turkey-India relations at some point, it is important to note that the growing relationship between the two countries is largely based on economic ties and both countries' growing economies are an important driver in this respect.